

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

August 6, 2006

**The Israel-Hizbullah War:
A Zero-Sum Game for Everyone?**

Ephraim Lavie
Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies

Although Israel's political leadership has designated the clash with Hizbullah a "war of no choice," it has still been obliged to define realistic objectives for the prosecution and termination of this war. These objectives must inevitably relate to the broader regional and global context of the confrontation.

The expulsion of Syria from Lebanon created a new situation in which a Hizbullah provocation of Israel did not necessarily imply a confrontation between Israel and Syria. Moreover, Israel did not react harshly to a previous Hizbullah attempt to abduct Israeli soldiers in an effort to bring about a new exchange of prisoners after the previous deal failed to return Samir Kuntar to Lebanon. To a large extent, established patterns of behavior by both sides suggested a kind of mutual deterrence: Hassan Nasrallah tended to think that Israel would not undertake any large-scale military action or escalate a crisis because of its fear of Hizbullah's missile force but would instead be forced to negotiate, indirectly, for a new deal; Israel preferred to believe that its military power would deter Nasrallah from any further military provocation.

When Nasrallah was not deterred by Israel's military power, Israel chose not to be deterred by Hizbullah's missiles and instead launched a large-scale operation. But the military measures

adopted did not match the defined objectives (return of the kidnapped soldiers, an end to the rocket fire, and deployment of the Lebanese army throughout the south of the country). The initial reliance on airpower, intended to produce internal Lebanese pressure on Hizbullah, instead led it to activate the missile array it had built up and be dragged into a war at a time not of its choosing. For Iran, too, the use of the missiles at this time may well constitute a waste of a strategic asset intended, according to one school of thought, to deter Israel (or others) from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities.

It is altogether possible that Israel will be unable to dismantle or completely disarm Hizbullah and will have to settle for a substantial reduction in the latter's military capabilities and a limitation of the gains it can register as a result of protracted fighting with the missile reserve it retains. The IDF can achieve these objectives by expanding its ground operations and continuing to strike at Hizbullah's long-range missile array and completing the destruction of its fortifications in a security zone along the border, thus turning them into a monument to Hizbullah's military defeat. If Israel entrenches the image of Nasrallah as a defeated military leader, politically isolated in the Arab world and condemned at home for sacrificing Lebanon on the altar of Islamic zealotry, it can thwart his



Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

demands that a multinational force be deployed on both sides of the border or that Hizbullah units be attached to any Lebanese army deployment in the south. And while the incident at Kafr Qana may have revived Nasrallah's hopes that he can influence the manner in which Resolution 1559 is implemented, it is ultimately the Security Council that will decide how this is done. Consequently, it is vitally important to Israel that the extent of its presence in Lebanon and the manner of its coordination with the UN not jeopardize the possibility that 1559 will actually be implemented. Prolonged presence in Lebanese territory could create conditions for Nasrallah to blur the extent of his military setback and mobilize domestic and international support for an unconditional ceasefire and withdrawal of Israeli forces.

Israel will therefore probably lower its sights and settle for the disarming of Hizbullah only in the south of Lebanon and preventing its future rehabilitation. That would allow Hizbullah to preserve part of its military strength, but without any practical capacity to inflict damage on Israel or reemerge as a force able to dictate Lebanon's foreign and defense policy. But achieving these two goals will require Israel to deal with the Lebanese government as a partner in any political and security arrangements. Moreover, negotiating with the government would strengthen its position as the only sovereign element able to bring about a solution to outstanding problems with Israel and neutralize any Hizbullah claim to the contrary. However, there is little chance that negotiations with the Lebanese government could lead to the disarmament of Hizbullah in the south unless they included a prisoner exchange deal and – to the extent that Syria is ready for a solution of the Shab'a Farms issue – the transfer of those territories to Lebanon. Such a solution would enable the Lebanese government to assert its authority in the south, albeit with support from a multinational force, and deprive Hizbullah of any immediate pretext to act against Israel.

The subsequent rehabilitation of Hizbullah, however, depends on neutralizing Syrian and Iranian involvement in Lebanon. That implies exploring the possibility of exploiting Syria's interest in avoiding getting caught up in the fighting and being a party to arrangements to end the war. Some such understanding might reverse Syria's diplomatic isolation and allow it and the United States to open a new chapter of practical dialogue on security and political issues. Such a dialogue could eventually also serve Israeli interests.

Moving in that direction would make the current war a regional turning point in favor of Israel and not just a means of removing Hizbullah from southern Lebanon. It could lead to the following developments:

1. removing Syria from the list of state-sponsors of terrorism in return for its cessation of support for Hizbullah and a commitment to prevent the transfer to it of weapons and equipment, from or through its territory. Meeting that obligation would open the way for Syria's involvement in the political process;
2. expelling Iran from the immediate arena by preventing the rehabilitation of Hizbullah and prying Syria away from the "axis of evil." Iran's isolation would help the west in its anticipated confrontation with Iran over the latter's nuclear programs;
3. strengthening the standing of moderate Arab regimes trying to resist Iran's hegemonial ambitions in the region and radical Islamist movements at home that aim to undermine the regimes' monopoly on the use of force and on decisions on war and peace.

KEYWORDS: Israel; Lebanon; Syria