

# Israel's Overlooked Strategic Losses in Wars Against Arabs

After conventional Arab armies failed to deter Israeli invasions, Lebanese and Palestinian volunteers have changed the strategic balance in the Middle East, writes As`ad AbuKhalil.

## 2006 Lebanese War Changed Power Calculus

**By As`ad AbuKhalil**

*Special to Consortium News*



In South Lebanon, the Museum for Resistance, also known as the Mlita Museum, for the town in which it is located, is a wildly popular tourist attraction and a place where you can run into Arabs visiting from around the region.

In it, Hizbullah—the political party with an armed wing that, with Iranian assistance, emerged in response to the Israeli invasion of 1982—celebrates its military successes, displaying weapons captured from the occupation army and replicas of some of its military tunnels.

The museum enshrines an important realization for the country: that while conventional Arab armies failed to deter Israeli invasions, Lebanese and Palestinian volunteers succeeded in holding the mighty Israeli army at bay and have become the real defenders against Israeli attacks and occupation. As such, the museum offers testimony to the current nature of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The U.S. and

other Western powers want to disarm Hizbullah while denying the Lebanese Army the weapons to deter Israel. In other words, they want to return Lebanon to its former state of weakness.

The problems this situation poses for Israel are often overlooked given its apparently clear strategic advantage.

Israel's arsenal of weapons of mass destruction is still being protected by Western countries from scrutiny or even criticism. The Obama administration guaranteed Israel a most generous financial assistance program for the next decade. Israeli's 100-percent occupation of Palestine remains immune from U.N. or other international condemnation. Israeli citizens' settlement building in Palestine territories—despite violating international law—has not caused a rift between Israel and either the European Union or the U.S.

Egypt, meanwhile, remains committed to the peace treaty with Israel and to security coordination with the occupation state, as does Jordan. And Israel does not fear an assault from any Arab state or a combination of Arab states. (Arab threats—largely rhetorical—have only been intended to pacify popular anger.)

But things are not as secure for Israel as they might seem.

### **The Resistance Persists**

A century after the Balfour Declaration, the Arab-Israeli conflict has not ended. Early Zionist thinkers and leaders—influenced by racist European attitudes about the natives—never considered that the Palestinians would

continue to resist Zionism for so long. This in itself is a big failure for Zionism as it defies the long-held belief that force is the only language that Arabs understand. At the same time, economic offers and political ploys have not deceived the Palestinians—or Arabs—into accepting the Israeli occupation project either.

The resistance is not only tenacious, its effectiveness reached a new level in 2000. That year, after an escalating pattern of resistance operations that began in 1982—first by secular (communist and Syrian nationalist) groups and later by Hizbullah—the Israeli occupation army was forced to withdraw from South Lebanon.

Israel's biggest strategic loss came in 2006 during the [Lebanese-Israeli War](#), when armed groups (not part of an Arab conventional army) resisted Israeli assaults and deterred a ground offensive against Arab territory. Unless you have studied the performance of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Lebanon between 1970 and 1982, it's difficult to fathom how seriously this changed the power calculus of Lebanese and Palestinian resistance groups vis-à-vis Israel.

But the significance of that war—and most importantly on Arab perceptions of it—was obscured by Saudi regime propaganda intent on undermining the standing of any resistance, leftist or Islamist, Sunni or Shi'ite. The House of Saud began to promote sectarian hatred and agitation and emphasize the losses for the Arab side to downplay the precedent set by the war. (Examples of this are so pervasive it would be unfair to single out any one broadcaster or publication.)

During the invasions of Gaza, Israel failed again to advance or even to prevent primitive Hamas rockets from firing; all claims to the (fake) successes of the Iron Dome air defense system notwithstanding.

This is a marked contrast to previous confrontations. In 1978, Israel invaded Lebanon and the PLO's resistance was disorganized and largely spontaneous. Four years later, in the face of the 1982 massive Israel invasion, the PLO failed again to formulate a joint resistance plan. Fighting was stiff in some cases, such as at the refugee camp`Ayn Al-Hilwi and the medieval-era Beaufort castle. And later at Khaldah, on the outskirts of Beirut, the PLO did implement a defense plan for Beirut (designed by West Point graduate Abu Al-Walid), which explains why Israel never dared to invade West Beirut until after the evacuation of PLO forces from Lebanon. Overall, however, the PLO resistance record pales in comparison to that of Hamas and Hizbullah, in Gaza and South Lebanon, respectively.

### **Former Psychological Advantage**

Israeli strategy in dealing with the Arabs was based on massive, indiscriminate use of force and the promotion of the Israeli soldier as invincible and terrifying. This produced a psychological advantage that, from 1948 to 1967, sowed fear and resignation.

More recently, however, the image of the mighty Israeli soldier and a fearful Arab resistance has been reversed. In the 2006 war, Israeli soldiers in South Lebanon were terrified by Hizbullah fighters who prevented the enemy army from advancing one inch into Lebanese territory. I grew up

in Lebanon in the 1960s and 1970s, when Israel used to bomb and invade at will. This no longer happens because Israel has come to fear Hizbullah.

Another problem for Israel is its once-vaunted intelligence, which has developed a reputation for clumsiness. The failed raid in Gaza (by an elite unit of the Israeli occupation army) is the most recent example. In 2010, Dubai police plastered the faces of top agents of Mossad, the intelligence agency, around the world in the wake of the [assassination of Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh](#), a co-founder of the military wing of Hamas. Before that, in 1997, there was the botched assassination attempt on Khalid Misha`l', the Doha-based former leader of Hamas, by Mossad agents.

In the 2006 war with Lebanon, Israel's intelligence failures included the famous and (almost) comical kidnapping of a poor man whose only crime was that his name was Hasan Nasrallah, the same as that of the Hizbullah leader. Presumably, Mossad experts on the Arab world assumed there was only one Hasan Nasrallah in all of Lebanon.

Hizbullah and Hamas, meanwhile, have run intelligence operations that the PLO has rarely ever matched. Hizbullah's 2012 kidnapping of Israeli soldiers is an example of careful preparations and reliable intelligence. Hizbullah and Hamas have special operatives monitoring the communications of the Israeli military. Hizbullah has its own Hebrew language school. PLO organizations, by contrast, had so few Hebrew speakers they often had to rely on Hebrew teachers from the Institute of Palestine Studies in Beirut to translate important documents.

The Arab-Israeli conflict is not about to end anytime soon. Trump's ["Deal of the Century"](#) hinges on the belief that [Saudi Arabia's Mohammad bin Salman](#) can convince the Palestinians to give up their cause. This is a conflict that is unlikely to end in compromise, and the Israeli occupation state has made it clear that historical Palestine belongs to the Jewish people and that the Palestinians represent a mere nuisance on the land.

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## Pence's Attacks on China Won't Help Trump at G-20

Beijing wants to avoid an all-out trade war with Washington. That is what will count at the G-20 summit later this week, writes Patrick Lawrence, not the U.S. vice president's hostility in Asia earlier this month.

# Trying to Isolate China is a Failing U.S. Strategy

By Patrick Lawrence

*Special to Consortium News*



After Vice President Mike Pence's [poor reception](#) in Asia a couple of weeks ago one shouldn't expect a great outcome for President Donald Trump when he meets China's President Xi Jinping at the [Group of 20 summit](#) in Buenos Aires on Friday.

Trump sent Pence to Asia earlier this month to deliver two bluntly hostile attacks on the Chinese and to insist that the rest of Asia choose: You're with us or you're with them.

U.S. officials have delivered many obtuse performances in Asia over the years, but Pence bested them when he spoke in Singapore at an annual summit of Southeast Asian nations and, two days later, at the [Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation](#) session in Papua New Guinea.

In Singapore he cast China's presence in the region as an "empire of aggression"—skipping the fact that China has no recent record of aggression. He then turned the 21-nation APEC session into a direct face-off with Xi, who was also present.

The U.S. vice president's over-the-top performances were probably a case of calculated pugnacity; a softening-up exercise. But if they have any effect at all on Xi it will be to stiffen his position when he meets Trump later this

week. Washington does not yet realize that challenging China's place as an Asian power is a losing proposition.

The incipient trade war between the U.S. and China was one of Pence's prominent themes. He threatened to more than double the tariffs the Trump administration has already imposed on \$250 billion worth of Chinese exports if China fails to fulfill Washington's long list of market-opening measures. "The United States," Pence said, "will not change course until China changes its ways."

### **Attacks on 'Belt and Road'**

Pence's most vituperative remarks at APEC concerned China's immensely ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, intended to connect the Eurasian landmass from Shanghai to Lisbon via ports, power grids, rail lines and other infrastructure projects. Pence asserted the multi-trillion-dollar effort is nothing more than a debt trap structured to China's advantage.

He then presented Asians with their neatly packaged us-or-them choice. "We don't coerce or compromise your independence," Pence said. "We do not offer a constricting belt or a one-way road," he taunted. "When you partner with us, we partner with you, and we all prosper."

It takes a lot of nerve, ignorance of history, or both, for an American official to make such assertions. U.S. banks and Western-controlled financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund have made an art of saddling developing nations with debt—and dictating economic policies along with it—since the Bretton Woods system was negotiated in 1944. Remember the Third World debt crisis of the 1970s



and 1980s? More than a few developing-nation officials listening to Pence likely recalled it all too well.

Xi seems to have anticipated the U.S. broadside. Before Pence spoke he said Belt and Road was not for geopolitical purposes. “It is not the so-called trap, as some people say. It is the sunshine avenue where China shares opportunities with the world to seek common development.”

The White House’s strategy here looks like the Dealmaker at work once again: Give the other side a thorough working over, then proceed to the mahogany table and negotiate an agreement to maximum advantage.

Those were the features of the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaigns against North Korea and (as we speak) Iran. Trump’s “deal of the century” in the Mideast, still in development, is another example.

## **Two Key Flaws**

Trump’s brand of diplomacy is flawed in two key ways.

No. 1: It’s foolish to apply what works in the Manhattan real estate market to global strategy. There is little-to-no chance that Trump’s style will deliver the intended results in Iran, North Korea or in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Trump may win further concessions on trade when he meets Xi in Argentina later this week, but this will have nothing to do with Pence’s disgracefully bellicose speeches at the two back-to-back gatherings of Asia–Pacific nations.

No. 2: Obsessed with its decades of primacy in the Pacific, the U.S. simply cannot accept China’s inevitable emergence as a regional and global power. This second problem is the

larger and more worrisome, driving one mistake after another in Washington's trans-Pacific strategies. So long as members of U.S. policy cliques see everything Beijing does as a threat, they will fail to grasp the many opportunities for cooperation that a stronger and more prosperous China makes possible. This is more than merely a shame: it is causing a self-inflicted decline.

Washington would do well to learn that it's futile to try to isolate mainland China from the rest of Asia. It's like trying to isolate most of a hemisphere from the rest of the planet. And no Asian nation—not even the ever-loyal Japanese—shows any interest in choosing a side in a confrontation that is more or less of Washington's making.

No undertaking of the magnitude of Belt and Road—which now involves more than 70 nations—will be without its problems, especially at the front end. But Xi's description of it seems closer than Pence's. Of the roughly 1,700 projects now in progress, only one—a port that Chinese firms constructed in Sri Lanka—has run into major financing problems, and these appear to reflect Sri Lanka's misjudgments more than China's.

To be fair to Pence and his boss, the Trump administration is not the first to confront Asians with an us-or-them choice between the U.S. and China. That error goes to the administration of Barack Obama when it was negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership. By pointedly not inviting China to join the TPP, it treated the deal, primarily, as a device to isolate China.

The U.S. has not had a coherent approach to China at least

since the first Bush presidency back in the early 1990s, when there was at least some acceptance of China as a rising power.

Beijing eagerly wants to avoid an all-out trade war with the U.S. And this is what will count in Buenos Aires, not Pence's chest-out posturing. Absent an agreement, the 10 percent tariffs now in place will go to 25 percent in January, and the United States will impose new tariffs on an additional \$267 billion worth of Chinese exports. These numbers are what will motivate Xi.

The Chinese recently sent the White House a list 140 concessions they are willing to make, which Trump called insufficient. "Some things were left off," Trump said breezily after reviewing it. "We will probably get them, too."

If the Dealmaker really wants a deal, he would have to negotiate with an important trading partner, not an adversary, and drop all suggestions that U.S. primacy in the Pacific remains intact. China has already retaliated with tariffs on \$60 billion worth of U.S. products. There is plenty more where that came from if Trump misreads Xi as badly as his vice-president has done.

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