

Costly Miscalculations

Dr. Nabeel T. Jabbour

August 18, 2006

If there are two key words that could best describe the war in Lebanon, the words are *costly* and *miscalculation*.

Sheikh **Hasan Nasrallah** of Hizbullah miscalculated when he gave the order for the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers without consulting the Lebanese government. He hijacked Lebanon into a costly war. More important **Nasrallah** in the past miscalculated by contributing to the creation of Hizbullah, a state within a state. Furthermore **Nasrallah** failed to take the current inner politics of Israel into account. The Kadima party is a new party in Israel and it is under scrutiny by both the Likkud Party on the right, and by the Labor party on the left. Kadima wants to prove to the Israeli public that they can be tough, like Sharon used to be, and yet at the same time they can withdraw from territories when it is convenient for them as they did in Gaza.

Hasan **Nasrallah** should have known that one of the underlying policies in Israel in recent history has been the need to appear tough by crushing its opponents under the slogan of "War on Terrorism." Hasan **Nasrallah** was naïve to think that Israel, at this critical time in its history, would have been willing to exchange prisoners as it did in the past. He should have learned from the Palestinian situation in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel in its policy does not want anything less than bringing the Palestinians to their knees. It is not negotiations that they want with the Palestinians, they want surrender and then negotiations will follow. Nasrallah should have known that, but he did not seem to understand that at this time in its history Israel's attitude towards the Palestinians and its enemies is expressed best in

August 30, 2002 by Moshe Yaalon, the Israeli army chief of staff: *"The Palestinians must be made to understand in the deepest recesses of their consciences that they are a defeated people."*

Israel under its new Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, miscalculated as well. **Olmert**, along with his cabinet, assumed that they can crush Hizbullah and bring it down to its knees. Just because Israel has been able to marginalize the democratically elected Hamas government in the West Bank and Gaza, they assumed that it could be done with Hizbullah as well.

Hizbullah has been a movement and an organization with deep roots which is highly respected by the Lebanese people, especially the Shiites. Their social, humanitarian programs earned them the right to enter Lebanese politics and have its representatives in the Lebanese government and in the parliament. Their military branch was perceived as a resistance movement by some Lebanese. As long as Shaba Farms were perceived to be occupied by Israel, Hizbullah argued that they have the right to resist the occupation. There are some questions about the history of the Shaba Farms. Israel claims that Shaba Farms belonged to Syria before 1967 war, while both Syria and Lebanon claim that the Shaba Farms belong to Lebanon.

Israel miscalculated by assuming that Hizbullah could be demonized in the eyes of the Lebanese and could be blamed for the destruction of Lebanon. As a result of this war in Lebanon, Nasrallah was not "taken out" and has become not only a Lebanese leading figure, but an Arab charismatic leader who can be trusted to fulfill his promises. Some people are comparing him to President Nasser of Egypt in the sixties.

The **U.S. administration** has miscalculated as it followed the Israeli logic. It assumed that Hizbullah would be crushed and demonized. It assumed that the Israeli attack on the infrastructure of Lebanon would convince the Lebanese to revolt against Hizbullah like many of them revolted against the Syrian presence in Lebanon. The **US administration** assumed that the Israeli attack would be swift, and would produce shock and awe that would finally produce negotiations on the dismantling of Hizbullah. The US administration miscalculated by approving what Israel was doing and thus was perceived as having lost the right to be an honest broker.

What is the cost?

The cost is huge by all accounts. It is obvious that on **all sides** there was a **high cost in life, in injuries, in refugees, and in destruction**. According to the most recent estimates, the cost of the rebuilding in Lebanon alone will be more than ten billion dollars. The fragile democracy in Lebanon took years to reach where it was before the war with a revived economy and with a hope for a better future. Not only Lebanon lost a great deal. Israel might come to the States with a request for a gift of six billion dollars to compensate for its losses, mainly in weapons.

The bigger issue at hand is **Hizbullah**. Will it be disarmed after this very costly war? What was accomplished?

The biggest issue I see is the polarization which is taking place between Muslims on the one hand and the West on the other. I think our aim as a US administration should be to **empower the moderates and marginalize the fundamentalists** in the Muslim world. I believe that the biggest war taking place in the world today is for the minds and hearts of Muslims. My fear is that as a

result of this war in Lebanon, our closest allies in the Arab world, the leadership in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan have been marginalized while Hizbullah and Iran have been energized and empowered.

There is something called the Jenin Paradox. According the British newspaper on December 10, 2004, *The Guardian*, "*The Israeli military justified an incursion into Jenin in the West Bank on the grounds that there had been 10 terrorists in the city and after the military action there were only four. The threat was reduced. Six had been killed. But to others, and to Jenin's inhabitants, there was a different perception. There had been 10 resistance fighters, the Israeli military had killed six - and now there were 24. The question is: was the use of superior military force a tool for subtraction or multiplication?*"

Unless we learn from our mistakes, we will tend to repeat them. I hope that **Hizbullah** will not miscalculate and refuse to disarm. They should not continue to be a state within the state. I hope that **Israel** will choose to negotiate with its enemies, whether Hamas or Hizbullah which is part of the Lebanese government and not assume that negotiations are only useful after the full surrender of the enemy. I hope that the **US administration** will focus its attention on winning the hearts and minds of Muslims by empowering the moderates and marginalizing the fundamentalists. It is wrong for me to use derogatory analogies about human beings, but I am going to use one. We can eradicate a generation of **mosquitoes**, but if the **swamps** continue to exist, every few years we will have to wage a new war against a new generation of mosquitoes. What scares me is that every new war will be tougher to deal with because violence escalates.