

## The wider war



CHRISTOPHER DICKEY AND ROD NORDLAND

WHEN Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, Assaf Sharon was only 8 years old. As a young man, he served as a reservist with the elite Golani Brigade occupying South Lebanese hillsides, which he remembers for their beauty, and as the place where his friends died. A few years later, in 2000, when those troops were pulled out, he wondered why they'd ever been there. And now that his own son is 8, this 31-year-old graduate student wonders why Israel is calling up its reserves again. "I was watching the news one evening with my son, and suddenly it struck me: whole generation has passed and nothing really changed."

Actually, though, a lot has changed and not just because Hezbollah had transformed itself from the 1980s terrorist organization that trafficked in hostages and car bombs into a disciplined militia that was able to absorb everything the Israelis threw at it the past three weeks, only to emerge from the rubble and dare it to keep trying.

There is another, even larger reality this time around: today the battle is not just over some hardscrabble hillsides in southern Lebanon, but for public opinion in a far more polarized and interconnected world. In that world, Hezbollah's patron, Iran, is plotting to develop nuclear weapons. al-Qaeda is trying to turn the conflict to its advantage. At least some Palestinians who began as Hezbollah's sworn enemies now vow not to make a separate peace in Gaza, leaving Israel with a two-front war. Perhaps most worrisome of all, Iraq's American-backed government is taking time out from its bitter civil war to align itself with Hezbollah and make its anger over American

support for Israel very clear indeed. No one denies that Hezbollah started the fight, with its unprovoked incursion into Israel, and no one doubts that Israel can win it, at least in conventional terms. But that's not what matters as much as public perceptions, and the impact those perceptions have from Tehran to Cairo. The conflagrations in Gaza, Lebanon and Iraq risk converging, if not on the ground, then in that virtual reality satellite television and the Web where al-Qaeda and Hezbollah find recruits for their global networks.

Israel can bomb Lebanon's infrastructure all it wants, but Hezbollah, which operates beyond the limits of a state, ultimately has no infrastructure. Hezbollah's own rockets and missiles can miss nearly all its targets, with comparatively little loss of life, but so long as they keep firing, they shatter the myth of Israeli invincibility and win friends and admirers in a radicalized Muslim world. "The Zionist enemy has not been able to reach a military victory," said Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah in a speech Friday on his organization's Al-Manar TV, still broadcasting despite Israeli Air Force strikes that obliterated its studios and transmission towers. "I'm not saying that. They said that. The whole world is saying that."

The potential consequences are sobering to contemplate. Lebanon could descend into yet another civil war, with 750,000 refugees possibly fleeing the Shiite areas of southern Lebanon into other parts of the country and taking their weapons with them. America could find itself in the middle of a growing civil war in Iraq, facing Shiite foes as well as the Sunni insurgency.

The blowback was worrisome enough that diplomats were scrambling to find a face-saving solution. Moderate Arab allies, who began by condemning Hezbollah for starting



the mess, were more worried about the anger on their own streets. That left the United States almost alone, with Britain, in resisting calls to impose an immediate cease-fire. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice rushed back to the region over the weekend with a plan for an "urgent" cease-fire combined with a multinational "stabilization force."

Israeli officials backed down from their insistence on a deal that would call for disarming Hezbollah and force it to accept previous UN Security Council resolutions recognizing the sovereignty of Lebanon's weak central government. Instead, the Israelis signaled they would accept a plan where Iran and Syria would be prevented from rearming the group. An Israeli official indicated his government would also discuss an exchange of prisoners and bodies from the recent fighting, another climb-down. But Rice had a difficult job of shuttle diplomacy ahead of her, with Israel insisting on freedom for its captured soldiers, Hezbollah suspicious of any foreign peacekeeping force, and possible contributors to such a force understandably nervous about sending troops to Lebanon, a graveyard for peacekeepers for four decades.

Compromise had not been on the table when diplomats met in Rome last Wednesday to find a solution to the crisis. Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora pleaded with Rice in public as well as in private: "The country is being cut to pieces," he said. "We wanted a cease-fire, an immediate cease-fire." But the conference communiqué insisted that any cessation of hostilities "must be lasting, permanent and sustainable."

By Friday, when British Prime Minister Tony Blair met George W. Bush in Washington, the United States was softening the terms. "This is a moment of intense conflict in the

Middle East," said Bush. "Yet our aim is to turn it into a moment of opportunity and a chance for a broader change in the region." But the president resolutely held to his view that Lebanon was just the latest front in the war on terror. "What the world is seeing is a desire by this country and our allies to defeat the ideology of hate with an ideology that has worked and that brings hope," the president said. "This should be a moment of clarity for people to see the stakes in the 21st century."

Al-Qaeda's No. 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had a twisted take on the same subject. In a slickly produced video released recently, he called for all Muslims to support the fight against Israel. In the past, the group had condemned Shiite Muslims as "worse than the Jews." From the Bush administration's vantage point, Hezbollah, like al-Qaeda, is waging an open-ended war that is in many ways even more complex than the traditional Arab-Israeli conflict. The essence of the dispute between the Palestinians and the Israelis is territory. The essence of that between Hezbollah and al-Qaeda, says Alberto Fernandez, spokesman for the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, is the hope that they might turn these and other conflicts into dramas about the future of the whole Muslim world. In this light, a battle along the Lebanon-Israeli border could very easily fuel a larger, more amorphous but no less deadly conflict in the same way the Iraq war has.

Underlying the Bush administration's concern about Lebanon was a realization that Hezbollah could win simply by losing. Already Israel's incursion has lasted longer than the Yom Kippur War or the Six Day War. Though Israeli officials said publicly that they had expected the stiff resistance Hezbollah guerrillas showed, other Israeli analysts were more



skeptical. "It's not going well," says historian Tom Segev. "It should never have started." Bush officials, who earlier had been confident the Iranian-backed militia could be crippled quickly by Israel's military, were "freaked out" by Hezbollah's resilience, says one senior US official who didn't want to be named expressing skepticism about policy. "It is a very, very dangerous situation," said another, who requested anonymity for the same reason. "The more Hezbollah resists, and the more Israel hits back at them, the more open-ended this is." In Beirut a member of Hezbollah's politburo smiled when asked what it would take for Hezbollah to win. "To hang on," he told Newsweek. "When we can stand in the face of the forces supported by the United States, that is a great victory."

To the Americans and the Israelis, that may seem like overblown rhetoric. Hezbollah hinted that it would soon start firing missiles that would hit Tel Aviv, but so far its surprise weapons barely reached past Haifa, exploding harmlessly. Still, even that trajectory played well in the region, especially coming off the Arab rage over the growing body count. While Israel suffered 52 dead, mostly soldiers, Israeli strikes killed more than 450 Lebanese, mostly civilians. The United Nations says a third of the Lebanese dead were children.

The Iranians seem to have trained their proteges well. After more than two weeks of fighting, it became clear that Israel was not going to deliver a knockout blow to Hezbollah, and the longer it went on, the more the militants had to gain. "There are some important elements of the administration that still cling to the forlorn hope that Israel can damage Hezbollah much more in the next few days," says one US official, speaking with anonymity because he was criticizing

other officials. Until recently, though, that was a minority view. US officials say the Israelis have been stunned to discover the extent to which Hezbollah has dug in, and the sophistication of their communications as well as the camouflage of their installations.

In the bloody fight for the little town of Bint Jbeil, just four kilometers from the Israeli border, the Israelis pulled back after nine of their soldiers were killed. "The Israelis thought the area was empty, but the resistance was sitting back," Ghaleb Abu Zeinab, a member of Hezbollah's politburo, told Newsweek. "They were very surprised." And while Israel said it had accomplished its objectives in Bint Jbeil, Hezbollah quickly claimed a victory. In Cairo, posters went up in celebration of the "victory," reading "Nasser, 1956; Nasrallah, 2006."

Meanwhile, Hezbollah was gaining allies with each passing day. Fighting first broke out in Gaza in June, with the capture of an Israeli soldier, and it continued there last week; in a single day Israeli forces killed 24 Palestinians. But some in the militant Hamas organization, no friend of Hezbollah's in the past, made it clear there would be no separate talks. "Nobody wants to negotiate without Hezbollah," says Mahmoud Musleh, a Hamas member of the Palestinian Parliament. "To do it in isolation would be a betrayal." That's a far cry from the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when the Shiites cheered the Israeli Defense Forces for attacking the Palestinians. Now Hamas supporters in Gaza sing a popular song, "Right on, Hezbollah!"

The Iranians, while careful not to focus too much attention on themselves, clearly are pleased with the way these forces that they finance, arm and train are performing. "Hezbollah doesn't have a borderline



to defend or to withdraw from; Hezbollah is a guerrilla group, and guerrillas do not have borders," said former Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati, who is close to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. "Guerrillas will let their opponents make a move and then attack them from back, front and sides."

Israel's UN Ambassador Dan Gilerman said last week that the Israeli military is "sensitive" about targeting. "Believe me, we have the capability, both militarily and technologically, to erase the whole of Lebanon and to make sure that nobody can live there another day," he told the press in New York. "This is not our intention. And because we are doing it so carefully it is taking longer and we are suffering more casualties." But pictures of even a few children torn apart by Israeli bombs have a devastating effect on international opinion. "There is something fundamentally wrong with the war where there are more dead children than armed men," said UN Special Coordinator Jan Egeland.

Some of Hezbollah's biggest supporters are America's allies in Iraq's Shiite-led government. Already, radical Shiites in Iraq are angry at the US military as it tries to suppress death-squad attacks against the Sunni minority there. Recently Bush announced that an additional 5,000 U.S. troops will likely be brought in to bolster the 133,000 American soldiers already there, mostly to deal with sectarianism in Baghdad. When Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki visited Washington, some members of Congress criticized his failure to condemn Hezbollah. But at home in Baghdad, Sheikh Aws Khatifa, a radical Shiite cleric, demanded to know why Maliki had dined with "the occupiers." All the terror wreaked on the Shiites in Iraq by car bombs and terrorism, he said,

was "under the protection of Zionist-American plans." So far, that's empty talk but the US military has tangled with Shiite militias in Iraq before, and a resumption of that is a nightmare scenario for troops that are already hard-pressed to deal with the Sunni insurgency.

For many Israelis, what sets this war apart from their last one in Lebanon is the sudden, terrifying sense that it is no longer about borders but about existence. "The message that will be conveyed to the Arab and Muslim world will be quite simply that fanaticism pays," says Dror Etkes, an activist with Peace Now. "We cannot be seen as the losing side," says historian Amotz Ben-Ami. "The Islamic world is (1.2 billion people. Israel is 6 million... If we stop right now, it means we lost."

Something less than victory for Israel, and something less than defeat for Hezbollah, may be the only formula that can bring the fighting to a stop. Near Avivim, on the Israeli border with Lebanon, 36-year-old Staff Sergeant Roni Omessi watched as his artillery battery hurled 155mm howitzer shells into the Lebanese hills. He had been there in 1990, too, when Israel still occupied southern Lebanon. "I feel sad for them," he said. "For them and for us."

Wars end in the Middle East. That's happened many times. This time the challenge will not only be to bring this one to an end, but to keep it from changing into something still worse in the region, and beyond.

With John Barry, Michael Hirsh and Richard Wolf in Washington, Babak Dehghanipish in Beirut, Kevin Peraino in Avivim, Joanna Chen in Jerusalem, Nisid Hajari and Maziar Bahari in Tehran, and Malcolm Beith and Scott Johnson in Baghdad.

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## Asian wars, non-Asian actors

A theory of the inherent superiority of the colonial master is a sine qua non for the occupation and rule over a foreign people. As Bangladeshis, we know twice over the perniciousness of being subjects to colonial overlords exercising their divine right to be our rulers. If, as Mr. Steele observes, the idea of white supremacy is now morally repugnant to most westerners, on what alternate doctrine of supremacy might the 21st century western occupiers of Asian lands base their moral foundation upon?

MANZUR RAHMAN

FOR purely selfish reasons -- maintaining sanity, keeping alive the flickering hope for justice in human affairs, etc. -- I had tried not to delve too deeply into the details of the current "hot" wars in the Middle East during my recent holiday in Dhaka. However, glances at the headlines of the morning papers, flashes from the nightly news, in the midst of channel-surfing, and, of course, the ubiquitous web bulletins, had their cumulative effect, where it was no longer possible to ignore and still be a somewhat responsible member of the species.

In thinking about the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine I couldn't help but recall a recent article (May 2, 2006) published in The Wall Street Journal, "White Guilt and the Western Past." The author, Shelby Steele, a noted intellectual at the conservative Hoover Institution at Stanford University in the US was lamenting the insufficient ferocity used by western powers in their wars against developing countries in recent times.

The pictures in this morning's front pages of my local paper, The San Diego Union-Tribune, and The Wall Street Journal, of bombed out sites in Zifra and Beirut, respectively, should, one would think, reassure Mr. Steele about the level of ferocity being employed by western forces, even if the Iraqi casualties reported by Iraq body count, or Lancet, or the blastings of Iraqi cities and towns had previously only caused him to despair at their meekness.

But I actually find Mr. Steele's socio-political analysis of "White Guilt" extremely interesting -- though the diagnosis of meekness in the case of current western wars on Asia is hardly sustainable. According to him the lack of ferocity is due to "the world-wide collapse of

white supremacy as a source of moral authority, political legitimacy, and even sovereignty."

"This idea had organized the entire world, divided up its resources, imposed the nation-state system across the globe, and delivered the majority of the world's population into servitude and oppression. After World War II, revolutions across the globe, from India to Algeria, and from Indonesia to the American civil rights revolution, defeated the authority inherent in white supremacy, if not the idea itself."

Thus while the dogma of white supremacy has retreated into the background, the cumulative weight of the moral crimes of racism and imperialism, notes Mr. Steele, means that "if a military victory makes us look like an imperialist nation bent on occupying and raping the resources of a poor brown nation, then victory would mean less because it would have no legitimacy."

Mr. Steele's analysis of the foundation of the western colonialist project on the dogma of white supremacy is elegant and sound, and the natural consequences he suggests of such past behavior -- expiation, labouring "to prove that [westerners] have not relapsed into their group's former sinfulness" -- is logical. But not the reality.

Perhaps, in an ideal world, the species would engage in such self-correcting modifications, but for now, Mr. Steele's conclusions count, and (lamentations) remain in the creative realm of counter-factual history that some scholars are so fond of. Now, in the world we live in, evangelical Christians pack into Washington hotels to cheer on Israel's bombardment of Lebanon. Now, in the world we live in, "Christians United for Israel" draw in US political heavyweights to their rally in Washington to promote wars in Lebanon and Iran, with messages

of praise and thanks from the US and Israeli leaders.

A theory of the inherent superiority of the colonial master is a sine qua non for the occupation and rule over a foreign people. As Bangladeshis, we know twice over the perniciousness of being subjects to colonial overlords exercising their divine right to be our rulers. If, as Mr. Steele observes, the idea of white supremacy is now morally repugnant to most westerners, on what alternate doctrine of supremacy might the 21st century western occupiers of Asian lands base their moral foundation upon?

John Hagee, the leader of the aforementioned "Christians United for Israel," is happy to provide a substitute for the role left vacant by the demise of the doctrine of white supremacy, at least, for the time being, insofar as the West's wars in the Middle East are concerned. He, and his fellow evangelicals, embrace the notion of a global conflict between the Judeo-Christian West and Islam, and are mobilising people, capital, and political resources for wars across the region.

Viewing the West's new colonialism in Asia through the lens provided by Mr. Hagee, and his supporters, it is hard not to discern a certain symmetry in the response to the current occupations. The only resistance of any substance in the various occupied territories -- be it Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, or Afghanistan -- is being put up by various, mostly indigenous, Islamist groups.

To a confirmed secularist, brought up in the spirit of Liberation, the present state of affairs -- occupation by Judeo-Christianists, resistance by Islamists -- is both depressing and alarming. The replacement of racial animus for the religious, and the possibility of even greater vitriol generated by religious

fever, is demoralising and even immobilising, reducing one to merely uttering "a pox on both your houses." The heightened emotions, and the faith-imposed impossibility for compromise on either side, would seem to lead to the Judeo-Christianists' end-game of Armageddon.

Prior to leaving Dhaka, I was reading in the letters column of this newspaper passionate and, not surprisingly, anguished letters from readers, both in Bangladesh and abroad, decrying the disproportionate violence unleashed by Israel. Bangladeshis, having had the misfortune to experience two colonial overlords in recent memory, are perhaps more sensitive and empathetic to the straits of occupied peoples, and the plight of the Palestinians naturally strikes an immediate chord.

However, and unfortunately, sometimes in our (correct) condemnation of Israeli action, we add in sentiments that demonise Jews. The occupation of Palestine is wrong, and the historical mistake that is Israel, has caused undeserved pain and suffering to an entire people, and reason demands that it be condemned.

But the source of the ethnic cleansing suffered by the Palestinians is not something inherent in Jewishness but rather in the (at best, anachronistic) logic of a Zionist state in Palestine, just as we should not attribute the plight of the Tibetans to something intrinsically evil in being Chinese. When we criticise Jews qua Jews, we fall, I fear, in the same trap as the occupiers, with their self-serving dogma of their inherent superiority.

Three hundred fifty years ago, a 23-year old philosopher named Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated from the Portuguese Jewish community in Amsterdam for arguing the logical impossibility of rightfully claiming God's partiality towards the beliefs and ways of any one group, or religion, thereby ushering in the Age of Modernity. The Judeo-Christianists and Islamists among us may wish to consider adding Spinoza to their reading list.

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## Standing in the shoes of the enemy

Just as we are convinced of the goodness of our conviction, we have to recognise that our "enemies" are also convinced of the goodness of their conviction. "Legitimate grievance" is not the monopoly of any one side. In spite of the historical baggage, or perhaps because of it, both the Palestinians, and the Israelis, have claims upon it. As long as Arabs derive their pride only from fighting Israel, the Arab world is doomed. As long as Israel thinks technological and military superiority are the final arbiter, Israel is doomed.

HASAN ZILLUR RAHIM

IN Harper Lee's classic "To Kill a Mockingbird," the precocious Scout Finch recalls something her father told her once: "Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them."

I have been thinking of this fatherly wisdom, and its dawning on a daughter, ever since the breakout of the horrific fighting in Israel and Lebanon.

Have Hezbollah (and Hamas, and other warring factions, for that matter) and the Israelis ever considered standing in each others' shoes, I wondered, and walked around in them?

When a Hezbollah fighter launches a rocket toward Haifa can he imagine being in the shoes of an old woman in that city, shuffling around in her modest kitchen to prepare a meal, unaware that death is swooping down on her?

At the precise moment that an Israeli pilot presses a button to unleash a missile over Lebanon can he imagine being in the shoes of a child, in an apartment building playing with his toys, oblivious to the fact that he is about to be blown into smithereens?

I think not. There is not only a moral failing here, but also a failure of the imagination.

And as long as these failures persist, the Middle East violence we are now witnessing will continue with terrifying regularity.

But let's face it: It is supremely difficult for most of us to stand in the shoes of our enemies, much less walk

around in them.

We have neither the morality, nor the imagination for it, no matter how virtuous and mentally agile we may think ourselves to be.

Yet there is a way to get to that exalted state, a prelude if you will, and that is to engage in honest self-examination, to ask: "Before I point my finger at the 'other,' let me consider my own culpability."

Although this too is a rare trait, there are inspiring practitioners who represent a beacon of hope in our darkening world.

Consider this from Ze'ev Maoz, a professor of political science at Tel Aviv University (Haaretz, July 25):

"There's practically a holy consensus right now that the war in the North is a just war and that morality is on our side. The bitter truth must be said: this holy consensus is based on short-range selective memory, an introverted worldview, and double standards. Israel is using excessive force without distinguishing between civilian population and enemy. We invaded a sovereign state, and occupied its capital in 1982. Approximately 14,000 civilians were killed between June and September of 1982. On July 28, 1989, we kidnapped Sheikh Obeid, and on May 12, 1994, we kidnapped Mustafa Dirani. Hezbollah crossed a border that is recognised by the international community. That is true. What we are forgetting is that ever since our withdrawal from Lebanon, the Israeli Air Force has conducted photo-surveillance sorties on a daily basis in Lebanese airspace, border violations are border viola-

tions. Here, too, morality is not on our side."

Now consider this from Youssef Ibrahim, a distinguished Egyptian-born reporter (New York Sun, July 14):

"Suddenly, war is upon us in the Greater Middle East. A coalition of Arabian Muslim jihadists has set the trap. Using Israeli soldiers as hostages, the Iranian, Hamas, Muslim Brotherhood, and Syrian jihadists are enveloping the region, opening a two-front war with Israel, delivering Lebanon into Hezbollah's grip, checkmating vital American interests, and bringing Iraq to the brink of civil war. Hobbled by fifth columns of Muslim fundamentalists within, the Arabs, themselves, cannot take on Syria or Iran. If Israel goes for the Syrian jugular, Iraq will get a break from the unending stream of insurgents from the Syrian border, and Lebanon could stand up to Hezbollah."

Partisans may rant and rave, but these are bold voices that challenge the status quo and the reflexive response, compelling Jews and Muslims alike to look into their hearts to seek paths to enduring peace. Just as we are convinced of the goodness of our conviction, we have to recognise that our "enemies" are also convinced of the goodness of their conviction. "Legitimate grievance" is not the monopoly of any one side. In spite of the historical baggage, or perhaps because of it, both the Palestinians, and the Israelis, have claims upon it.

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long as Israel thinks technological and military superiority are the final arbiter, Israel is doomed.

That is why the bold voices emanating from Israel and the Arab world, stating difficult truths, are so important. They point toward a different possibility, a possibility of replacing unending warfare with meaningful peace.

Only when such voices reach critical mass can we hope for the antagonists to make the effort to stand in each others' shoes. Only then perhaps will an Israeli understand the anguish of Lebanese Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora, when he says: "Are we children of a lesser God? Is an Israeli tear-drop worth more than a drop of our blood?"

Only then perhaps will an Arab understand the grim determination of an Israeli pollster when he says: "We are fighting for our survival. This time there is no motive other than Israel's existence."

Perhaps, when that stage is reached, will peace toward enemies become a practical idea.

I leave you with the final scene from "To Kill a Mockingbird."

The Finch family, and residents of sleepy Maycomb County, Alabama, have gone through a traumatic event. Irrepressible Scout is narrating her view of the event to her father. She is particularly wonder-struck by the breakdown of a stereotype.

"They all thought it was Stoner's Boy messin' up their clubhouse and throwin' ink all over it an' they chased him 'n' never could catch him 'cause they didn't know what he looked like, an' Atticus, when they finally saw him, why he hadn't done any of those things ... Atticus, he was real nice."

His hands were under my chin, pulling up the cover, tucking it around me.

"Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them."

The author is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.