

Chapter 12

July-August Heat: The Israeli-Palestinian Arena

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The escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation that coincided with the war between Israel and Hizbollah heightened the perceived threat to Israel inherent in the regional context, and in particular, the association between the arenas powered by Islamic forces. Indeed, for several weeks Israel was involved in direct confrontations both with the Lebanese Hizbollah and with Palestinian militant factions. Prominent among them were those that viewed the struggle against Israel as part of the drive toward regional Islamization. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the chronological coincidence, the escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena in the summer of 2006 was a separate event, propelled by its own particular circumstances.¹

On the Eve of the War

When the war broke out between Israel and Hizbollah, the Israeli-Palestinian arena was already engulfed in a process of escalation. Qassam rocket fire from the Gaza Strip on the western Negev, ongoing since the IDF withdrew from Gaza in August 2005, had increased with the Hamas movement's victory in the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). Factions that had established independent organizational frameworks, operational abilities, and political agendas during the intifada continued their violent campaign in order to embarrass the Hamas government and bring about an escalation in the confrontation. Israeli security forces

responded to the Qassam fire, terrorist attacks, and attempted assaults with pursuits of activists in the West Bank and Gaza, with artillery fire, and with aerial and naval attacks on rocket-launching areas in the Gaza Strip.

At the same time, Palestinian bipolar institutional tension increased between Hamas, which controlled the government and the PLC, and the presidency, held by Mahmoud Abbas. The friction paralyzed the ability of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to function, and the political stagnation capped any potential interest within both Hamas and Fatah to contain the armed factions. The inter-organizational tension and the lack of central control were also reflected in sporadic clashes between members of various organizations, particularly Fatah and Hamas. These developments unfolded against the backdrop of an economic crisis that worsened due to the sanctions imposed by Israel, the European Union, and the United States against the PA in the wake of Hamas's electoral victory. The sanctions were intended either to encourage Hamas to change the basic guidelines of its government or, alternatively, to bring about its downfall. In an effort to boost the economic situation, lifting the closure was a key objective of the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails who in what became known as "the prisoners' document" proposed a basis for the government and the presidency to form a national unity government. On June 24, 2006, under public pressure to endorse the prisoners' proposal, Hamas and Fatah leaderships announced agreement on principles for establishing a coalition.² However, the escalation that erupted immediately thereafter in the Israeli-Palestinian sphere blocked the possibility of translating this agreement into any rehabilitation of the Palestinian political system.

On June 25 the IDF intensified its operations in the Gaza Strip following the infiltration into Israel near Kerem Shalom of operatives from the Army of Islam, a Hamas-aligned faction, and their kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. Operation "Shalit Dromi" (Southern Shalit) was designed to generate public pressure on the Hamas government to work for his release and contain the rocket fire. On July 2, following the intensified rocket fire and the continued crisis in the wake of the kidnapping, the IDF's operation in the Strip was expanded. In the second phase of the operation, called "Gishmei Kayitz" (summer rains), ground forces entered the Gaza Strip and, backed by airpower, concentrated on destroying Hamas's civilian

institutions and the military infrastructures belonging to Hamas and other militant factions.

Following the upsurge in the crisis Hizbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah declared that releasing the soldier without obtaining something in return would constitute a failure and a blow to thousands of Palestinian prisoners. On July 13, the day after two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped by Hizbollah on the northern border – the climax of a series of incidents that led to the outbreak of war between Israel and Hizbollah – Nasrallah linked the two kidnapping incidents together and declared that he intended to advance the release of the three Israeli soldiers “in return for the release of Arab prisoners.”³

Operation Summer Rains

The political and media focus on the Lebanese arena both in Israel and around the world reduced interest in the events that were unfolding in the Palestinian arena, and helped to moderate criticism of the duration, extent, and intensity of the Israeli military campaign in the Gaza Strip. However, the limited coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian escalation was not the driving force behind the campaign, which was expanded significantly even before the outbreak of hostilities in Lebanon. In fact, the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation escalated and followed its traditional pattern, largely divorced from its Lebanese counterpart. The IDF maintained its persistent campaign against the militant infrastructure in the West Bank, and acted on land, by sea, and by air against the operational capability of armed elements in the Strip. Nevertheless, the Qassam rocket fire continued. In response to the continued militancy and the failure to achieve the release of the kidnapped soldier, the border crossings between Gaza and the outside world remained closed – barring occasional openings for food, medical equipment, and basic supplies – and hence the shortages and economic crisis in the Strip intensified dramatically. Meantime, alongside military measures, Israel continued arrests of senior Hamas officials.

Confronted by the pressure, Hamas called for a ceasefire in return for an exchange of prisoners and an end to the Israeli military activity in the territories. Prime Minister Haniyeh even urged activists in the field to stop the rocket fire. However, Hamas’s political wing in Damascus and the

local leadership closely aligned with it adhered to the hard-line position.⁴ Moreover, it is doubtful whether the Hamas government, President Abbas, and the PA's security forces would have been able to enforce a policy of relaxation even if it were announced. Abbas's plan to deploy the PA's security forces in the Strip was withdrawn following opposition by Islamic Jihad activists, the Popular Resistance Committees, and the Popular Front, and explicit threats by them to attack the forces.

The number of dead rose as the violence, environmental destruction, boycott, and economic and humanitarian crisis continued in the territories and, in particular, the Gaza Strip. These in turn sparked volatile protests on the Palestinian street,⁵ and ultimately the familiar grievances against Israel joined the anger prompted by the IDF's actions in Lebanon. The Palestinian protesters highlighted the link between the Palestinian struggle and the Lebanese struggle; repeated calls to Nasrallah to keep up the rocket fire on towns and cities in the north of Israel and to attack Tel Aviv; and expressed support for Nasrallah's demand that he himself conduct negotiations for the release of the three kidnapped Israeli soldiers. Criticism on the street, nourished by events in both the Lebanese and the Palestinian arenas, reinforced the concern in Israel, as well as among Fatah ranks and the Palestinian public in general, over the strengthening of the Islamic camp and of the militant factions in the territories. This concern was based on calls in the Palestinian media to escalate the struggle, inspired by the resistance demonstrated by Hizbollah during the war in Lebanon and the organization's proven ability to attack Israel's home front over a period of several weeks even while its forces were subjected to a concentrated and powerful Israeli attack.⁶ The apprehension that the war in Lebanon might become a model for the Palestinians grew with reports of the ongoing acquisition of smuggled arms by militant groups in the territories. The reports underlined increased efforts to transfer to the Strip via Egypt funds, guns, and munitions, as well as anti-tank missiles and rockets with longer ranges than the improvised Qassam rockets.⁷

At the same time, concern also surfaced that Israeli frustration at its evident inability to crush Hizbollah would be channeled toward the territories.⁸ This concern exerted a restraining effect on the Palestinians, which explained, at least in part, the fact that anger against Israel, like support for parties that actively opposed the IDF presence in the Strip and

the conditions presented by the Hamas government for solving the crisis, did not translate into ongoing escalation of the struggle. The damage that would be caused by continued Israeli military pressure, on top of the destruction that had already been caused to operational and civilian infrastructures, limited the militant impetus to escalate the violent provocations. Thus, in the middle of August, along with approval of UN Security Council resolution 1701, there was a sharp decline in rocket fire from the Strip.⁹ As the rocket fire lessened, the intensity of the IDF's counter operations subsided as well.

Back to the Future

The escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation fueled a renewal of Palestinian national dialogue, spurred new international efforts to bring Israel and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table, and removed the idea of a unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank from the Israeli agenda. The latter two developments were reinforced by the war between Israel and Hizbollah.

The confrontation in the Gaza Strip, which in part resulted from the loss of central rule in the territories, accelerated the process of disintegration in the Palestinian Authority. Prime Minister Haniyeh called for public deliberation of official dismantlement of the PA. Motivated primarily by Israel's mass arrest of Hamas leaders, the call was a de facto admission of the Hamas government's failure to establish law and order, the PA's helplessness in dealing with its internal and external challenges, and recognition of the fact that Hamas was about to lose its electoral achievements. At the height of the confrontation, efforts to save the PA by creating a national unity government ebbed. However, in view of the destruction of the institutional and civilian infrastructures in the territories, there were calls for stocktaking from Hamas as well.¹⁰ Even Khaled Masha'al moderated his position on the immediate crisis with Israel and expressed his willingness for a prisoner exchange and a mutual ceasefire.¹¹ In addition, the criticism towards the government by sectors of the public and organizations identified with Fatah, which subsided during the escalation between Israel and the Palestinians, reemerged with greater force once the confrontation had peaked. Widening cracks in the economic boycott against the PA allowed sporadic and partial

payment of salaries to civil servants, but the amounts transferred were not nearly enough to compensate the public at large for the damage of late, ensure regular payment of salaries, and thus help reduce the humanitarian crisis in the territories.¹² At the beginning of September, a general strike was organized in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip by the unions affiliated with Fatah to protest the delay in salary payments. The strike, which was supported by the Fatah-controlled security apparatus of the PA, became something of a protest against Hamas and overshadowed the appeal to the international community to cancel the boycott of the Hamas government. Public opinion polls reinforced the impression that public support for Hamas was eroding.¹³

In view of the public protest and in the wake of threats by Abbas that he would dismantle the Hamas government and call for general elections in the territories, the national dialogue garnered new momentum. On September 11, Haniyeh and Abbas yet once more announced agreement on basic principles of a unity government, based on the prisoners' document, the Arab peace initiative from March 2002, and the UN resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Abbas for his part agreed that Haniyeh would continue to serve as prime minister. Representatives of the two movements embarked on ongoing discussions over the allocation of portfolios and the wording of the joint government manifesto. This progressed intermittently against a backdrop of fierce clashes between members of Fatah and Hamas, and attacks of government ministries and government institutions by Fatah members. By early October 2006 there was an atmosphere of impending civil war in the territories.

The weakness of the Palestinian Authority played a major role in reducing the prospects of regional and international efforts to renew the Israeli-Palestinian political process. Measures in this regard emerged in the wake of the war in Lebanon and the escalation on the Israeli-Palestinian front that, together and independently, demonstrated the unsettling potential of the direct confrontation between Israel and Islamic movements supported by the Iranian-Syrian axis. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice initiated a series of talks ahead of the regional summit meeting of the moderate states – led by Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia – where the revival of the Israeli-Palestinian political process would be discussed, along with examining ways of dealing with the Iranian nuclear program. British prime minister

Tony Blair declared at his farewell address to the British Labor Party conference on September 26 that he intended to devote the time he had left in office “to furthering peace between Israel and Palestine.”¹⁴

Meanwhile the diplomatic coordination between Israel and the United States continued in the background. This was designed to prevent dissolution of the international front against Hamas and in particular to offset the possibility that the European Union might see the manifesto of the planned unity government as a basis for establishing a channel of dialogue with the Hamas government. UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, in a joint statement with the Quartet foreign ministers, expressed hope that a Palestinian unity government would reflect the principles of the Quartet. This statement did not reiterate the accepted refrain, namely, that recognition of the Hamas government was contingent on its acceptance of the Quartet’s three demands: recognition of Israel, rejection of terror, and recognition of previous agreements.¹⁵ To avoid all doubt over possible loosening of the United States’ position towards Hamas, as one might have understood from the Quartet statement, President Bush emphasized in talks with Abbas at the White House in late September that the unity government would be recognized only if it accepted the three conditions. The American stance was bolstered by Prime Minister Haniyeh himself when he said that the decision by the Quartet constituted “a positive step.” However, he added that Hamas would not be part of a government that would recognize Israel.

In such circumstances, all that was left was to maintain and strengthen the position of President Abbas as a possible partner in future negotiations. Israel and the United States limited their ties to the PA to contact with President Abbas, though in actuality, these relations were more symbolic than practical. Abbas also won the backing of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which at the outbreak of the war in Lebanon fiercely criticized Hizbollah for inciting the arena and bringing disaster on Lebanon. Egypt continued its ongoing efforts to stabilize the Palestinian arena and even criticized the political wing of Hamas, particularly the obstacles placed by Khaled Masha’al on talks over the release of Gilad Shalit. By the end of September relations between Cairo and Masha’al’s office reached an open crisis.

Notably, the most significant development in the Israeli-Palestinian arena in context of the Second Lebanon War was the removal of the idea of

unilateral withdrawal ("convergence") from parts of the West Bank from the Israeli government's agenda. The rocket batteries deployed by Hizbollah following the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon demonstrated the threat that was liable to form on the other side of any unilaterally-declared border with the Palestinians. The convergence plan would be a complex challenge in any case due to the difficulty in controlling the border, proven by the withdrawal from Gaza.¹⁶ The Second Lebanon War, along with the concurrent rocket campaign from the Gaza Strip, accentuated existing security concerns. During the war Prime Minister Olmert said that the IDF's achievements in Lebanon would help advance the convergence plan.¹⁷ In fact, the combination of Hizbollah achievements and inadequate IDF achievements in Lebanon, together with the increased security threat from the Gaza Strip, accelerated erosion of support for this idea.

Yet suspending the unilateral convergence plan did not enhance the chances of any bilateral alternative. A major obstacle to advancing an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, let alone securing its implementation, remained the absence of central authority in the Palestinian arena. However, the Fatah-Hamas power struggle was far from exhausted. In addition, even if a unity government were established, it would have to endorse a conciliatory approach to Israel so as to become a partner in the political process. In other words, Hamas would have to accept the terms set by Israel and the Quartet: recognition of Israel and of the agreements signed by Israel and the Palestinians to date, and a commitment to reject terrorism. For its part, Israel insisted it would not recognize a government that included Hamas members as long as the movement did not recognize Israel's right to exist.

Non-recognition, however, proved to be a double-edged sword. The political stagnation along with the economic boycott accelerated the loss of support of whatever political legitimacy the Palestinian Authority had enjoyed prior to the PLC elections in January 2006. On the other hand, preventing Hamas from consolidating its government and gaining a positive governmental experience robbed Israel of a potential address on the Palestinian side for security coordination and possibly also political understandings. At the same time, the political divide relieved the Palestinian and Israeli leaderships alike from an immediate confrontation with weighty security, ideological, and domestic political issues. The escalation in the confrontation in the summer of 2006 conveyed the urgency of the need to

find an exit from the morass. Yet given the internal politics on both sides, along with the increased security threat to Israel due to collapse of the PA, few if any terms remained that would facilitate a compromise. As such, notwithstanding suspension of the Israeli idea of convergence, and the increased international encouragement to renew dialogue, once the storm abated Israel and the Palestinian Authority were left in the same sort of political dead end and on the same violent collision course that confronted them on the eve of the war.

Conclusion

The Israeli-Arab conflict has its own dynamic. Its expressions and patterns are not derived directly or necessarily from surrounding events. This feature was underscored in the summer of 2006 in light of the war between Israel and Hizbollah. The confrontation would have escalated as per the developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena that preceded the fighting between Israel and Hizbollah, particularly, the kidnapping of a soldier on the Gaza Strip border. Regardless of the Lebanese arena, Israel's efforts to weaken the Hamas government would have continued, the economic and humanitarian crisis in the territories would have deepened, the Palestinian Authority would have continued losing its status and domestic authority, the inter-organizational power struggles would have continued; and ongoing efforts by militant elements to incite the confrontation would have been sustained.

One main effect of the war in Lebanon was the temporary lack of attention in Israel and the world at large to the Palestinian arena. For a while, this allowed Israel more freedom in its fight against the armed infrastructures, the Hamas movement, and the Hamas government. A clearer impact of the war in Lebanon on the Israeli-Palestinian arena was the slashed support in Israel for the idea of unilateral convergence in the West Bank, in view of the military arrays deployed by Hizbollah since the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon. In addition, after the end of the war, international efforts to stabilize the regional arena through returning Israel and the Palestinians to the negotiating table were renewed. Still, the Second Lebanon War only served to accelerate these developments. Their direct catalysts were

spawned both prior to and during the war in Lebanon in the immediate Israeli-Palestinian sphere.

Notes

1. The short lapse between the outbreak of the intifada in September 2000 and the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon the previous May was widely interpreted as evidence of the connection between the Palestinian and Lebanese arenas, though relating mainly to the methods of struggle. The idea that the withdrawal from Lebanon was seen in the territories as an achievement to be duplicated through a direct struggle against Israel has both Israeli and Palestinian proponents. Hassan Nasrallah himself referred frequently to the link between the arenas, which was actualized in part by the substantial aid given by Hizbollah to Palestinian militant groups. How much the Palestinians lacked for inspiration to launch a new armed campaign – following the failed 2000 Camp David summit, years of a stagnant diplomatic process, the ongoing dysfunction of the Palestinian Authority, and years of struggle against Israel – is beyond precise measurement, and so the question of Lebanon-inspired motivation remains open.
2. The document called for the establishment of a national unity government based on implementation of decisions by the Arab summit that support “the Palestinian issue,” recognition of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and the inclusion of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the organization. It cites the right of the Palestinian people to focus on the struggle against Israel in the territories beyond the Green Line, alongside continuing political negotiations, and the realization of the right of return of Palestinian refugees. The document, which has no mention of Israel, underlines the call for the creation of a Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as its capital, on land occupied since 1967. According to a public opinion survey published on June 19, 2006, 74 percent expressed support for the principles of the document, although only 47 percent said they would vote for the document if it were presented in a referendum. See *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, Survey Research Unit*, Poll no. 20, June 15-18, 2006.
3. Times Online, July 13, 2006.
4. Rejecting the position of the Hamas leadership in the territories, which was willing to reach a separate agreement with Israel, Muhammad Nazal, Khaled Masha'al's deputy, echoed Nasrallah's line and demanded that the issue of the kidnapped soldiers in Lebanon be linked with the soldier kidnapped on the Gaza Strip border. See Avi Issacharoff and Michal Greenberg, “Hamas Senior Official Abroad: Hezbollah and Hamas to Cooperate on the Hostages,” July 26, 2006, Haaretz.co.il.
5. Between June 25, 2006 and the middle of September 2006, 227 Palestinians were killed in the Gaza Strip (*Haaretz*, September 13, 2006).
6. Avi Issacharoff, “The Lesson of the Palestinians – More Missiles,” August 7, 2006, Haaretz.co.il; Ibrahim al-Hijaa, “The Victory in Lebanon Opens the Door for a Third Intifada,” *al-Rassalah*, August 4, 2006, translated from MEMRI: Middle East Media

- Research Institute, August 7, 2006; see also *Palestinian Media Watch Bulletin*, August 12, 2006, August 31, 2006.
7. Figures of arms smuggling from GSS head Yuval Diskin, as reported in *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict News*, August 15-31, 2006, *Intelligence Heritage Center, Center for Data on Intelligence and Terror*.
 8. "Palestinian Officials Fear Israel to Shift 'Aggression' From Lebanon to PA Areas" in: *Dialogue: West Bank & Gaza Strip – OSC Report*, August 15, 2006.
 9. In June, 140 Qassam rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip, 191 in July, and 41 in August. That was the lowest number of rockets fired in any single month since October 2005. During September 45 rockets were fired from Gaza (*The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict News*, August 15-31, 2006, September 1-14, 2006), September 15-30, The Intelligence Heritage Center, Center for Data on Intelligence and Terror).
 10. "I want us to take a good look at ourselves in view of our mistakes... we have become accustomed to placing responsibility on others. The chaos...the pointless killings, land theft, family conflicts, what have all these to do with the occupation? ...We have worn ourselves down, time after time, with mistakes for which everyone is responsible...The question is, why did we not maintain Gaza's freedom? In the past we have repeatedly said that we support the liberation of every inch of land. Now we have thousands of inches of land...and, despite this, we have not managed to safeguard this valuable asset and we have begun to lose it...Since the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza 500 Palestinians have been killed and over 3,000 wounded...This is in addition to the destruction of infrastructures, bridges and electricity stations...Couldn't our losses have been limited if we had used our brains." From an article published by the Hamas government spokesperson, Dr. Jazi Hamad in the PA's bulletin *al-Ayam*, August 27, 2006, translated from MEMRI: Middle East Media Research Institute.
 11. Haaretz.co.il, July 3, 2006.
 12. The Stockholm Committee of the donor countries undertook to transfer \$500 million for investment in humanitarian projects. Saudi Arabia promised to provide \$250 million, and the European Union offered \$135 million to the PA over three years (Haaretz.co.il, September 3, 2006).
 13. In addition, according to a public opinion poll conducted by the Near East Consulting Research Institute (Ramallah, August 9, 2006), during the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation and the war in Lebanon, support for a peace treaty with Israel fell among the Palestinian public from 76 percent in June to 51 percent in August. Support recovered in September to 64 percent. The level of support, as measured in September, reached 77 percent among those who identified with Fatah, and 48 percent among supporters of Hamas "A poll conducted by a-Najakh University in Nablus indicates a change in Palestinian political stances...if elections were held today Fatah would receive 35 percent of the votes compared with 20 percent to Hamas," Ynet, September 10, 2006.
 14. Times Online, September 26, 2006.
 15. "The Quartet welcomes the efforts of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to form a government of national unity, in the hope that the platform of such a government

would reflect Quartet principles and allow for early engagement.” *The New York Times*, September 21, 2006.

16. “The Convergence is Disappearing,” by Aluf Benn, *Haaretz.co.il*, June 26, 2006; according to the peace index of July 3-4, 2006, only 46 percent said that disengagement from the Gaza Strip was a positive measure.
17. *Haaretz*, August 18, 2006.