

U.S. Middle East Policy after the Lebanon War – Between Democratic Visions and the Cool Necessity of Conflict Containment

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The war in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah in July 2006 foregrounded two tendencies which have characterized the security situation in the Middle East since the 2003 war in Iraq. Firstly, the balance between state and society in the Arab states has become displaced in the sense that the Arab states have been weakened while transnational and oppositional movements based on Islamism have been strengthened. Secondly, after the removal of the regime of Saddam Hussein, Iran's role within the region has been strengthened considerably, and, with their 48 percent share of the seats in the Iraqi parliament and the effective resistance of Hezbollah against the Israeli attack, politically the Shias are now stronger than ever before. The increased strength and significance of Iran and the Shias within the region has brought on the usage among Arab leaders, commentators, as well as Middle East scholars of the term *the Shia Crescent*: a mobilized political zone spanning Iran, Iraq and Lebanon with possible further political potential among Shias in the Arab states in the Gulf and Syria. But this is not expressive of a clear-cut Shia – Sunni confrontation: Sunni imams in the Arabian Peninsula, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as well as al-Qaida leaders such as Ayman al-Zawahiri have encouraged support for Hezbollah, and the Sunni Hamas in Palestine has joined forces with Hezbollah and is apparently receiving support from Iran. These two tendencies thus seem to merge in a confrontation between, on the one side, a pan-Islamist rebellion against Israel, the West, the U.S. and the American order in the Middle East. This rebellion is led by Iran and Hezbollah and is supported by the otherwise secularized Syria as well as Islamist movements including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaida inspired jihadist groups, groups popular within Pakistan, and of course most of the rebels – or terrorists, as it were – in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the other side are Israel, the United States and the Saudi, Jordanian and Egyptian governments which, despite their differing strategic interests and political situations join forces in opposing Iran's strengthened political position within the region, Hezbollah, as well as jihadists and Islamist opposition groups. A picture, then, is emerging of a stronger and more confident Iran, growing popular support for the Islamist opposition movements, as well as weakened Sunni Arab regimes. Countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia have, since 9/11, come under twofold pressure: from the U.S. and the West in the form of demands that they must fight radicalized Islamism, and by a popularly supported opposition loyal to the Islamist opposition to the U.S. project of creating a new liberal order in the Middle East. The anti-American Islamist opposition has been strengthened by the new media conditions in the Middle East which, with outlets such as *al-jazeera*,

make room for both critical analysis, commentary and reporting of U.S. Middle East policy as well as challenging monopolized media and thereby the flow of information which the Arab regimes have long been able to control through strict censorship of state media outlets. When referring to the Arab regimes as weakened I do not – at least not necessarily – mean to say that their stability has been weakened, but rather that they, in their efforts to control the political discourse within the region, are increasingly challenged by their own oppositions as well as by Iranian agendas.

In addition to this picture, the war in Lebanon led to the Israeli realization that Ariel Sharon's unilateral approach to the Palestinian problem is not viable and certainly no longer enjoys support within Israel. Israelis believe that the failure of the Israeli military to defeat Hezbollah, which throughout remained capable of launching hundreds of missiles onto Israeli territory, was due to the fact that the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in May of 2002 had left Hezbollah, aided by Iran and Syria, free to spend the following six years rearming, building underground military compounds and amassing secret stockpiles of weapons. According to the Sharon plan, which constituted the most important political platform of the Kadima party and led to its March 2006 electoral victory under the new leadership of Ehud Olmert, Israel would unilaterally, meaning without previous negotiations with the Palestinians, withdraw from the West Bank upon the completion of the so-called security barrier. This plan would allow Israel to define the borders of a new Palestinian state on its own. This would largely coincide with the so-called 'line of June 4' which constituted the border previous to the war of 1967, *except for Jerusalem*, which Israel has subsumed entirely into its own state. The experience of the war in Lebanon has, however, caused support for the plan to plummet, as many Israelis fear a potential rearmament on the Palestinian side of the border similar to that which had taken place in Southern Lebanon. In addition to the widespread criticism directed at the Israeli government over its handling of the conflict and of the subsequent war with Hezbollah, the war has also left the government in desperate need of a plan which might replace the Sharon plan for solving the Palestinian conflict.

Whatever else such an alternate plan might include, it will entail negotiations with Palestinians and Arab states. This necessitates a thorough revision of Israel's Arab and Palestinian policies. These were designed by Ariel Sharon and have specifically rejected negotiations on the grounds that neither the Arab nor the Palestinian parties were considered fair or, according to Israeli opinion, legitimate negotiating partners – apart from Egypt and Jordan, both of which have entered into peace settlements with Israel and which are both supposed to contribute to any solution of the problem by securing the borders of an eventual Palestinian state. The isolation imposed on Israel in the Middle East, then, results not only from either the policies of the Arab regimes or the popular hostility towards Israel, which for instance is clearly present in Egypt, but also from Israel's own policy, particularly under Ariel Sharon and then carried on by Ehud Olmert until the advent of the war in Lebanon. A policy which up until the war had rejected the Arab Peace Initiative, as promoted by the Saudis and presented to and seconded by the Arab League in 2002, as

well as any negotiations with the Palestinian Authority and the governments of Syria and Lebanon. The war both showed and lead to the Israeli realization that Sharon's policy was untenable if lasting and stable security political results were to be reached.

The unilateral Israeli strategy has been supported and facilitated by a U.S. Middle East policy which since 9/11 has likewise prioritized a unilateral approach to the region, based on key concepts such as regime change and the spreading of democracy. As a paradoxical aspect of the American policy, it has turned out that the more vigorously the U.S., on the basis of its new security policy, has engaged itself politically, economically and militarily in the Middle East, the more isolated the U.S. has become within the region. This is true at the societal level where trust in the American superpower is at an all-time low, bordering on what some refer to as widespread anti-Americanism. It is also true at state level, where the U.S. has renounced the possibility of negotiating with the Palestinian Authority (because it is controlled by a Hamas government), Syria and Iran. The U.S. insists on dictating the conditions for negotiation and cooperation with the so-called moderate Arab states in the form of cooperation regarding the war on terror and, as stated by the U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Jeddah in early October, 2006, the fight against extremism, which according to the Secretary means Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah. This very policy has placed the Sunni Arab states in a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, they are obliged to be loyal to the U.S. with regards to the fight against Islamism, Iran, the Iraqi insurgents, Hamas and Hezbollah. On the other hand, there is growing support among their own populations for exactly this pan-Islamist rebellion, the selfsame forces which the U.S. demands the Arab regimes must cooperate in fighting.

The expectations of the American government that the war in Iraq and the removal of the Hussein dictatorship would initiate a widespread democratization of the Middle East because as free, democratic, liberal Iraq would function emerge as an example to be followed by other states in the region have – unfortunately – far from been fulfilled at this point, four years after the start of the war. On the contrary, the state of security in Iraq is very bad, and 2006 has been the most difficult year since the fall of Saddam Hussein. It is generally acknowledged that Iraq is in fact in a state of civil war, while some, including Kofi Annan, who held the position of Secretary General of the UN until the end of 2006, deem the situation to be worse even than one of civil war. However the Iraqi government and the United States approach the situation, nobody expects Iraq to achieve stability and security, not to mention welfare, prosperity and solid democratic progress, within the foreseeable future. On the contrary, there is widespread concern that Iraq, with or without an American military presence, is bound for an increasingly violent and bloody internal conflict between groups of different political, religious and ethnic affiliations. This outlook is

cause for concern not only with regard to the situation in Iraq, but also significantly for the future consequences for the entire region of a deteriorating state of affairs in Iraq. Asher Susser of Tel Aviv University has pointed out that a breakdown of the fragile Iraqi state could have dramatic consequences for the state of Israeli security, as a brutal civil war in Iraq with its attendant refugee crisis could threaten the stability of Jordan, which is already host to more than one million Iraqi refugees. This would extend the conflict to an Israeli frontier state, opening a path to the Israeli border for the enemies of Israel, not least Iran. This perspective constitutes the major contributing factor to Israel's concern over the still deteriorating situation in Iraq. It could strengthen the position and potential of Iran and the Iranian-supported Islamists, including, as previously mentioned, Shia as well as Sunni Muslim groups, as the currently most serious strategic threat to Israeli security. The Iraq crisis, therefore, has ramifications beyond Iraq; it has bearing upon the security of the entire region. The so-called reverse domino theory, according to which democracy would spread from Iraq to the Arabs, as such now threatens to morph into a straightforward domino theory, which sees the spread of violence and insecurity throughout the Middle East. Similar concerns are held by the Saudi Arabian regime which fears that an escalated conflict between Shias and Sunnis in Iraq, with its risk of massacres on Iraqi Sunni Muslims, might mobilize Saudi Sunni Muslim Islamists. This situation could be complicated further if the Saudi Shia minority, possibly supported by Iran, was likewise mobilized by an escalation of the crisis in Iraq.

In addition to the bleak outlook in Iraq, two other civil wars are threatening to break out in the Middle East: in Lebanon the situation remains anything but stable after the last year's war, with Hezbollah refusing to be disarmed as well as demanding greater influence within the Lebanese government; in the Palestinian Authority, the Christmas of 2006 saw earnest violent confrontation between Fatah and Hamas. There is thus a very real risk that three open civil wars could break out in the Middle East in 2007 and, worse still, all three of these may well affect and exacerbate the others. Iran is a factor in all three conflicts. Whatever the nature and significance of the Iranian factor, Israel, the United States and the Arab regimes in Jordan and Saudi Arabia insist on interpreting and presenting it as decisive and significant. For this very reason the Baker-Hamilton report recommended that Iran be included in a renewed American diplomatic effort. The premise for this proposal was twofold: firstly, the report establishes that Iran can in fact influence crucial actors in Iraq – referring of course to the Shia Muslim groups behind the Iraqi government – and, secondly, the United States and Iran have a shared interest in preventing the situation in Iraq from deteriorating into a chaotic civil war. The Baker-Hamilton group, officially named *The Iraq Study Group*, is aware that dialogue between the United States and Iran is made impossible by the fact that Iran remains unwilling to comply with American demands that they halt production of enriched uranium. The report therefore suggests that the two issues be separated, leaving the U.S. to negotiate the issue of Iraq with Iran while the nuclear issue is handed off to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany.

There are, however, several reasons why the suggestions of the Baker-Hamilton report regarding diplomatic negotiation between the U.S. and Iran will not be carried out. Firstly, neither party is ready to separate the two issues, which makes it crucial whether Iran continues its production of enriched uranium. The fact of the matter is that on the issue of Iraq, Iran would be negotiating from a position of strength: the United States is the party which is in trouble, while Iran considers itself to be on the winning side in Iraq. Therefore the Iranians will of course demand something in return for aiding the United States in stabilizing Iraq, and that something will no doubt be that the Americans tone down their demand for the halting of the production of enriched uranium. This is something that neither the Bush administration nor the Democratic congressional majority are willing to surrender. Because neither party is willing to stand down on this issue, it is unlikely that there will be any dialogue concerning Iraq. Secondly, there is no basis for assuming that the Iraqi stability desired by Iran resembles the kind of stability desired by the United States. While Iran strategically speaking is pleased with the status quo, the United States wants a more stable and better representative political process, which presupposes much greater inclusion of the Sunni Muslim parties which would certainly weaken the Iranian influence. Stability, then, means one thing in American and quite another in Persian. Thirdly, the Bush administration would have great difficulty – as would a Democratic administration – negotiating the issue of Iraq with the Iranians while Iran overtly not only supports, but in fact gains political leverage within the Middle East by supporting Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas. The means of limiting Iran's influence in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East, then, cannot be direct negotiations between the U.S. and Iran – at least not on the basis of the premises on which Iran and a large Washington majority stand firm and which remain mutually exclusive.

The alternative chosen by the Bush administration is to (try to) isolate Iran. This cannot be done by way of the UN due to Chinese and Russian resistance, and, consequently, a revival of the Cold War strategy of containment and deterrence in the form of persistent threats of military action will most likely be the American strategy. The end goal is not to attack Iran, but rather to push Iran out of Iraq and the Middle East by forging an alliance between Israel and the Arab countries while, by means of threats of military action, forcing Iran to restrain itself. Such an alliance would also in the eyes of the Bush administration be useful in creating greater Arab support for the effort to deal with the situation in Iraq. The forging of such an alliance requires the revival of a genuine peace process between the Palestinians and Israel with the clear aim of creating a Palestinian state. If the Arab countries, as intended, are to be included in this process, the basis will be the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, but even if the U.S. and Israel accede to this, a Palestinian negotiating partner is still absent. Both Israel and the United States prefer Mahmoud Abbas. The problem is that Abbas' position within the Palestinian Authority is weak. He and his party would need to build themselves into not only a genuine but also an attractive alternative to Hamas. The irony of this situation is that the U.S. and Israel together with the Arab countries and the EU now need to rebuild the trust in the Fatah movement and

the Palestinian Authority which the Sharon government since 2001 has systematically dismantled, with a view to implementing his unilateral policy.

Similar problems exist in Lebanon. In terms of security policy the major internal problem here, as in Palestine, is that the government does not have a monopoly on violence, which means that the threat of civil war is a constant presence. Resolution 1701 formed the basis – at least temporarily – for preventing Hezbollah from initiating another war against Israel. But only the disarming of Hezbollah and a strengthening of the government's monopoly on violence can reduce the risk of another civil war. Besides strengthening the government army, the point is to create viable political and social alternatives to Hezbollah for the many Shia Muslims in Lebanon. As long as 30 to 40 percent of the Lebanese population sees the country's social and political situation as guaranteed by Hezbollah, the risk will remain that any attempt at disarming Hezbollah will result in civil war.

A striking analogy exists between Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine: all three stand on the brink of open civil war and the complete breakdown of central government. In all three places the only viable strategy in the effort to stabilize the situation seems to be the creation of strong central powers possessing a monopoly on violence, and in all three places the massive rebuilding of infrastructure, societal institutions and the creation of impartial and fair systems of justice, welfare and marked improvements in social conditions constitute the only possible way ahead if popular confidence in such central powers is to be established. None of the three countries can achieve such developments without massive international efforts and as well as the support of the other states in the region. It is therefore sad to note that international and regional support for the establishment of these states and the rebuilding of societies in all three places have been markedly deprioritized if not downright neglected since 2001. In Palestine, the Palestinian Authority has been destroyed since the eruption of the al-Aqsa Intifada in September of 2000 and, not least, the assumption of government in Israel by Ariel Sharon in February of 2001. This development was of course severely exacerbated when the EU and the U.S. cut off funds after the January 2005 assumption of government by Hamas. In Lebanon, political support for the Siniora government which assumed power after the so-called Cedar Revolution in the spring of 2005 has not been followed by international, Western, efforts which, through targeted development projects, for instance in Southern Lebanon, might enable the state to assume responsibility for the social tasks still shouldered by Hezbollah on the basis of Iranian funds. In Iraq, the already weak state totally collapsed in connection with the war: ministries were looted, the army and the police disbanded and local as well as central administration destroyed in connection with the thorough de-Baathification carried out after the dismantling of the regime. Attempts at handling the overwhelming problems of security which followed the fall of Saddam Hussein have largely overshadowed, or hindered, the rebuilding of state and society.

In Palestine as well as Iraq, the West has prioritized the forced implementation of political processes in the form of elections over the rebuilding and establishment of state institutions and society. As

in so many other parts of the Middle East, this has led to the strengthening of Islamist forces. In terms of democratization, the Iraq war shows that combining bombs and elections works out poorly; rather than promoting democracy it has strengthened anti-democratic forces and fundamentalism. This is true of places such as Iraq and Palestine, where regime change has been carried out, as well as in countries such as Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where the governments have carried out tentative political reforms. In other words, free elections in un-free societies within a context of violence and war do not appear to promote either freedom, democracy or political reform. The reason for this probably is that democracy must be viewed as both process and institution. Where the liberal, democratic institutions which constitute the basis for genuinely free elections are absent, elections lead to the releasing of anti-democratic forces rather than to the creation of viable democratic reform processes. Democracy can not likely be established by means of the ballot; experience indicates that it presupposes state institutions which enjoy the trust of the citizens – the voters. These are absent in Iraq, Palestine and, to a great extent throughout the remainder of the Arab countries. In Denmark they were developed and founded during the age of absolute monarchy, and it took another 100 years before the constitutional monarchy of 1848 became a democracy. This does not necessarily mean that the democratization of the Middle East will likewise take a century. The point of departure differs, in the Middle East as well as globally. It does mean, however, that the establishing of relatively well-functioning apparatus of state constitutes a necessary premise for the initialization of processes of political reform.

The greatest and most important challenge for the region, and for Western Middle East policy, then, appears to be the creation of apparatus of state in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine, and the development of the other states in the region. The West needs to engage in politics with the existing Arab states if stability is to be established in the region. Rather than prioritizing political reforms in the form of the carrying out of free elections, the establishment and development of state institutions which command the trust of Middle Eastern and Arab populations must be prioritized by the European Union and the United States if the vision of a new Middle East is to have a chance of being realized. This is not contrary to American and Danish foreign and security policy goals of spreading freedom and democracy to the Middle East; rather, it is an absolute necessity for the achievement of these goals.