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Between Hamas and Hizballah—Israel's Vital Interests

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Some would argue that Israel's strategy of disengagement has proved to be a miserable failure. Israel withdrew unilaterally from Lebanon in the summer of 2000 and from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005, and instead of peace it has war on both these fronts simultaneously, and on the home front too, including Ashkelon in the south and now Nahariya, Safed and Haifa in the North. Israel's willingness to withdraw unilaterally was understood by the neighborhood as a victory for terrorism and a sign of weakness that emboldened Hizballah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and even elements of Fatah to harass Israel and drag it onto a war of attrition, by cross border incursions, rocket attacks on Israeli towns and most recently the kidnapping of three Israeli soldiers. This, however, is a flawed argument. Two clarifications are in order here.

1) Lebanon. Israel withdrew from Lebanon when it was losing some 25 soldiers killed there annually, for objectives over which there was no consensus in the country. Many then argued that Israel could defend itself at less cost from the international boundary, and if attacked would be able to respond with great force and with a greater measure of international support. So far it is they who have been proved right and not the nay sayers. Israel lost over one thousand soldiers in the years of war and occupation in Lebanon. At the rate of losses Israel sustained in the last years of occupation it would have lost another 150 soldiers in the last six years, but instead it actually lost about one tenth of that number (soldiers and civilians) in this period. Israel's deterrence lasted for six years, and Hasan Nasrallah refrained from firing Hizballah's rockets into Israel assuming what the response would be.

Israel's deterrence was apparently seriously eroded by its restraint in reaction to the attacks from Gaza and by the failure of the IDF to prevent the kidnapping of one of its soldiers, and thus the kidnapping by Hizballah of two more. Nasrallah, however, miscalculated. He did not expect such a massive Israeli counter-attack for the kidnapping incident. Israel's restraint in Gaza does not apply to Lebanon. These are two different arenas with different sets of considerations. Israel

can threaten the Lebanese with economic collapse, but it has to be awfully careful not to do the same for Gaza and thus be sucked back into taking responsibility and occupation. For Israel to pull out all stops in Lebanon is a lot easier than it is in the Palestinian territories. Nasrallah threatened Israel with Hizballah's rocketry in the mistaken belief that it would deter Israel, just as Israel had deterred him hitherto. But the symmetry in Nasrallah's mind does not really exist on the ground. Israel has the capacity to inflict on Lebanon immeasurably more damage than Hizbullah could ever cause to Israel, as the Lebanese are now finding out. Moreover, the payloads delivered so far are just a fraction of what Israel could really do.

Hizballah has been surprised twice over, first, by the scope and ferocity of the Israeli response, and second by the limited effectiveness of their rocketry. Nasrallah seems to have been taken in by his own propaganda. The rockets from Lebanon that Hizballah threatened to use against Israel have been fired, many hundreds of them. The rockets were fired into all of Northern Israel, with the intention of killing as many people as possible. Scores of civilians have been injured, but fortunately relatively few have been killed. All losses are too many. But at the same time it should be remembered that one suicide bomber with a bag or belt can inflict far more fatalities than all the rocket attacks, so far. The disruption of normal life in the North is obviously unacceptable and Israel cannot allow that to last.

Yet, those who think about reoccupying southern Lebanon, should think again, and first make a purely rational profit and loss account. What Israel is now doing is exactly what it should be doing, not reoccupation, but explaining the hard way to Hizballah and to their Iranian and Syrian patrons (with the knowledge that the Palestinians are also watching) that Israel is unwavering in its determination to exact an intolerable price from those who are operating under the mistaken assumption that Israel's withdrawals stemmed from weakness or lack of resolve. Hizballah has now crossed all the red lines and broken all the rules in the book. Israel, therefore, is rewriting the rule book and should not rest until all the lessons have been learnt by the neighbors.

Moreover, Israel cannot possibly allow Hizballah back into the positions it held along the border. When this present round is over, if they try to return Israel must prevent them from doing so. Hizballah has provided Israel with an opportunity to reestablish its deterrence and to fundamentally alter the military situation along the

Northern border. This is an opportunity to be exploited to the very full. Israel must continue without respite until all these objectives have been attained.

2) Gaza. Here the nay sayers have it wrong again. Israel did not withdraw from Gaza under the naïve illusion that by so doing peace would break out in the Middle East and Hamas and company would all abide by the rules. Israel did not withdraw from Gaza in flight from the terrorists, no matter what Hamas and others may say. Israel withdrew from Gaza, as it should also do from most of the West Bank, to maintain Israel as the State of the Jewish people. Israel will not be so if it chooses to control millions of Palestinians forever. That is the really critical issue and of that Israel should never lose sight. Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza for whatever security or biblical justification is self-defeating in the long run. The withdrawal, therefore, was unquestionably the right thing to do, even though it was expected that sooner or later the rockets would fly.

Israel, however, cannot possibly be expected to tolerate the rockets nor the kidnapping of its soldiers, under any circumstances whatsoever. Hamas and company must be made to pay a price that they cannot afford. The price must be exacted in military terms by taking out as many of their armed men, some leaders if need be, and as much rocket infrastructure as possible with as little loss to Israel. Here too Israel must establish the post-disengagement rules of play. The Palestinians cannot go on as if Israel has not withdrawn.

But Israel must always remember, above all else, its own grand design. Israel intends to disengage from most of the West Bank too and if it destroys the Palestinian Authority and turns it into a kind of "Somalia" it will not be able to withdraw and might even have to reoccupy Gaza. That would be a disastrous counterproductive outcome that would defeat Israel's own strategic purpose. Therefore despite the fact that Hamas is an incorrigible lot in whom Israel has no faith, Israel must not lead itself to where it does not wish to go. Just like Nasrallah was induced to keep the rules, for six years, and is now being reminded, Israel must also coerce Hamas and all the rest to play by the rules. Indeed, their full understanding of the rules is an essential pre-condition for any further planned disengagement.

The rules have to be set, but short of creating intolerable chaos on the other side. Hamas must be tested by their behavior. If they keep the peace that is fine, if they don't Israel must make them. This is where Israel cannot afford to fail.

Between Hamas's intentions and their capabilities stands Israel's power, military and moral. As long as Israel has those Hamas's intentions are less important. Israel cannot change their intentions, but it can affect their behavior, and Israel must do so by a calculated use of force.

Therefore the present campaign, on all fronts, is an absolutely vital component of Israel's withdrawal strategy. It is not the undoing of that strategy but quite the opposite. It is intended to create the essential preconditions for Israeli redeployment, that is, to set the rules of play for the neighborhood to ensure a secure Israel after withdrawal, without being dragged back into reoccupation with all the hazards that entails.