

# The $n$ days war

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24 July 2006

The war in Lebanon and Northern Israel is not the same old ‘Jews hate the Arabs and the Arabs hate the Jews’ song, but a different matter entirely. Since many people seem to think Lebanon is being bombed over the kidnapping of two individuals, it’s worth taking a look around the region to see the situation in full perspective.

First, the usual caveats: I am a Jew and my family has lived on the land that is now Israel for a century. I have family in Haifa; for those of you who don’t remember the names of all those towns, that is the town that is now under occasional rocket attack by Hezbollah forces from Lebanon.

I believe I am better read than most regarding issues in the Middle East, but my authority is decidedly not in Foreign Policy. I expect you as a reader to recognize what of the below is historical statement of fact and what is informed speculation about motivations.

## Infighting

Let us begin our discussion of Israel with a discussion of everybody else. As you are surely aware, there are two main subsets of Islam: Sunni and Shiite. For the usual reasons that seem arbitrary to everybody who isn’t involved, the two sides have been in a power struggle for a few centuries now. [Somebody tell me again why Catholic Christians and Protestant Christians bicker so much?] On the Shiite team, we primarily have Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. On the Sunni team, we primarily have Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Hamas. Iraq used to be Sunni-run, and is now run by nobody. For your convenience, here it is in tabular form:

<b>Shiite team</b>	<b>Sunni team</b>
Iran (team captain)	Saudi Arabia (team captain)
Syria	Jordan
Lebanon	Egypt
Russia (funding)	USA (funding)
Hezbollah (hired guns)	Hamas (hired guns)

The United States is basically on the Sunni team. The reader is no doubt aware of the military and funding dealings between the USA and Saudi Arabia. Does the fact that Iran is on the opposing team from Saudi Arabia influence

the fact that Iran is a member of the ‘Axis of Evil’? Who knows, but it puts the USA more strongly on the Sunni team. If you are concerned about Iran’s nuclear capabilities, then for the next few months, you will be rooting for the Sunni team as well.

By the way, the USA assists Israel so it can fight Hamas, and it also assists Saudi Arabia, who funds Hamas so it can fight Israel. Hilarity ensues.

As another aside, Chechnya is on the Sunni team. That puts Russia squarely on the Shiite team, and the reader will recall the endless Iran-Iraq war, which was often cast as a Shiite-Sunni war or as a USA-Russia proxy war.

Finally, are there more nuances than those I’ve discussed here? Yup. Iran is as Persian as it is Muslim, Syria’s government is secular and only semi-Shiite, and so on. Every last country I’m discussing has a populace that is in some ways politically divided. But we have enough to deal with, and the alliances above are well-established.

## Israel’s place

Both the Sunni team and the Shiite team hate Israel. Since Israel is backed by the USA, and thanks to the USA’s new Christian crusade against the Islamic world, the USA is not getting much love from the Muslim on the street either. But since the USA has cash, diplomatic relations with the USA tend to be polite.

Israel’s goal, as a nation, is to continue to exist. Among its populace, there is debate about the exact boundaries of Israel, which I am not going to touch here.<sup>1</sup> But one would be hard-pressed to believe that more than a fringe in Israel wants continuing war.

This month, Israel’s goal has a central focus: Iran’s nukes. As above, the goals of the USA, Israel, and the Sunni team is to make sure Iran does not attain the nuclear capabilities it brags that it is close to achieving.

## The invasion of Lebanon

In this context, we come to Hezbollah’s capture of two Israeli soldiers (and killing of several more), enacted from within Lebanon’s borders. Hezbollah’s hope was a ‘hostage exchange’ for three prisoners in Israeli jails. Israel has done many such exchanges in the past, so this expectation was not out of line. But instead, Israel responded by embarking upon its military campaign on Lebanon.

Let us cast aside any belief that Israel is doing this over two hostages. That was the excuse and no more. Rather, this is the beginning of a concerted effort against the Sunni team. Iran just recently made it clear that it was soon to be a nuclear threat, and Hezbollah’s actions have been the first event since then to give Israel an opening to try to check the Shiite team.

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<sup>1</sup>With regards to Israel’s boundaries, the relevant parties are well on their way to finally cementing the 1967 borders (in some areas, literally so). Are they the Ethical and Correct borders? I dunno, but I do know that the more people resist this political inevitability, the more deaths we’ll see.

Back up to 1981, when Iraq was the one with nuclear pretensions. In “Operation Opera”, the Israeli army sent in 14 jets, heavily damaged the relevant reactor, and literally got all the jets back in time for dinner.

Our ideal, of course, is nonviolence and peace all around. But given the realities of the world, something like Operation Opera would be the best outcome for those of us who don’t want people killed but also don’t want to see Iran as a nuclear power. This is especially true if we compare it with the thought of a USA invasion, since the USA has no reputation for regard for non-uniformed life, and it has a reputation from Iraq and other past wars of having no ability to deal with the sort of guerrilla warfare that the Israeli army sees literally every day.

Both Hamas and Hezbollah are military forces whose sole purpose is the destruction of Israel. This is not Jewish paranoia, but the explicit mission statements of both organizations. That is, both the Shiite and Sunni sides have hired a militia to keep rockets pointed at Israeli cities. Is it morally correct that both Sunnis and Shiites fund organizations that aim to destroy Israel? We can talk about the question of whether Israel should exist another day, but in the context here, Hamas and Hezbollah are the Sunni and Shiite teams’ way of keeping Israel out of their hair.

I bet you never thought you’d read this, but *Israel can be a balancing, pacifying force in the Middle East*. This is not by being a common enemy to the Shiite and Sunni teams, but by demonstrating that it is capable of actions that would prevent an all-out war or major shift in balance between the two major teams. But Hezbollah’s position at Israel’s border makes it difficult for Israel to exert balancing forces on the Shiite team, and Hamas’s position makes it difficult to exert balancing forces on the Sunni team—that’s why Hezbollah and Hamas get funding.

Thus, the first step for a potential Operation Operan would be to eliminate Hezbollah’s rockets in range of Israeli cities.

Politics is one of those games that is more about what could be done than what actually happens. After all, the USA had decades of cold war with Russia without a single nuclear missile being fired, and if Iran gets nukes, they won’t be firing them as soon as they’re assembled either. Similarly, Israel’s current efforts to dislodge the Shiite team’s rocket-molls does not mean that it will be bombing Iraq’s three known nuclear facilities by the end of the year. But by creating possibilities for Israel to take more extensive action, the diplomats have a stronger position from which to talk Iran down. This is especially the case now that the USA has blown every last resource in Iraq, and can’t credibly commit to even considering such action itself.

## Proportion

There is some debate as to whether Lebanon wants Hezbollah operating within its borders, or is simply tolerating forces pushed upon it by its more powerful teammates. The majority opinion in Lebanon does not support Hezbollah. The other day, President Bush was caught saying “See the irony is what they need

to do is get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this shit and it's over." Setting aside his lack of gravitas, he is absolutely correct. From an interview in Al Jazeera: "[...] Hezbollah is not pursuing a Lebanese agenda. Its actions serve the agenda of Syria and Iran." However, Iran shares no borders with Israel, and Syria has a ceasefire with Israel which it has judiciously respected. As a result, Hezbollah's operations are running out of the weakest (and potentially most reluctant) member of the Shiite team.

If most of the borders in the Middle East were all erased, and we just had Israel, Shiitelandia, and Sunnilandia, Israel's attack of Shiitelandia would be harder to argue with. But there are an awful lot of borders in that little swatch of land, and in this framework, Lebanon and its people are being royally shafted—both by Syria and Iran, who put Lebanon in harm's way by funding Hezbollah's state-within-a-state, and by Israel, which is finally dropping the bombs nobody is surprised it is dropping.

Is Israel's military action "disproportionate"? I'm not happy that Lebanon is being bombed extensively, and am not going to dismiss several hundred deaths as just collateral damage. With respect to the kidnapping of two soldiers, its actions are absolutely disproportionate—but it's not about that. With respect to aggression by the government of Lebanon—the usual 'Arabs hate the Jews' half of the story—it is not so out-of-scale, since Lebanon is not entirely innocent to Hezbollah's rocket attacks. But the Lebanese government is not as active in funding Hezbollah as its teammates. As the opening to a (hopefully brief) campaign to eliminate the Shiite team's nuclear aspirations, Israel's actions start to look a lot more reasonable. It may be disproportionate, but there exist many real possibilities, such as a US invasion of Iran, that would make it look piddling in comparison.