

## Column One: Coalitions, real and imaginary

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Caroline Glick , THE JERUSALEM POST

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Building and maintaining coalitions is one of the most difficult tasks of a nation at war. On the one hand, a state must ensure that its coalition partners share enough common goals and interests to ensure that their cooperation is effective. On the other hand, a state must constantly weigh the political and diplomatic benefits of maintaining its coalition against the price it must pay in terms of military effectiveness by delegating responsibility to others.

The price of maintaining coalitions is starkly exposed by the British military's failure to rein in radical Shi'ite forces and Iranian influence in Basra, the Iraqi port city and oil hub. The question of whether having coalitions advances a nation's interests at all is brought to bear in Israel's diplomatic and strategic handling of its relations with the Palestinians and of the emerging situation in southern Lebanon.

Tuesday, a US intelligence official was quoted by the Washington Post saying, "The British have basically been defeated in the South." The *Post* article goes on to explain that the British "are abandoning their former headquarters at Basra Palace, where a recent official visitor from London described them as 'surrounded like cowboys and Indians' by militia fighters. An airport base outside the city, where a regional US Embassy office and Britain's remaining 5,500 troops are barricaded behind building-high sandbags, has been attacked with mortars or rockets nearly 600 times over the past four months."

The British defeat in Basra was eminently foreseeable. Immediately after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, some 100,000 Iraqi exiles who had lived in Iran since the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s entered the city. Under the command of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, during their time in exile, these Iraqis had organized a number of militias, including the Badr Brigade, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Dawa party, as well as several smaller militias. Muqtada el-Sadr's Mahdi Army, although Iraq-based, was also supported by the Iranians.

These Iranian-backed forces were the most organized groups in the city in the chaos that engulfed Basra after the regime fell. Capitalizing on their organizational advantage, the groups volunteered to serve in the police and security services the British were raising to run the city. So it came to pass that within a short period of time, radical Shi'ite forces, backed by Iran, successfully took over Basra.

This radical Shi'ite takeover precipitated a reign of terror and intimidation in the city. As freelance reporter Steven Vincent chronicled before he was murdered in Basra in August 2005, the militias instituted a Khomeinist regime in the city, replete with death squads, generally comprised of off-duty policemen, which executed hundreds of civilians they accused of ties to the Ba'ath Party; the brutalization of women caught unveiled in public; the takeover of Basra's university and hospitals; and the extortion of businessmen in mafia-like protection rackets. All the while, the British turned a blind eye to the devolution of the city into an Iranian enclave.

In an interview with the BBC, Air Chief Marshall and chief of the British Defense Staff Jock Stirrup made clear that Britain never considered it its business how post-Saddam Iraq developed. Insisting that the British mission in Basra has been a success, Stirrup allowed that one's judgment of the British mission depended on "what your interpretation of the mission was in the first place." As he put it, Britain viewed its mission as limited to getting "the place and the people to a state where the Iraqis could run this part of the country, if they chose to."

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown's government is keen to withdraw Britain's remaining forces from Iraq in the fall. Given Britain's performance in Basra, a British withdrawal would probably advance rather than harm the US's strategic interests in Iraq.

And yet, for all the difficulties that the British forces in Iraq have created for the Americans (and for the Iraqis who are interested in living in a free society), there is no doubt that both countries perceive themselves as strong allies. To this end, the Americans refrain from publicly criticizing the British military's dismal performance. For their part, the British have made clear that they will withdraw their forces in a manner that will minimize embarrassment to the US.

THE ANGLO-AMERICAN alliance is a clear example of a true, but problematic partnership. In contrast, the Olmert government's representations of Fatah and Egypt as Israel's coalition partners against Hamas on the one hand, and the UNIFIL forces as Israel's coalition partner against Hizbullah on the other hand, are a sham.

The Olmert government's policies towards Hamas today are driven by its presumption of a partnership with Fatah and Egypt. The government asserts that both Fatah and Egypt share Israel's goal of limiting Hamas's power to the Gaza Strip in the short run and overthrowing the jihadist movement in the long run. But reality tells a different tale.

This week, we learned that the \$100 million that Israel transferred to Salaam Fayad's Fatah government last month was used to pay the annual salaries of soldiers in Hamas's army in Gaza. Then too, this week it was reported that far from eschewing Hamas politically, Fatah is engaged in intense discussions with Hamas towards the establishment of a new Hamas-Fatah government. Far from cooperating with Israel in weakening Hamas, Fatah is actively maintaining Hamas's strength.

Then there is Egypt. Although successive Israeli governments have insisted that Egypt is a moderating force on Palestinian society, for the past seven years, Egypt has worked steadily to strengthen Palestinian terror forces against Israel.

This state of affairs is most blatant in Egypt's embrace of Hamas through its hosting of Palestinian "unity" talks for the past seven years, and in its facilitation of the weapons flow into Gaza through Egypt. That Hamas itself views Egypt as an ally rather than a foe was made abundantly clear this week when Hamas leaders offered to transfer control over security forces' headquarters in Gaza to Egypt as a first step towards reconciling with Fatah.

Then there are the UNIFIL forces in Lebanon. Speaking to Kadima party members Wednesday, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert bragged that the security situation in northern Israel and southern Lebanon has never been better. Olmert added, "The commanders of the international forces say so, too."

In this statement, and in countless similar statements he has made over the past year, Olmert has presented UNIFIL as a friendly force which shares Israel's goal of neutralizing Hizbullah. But here, too, reality tells a different tale.

During last summer's war, UNIFIL directly assisted Hizbullah by reporting IDF troop movements in real time on its Web site. Since the war ended, UNIFIL forces have done nothing to prevent Hizbullah's massive rearmament.

Under the protective cover of UNIFIL forces, Hizbullah has reasserted its control over the villages in the South and prevented their Christian residents who fled during the war from returning home. Hizbullah's unqualified control over south Lebanon is attested to by foreign visitors who report that they must receive Hizbullah travel permits in order to enter south Lebanon. Then too, this week Lebanon's *An Nahar* newspaper reported that Hizbullah was moving to extend its independent telephone network to the south. Needless to say, UNIFIL has taken no action to prevent any of this.

UNIFIL's treatment of Hizbullah demonstrates that like Fatah and Egypt, UNIFIL does not construe its interests or goals in a manner that adheres to any Israeli interests or goals. Indeed, UNIFIL's assessment of its goals and interests are antithetical and hostile to Israel's national security interests.

Yet Olmert, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and their cabinet colleagues consistently represent UNIFIL as an ally and have worked fastidiously to strengthen it. During the ceasefire negotiations last summer, the government insisted on enlarging the UNIFIL force and extending its mandate. After the war ended, in the interest of strengthening UNIFIL, the government made no effective protest against UNIFIL's inclusion of forces from countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, whose governments are allied with Iran.

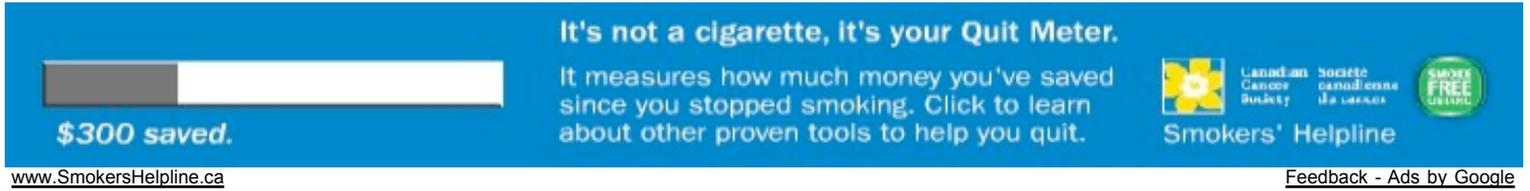
UNIFIL's mandate expires on August 31. Next week the UN Security Council is scheduled to convene to extend its mandate for another year. Rather than acknowledge UNIFIL's institutional hostility towards Israel, the Olmert government supports the extension of its mandate. As *The Jerusalem Post* reported this week, the government even hopes that UNIFIL's renewed mandate will empower it to increase its presence in Lebanese villages - as if there is any chance that UNIFIL would use its widened role to fight Hizbullah.

DUE TO the rampantly anti-American atmosphere in Britain and to Britain's refusal to view the threat that Middle Eastern rogue regimes pose to its national security in the same way as the US perceives the threat, there have always been tensions in the countries' alliance that have led to their starkly different strategies in Iraq. The main reason that these divergent strategies receive attention today is because the US military's recent successes in Iraq make Britain's failures impossible to ignore.

The administration changed course in Iraq because domestic pressure forced it to acknowledge that its previous course was failing. So indirectly, it was public pressure on the administration that exposed the operational disparity between the British and the American militaries. The exposure of this disparity is now forcing the administration to contend with the fact that the coalition with Britain is not as useful as it had hoped. No doubt, as a result, the US military will soon be forced to operate in Basra regardless of whether the British remain in Iraq or withdraw.

Sadly, in Israel, the Olmert government refuses to acknowledge, let alone respond to domestic criticisms of its mishandling of the situation with the Palestinians and its mismanagement of Lebanon. Rather than acknowledge that Fatah, Egypt and UNIFIL share none of Israel's national interests, the government continues to embrace them and hopes that no one will notice that its imaginary coalition partners endanger, rather than advance Israel's national security.

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