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"Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon warned that rising tensions between Lebanon and Israel could lead to a new war with potentially devastating consequences for the entire region."

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The Next War?
The Danger of the Lebanese-Israeli Border Ignitin

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London: In an important and alarming report to the U.N. Security Council in early July 2010, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon warned that rising tensions between Lebanon and Israel could lead to a new war with potentially devastating consequences for the entire region. He cited dozens of examples whereby the two warring camps - Israel and Hezbollah - almost came to blows and accused them of violating the 2006 cease-fire resolution that ended the 34-day war in 2006: Hezbollah maintains "a substantial military capacity," and Israel continues to conduct daily over-flights of Lebanon and refuses to withdraw from the disputed northern border village of Ghajar.

Ban said Israeli accusations in April 2010 that neighboring Syria had provided Scud missiles to Hezbollah -- an allegation later raised by American officials and categorically denied by Lebanese and Syrian authorities -- "greatly increased tensions" among Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. "Rhetoric escalated rapidly, creating a perception in the public that a resumption of conflict was imminent," the secretary-general said. But for the moment, he added, tensions appear to have subsided. Nonetheless, he went on to say that the increased tension "raised the spectre of a miscalculation by either party leading to a resumption of hostilities, with potentially devastating consequences for Lebanon and the region."

The U.N. general-secretary is not alone in warning of a possible Lebanon-Israel conflict. There is a real fear inside and outside the region that the southern Lebanon-Israel border area, one of the most militarized zones in the world, might supply the spark that ignites a regional conflagration. This fear is based on the fact that tensions between the Jewish state and its small Arab neighbor have recently escalated to the boiling point. On the one hand, Israel accuses Syria and Iran of supplying Hezbollah with long-range missiles that reach deep into its urban centers and threaten to tilt the balance of power in favor of the resistance camp. On the other hand, Hezbollah demands that Israel withdraw from

occupied Lebanese land and stop violating Lebanese sovereignty.

After the 2006 war, the Israeli army tried to learn the lessons of its dismal performance against Hezbollah and conducted huge military exercises on the Lebanese and Syrian borders. There is general agreement within the Israeli foreign policy and military establishment that the status quo is unacceptable and that Israel must repair the damage done to its deterrence capabilities in 2006. The conventional wisdom in Israel says that this would require cutting Hezbollah down to size and destroying its missile depots. Similarly, Hezbollah has acquired a greater missile capability and has positioned itself for the next round.

Desperate to restore Israel's deterrence at all costs, the right-wing governing coalition has reportedly prepared contingency plans to reoccupy southern Lebanon. In the past year, Israeli officials have repeatedly threatened to wage an all-out against Hezbollah and the Lebanese state; nothing would be spared, including Lebanon's civilian infrastructure and institutions. Although some observers might dismiss these threats as rhetoric designed to deter Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran, past Israeli conduct and history show a consistent pattern of military recklessness and disregard of common sense. Time and again, Israel has preempted any neighboring Arab state that sought to obtain a credible deterrence. Therefore, understanding Israel's official mindset and relations with neighboring Lebanon provide a context and a key to unlocking the riddle of the next war.

A new book by David Hirst, the *Guardian*'s long-term Middle East correspondent - *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East* - has just come out. In it, he warns that the next Arab-Israeli war might break out on the Lebanese-Israeli front. Statesmen and soldiers ignore Hirst's warning at their own peril.

Beware of Small States is a history of the Arab-Israeli conflict as seen through the prism of its impact on the internal development of neighboring Arab states, particularly tiny, fragile Lebanon, the sectarian state par excellence and historic battleground for other peoples' conflicts. Few people are as qualified as Hirst to venture such a forecast and to write a history of Lebanon, the war-torn country in which he has resided and studied for half a century. He has witnessed and reported on most of the events described in this book, a fact that gives his narrative the intellectual credibility and intensity often lacking in other accounts.

For him, the starting point is Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, a pivotal development that changed the face of the entire region. In the 1970s Lebanon was plunged into all-out civil war and, by the time of the Israeli invasion, Hirst notes that “Greater-Israel expansionists” such as right-wing Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon saw in Lebanon's disintegration a historic opportunity to redraw the geopolitical map of the Middle East in a way that would allow Israel to secure the whole of Palestine for themselves and extinguish any rival claims to the Occupied Territories (p. 131).

Hirst writes astutely that Israel's imperial hubris coincided with the advent of the Reagan administration; as Begin acknowledged, there had never been an administration so favorable to Israel as this one. No wonder then, he says, that before Begin and Sharon sent their army into Lebanon - 90,000 soldiers, 1,300 tanks, and 1,500 armored personnel carriers - they got a green light from Secretary of State Alexander Haig that was so phrased that a man like Sharon could only see it “as a hunting licence” (pp. 136-37).

The 1982 war killed 20,000 people, mostly civilians. Israel besieged an Arab capital (Beirut), drove out

Yasser Arafat and the PLO leadership and destroyed the guerrilla state-within-the state, and presided over the Lebanese Forces' slaughter of 3,000 Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Far from learning from history, targeting civilians has emerged as the very essence of Israel's deterrence, as demonstrated by its more recent wars against Hezbollah (2006) and Hamas (2009) (pp. 116, 160).

The significance of the 1982 war (which lasted until 2000) lies in how it transformed Lebanese domestic politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The war inflicted irreparable damage upon Israel's aura of invincibility and created a new Shiite enemy from whose ranks arose a grass-roots resistance movement, Hezbollah, that would prove to be far more formidable than the largely bureaucratic and corrupt PLO. “Had the enemy not taken this step,” said its leader Hassan Nasrallah many years later, “I don't know whether something called Hezbollah would have been born. I doubt it” (p. 183).

Hezbollah now projects itself as the spearhead of the whole Arab/Muslim struggle against the Jewish state, and much of the global Muslim community seems to see it that way too. According to the author, Israel's colossal strategic and moral failure in Lebanon further delegitimized such pro-American “moderate” Arab regimes as Egypt and Saudi Arabia and strengthened the Islamo-nationalist resistance camp led by Iran and Syria.

In his post-2006 war speech, Nasrallah told the immense, euphoric throng that the victory they were celebrating had transformed Lebanon from a “small” state in the Middle East into a “great” one. Hirst agrees that Lebanon is no longer the hapless object of others' actions but an active agent in its own right because of Hezbollah's powerful influence in the region. “Lebanon - the eternal victim - has now become the perpetrator too, posing no less a threat to greater states than they habitually posed to it.”

That is a mixed blessing. Hirst cites Israeli leaders who say they are readying themselves for the “next war,” the “second round” against Hezbollah and the Lebanese state, which they deem to be all but inevitable. And while Hezbollah has evolved into a conventional political party with a domestic agenda, he argues that it still possesses a potent armed militia with an external, visionary, Islamist agenda and is aligned with Iranian and even Syrian foreign policy (p. 426).

In other words, Lebanon remains a battlefield for its neighbors' wars. The only difference now is that if Israel fires the first shot in the “seventh Middle Eastern war,” the war might not remain confined to Lebanon. Other members of the Islamo-nationlist camp, such as Hamas, Syria, and heavyweight Iran, might join in. Thus, war would come to the entire Middle East.

Hirst's forecast is not far-fetched. The region is at a critical juncture, and the drums of war are beating louder with each passing day. President Barack Obama's much-anticipated peace drive has reached a deadlock, Israel's governing Likud coalition has rejected his appeal to stop further settlement construction in the West Bank and occupied East Jerusalem, and his engagement initiative to Iran has faltered. As a result, there is a deepening sense of despair among Palestinians and Arabs in general.

Netanyahu and company appear willing to create “facts on the ground” that forestall the establishment of an independent Palestine state. But this policy appears to have turned world opinion against their flawed policies, for Israel, by playing by its own rules, has only isolated itself and undermined its long-term

security. Israel no longer has any regional allies for it has even managed to alienate Turkey, historically its most important Muslim ally and a longstanding NATO member. More and more voices even in the United States are now calling Israel a strategic liability, not an asset - a marked departure in the American political scene.

Historically, when faced with political and security challenges Israeli leaders have resorted to war to change the unfavorable strategic environment in their favor. Time and again the Israeli ruling elite has gone to war to practice politics by other means, only to exacerbate the country's long-term strategic predicament. Cases in point include Israel's wars in Lebanon (1982 and 2006) and Gaza (2008-09).

If history serves as any guide, in the absence of a final Arab-Israeli peace, or at least progress toward one, “there will be war, or large-scale violence,” Hirst concludes ominously. According to his logic, the question is not if there will be war, but when. Only time will tell if history repeats itself in the Middle East!

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