



“Evidence of growing divisions within Lebanon is not necessarily good news for the effectiveness of Israel’s deterrence.”

## Lebanese Identity and Israeli Security in the Shadows of the 2006 War

SHIBLEY TELHAMI

When Israel launched its major assault on the Shiite militia Hezbollah and other Lebanese targets in July 2006, following a Hezbollah attack that left several Israeli soldiers dead and two taken hostage, one presumed objective was to reestablish Israeli deterrence. The government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was elected on a platform calling for unilateral Israeli withdrawal from parts of the West Bank following a similar un-negotiated withdrawal from Gaza. Israel had also pulled out of Lebanon before the Lebanon War, without an agreement in 2000. But the thought that these withdrawals would bring about Israeli security was already evaporating in the Israeli body politic, as Israeli-Palestinian violence in Gaza escalated and as militant Palestinian groups launched brazen attacks, including an operation against an Israeli military post that ended in the abduction of an Israeli soldier. The Israeli reaction to that June 25 attack was a large-scale targeting not only of the Islamist governing party Hamas, but also of Palestinian infrastructure such as an electricity generating plant.

Thus, when Hezbollah launched its raid in July, the Israeli government’s primary plan for disengagement from the Palestinian territories was already in trouble. Perhaps more important, Israelis, especially in the military establishment, were worried that deterrence—that is, a reluctance to provoke Israel, based on the fear of military punishment—which the Israelis had managed to project toward their neighbors over decades had significantly eroded.

No doubt there will continue to be debates about the fact that both Prime Minister Olmert

and Defense Minister Amir Peretz were leaders without major military experience, and whether this figured into what many regarded as an over-reaction in Lebanon. The fact that the Israelis were already concerned about the buildup of Hezbollah’s military capabilities and had prepared contingency plans to attack these capabilities was also seen by many, especially in the Arab world, as evidence that Israel was not merely reacting to Hezbollah’s July 12 raid. Since the war, there have been debates within Israel about the lack of preparation, poor intelligence, and unwise decisions throughout the 34-day conflict with Lebanon. Indeed, an Israeli commission has been formed to investigate the war’s mistakes.

None of this changes the core point, which is that Israel strongly believed that at the end of the day, the war would enhance Israeli deterrence against the emergence of threats, not only from Lebanon but also from other countries in the region. There will continue to be debate about the state of Israel’s deterrence in the aftermath of the 2006 war. It is clear, however, that deterrence depends on two critical factors: the structure of the entity being deterred, and the perceptions that constituents of that entity hold with regard to Israeli power.

A public opinion survey that I conducted in Lebanon with Zogby International, between November 11 and 16, 2006, highlights the impact of popular opinion on perceptions of deterrence and prospects for peace between Lebanon and Israel. It also underscores the depth of divisions within Lebanon, which in turn affects prospects for political stability.

### STABILITY AND DETERRENCE

Before turning to the results of the survey, it is worth considering the relationship between political stability and deterrence. Historically, the Israeli

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military, assumed to be one of the most powerful in the world, has managed not only to win wars against conventional Arab armies, but also to deter Arab states. In fact, since the 1973 war, no Arab state has launched major attacks against Israel. A good example of this is Syria. It continues to have a strong military, and Israel continues to occupy its Golan Heights. Syria was unable to win the return of these occupied territories through negotiations in the 1990s, and it has not engaged in talks with Israel since. But clearly the Syrians have been deterred by Israel's superior power.

Israeli deterrence has not been effective, however, against non-state groups, especially those that are dispersed and not highly centralized. In general, non-state groups thrive in an environment where state central authority is weak. The United States' involvement in Iraq is a case in point. America's military was able to rapidly and handily defeat the centralized army of Saddam Hussein. But, even with the world's most powerful military, the best equipment and training, and the investment of hundreds of billions of dollars, the sole superpower has been unable to quell an insurgency that flourishes in the absence of a strong central authority.

In the Palestinian and Lebanese cases, it is also clear that the weakening of central security forces has allowed militant groups to thrive. In particular, Israel's focus on undermining the institutions of the Palestinian Authority of Yasser Arafat following the collapse of negotiations in 2000 has been

an important reason for the growth of the military power of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other splinter militant groups. Similarly, the push for Syria's rapid military withdrawal from Lebanon—without empowering an alternative security apparatus that could defend the interests of the state—undoubtedly empowered and emboldened Hezbollah. To be sure, while Syrian forces were in Lebanon, Syria was able to use Hezbollah as a lever against Israel. Nevertheless, Syrian influence had some restraining effect on the types of operations that Hezbollah carried out, because Syria sought to avoid Israeli retaliation against its own forces.

In short, instability in a target state is the enemy of effective deterrence. Seen from this perspective, evidence of growing divisions within Lebanon is not necessarily good news for the effectiveness of Israel's deterrence.

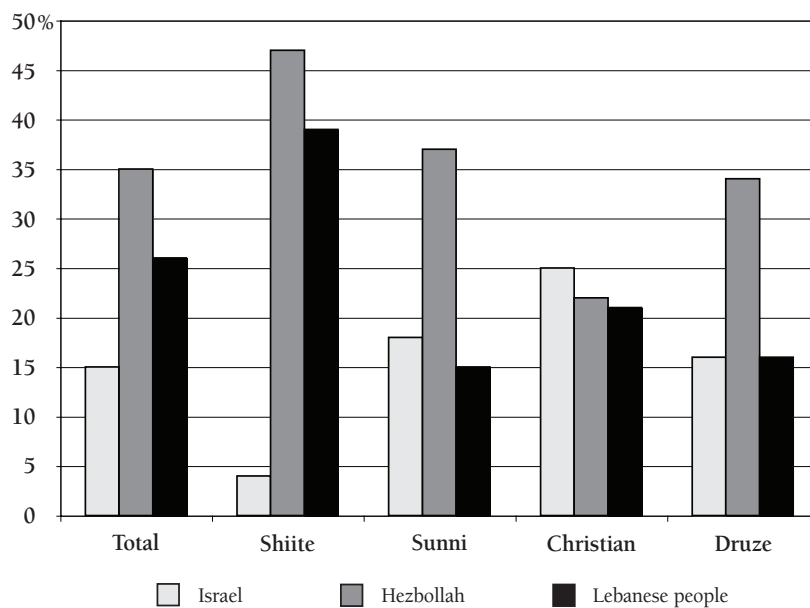
### WINNERS AND LOSERS

One of the central disputes following the Lebanon war of 2006 focused on who won and who lost. This even became an issue in American political discourse, as the Bush administration quickly declared that Israel had won—hardly a surprising conclusion given the administration's close involvement in the Israeli effort in that war. The Israeli public and press had mixed interpretations, but the Israeli government also declared victory. In Lebanon and much of the Arab world, on the other hand, the discourse clearly reflected a sense of triumph by Hezbollah, which mobilized hundreds of thousands of its supporters to celebrate “victory.”

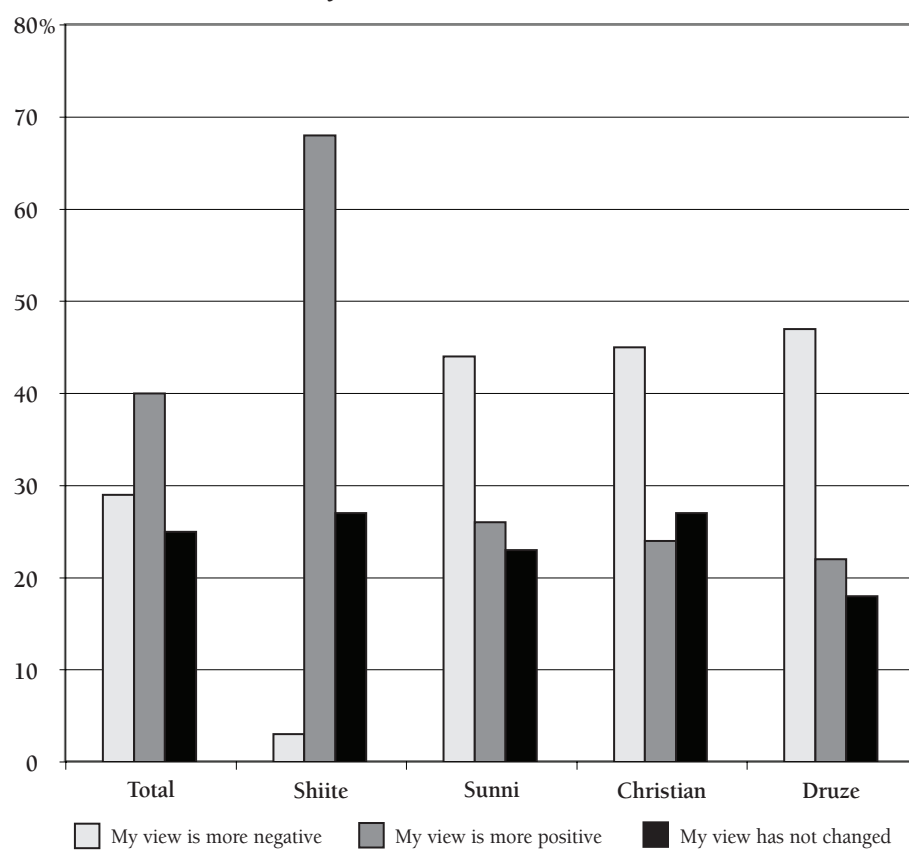
How do the Lebanese people view the outcome of the war? Our survey asked Lebanese citizens who they think emerged the biggest winner. As reflected in the table on this page, the results are telling, not only in answering that question, but also in revealing significant differences in perception among Lebanon's diverse sects. Overall, a plurality of Lebanese believe that Hezbollah emerged as the biggest winner, followed by “the Lebanese people.” Only 15 percent of Lebanese believe Israel won the war.

While the sense of Hezbollah's victory is evident across the Muslim and Druze sects of Lebanon,

*When you consider the outcome of the Lebanon-Israel War, who do you think emerged as the biggest winner?*



After the Lebanon war,  
describe your attitudes toward Hezbollah



a plurality of Christians actually believe that Israel won—although one must not exaggerate this finding, since overall more than 40 percent of the Christians believe that either Hezbollah or the Lebanese people won the war.

A related question pertains to the public sense of who the biggest losers were in the war. Here, overall, a slight plurality identifies Israel as the biggest loser, followed by “the Lebanese people.” Only a small percentage identify Hezbollah as the loser. On this issue, there is a significant division between the Lebanese Shiites and all other sects. Practically no one among the Shiites who were polled identified Hezbollah as a loser, while over 70 percent identified Israel. In contrast, majorities of Sunnis and Druze, and a plurality of Christians, expressed the belief that the Lebanese people were the biggest losers. This finding reflects a serious divide among the sects on a core issue of contention in current Lebanese politics.

This divide is also reflected in expressed attitudes about Hezbollah (see the table on this page). Asked to describe their attitudes toward Hezbollah after the Lebanon war, 40 percent said that their view of the organization had become more positive. At the same time, nearly 30 percent stated that their view of Hezbollah had become more negative. But the differences among Lebanon’s key sects are striking. Majorities of over 40 percent among Sunnis, Christians, and Druze expressed more negative views, while an overwhelming majority of Shiites expressed positive views. These results clearly depict the Lebanese tensions that followed the war and the extent to which Hezbollah was blamed for its consequences, especially by non-Shiites. Still, it is important to note that, while Shiite views are nearly monolithic, the views of the other sects are more diverse on this issue. Nearly a quarter of Sunnis, Christians, and Druze indicated that their

views of Hezbollah had become more positive as a consequence of the war.

In an attempt to measure perceptions of Israeli power, respondents were asked whether the recent violence in Lebanon and Gaza leads them to believe that Israel is very powerful and likely to use this power to consolidate its position in the region even more, or that Israel is weaker than it appears and it will be only a matter of time before it is defeated. They were also given a third option, that no one can tell if Israel will get stronger or weaker in the future. Those who believe that Israel is strong numbered fewer than 20 percent (see the table on page 24). The rest were roughly evenly divided between those who said that no one can tell and those who believe that Israel is weaker than it looks. But here again, the sectarian divisions are dramatic. Nearly 60 percent of Shiites believe that Israel is weak and it is only a matter of time until it is defeated, whereas pluralities of the other sects expressed uncertainty. What is notable about these responses, overall, is not only that Israel appears weaker in Lebanese eyes, but also that those who were hurt the most by the war, the Shiites, are the ones who are more confident about Israel’s vulnerability.

### SECTARIAN PRISMS

Differences in attitudes among Lebanon's sects are also evident on other issues. Asked to name the two countries that pose the greatest threat to them, majorities of Lebanese named Israel and the United States, with Israel identified by over 80 percent of the public and by the vast majority of all sects. But there are striking differences that relate to Syria and Iran. Majorities of both Christians and Druze identify Syria as the second-biggest threat, and Iran as the third-biggest, whereas a minimal number of Shiites identify those countries as being a threat to them. The Sunnis rank Syria the third-highest threat, with nearly 40 percent identifying it as one of the two biggest threats to them. This is not especially surprising, given the polarization in Lebanon over the role of Syria and Iran in Lebanese politics.

Similarly, when respondents were asked to identify the world leader outside their own country whom they admire most, sectarian differences were pronounced. Overall, President Jacques Chirac of France is the single most admired leader among the Lebanese. Yet Chirac, who is even more popular among Sunnis than among Christians, received little support from Shiites. Instead, majorities of Shiites identified Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as their favorite world leader, fol-

lowed by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Cuba's Fidel Castro. Chirac's popularity in Lebanon is a result not only of the historically strong relationship between Lebanon and France, but also of Chirac's opposition to the Iraq War, which makes him popular in other parts of the Arab world as well. The role of France in securing Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon and Chirac's close relationship with the assassinated former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri also help to explain the strength of his popularity, especially among the Sunnis.

Equally telling were responses regarding the world leaders that Lebanese dislike most. Overall, President George W. Bush is by far in first place, especially among Shiites. What is surprising, however, is that Syrian President Bashar Assad surpasses Prime Minister Olmert on the list, coming in second. In fact, Assad is identified as the single most disliked leader by both Christians and Druze, and ranks a close second to President Bush among the Sunnis.

These differences in sectarian attitudes are also present on the issue of Iraq. A strong plurality among Shiites (nearly half) have confidence that an American withdrawal from Iraq would likely bring the feuding Iraqi factions together, whereas majorities of the rest of the Lebanese sects believe that a rapid US withdrawal would result in an expansion of civil war.

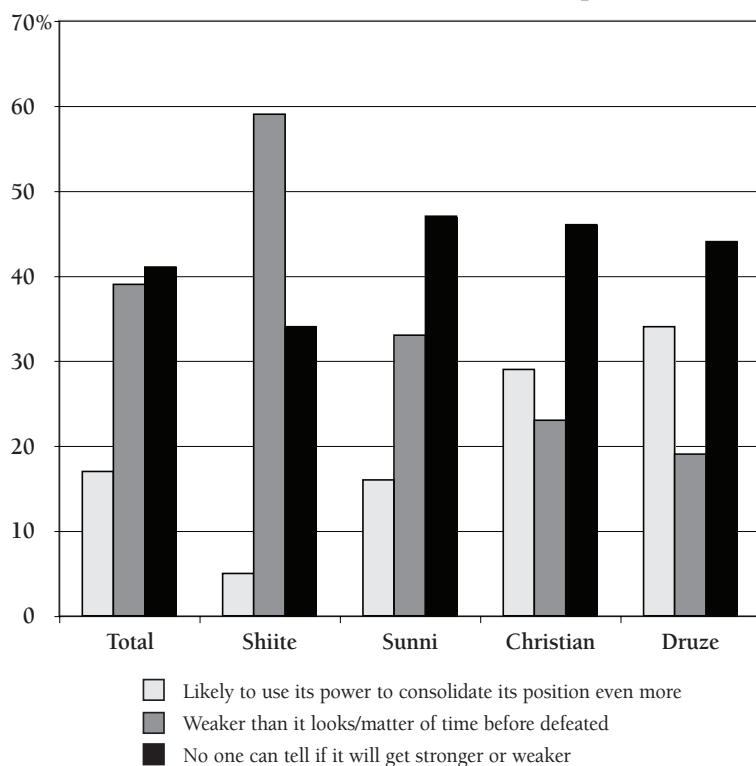
Not surprisingly, Shiites hold views different from the rest of the Lebanese on the issue of Iran. Whereas the vast majority of Sunnis, Christians, and Druze believe that Iran is trying to develop nuclear weapons, a plurality of Shiites perceive Iran's program to be primarily for peaceful purposes. And, while most other Lebanese want the international community to pressure Iran to curtail its program, very few Shiites want to see such pressure.

### SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

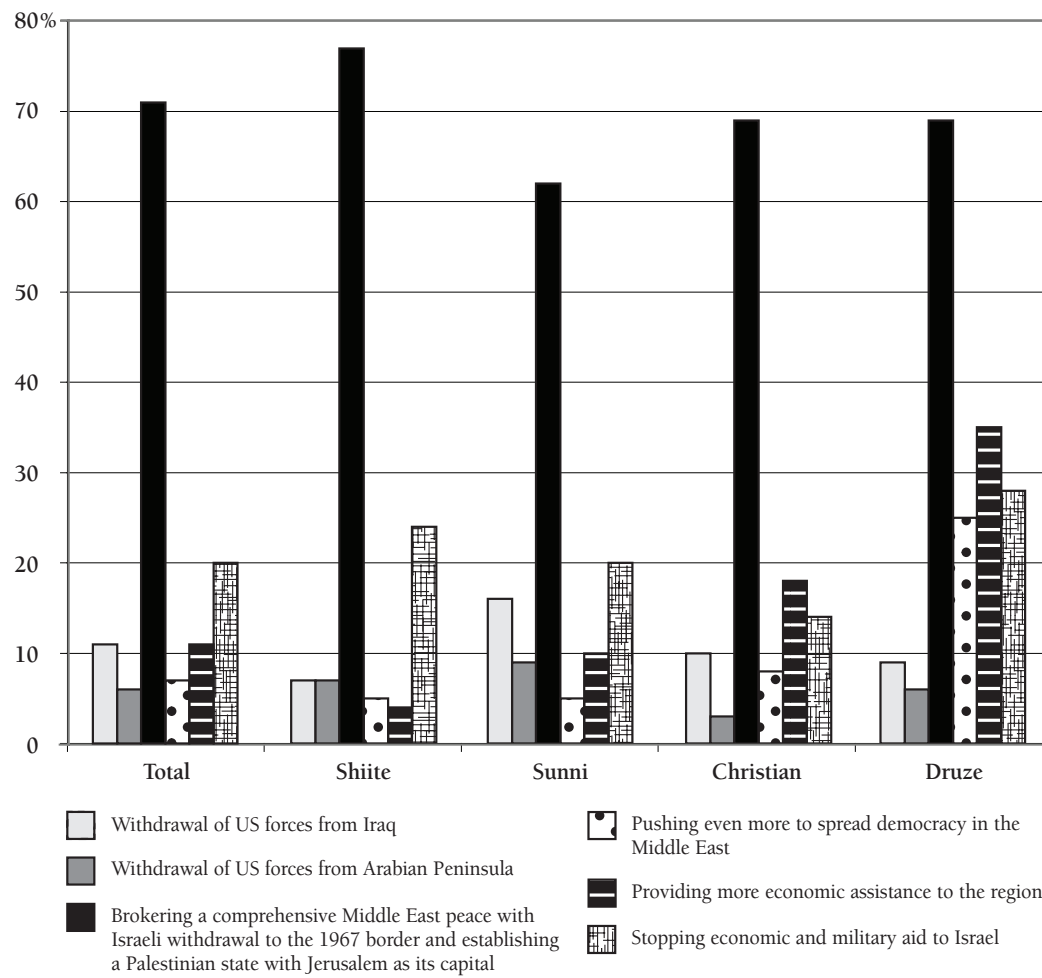
Although attitudes toward the United States, President Bush, and Israel are largely negative, and although many of the attitudes reflected in the survey reveal strong sectarian differences on important issues among the Lebanese, some of the results can be viewed positively.

First, when asked whether they base their attitudes toward the United States on American values or American

*Looking at the recent violence in Lebanon and Gaza, describe your attitude toward Israel's power*



What step by the US would improve your views of the US most?



policies, the vast majority among all sects identified American policies above values. Indeed, this response is bolstered by their view of the countries that they identify as having more freedom and democracy. In response to this query, among every sect, all of the top countries selected are Western countries, with France leading in every community, but with the United States also scoring well, especially among Druze and Christians.

Similarly, when asked what aspect of Al Qaeda, if any, they sympathize with most, the vast majority of Lebanese across every sect indicated no sympathy with any aspect, while about 20 percent sympathize with the group's perceived standing up to the United States. Fewer than 3 percent of respondents sympathize with Al Qaeda's advocacy of a puritanical Islamic state.

Which US policies matter most to the Lebanese? In response to a question that asked what American action would improve their attitude toward the United States the most, the vast majority in every sect chose "brokering an Arab-Israeli peace based

on the 1967 boundaries" that would include a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. This alternative was chosen over other options that included withdrawal from Iraq, withdrawal from the Arabian peninsula, spreading democracy in the Middle East, increasing economic aid to the region, and withholding aid from Israel (see the table on this page). This answer is telling insofar as it identifies the Arab-Israeli conflict as the key prism through which the Lebanese still analyze American foreign policy, and it also importantly shows a preference for achieving Arab-Israeli peace over punishing Israel. Coming at the tail end of a punishing war, these results show promising attitudes in the Lebanese approach to resolving the conflict with Israel.

On this latter score, respondents were asked whether they were prepared for a just and comprehensive peace with Israel on the basis of the 1967 boundaries. Majorities of Lebanese answered in the affirmative (some wanting Arab governments to do more to achieve a settlement, while others believe

that Israel will never give up the occupied territories peacefully). About 28 percent feel that Arabs should continue to fight Israel regardless, including nearly half of the Shiites. Here again, while a slight majority of Shiites are prepared for a just and comprehensive peace with Israel, more Shiites than anyone else want to continue to fight Israel, despite the fact that they paid such a high price in the recent war.

### IDENTITY AND PEACE

One of the remarkable findings in this poll, and potentially the most promising for the Lebanese people, is that—despite the polarizing effect of the war with Israel, and the contentious political environment that emerged afterwards—Lebanese of all sects retain strong identification with the Lebanese state. Asked to specify which identity is most important to them (as Lebanese citizens, Arabs, Muslims, Christians, or Druze) the vast majority of every sect, including 70 percent of Shiites, identified Lebanese citizenship as more important than any of the others. Even when asked about their second most important identity, Arab identity trumps religious identity for all sects except Christians, and even there, “Arab” is a close third to “Christian.” Similarly, when asked whether they believe that their government should serve the interests of Lebanon’s citizens or the interests of Arabs and Muslims more broadly, the vast majority see their government’s role as serving the Lebanese citizens above all.

The Lebanon war of 2006 appears to have had a polarizing effect among Lebanon’s sects, especially between the Shiites and the rest. The war aggra-

vated an existing divide that had been triggered by Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon and its suspected involvement in the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri. The recent assassination of the Lebanese minister of industry Pierre Gemayel is likely to intensify this polarization even more. Sectarian tensions continue to divide and weaken the state and nation of Lebanon.

But from the point of view of the Israeli aim of deterring future attacks, this polarization is probably not cause for cheer. Instability amid weakened central authority in Lebanon not only will benefit Hezbollah, it will also enable other militant groups to take hold. Hezbollah is already seen by a plurality of Lebanese as the winner in the war with Israel, and its influence is likely to increase. At the same time, Hezbollah’s primary constituency, the Shiite community in Lebanon, strongly believes that Israel lost the 2006 war, that it is weaker than it seems, and that it ultimately will be defeated. This, despite the fact that the Shiite community suffered the most casualties and devastation from the war.

This picture is balanced by perhaps the best news for the Lebanese: the continuing sense of Lebanese identity and some shared values. It is also balanced by the majority view, including among Shiites, that the Lebanese are ready for a comprehensive settlement with Israel. If the question of who won the Israeli-Lebanon war matters for security prospects, so does the question of whether public attitudes permit the search for peace to go forward. The vast majority of Lebanese, expressing an aversion to US policies rather than to Americans themselves, still want to see an American effort to broker a lasting peace in the region. ■