

BITTERLEMONS.ORG AND THE LEBANON WAR



LAUNCHED IN 2001 WITH U.S. SUPPORT,
THIS INNOVATIVE PROJECT PROMOTES JOINT,
WEB-BASED ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN DIALOGUE.

By Yossi Alpher

O

in the regional map that emerged in early 2006, Israel faced militant and aggressive Islamist movements on two fronts, in Lebanon and Gaza. Both Hezbollah and Hamas are combinations of militia, terrorist band and political party, the latter enfranchised by recent democratic reform schemes for the region. Backed by Iran and its client state, Syria, both reject Israel's very existence, refuse to negotiate with it, and feed on failed or weak Arab political entities.

Within a few short weeks in late June and early July of this year, both movements carried out acts of war against Israel, invading its territory to kill and abduct members of the Israel Defense Forces. The IDF responded with a prolonged air and ground counterattack. In mid-August, a ceasefire ended more than a month's fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, after which a United Nations force, known as UNIFIL II, was introduced under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701. As of early November, low-level conflict continued between Israel and Hamas, and with other militants in the Gaza Strip.

All these developments, and more, that took place during and after the war constituted the weekly fare of *bitterlemons.org*, a joint Israeli-Palestinian Web-based dialogue project launched in 2001 with considerable support from the State Department's Wye River People-to-People Program. Produced and co-edited by the author together with Ghassan Khatib (see p. 29), a former Palestinian Authority minister, *bitterlemons* is unique in several respects: for having some 100,000 well-placed readers in the region and beyond, for the coverage its articles receive from Web and print media, and for its format.

Rather than looking for agreement on the issues and risk narrowing its readership to the peace camp niche, *bitterlemons* thrives on diversity, airing views that range from Hamas to the settlers. Every week Khatib and I select a new topic of controversy; each addresses it in op-ed format, and each solicits an op-ed by a compatriot with different views. Because the two of us agree on little beyond the need for *bitterlemons* and the way to run it smoothly, the result is usually four very different views on the issue at hand.

Fallout from the War

What, then, are we trying to prove? That political antagonists can deal with their differences in a civilized manner. That is the *bitterlemons* message. In this article we shall briefly review the key strategic developments of the immediate postwar situation, then examine how *bitterlemons* dealt with them.

One important and almost immediate Palestinian-

Yossi Alpher is co-editor of the bitterlemons family of Internet publications. He is a former director of the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University and a former senior adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

related corollary to the fighting in Lebanon and Gaza was the shelving by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of his plan to withdraw unilaterally from parts of the West Bank. Israel felt it had been attacked unprovoked across two internationally recognized boundaries after having withdrawn unilaterally across them; this called into question at least the Gaza model of withdrawing both the settlements and the army without prior agreement with a viable Palestinian government.

In both the Israeli and Palestinian arenas, some of the ramifications of the Lebanon ceasefire appeared to be negative, both militarily and politically, while a few seemed to open prospects for possible new diplomatic departures.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 at least temporarily ended the fighting. After some initial international fumbling, Italian, French and other forces began to arrive in the south, and Israel was able to withdraw its troops from southern Lebanon and end its embargo of Lebanese ports. Hezbollah's leadership was contrite, Lebanon's forceful. At least in these early stages, 1701 appeared to be working.

Yet, despite the enthusiasm of some European leaders who volunteered their troops for UNIFIL II in Lebanon, 1701 is a problematic model for an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire in Gaza. In Lebanon, an international force was introduced to support a weak government that at least had good intentions, even as it feared the consequences of complying with U.N. demands to disarm Hezbollah. A similar measure in Gaza would support an even weaker — but also extremist — Hamas government that is boycotted by the international community. Nor is the geography of tiny, overpopulated Gaza conducive to deploying international forces on a large scale to create a buffer zone. Finally, non-U.N. forces, such as the U.S.-led Multinational Force and Observers on the Sinai Peninsula and the European Union monitors in Gaza, appear to have a greater chance of success in the Israel-Arab context than U.N. forces like UNIFIL, whether enhanced or not.

On the other hand, Israel's military achievements in Gaza (Qassam rocket firings were radically reduced; large numbers of militants were killed, against few Israeli casualties) and the prospect of a ceasefire and prisoner exchange agreement appeared to obviate the immediate need for anything but humanitarian international intervention there. Nor did Israeli forces reoccupy Gaza as they did, however briefly, southern Lebanon. In other words,

Holding Israel Responsible

By Ghassan Khatib

In recent years, Israeli positions and practices vis-à-vis Palestinians and the Arab-Israeli conflict at large have been responsible for the process of regional political and ideological radicalization.

Over the last few decades, Palestinians and Arabs have come a long way toward reaching a historic compromise. They have accepted the outline of an end to the conflict — recognition of Israel within the pre-1967 borders — despite the fact that this solution compromises the basic historical, political and national rights of Palestinians. In return for an end to the illegal Israeli military occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, Arab countries unanimously endorsed such a compromise at a 2002 summit.

These changing attitudes enabled Palestinians and Israelis, with the help of the international community, to begin the Madrid peace process in 1991. This culminated in the signing of the Oslo agreement two years later, which instituted interim arrangements lasting five years, to be followed by an end to the conflict on the basis of the land-for-peace formula.

Toward the end of the 1990s, particularly after the 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, significant changes occurred in the Israeli political landscape. Israeli public opinion manifested itself in positions and practices that left Palestinians and the Arabs with the sense that Israel had not yet reached the maturity required to end its illegal occupation, which has been the conflict's main provocation and the source of 39 years of humiliation and suffering for the Palestinian people.

The single most decisive aspect of ongoing Israeli policies that contribute to this shared Palestinian and Arab conclusion has been nonstop Israeli expansion of illegal Jewish settlements inside the occupied territories, alongside construction of the Israeli separation wall, which all too often has been routed through Palestinian land rather than on the 1967 borders.

Settlement expansion policies are incompatible with the peace process, because they consolidate rather than end the occupation. Nor are they easily reversed. Settlements create facts on the ground that prejudice the

borders of a two-state solution, the main vision of peace shared by those interested in ending this conflict.

The failure of the peace process culminated after the death of former Palestinian President Yasser Arafat and the election of President Mahmoud Abbas. Abu Mazen, as he is generally known, was elected by a clear majority in order to achieve through peaceful means the legitimate Palestinian aspirations of ending the occupation and attaining independence. But during the year of Abu Mazen's presidency, between Arafat's absence and the election of Hamas, he and the peace camp that he represents were completely abandoned by Israel and the United States. This further contributed to the radicalization of public opinion in Palestine and the region.

Israeli collective punishment, specifically "closure" policies and movement restrictions on people and goods between various Palestinian areas, have been recognized by the World Bank and other international agencies as being the primary cause of ongoing economic deterioration and unprecedented poverty. Many independent studies have tied political radicalization to increases in poverty.

But this Palestinian account is far less liable to reach the eyes and ears of those interested in achieving a balanced understanding of the conflict. As such, *bitterlemons.org* has created a unique opportunity for both concerned individuals and groups outside the region to gain greater understanding. Its contributors write and are interviewed separately by each side's editor, allowing them to present their views as complete viewpoints, rather than as reactions to the ideas of others. As such, perspectives are presented without compromise or the approval of the "other side." This is the truly unprecedented aspect of *bitterlemons*, one made possible by the landless arena of cyberspace and the commitment of its readers and creators.

Ghassan Khatib, co-editor of the bitterlemons family of Internet publications, is a former Palestinian Authority Cabinet minister. He is a lecturer in cultural studies at Birzeit University and director of the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center.

from Israel's standpoint an internationally mandated ceasefire was not needed in Gaza, and in any case probably would not work even as well as in Lebanon because of the ideological positions of the Hamas government.

Broadly speaking, it was not at all clear whether a war fought by Israel in Lebanon to restore its deterrent profile actually did so. This could have negative repercussions for the way Palestinian militants view Israel. The most obvious example is the failure of Resolution 1701 to return Israel's two abducted soldiers from Lebanon; this hardly boded well for a resolution of the hostage affair in Gaza on terms congenial to Israel. More important was the warning by senior Israeli security officials that Hamas would now redouble its efforts to obtain a rocket arsenal similar to that deployed so effectively by Hezbollah in Lebanon. This put the focus on Egypt, which has undertaken to stop arms smuggling into Gaza from the Sinai Peninsula.

Yet Palestinian militants in Gaza were also aware that Israel could do far more damage to the Gazan infrastructure than it had actually done. They expressed apprehension lest Israel "take out its frustrations" from its latest Lebanon experience by stepping up its attacks on Gaza, where the humanitarian situation was disastrous. All this appeared to have raised hope for forming some sort of unity or technocratic government in the Palestinian Authority that might conceivably restore lines of communication between the PA and Israel and the West.

Cause for Optimism?

Optimists hoped that a successful prisoner exchange deal with Hamas would pave the way for a Palestinian unity government that increased stability and moderation, maintained a ceasefire and ushered in a peace process. But this was hardly a necessary chain of events. Equally, if not more, likely, stalemate and anarchy in Palestine could generate new military and terrorist escalation or the collapse of the Palestinian Authority — eventualities that would benefit neither Palestinians nor Israelis.

Some on the Israeli left and in the Arab world called for the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference to be reconvened, or some other multilateral process invoked, as a means of using the outcome of this war to leverage a renewed political process. But Madrid followed an American-led military triumph that ostensibly ushered in a regional Pax Americana, which in turn helped generate a peace process. In contrast, the United States' involvement in Iraq was not seen as bringing stability to the region, and

the Lebanon conflict ended without a decisive victory for either side.

Certainly no new American initiative appeared likely until after the November 2006 midterm elections. Even then, Washington's heavy commitments regarding Iraq and Iran, and the Bush administration's reluctance to engage intensively in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, appear to preclude a major U.S. move. On the other hand, the United Nations, the European Union and the moderate Arab states all appeared to be increasingly resolved to try to do something after Lebanon on the Palestinian front as well. The March 2002 Arab League peace plan was revived and Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan all evinced a desire to facilitate movement on the Israeli-Palestinian front as a means of leveraging better Arab-Western-Israeli coordination against the looming Iranian threat that many believe fostered Hezbollah's performance in Lebanon. The United States, part of the Middle East Quartet (along with the European Union, Russia and the United Nations), supported this general direction.

Israel appears to be increasingly comfortable with such initiatives, and to prefer an international presence on its borders with troublesome Islamist neighbors to renewing its military occupation — an option now rejected out of hand by the Israeli public. Until recently, few in Israel would have wished for an enhanced UNIFIL in Lebanon. Two years ago, few would have imagined that Egypt and the E.U. would play their current constructive role in Gaza. Strong doubts about the efficacy of occupying enemy territory and a growing readiness to accept international intervention are two very dramatic recent strategic departures for Israel.

Exploring the Issues

Bitterlemons explored these issues week after week throughout the conflict and beyond. Thus, in discussing regional ramifications of the conflict, Professor Asher Susser of Tel Aviv University wrote on July 24 that "the weakening of the Arab state has raised the profile and relevance of primordial, sectarian and religious identities, coupled with the rise of non-state actors throughout the region. The likes of Osama bin Laden, Abu Misab al-Zarqawi and his successors, and Hezbollah and Hamas, the latter now in some mode of control of the non-state of Palestine, have created a unique brand of chaotic statelessness."

Professor George Giacaman of the Palestinian Insti-

tute for the Study of Democracy countered that the Palestinian reaction to Lebanon was “the determined attempt to reach internal [Palestinian] agreement on a package deal with the Israelis involving release of the captured soldier and an exchange of prisoners at a later date, plus a ceasefire from both sides. [This] ... seems to be the first consequence of the Lebanon escalation: first to separate the Lebanese issue from the Palestinian issue; and, second, to resolve the Gaza situation independently from the Lebanese situation.”

Looking at the fate of the Palestinian Authority in light of the war, Professor Mustafa Abu Sway of al-Quds University in East Jerusalem argued on Aug. 7 that “a growing number of Palestinian voices are calling for an end to the existence of the interim PA itself in order to force Israel to assume its responsibilities as an occupier.” Professor Gerald Steinberg of Bar-Ilan University responded with a radically different formula: “Until basic changes in Palestinian self-governance take place and a more capable and pragmatic leadership emerges,

de facto [international] trusteeship is likely to continue.”

The applicability of the international force decided on by the U.N. for Lebanon has also been the subject of a *bitterlemons* debate. Palestinian law professor Camille Mansour asserted on Sept. 18 that “any deployment of an international force would be largely impossible in the absence of political negotiations,” while former Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami responded that, to the contrary, “the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will have to come from the international community, or there will be no solution at all.”

The rest of the Arab world commented on the war and its ramifications in the virtual pages of *bitterlemons-international*, Alpher and Khatib’s companion Webzine that pits diverse views on broader Middle East issues from throughout the region against each other. Egypt’s Abdel Monem Said Aly, who heads the Al Ahram Strategic Studies Center, noted with satisfaction on Sept. 14 that Cairo had contributed to formulating an “ideal conclusion to the [Lebanon] crisis,” which was to have “neither win-

The Jannette Embassy Plan

Overseas Insurance for Personal Auto & Contents Coverage

Since 1969, the Jannette Embassy Plan has provided dependable coverage to thousands of Foreign Service Personnel throughout the world. Our plan provides U.S. and Canadian personnel working at embassies and consulates insurance protection for their personal property, including automobiles and household effects.

Each policy is backed by the expertise and dedicated support of our customer service team. To learn more about the specific coverages offered by the plan, please visit our website at www.jannetteintl.com.



Your Reliable Choice

The Jannette Embassy Plan

Administered by Clements International

One Thomas Circle NW, 8th Floor, Washington D.C. 20005
(800) 256-5141 (202) 478-6595 Fax (202) 466.9069
jannetteplan@clements.com www.jannetteintl.com

WORLDWIDE COVERAGE

Fire, theft comprehensive and collision protection are available at foreign posts

U.S. AUTO LIABILITY

Available for short-term on home leave, change of assignment, and new auto purchase prior to foreign departure. This coverage must be issued in combination with an Jannette Embassy Plan

FOREIGN LIABILITY

Contact post for compliance with local laws, excess liability limits over local liability coverage

PERSONAL COVERAGE

Household goods, transit, valuables, personal liability and life insurance

EMPLOYEE ASSOCIATION INSURANCE

Including directors and officers

F O C U S

ners nor losers.” Professor Soli Ozel of Bilgi University in Turkey explained why the government in Ankara opted to contribute forces to UNIFIL II despite the public’s misgivings. Nawaf Obaid of the Saudi National Security Assessment Project acknowledged that “the actual extent of the damage is now being realized, as is the fact that Hezbollah will not be able to rebuild what they have promised. And the apology by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah for the war was a big change in the perception that [it] had actually been victorious.”

Lebanese think-tank director Oussama Safa, writing in late August, appeared to agree, noting “Hezbollah has, in reality, given up a major part of its ability to maneuver.” A month later another Lebanese academic, Habib C. Malik, addressed the possibility of some sort of peace process emerging from the war and noted that it really depended on more distant issues. As he wrote, “A Syrian-Israeli peace is a function of the peaceful resolution of the current impasse with Iran over the nuclear issue,” while a Lebanese-Israeli process still depended, at least in part, on

Syria. But Damascus, according to Bassma Kodmani, a Syrian who serves as executive director of the Arab Reform Initiative, was preoccupied elsewhere: “The priority today for Damascus is to be rid of the pressure from the international community regarding the Hariri investigation.”

That Saudis, Iranians, Lebanese and Syrians all contribute to the *bitterlemons* project alongside Israelis and Palestinians testifies both to the growing readiness of all parties in the Middle East to debate their views openly — and to the power of the Internet to break down “traditional” barriers of enmity and suspicion. While Khatib and I have no agreed plan for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we have found a useful formula for expanding and deepening the discussion of both causes and possible solutions. A growing number of Web practitioners who deal with the Middle East, from Syrians to Americans, have begun to copy the *bitterlemons* format for promoting free and open discussion among rivals and enemies — a very necessary step before the region’s pressing problems can be resolved. ■

Get Your Finances In Line With SDFCU Online

You can depend on State Department Federal Credit Union for the ultimate in security and convenience with SDFCU Online banking. This FREE service allows you to access your Credit Union accounts via the Internet anytime, from anywhere in the world. Just go to www.sdfcu.org and click the SDFCU Online logo. You can conduct the following Credit Union business:

- ▶ Transfer funds between accounts
- ▶ View your account history over the last 15 months
- ▶ View and pay your credit card bill online
- ▶ Check current account balances
- ▶ View check images
- ▶ Pay Bills and much more!*

See just how easy SDFCU Online is! Visit us at www.sdfcuonline.org and check out the easy demo!

If you’re interested in becoming a member of State Department Federal Credit Union, give our Member Service Center a call at **703-706-5000**, or outside the D.C. Metro area at **800-296-8882**. You can also email us at sdfcu@sdfcu.org.

SDFCU Online puts us at your service, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whenever you need us the most. Sign up today!

*The Bill Payer service is available at no charge for Capital Club members. Otherwise, there is a low monthly fee of \$3.95 for unlimited transactions.

