

Thomas Birringer: Between Piles of Broken Glass and a New Beginning: The Middle East Conflict after the Crisis in Lebanon

The war between Israel and the radical Islamic Hizbullah lasted one month. On August 14, however, the guns fell silent, even though the ceasefire is deceptive and each side declared itself the winner immediately after it began. As a matter of fact, the situation in the South of Lebanon is anything but clear.

The strategic threat potential of the Hizbullah has not changed at all. Israel not only missed its target of defeating the organisation decisively; it also could not prevent Hizbullah emerging politically strengthened and being celebrated as the winner in the Arab world, despite its military defeat. What is more – in Lebanon, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah is now considered the real defender of the country, whose civilian victims were shown to the people every day on television.

Now, the thunder of guns has died away and concepts are needed. What is certain is that only a permanent settlement of the Middle East conflict may avert the outbreak of further crises on the recently experienced pattern. Hizbullah now is the opinion leader among the militant groups in the Arab world, an outcome that was certainly not intended by Israel and the West. This is why swift action is necessary.

The military conflict was triggered when in June and July of this year, Israeli soldiers were kidnapped on their own territory and rockets were fired on Israel from Gaza and Lebanon. The violence with which Israel reacted shows how much it felt threatened by this attack. The Israelis felt that a ceasefire could be declared only on the condition that Hizbullah's military power had been weakened permanently.

After its military defeat, Hizbullah will do everything to rearm and fill any gaps as swiftly as possible. It is doubtful whether an international peacekeeping force can prevent this. And it is doubtful whether such a force will receive a mandate to keep Hizbullah in check or even to disarm it. The latter especially cannot be expected from the country's army whose capacities as a regulatory power in the South of Lebanon are limited, given the religious orientation of many of its soldiers.

At all times, the actual reason why Syria and Iran supported Hizbullah was their fight against Israel and for Palestine. Consequently, the key to peace lies in a sustainable settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which would deprive Hizbullah, Syria, and especially Iran, led by Ahmadinejad, of part of its power base.

Now, after the end of the war in the Lebanese South, new opportunities might arise for both the Israelis and the Palestinians. After his controversial one-sided withdrawal from Gaza, Ariel Sharon founded the Kadima party in Israel. Its programme provided for unilateral disengagement from the Palestinians as well as for unilaterally redrawing Israel's national borders so as to safeguard a Jewish majority in the country permanently.

Ehud Olmert picked up Sharon's idea of withdrawal, whose early precursor may be the withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, and made it the basis of his policy. Thus, it was not even officially intended to include the Palestinians in the process of finding a solution for the border problem.

After the war that ended a few weeks ago, the Israelis also seem to understand that the concept of 'unilateral disengagement' is ineffectual since it apparently does not meet the country's security

requirements. Should this idea nevertheless play a role in the future, it would probably have to be based on a preceding successful military operation.

When more and more politicians of his own party distanced themselves from the concept of withdrawal while the war was still going on, Mr Olmert himself began to move away from the concept after the truce, especially as it seemed clear that in the case of its realisation, further rocket attacks on the country were to be expected. This means that even a one-sided withdrawal from the West Bank can be imagined – if at all – only with a clearly audible military 'background music'. Yet things will probably not get that far, since Israel will hardly abandon permanent control of the Jordan valley and the border with Jordan.

New perspectives for negotiations could also open up on the Palestinian side. The agreement between the Fatah, led by president Abbas, and the ruling radical Hamas continues valid even after the war in Lebanon. Its main objectives are to limit armed action against the occupied territories, which implies putting an end to terrorist attacks in Israel and rocket attacks from Gaza, and to form a 'government of national unity' consisting of the Fatah and Mr Abbas. The mandate to negotiate with Israel in this case would rest with Mr Abbas.

Israel promptly rejected the paper as irrelevant, although it could have marked a turning point. It could – possibly – have induced the Hamas to think again about acknowledging Israel's right to exist, and to turn its back on violence. And, based upon this, it could have contributed towards overcoming the growing incapability of the Palestinian authority and the international isolation of the Palestinian nation.

In response to the current crisis, the basis of Palestinian autonomy is increasingly challenged. Commentators fear that Israel might even intend to degrade the Palestinian National Authority to a mere 'service agency', a step that would absolve the country of its responsibility under international law for the occupied territory, since the Authority could then no longer be considered the 'seed' of a Palestinian state. This would go perfectly with the failure of Israel's plan of disengagement; however, it would certainly not constitute a basis for a permanent settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

The time window for resuming negotiations between both sides will be open only briefly. Pressure on president Abbas is increasing. There still is some time for rapprochement among the Palestinian political parties. The global community should urge both Israelis and Palestinians to make use of their opportunities, supporting those forces that really want to do so.

Moreover, it is important to strengthen the institutional framework in the Palestinian areas, and to promote those groups who are interested in developing democratic, constitutional, and pluralistic structures.

It would be about time to place the three great questions on the agenda again –the border, the status of Jerusalem, and the future of the Palestinian refugees. In this context, compromises on both sides would be inevitable.

There are several factors that should not be forgotten: Israel might be well interested in not gambling away the rapprochement with diverse Arab states it achieved after its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Careful consideration should also be given to the new Middle East strategy that was proclaimed by the US foreign minister, Mrs Rice, its objective being to limit Iran's influence in the region. What is more, the people living in the region should not be provided with further examples of the alleged success of violence. And, finally, the neighbouring countries, Europe,

and the USA also play an important role: It is their task to encourage the two conflicting parties to understand that, in view of the most recent disputes, a new beginning may only be successful if both sides are willing to bite the bullet – even where sensitive questions are concerned.