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Lessons Learned from Lebanon, by Paul Heinbecker*

It is always risky to draw lessons from a conflict before the dust has settled but a few things seem clear enough from the Lebanon war already to suggest some conclusions that can guide current diplomacy and might point to a more peaceful future.

Lesson one is that buffer zones and barriers will not themselves be sufficient to deliver real security. Hezbollah, which surprised everyone with its military sophistication, can probably go still further up the technology ladder. So long as it has allies or can otherwise find willing suppliers, it will be able to acquire increasingly effective missiles.

Lesson two is the corollary that it is time for all concerned to stop relying on military strength to solve political problems. Until the past few weeks, most observers, perhaps including most Israelis, assumed that Israel's undoubted arms superiority would make short work of Hezbollah. It didn't, and increasingly in the future, it probably won't. In an age of asymmetric power, warfare will rarely be conducted by conventional armies facing off in open terrain where technological superiority can be determinant and the outcome decisive. War is what we have been seeing for three long years in Iraq, increasingly in Afghanistan and currently in Lebanon. .

Lesson three is the truism that real security comes from building political and economic relationships that give all concerned a vested interest in peace. The Europeans, after having come to understand how literally dead-end the track was that they were on, progressively rejected the use of force to resolve problems among themselves. Merely wishing the same for the Middle East will hardly make it so but counting predominantly on armaments to deliver security there seems equally wrong-headed. Peace will come from removing the root cause of the conflict, identified by the G-8 communiqué as "the absence of a comprehensive Middle East peace." That will mean resolving the issues that have bedeviled diplomacy for decades—the West Bank settlements, the status of East Jerusalem and the rights of the refugees.

Lesson four is that the Middle East peace process needs new management. Prospects for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have worsened in part

because of the malign neglect of the Bush Administration. They have been further impeded by that administration's refusal to talk to Syria and Iran. Not talking to Iran with whom the US is on a collision course is particularly dangerous. Further, while the US remains indispensable to achieving Middle East peace, nearly two decades of an American monopoly on Middle East diplomacy have not succeeded in delivering that peace, in part because of the intrinsic complexity of the problems, in part because of the contradictions inherent in the US roles of honest broker and partisan player. These contradictions have to be overcome somehow. Perhaps this past week's Security Council negotiations, where the Europeans and the Americans ultimately found common ground on Lebanon, points to a potentially more effective avenue of diplomacy.

Lesson five is that the conflation of the occupation of Iraq, the Middle East conflict and Washington's "War on Terror" colours the views not just of ordinary Arabs but of vast numbers of people around the world towards the United States and its allies. Independent American polls show that those views have become dangerously negative. Further, newly free Arab news networks have been showing their viewers the gruesome war images from the fighting in Iraq, Gaza and now Lebanon that their western counterparts have delicately been denying us. Where we are shown rubble and twisted steel, Arabs see mutilated bodies, many of whom are women and children, most of whom are Moslem. With 1.2 billion Muslims on this planet, the radicalization of even one in ten thousand is simply unaffordable. The response to international terrorist crimes needs to be aggressive but it also needs to be disaggregated from the discredited "War on Terror".

There are lessons in the Lebanon conflict specific to Canada, too. Lesson six is that foreign policy is important. Successive governments have experienced major challenges in foreign policy: Chrétien on Iraq, Martin on Afghanistan and WMD and Harper on Afghanistan and Lebanon, and, yet, in the last election campaign, scarcely a question was asked on foreign affairs. To be effective, the government needs the mandate of Canadians. And to get that mandate it needs to conduct a foreign policy that enjoys consensus support.

Lesson seven: foreign policy is not rocket science but, as successive governments have discovered, it is harder than it looks. The government was right to sign on to the G-8 summit communiqué, which blamed Hezbollah for triggering this round. But the government made a rookie mistake in

calling the Israeli response to the Hezbollah action “measured”, only to see a major escalation follow, a family of eight Canadians killed and thousands needing evacuation. It supported the US in its resolve to give Israel more time to destroy Hezbollah to create the conditions for a lasting peace only to have the Americans shift position when that did not work. Interestingly, what was not possible in Lebanon was possible in Sri Lanka, where Canada called for an immediate cessation of hostilities. If the thesis of Seymour Hersh published in the New Yorker that the US and Israel had agreed months in advance on the need to attack Hezbollah is proved correct, the Canadian government’s position will seem even more credulous. As a minimum, it is safe to say that in the Middle East, things are always more complicated than they look.

Lesson eight is that the public service exists in part to give advice on this complexity and governments ignore it at their peril. Foreign Affairs would have advised that in the torrent that is Middle East politics the only rock on which to stand without losing equilibrium is international law. The government was right to insist that Israel had every right to defend itself but it was wrong to assume that that right was unqualified under international law, even appearing to blame the UN when a Canadian peacekeeper was killed on duty. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, a former prosecutor of war crimes in Yugoslavia and a Supreme Court Justice, and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan warned both sides about how they were prosecuting the fighting. Human Rights Watch (disclosure: I am a member of the Toronto committee) which did not join the rush to judgment of Israel over Jenin four years ago and which censured the recent UN Human Rights Council’s one-sided resolution against Israel reported this time that “The pattern of attacks during the Israeli offensive in Lebanon suggests... the commission of war crimes.” Regarding Hezbollah, HRW head Kenneth Roth, a former US prosecutor, said, “lobbing rockets blindly into civilian areas is without doubt a war crime”. (See www.hrw.org/). Canada has been the leader of the UN in urging the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Canada’s position on the Lebanon war would have been more consistent and principled if it had at least called for full respect of international law.

One definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome. The Arab-Israeli conflict fits this definition and is harming all parties to it and endangering the rest of us in the process. As long as it continues, things are as likely to get worse as better. The

elements of a solution are well known. Perhaps the most important lesson we all need to learn is that it is in everyone's interests to help resolve this conflict before it is too late.

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