A YEAR AFTER THE LEBANESE WAR

By Michael Provence

It has been just over a year since war broke out between Israel and Lebanon. I spent 2005-06 as a visiting Fulbright professor of modern Middle Eastern history at the American University of Beirut. I learned of the events that started the war on a Wednesday morning in my campus office. We had planned to fly to France on Friday on our way back to San Diego. It had been a wonderful year as we worked and renewed old friendships in Lebanon and Syria.

Cross-border operations and tensions had been a regular occurrence in Lebanon for decades. Although the Israeli army had left southern Lebanon in 2000 after almost 20 years of occupation, Israeli jets often buzzed Lebanese, breaking the sound barrier, shattering windows and jangling nerves and sometimes dropping crude leaflets. Before the end of the occupation, Israeli airstrikes occasionally hit Beirut power stations in retaliation for Hezbollah operations against Israeli soldiers in Lebanon. That night was clear, and there was a brilliant full moon. We had friends over to mark our departure. There was little to indicate that anything significant had changed in the tit-for-tat battles on the border. No one in Lebanon expected much beyond the scope of normal retaliation.

At 3:00 a.m., we woke to the roar of Israeli F-16s flying low over our apartment building. We saw the flash and heard the explosion of the bombs over Beirut’s southern suburbs a couple of miles away. At dawn, we learned from the radio that the airport was bombed and inoperable. We spent the next week in Beirut witnessing the city grind to a complete halt, the parks and schools filling up with tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the south, and the air thick with smoke and fumes from continuous airstrikes and naval artillery. We finally left on the one open road to the Syrian border, onward to Turkey, France and finally the United States.

The war was personally significant for the millions it touched, but its general significance continues to unfold. The war killed about 1,500 people, mostly Lebanese civilians, destroyed much Lebanese critical infrastructure, ... destroyed the last vestige of Israeli military invincibility and deterrence and finally shredded the last tattered remnants of American credibility in the region.

Why did the war of 2006 diverge so far from the American-Israeli script of previous regional conflicts? A new and untested Israeli government succeeding legendary warlord politician Ariel Sharon, entered a war in which it hoped to earn domestic legitimacy and immediately announced its intention to destroy Hezbollah, a political party and paramilitary force that is the elected representative of perhaps 40 percent of the Lebanese population. Israelis and Lebanese alike expected a few days of airstrikes, allowing Israel’s military to regain its credibility, and yet the war dragged on for 34 days, becoming an acknowledged defeat for Israeli army and for Ehud Olmert’s government.

Within the first days, the U.N. Security Council drafted a cease-fire resolution. During wars in 1956, 1967 and 1973, U.S. sponsored cease-fires ended fighting, usually within a few days. Early cease-fires served the interests of both the United States and Israel, since the United States could preserve a central role in adjudicating conflict, and Israel was able to achieve its strategic aims quickly without major destruction. The system broke down in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon, killing tens of thousands of Lebanese, besieging the capital and displacing most of the population of the south. The results were enormously damaging for both Israel and the United States, leading inexorably to the Marine Corps barracks bombing in Beirut on Oct. 23, 1983.

On July 13, 2006, the United States immediately vetoed the draft cease-fire resolution. At the time, fewer than 100 people had been killed. A few days later during a G8 conference in Russia, President Bush rejected all calls for an immediate cease-fire.

Bush was overheard speaking to British Prime Minister Tony Blair “I think Condi is going to go [to the region] pretty soon. [Annan’s] attitude is basically cease-fire and everything else happens.” “What they [the United Nations] needs to do is get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this (explosive), and it’s over.”

About 25,000 U.S. citizens were resident in Lebanon, and the U.S. Embassy worked to organize an evacuation. U.S. citizens were informed that they eventually would be evacuated, but that they would be responsible for the expense. Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese had fled their homes in the south, and every day refugee convoys were hit in airstrikes. Taxi fare from the south to Beirut went from $5 to $1,000 and up. Eventually, no one would drive at any price. Refugees walked.

Most of the southern villages were flattened. All roads were unsafe, and almost all bridges were destroyed. The Israeli military declared the entire southern region a free-fire zone, and inhabitants who did not flee were held responsible for their fate.

Continuous airstrikes and artillery bombardment depleted Israeli weapons and fuel stores. The U.S. naval battle group sent to evacuate U.S. citizens stopped in Haifa to offload aviation fuel and U.S. munitions. In other words, resupplying the Israeli military with U.S. taxpayer-funded munitions took precedence over evacuating U.S. citizens from Lebanon.

The U.S. government, fully committed to military rather than political solutions in the Middle East, extended the Israeli war in opposition to the wishes and interests of virtually the entire world. When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice held a press conference in advance of her first trip to the region, she claimed that the war represented the “birth pangs of a new Middle East.” She insisted that any cease-fire had to insure that U.S./Israeli policy goals had been met, and that there was no use in a cease-fire before things had truly changed.

The war lasted more than a month. The eventual cease-fire achieved none of the stated goals of either the Bush administration or the Israeli government. The destruction in Lebanon and in Israel was extensive. Fifteen years of Lebanese reconstruction was undone. Hezbollah was strengthened rather than destroyed. Lebanon was destabilized. Both the United States and Israel suffered a serious loss of credibility in the region. U.S. allies in Lebanon were undermined.

This miserable balance sheet is attributable to the same mindset that led us to Iraq: willful ignorance and a belief in military force and staggering high-tech violence to solve the problems of the Middle East. It is not working.