# Lebanon 2006: A debacle for Israel?

## Eric Lee

A quarter century ago, I stood with an American friend at a peace rally in Tel-Aviv. We were both veterans of the anti-Vietnam war movement, and my friend commented how similar had been the trajectories of both the American movement and the Israeli in the wake of the 1982 Lebanon war. The difference, he pointed out, was that what took years to happen in the USA – the steady growth of that movement – happened in Israel over the course of several weeks.

The same observation may be applied to Israel's second Lebanon war which took place over the summer of 2006. This time, the parallel is not with Vietnam, but with the war in Iraq. In both cases, initial widespread support for the war (in the USA, the UK and Israel) was frittered away, to be replaced by disenchantment. But while this took several years to happen in the USA and UK, the process in Israel once again occurred over several weeks.

But before embracing the widely-held belief that the battles this summer in Lebanon and Gaza were unmitigated disasters for the Jewish state, let's try to remember what actually happened.

Israel was attacked on both fronts. The initiative was taken by a ruthless, aggressive enemy whose action followed upon the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the territories in question – Lebanon in 2000, Gaza in 2005. Those withdrawals were carried out with the full support of the Israeli left and peace movements, and were cheered on by the international community. Furthermore, the Hamas and Hezbollah attacks in the early summer of 2006 followed the Israeli elections which had brought to power one of the most pro-peace governments the country had ever known. The Likud had been soundly beaten in the Israeli elections. The new government was dominated by advocates of Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories.

Why Hamas and Hezbollah chose this moment to provoke Israel is an interesting question – and perhaps the real question is why their state sponsors, Syria and Iran, chose to do so. No doubt this is related to the roles they see themselves playing in

the region, and not only in Palestine. In attacking Israel so brazenly, Iran and Syria have practically guaranteed themselves an invitation to be part of the 'solution' in Iraq.

But there is also the question of what Israel should have done following the capturing and killing of its soldiers on its territory, and the subsequent Hezbollah rocket attacks on Israeli civilians in the north.

First of all, it should have been better prepared. The capture of Israeli soldiers within Israel is more than what Israelis tend to call a 'fashla' (screw-up). It's more likely that the failure is systemic, but more on that in moment.

Israel was caught off guard and did what any country would do: it attempted to defend itself.

The consensus today is that the war was a disaster for Israel. But that consensus might just turn out to be wrong.

On the Lebanese front, Hezbollah was forced to withdraw its armed forces from the international border. A Lebanese army has been stationed there for the first time in decades. A vastly strengthened United Nations force is now in place. And the border has been quiet – completely quiet – since the war ended. How is any of this an Israeli defeat?

In Gaza, the war enormously weakened Hamas. In fact, the Islamic movement is now so weak that despite having clearly won the Palestinian elections earlier this year, it is now being forced to cede a considerable amount of power to its arch-rivals in Fatah. Had Israel really lost the battle in Gaza, this would not be happening.

There are some very clear parallels between what is happening in Israel now and what happened following the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The consensus at that time was that the Egyptian and Syrian armies had bloodied Israel, and that the myth of Israeli invulnerability dating back to the 1967 war had been buried.

Street demonstrations took place in Israel; the political careers of Golda Meir and Moshe Dayan were ended. Everyone agreed that the war had been a debacle. And all this in spite of the fact that Israeli forces, even though taken by surprise, had

smashed the Soviet-backed Syrians and Egyptians in three weeks of fierce fighting, crossing the Suez Canal for the first time.

But what happened next? In spite of what commentators and pundits were saying, the Egyptian elite (including President Sadat) realized that Israel could not be beaten by military force – even under the ideal conditions of a surprise attack.

This led directly to Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem and to the Camp David accords. Syria, though refusing to talk peace, did agree to a series of disengagements and a quieting down of the border along the occupied Golan Heights. Terrorists no longer enter Israel from Syrian territory and no one expects Syria to ever again attempt the kind of invasion it launched in 1973.

In other words, the 'debacle' of the Yom Kippur war turned out to be, at least in this sense, an Israeli triumph.

Can we say the same about the Lebanon war of 2006? It's too early to tell – anything can happen in Lebanese or Palestinian politics. But the good news is a greatly weakened Hamas and a much quieter northern border, with a commitment from the Lebanese government and the international community to keep it that way.

If Ehud Olmert and Amir Peretz lose their jobs over this, they will merely be following in the footsteps of Meir and Dayan. And perhaps they should lose their jobs.

After all, the war did reveal considerable weaknesses in the Israeli military. They should never have experienced the kidnapping and killing of armed soldiers on Israeli territory. The Israel Defense Forces proved largely incapable of preventing Hezbollah from launching its daily rocket barrages – perhaps because they were unable to focus Israel's firepower on Lebanese villages packed with civilians. (Had they done so, Hezbollah might have been crushed, but Israel too would have paid a heavy price.)

Whether this war, like its eerily-similar counterpart in 1973, leads to progress in the peace process remains an open question. The success of that process may depend less on what Israel and its Arab neighbors do, and more on what happens in Washington, as Bush and his successor re-discover the importance of continuing the ground-breaking work done by Bill Clinton in the 1990s.

Eric Lee is a former member of Kibbutz Ein Dor in Israel, where he lived from 1981-98. He served as a member of the central committee of Mapam, the united workers party, and founded Israel's first political blog, *BibiWATCH*, in 1996. He is based in London.