



## CONSEQUENCES OF THE 2006 WAR FOR ISRAEL

Moshe Arens\*

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*This article discusses how Israel's self- image and its image in the Middle East has changed as a result of the recent events—including the unilateral disengagement, and most recently the 2006 Lebanon War—and the consequences for Israel.*

Are we entering an era of a new Middle East?

The term "new Middle East" lost its charm in the last decade. Shimon Peres began talking about a new Middle East over a decade ago following the Oslo Accords. The expectations and hopes that were expressed during the Accords have faded over the years.

A few years ago, we began thinking in terms of a new Middle East once again, but in a completely different direction. This was following the glowing victories of the U.S. Army against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and in Iraq. This was also the result of our achievements against Palestinian terror, against the suicide bombers, and due to the Syrians being forced to leave Lebanon. This may have led us to believe that this was a new chapter in the Middle East. It appears, however, that such hopes and expectations also faded over the past few years.

The United States is stuck in a very complicated situation in Iraq. At the same time, Israel went through a second Lebanon War. A war ending in unconditional surrender, such as what we witnessed in World War II, is not the sort of thing we expect to see in a war in the Middle East. Victory or defeat in these wars is all in the eyes of the beholder; it is a matter of

perception. The perception in the Arab and Muslim world has already been mentioned; they believe that Israel was defeated by a few hundred Hizballah fighters, not by a big, strong army comparable to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Some 1.25 million residents were forced to evacuate their homes in the North of Israel or to sit in bomb shelters for over a month.

I believe that if the Israeli public were polled, the majority would conclude that we were defeated. In my opinion, this perception has serious ramifications for our future in the coming years. If we cannot change this perception and rehabilitate Israel's and the IDF's image, we will likely be faced with very difficult problems, problems for which it will be difficult to find solutions.

I feel it would be correct to say that we are now at the beginning of a new Middle East in one regard. Since the second Lebanon War, there has been a malaise in Israel. There is a sadness and lack of faith in its leadership, at almost every level; in its political leadership but also in its military leadership. For those of you who are old enough to remember all of the years of Israel's existence, we cannot remember a period of such low national morale. This is something new in the Middle East. This isn't just something we feel, rather it is also

projected to the outside, which others are aware of.

Israeli morale is like mercury, it is up and down, and it could still change. This instability is perhaps what characterizes the entire Middle East. Only two years ago, the current prime minister, Ehud Olmert, before becoming prime minister, said in a speech in New York, "We are tired of fighting, tired of defeating our enemies." This was expressed at a time when Israel was at a great advantage, the success against the Palestinian suicide bombers, an achievement that a few years earlier wasn't believed to be attainable.

There was a period when there were terror attacks every day, and sometimes even two or three in one day. Mothers were afraid to send their children to school; people were afraid to take the bus. This shows how our actions have led to an improvement in the situation over the last three or four years. The whole world was impressed by this achievement.

However, it appears that this achievement led to too much self-confidence. It led to a sort of feeling that from now on we will take matters into our own hands, we will determine the borders ourselves, we will uproot the settlements, and the State of Israel will be—as Olmert stated a year ago—"a fun place to live." Some among the Israeli public had faith in this statement. Sharon and Olmert's public relations people designed the election campaign and told the people that they should have hope. "It will be a fun place to live. "We won't wait for the Palestinians. We will determine the borders ourselves. We will build a security fence. They can do whatever they want on the other side, and living on our side will be fun." This was not too long ago. Since then, everything has been turned upside down.

It appears that it was the achievement against Palestinian terror that led to the feeling that unilateral steps were necessary and that resulted in the unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip, the uprooting of the settlements. This led to Hamas' rise in power and to the Qassam rockets being fired into Israel. Some say that there were Qassams before the disengagement as well, and that one should not blame the disengagement, but what we have today is not what was then. In some areas, in particular in northern Gaza, where we evacuated three settlements, we brought the Qassam launchers closer to their targets—all the way to the Ashkelon suburbs. At least for now, this has led to a situation we still have not succeeded in dealing with, and the government response to this is generally that there no magic solution. In other words, we are telling the residents of Sderot, there is nothing that can be done, so you better get used to it.

During the first stage in the Israeli-Arab conflict, we were up against an enemy whose goal was to wipe out Israel. During the second stage, there was a great deal of talk about how the existence of the State of Israel should be accepted; the only question was along what borders, what lines. There was a lot of talk about a two-state solution. We might assume that at least some of the speakers in the Arab world meant this. Now, however, we are again presented with an enemy who speaks of unlimited objectives in regards to Israel, and also as regards the Muslim conflict with the Western world.

We are witnessing a change that is also the result of what happened in the 2006 Lebanon War and that has affected the Arab Israeli population as well. These Arabs have Israeli citizenship, which leads us to believe that at least some, even many, have accepted Israel's existence. These

individuals may also respect this democratic framework and the advantages of living under such a framework. Lately, we have been witnessing expressions by some Arab citizens that indicate that they have not completely come to terms with the State of Israel as we know it. This has been expressed in declarations by those who claim to be the spokespersons of Israel's Arab citizens. However, I don't think they speak for everybody.

There is a delay in our perception of some of our leaders and our understanding of the reality. They continue to speak of the need for a political horizon, the need for political action, and even the need for talks with the Hamas. It seems that people simply aren't ready or are hesitant to look at reality as it is and to reach the right conclusions.

What conclusions can be drawn and what are the lessons to be learned from this? At least some of the Israeli public following the events of this past year have drawn the conclusion that unilateral withdrawal is not a formula for progress or for improving the situation. If this is true, then this is a dramatic change for most of the Israeli public, who just a year ago believed that this was the way and who also voted for this in the last elections. The unilateral withdrawals bring the terror closer to us. It began with the unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. The unilateral withdrawal from the security zone in Lebanon also involved the betrayal of our allies, the South Lebanese Army. These allies were people who fought and believed in a free Lebanon, people who suffered great losses in this war, people who were opposed to Syrian control in Lebanon. Then one day, we simply abandoned them. We witness daily the results of the unilateral withdrawal in Gaza, including Hamas' rise to power and the Qassams.

It is possible that these conclusions will be the opposite of some of those in the international arena, the American arena. The Iraq Study Group (ISG) headed by James Baker actually proposed that we raise a white flag. We must talk to the Iranians; we must talk to the Syrians; Israel has to make additional concessions; this is the way to get out of the situation we are in.

The challenge Israel is faced with now is to change its existing image in the Arab world, in the Muslim world, that Israel is retreating. We must change this image and take steps and make the necessary responses in order to succeed in restoring our past image, the image that the IDF is undefeatable. The goal is to create a situation so that we can prevent war, because we are capable of deterring this. There is no doubt that our deterrence was badly damaged as a result of the events of the second Lebanon War. This must be changed.

*\*Prof. Moshe Arens has served as the Israeli defense minister, foreign minister, was chairperson of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, and is a former Israeli Ambassador to the United States.*