

Apocalypse Two: The Wars In 2006 And 2023

By Ambassador Fernando Albarez
 Amb. Alberto M. Fernandez by this steadfastness against Israel, by the new weapons and tactics, by the unexpected losses among the Israelis. The Arab masses cheered the heroes and the martyrs as a wave of enthusiasm and popularity engulfed the "Resistance" fighters. Many authoritarian Arab regimes were frightened by this outpouring of passion in their streets and sought to appease or divert popular feeling. But this was not October 2023 but rather July 2006. As the *New York Times* reported at the time, "Tide of Arab Opinion Turns to Support for Hezbollah."



Israel and Hamas have clashed many times in and around the Gaza Strip but in many ways, the current Hamas War with Israel, launched on October 7, 2023, by a murderous invasion of the 1948 internationally recognized Israeli border may resemble more the 2006 Hezbollah conflict than previous Gaza conflicts.

Both wars came years after Israel had withdrawn from Arab territories, from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005. Both of them began with cross border raids, by Hezbollah and Hamas, aimed at killing Israelis and taking hostages.

Both situations are – so far – eerily similar. An initial terrorist strike provokes an Israeli response which grows in intensity over time, reports of innocents being killed by Israelis soon dominate Arab public opinion which sways from early exultation at striking Israel to anger at Arab casualties. Western support, initially leaning toward Israel, deteriorates over time. In both situations, Qatar's Al-Jazeera plays a key role, cheerleading for Hezbollah then and Hamas now. Having struck first and drawn blood, both Arab terrorist groups call for a ceasefire before Israel's response is complete.

In the 2006 War, Hezbollah fired what was at the time an unprecedented 4,228 rockets, more than 100 a day in the 34-day war, raining down on many Israeli cities, especially in the northern part of the country. Hezbollah was well prepared for an Israeli ground offensive inside Lebanon and used tunnels in its counter-attacks and was well equipped with night-vision goggles, flak jackets, and modern anti-armor weapons. At the time, it was clear that Hezbollah was much more "advanced" and better equipped than Hamas.

In 2006, Israel did not have the Iron Dome air defense system which only came into service in 2011. Hamas has also upgraded in the intervening years become, militarily, more like Hezbollah. It has its own extensive tunnel system and has planned for Israeli ground attacks into Gaza. It is far better equipped than it was in the past. In 2006, rockets were laboriously smuggled in from Iran into Gaza. Today, smuggling is supplemented by a local arms industry in Gaza which includes homegrown rocket and drone factories copying Iranian models.

The 2006 Hezbollah War was, at best, a draw which was not a good result for Israel. Hezbollah would be feted by the (mostly Sunni) Arab masses for years until its halo would be tarnished when it intervened decisively on behalf of Syrian dictator Bashar Al-Assad, mass murderer of Sunni Muslims, in that country's civil war.

Much is similar in the two conflicts but the differences are massive in four important ways.

Firstly, and most important of all for Israel, the damage already inflicted on Israelis, especially in the murdering of civilians, is far worse than in 2006. In that war, 44 civilians were killed (19 of them were Israeli Arabs) by Hamas. As of October 20, 2023 most of the 1,400 Israelis killed, an unprecedented number, have been civilians. Ten times as many Israelis have already been killed in the Hamas War than in the entirety of the Hezbollah War and many of them killed with a savagery never seen before by Israelis outside of an ISIS video. A sense of Israeli invulnerability and

longstanding faith in an Israeli intelligence and security establishment has been seemingly shattered.

Secondly, because of the sheer carnage, it would be a disaster for Israel if the 2023 War would end as the 2006 War finished, with the adversary still in power, bloodied but unbowed and enjoying the adulation of the howling mob. While no doubt many Israelis consider that the world changed on October 7 in many grim and bitter ways, Israel is now presented with an existential dilemma it may have wished to avoid under different circumstances. It must prevail and has to be seen to prevail in Gaza if it is to avoid even worse consequences in short order from a gloating regime in Iran.

Thirdly, in contrast to 2006, Iran's network of militias, terror groups, and death squads is far more developed than it was in the past. In 2006, the Houthis did not rule Yemen, Assad wanted a peaceful border with Syria, and Iranian-backed militias in Iraq were far smaller and less well-equipped than today. Now all these groups, all with their own Iranian-supplied missiles and drones, have a much more favorable position in their own countries and are better coordinated. And while Lebanon as a country has collapsed compared to 17 years ago, Hezbollah is better armed and has many more rockets, more precise and modern, than the Katyushas of 2006. The neighborhood today is far deadlier and less forgiving of weakness. This does not mean that the other parts of Iran's network, especially Hezbollah, will definitely intervene in the Hamas War but the temptation to actually use this network to advance Iran's interests and "rescue" Hamas will be very real.

Finally, a major difference in comparison to 2006 is the development of a pro-Hamas Fifth Column in the West. Arab enthusiasm toward anti-Israeli champions is nothing new. Remember the pro-Saddam Hussein frenzy in 1991 when he fired SCUD missiles at Israel. The Arab masses rallying around an anti-Israel strongman or group – Nasser, Arafat, Saddam, Nasrallah, and now Hamas – is nothing new. What is new is the rapid growth and influence of the anti-colonialist left in the West, combining the old radicals with the new – leftist race warriors in academia and culture and the far-left of the social democratic part of the political spectrum marching in sync with Islamist and Global South migrant activism. This Red-Green alliance not only wants an immediate ceasefire but actually blesses Hamas's bloody actions as legitimate. Despite the Jewish State's actual diversity on the ground, Israel is, for the Leftist-Islamist clique, too Western, too white, too much like the United States (the main villain). This is a burgeoning challenge as much for Israel's Western allies as it is for Israel.

History can illuminate but is not a perfect guide for the future. The beginnings of the 2006 Hezbollah War and 2023 Hamas War are striking in their similarity. But for Israel to not just survive but to prevail, the ending has to be very different.

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