Chapter 16

The International Dimension: Why So Few Constraints on Israel?

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The Second Lebanon War lasted just over one month. Its duration was determined by a variety of factors, but primarily by Israeli's own assessment that prolongation of the fighting would not advance any war aims even more ambitious than those that Israel had already achieved, at least not at a cost deemed acceptable to the society and political system. Unlike previous wars, Israel did not – contrary to the predictions of many analysts – have to operate under severe time constraints, because its margin of maneuver was not seriously curtailed by diplomatic pressure. Whether or not that freedom of maneuver ultimately worked to Israel's benefit is a subject of some controversy in Israel's collective post-war assessment, but as an operational factor it appears incontrovertible.

In the Israeli discourse, "diplomatic pressure" is normally understood to mean American pressure to cease hostilities. The reason for the focus on the United States is self-evident: Israeli dependency makes the United States the only foreign actor whose policies constitute a critical input into Israeli decision making. The convergence if not congruence of Israeli and American attitudes toward Hizbollah and its regional patrons meant that there was little intrinsic reason for the United States to push for an early termination of Israeli operations against Hizbollah. However, the rest of the international system or "international community" was not irrelevant, even if Israel itself might be inclined to downplay its importance, because it could have fed into the American calculus and, given the broader American agenda, have moved the administration to accommodate international

preferences even if they did not accord with its own. That explains the potential importance of the international dimension in the Second Lebanon War. In practice, however, that potential did not come into play.

There are two fairly straightforward reasons for this. The first is strategic. Because no other major extra-regional regional actors were closely aligned with the protagonists assumed to be at greatest risk – Lebanon and Hizbollah or their regional patrons – the critical interests and prestige of others were not engaged in the confrontation, obviating any anxiety about escalation of the type that often influenced superpower behavior in local conflicts during the height of the Cold War. Moreover, it quickly became clear that even other Middle Eastern actors were wary of being directly implicated in the fighting, alleviating concerns that the fighting might precipitate a broader regional conflict. In fact, some regional governments, perhaps for the first time in the history of Arab-Israeli wars, actually distanced themselves from an Arab protagonist, in part because they objected to the "hijacking" of national security agendas by a non-state actor. Saudi Arabia, for one, officially condemned the "rash adventures carried out by elements inside the state," in part because of Hizbollah's identification with Iran and with Islamist radicalism – factors that threatened its own state or regime security. But even Iran and Syria, which did support Hizbollah, nevertheless communicated their own intention to stay outside the fray in order to avoid jeopardizing what they deemed were more important national security interests.

Second, the emotional sympathy with the targets of Israeli military attacks that did exist was too limited to drive the foreign policies of major international actors. True, Israel did attack the Lebanese national infrastructure (the Beirut airport, oil storage facilities, an electricity transformer, some bridges) in the first few days of the war in the hope of generating more active Lebanese opposition to Hizbollah, and that prompted widespread condemnations of "disproportionate response." But the failure of this mode of operation to produce any discernible benefits led Israel to abandon it in favor of more focused attacks on Hizbollah, and these did not produce the same emotional resonance even when they took place in Shiite-populated areas. That is not just because Hizbollah was almost universally seen as responsible for the outbreak of violence. It also stemmed from Hizbollah's association with Syria and especially

Iran. At the global level, that placed it in the same camp with forces that are themselves objects of fear and loathing, particularly because of the Iranian leadership's belligerent rhetoric and refusal to take the steps necessary to dispel widespread suspicions that it is embarked on a quest for nuclear weapons. At the regional level, it made Hizbollah appear to be the spearhead of growing Shiite self-assertion and belligerency that had already prompted King Abdullah of Jordan to express anxiety about the danger of a "Shiite crescent" surrounding the Sunni Arab world and led President Mubarak of Egypt to complain that Iraqi Shiites are more loyal to Iran than to their own country.

Of course, there were large-scale condemnations of Israeli operations in Lebanon and expressions of sympathy for its victims, usually defined as "the Lebanese people" rather than as Hizbollah per se. These were most evident in demonstrations throughout the Muslim world from Morocco to Indonesia, although such demonstrations also took place in Western cities, where the most prominent participants were often local Arabs or other residents of Muslim origin along with leftists objecting to whatever the United States did or (in this case) did not do. As a result of these public sentiments, Arab governments quickly desisted from their initial criticism of Hizbollah and began to issue declarations of support for Hizbollah/Syrian/Iranian demands for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire. But while they shared the Hizbollah/Syrian/Iranian assessment that a prolongation of the fighting would be to the detriment of Hizbollah, they did not share the objective of avoiding that, and their declarations therefore seemed to be pro forma efforts to appease domestic public opinion rather than real investments of political capital. The same can be said of non-regional governments in Asia and Europe, including Great Britain, where Prime Minister Tony Blair did face strong criticism within his own party for aligning himself too closely with the substance and pace of American diplomacy.

As a result, none of the institutions that are taken to embody the international community (or significant parts of it) – the United Nations, the European Union, the G-8, even the Arab League – pressed vigorously for an early cessation of hostilities, and real momentum for a Security Council ceasefire did not begin to build until several weeks into the war, when both the United States and Israel itself concluded that further combat was unlikely to produce additional substantial gains or consolidate what

had been already been achieved. Moreover, the ceasefire resolution that did eventually emerge – SC 1701 – was very different from the version that Hizbollah and its backers had wanted: a cessation of hostilities that was either unconditional or (even more ambitiously) that also called for the immediate withdrawal of whatever Israeli forces were in Lebanon. Instead, by reaffirming previous Security Council resolutions that had never been implemented (especially 1559), it endorsed the extension of central Lebanese government authority throughout the country and the deployment of the Lebanese army up to the Israeli-Lebanese border. This was one of Israel's central objectives but had previously been anathema to Hizbollah. However, 1701 went further and established a mechanism for the implementation of this goal: a strengthened United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Despite initial delays and widespread skepticism about whether this force would actually come into existence or meet its force-level targets, various international actors (especially Italy and France) did come forward with contributions substantial enough to warrant the withdrawal of Israeli forces remaining in Lebanon.

All in all, it can therefore be argued not only that international pressure did not compel Israel to terminate operations in Lebanon before it itself was inclined to do so, but also that the international community actually helped to entrench and consolidate whatever gains Israel had managed to make through military means. Of course, that does not mean that international involvement helped secure goals that Israel was unable to achieve by its own actions. Nor does it necessarily mean that international involvement in Lebanon will continue to operate to Israel's advantage in the future. The relatively permissive international environment in the summer of 2006 was almost certainly a function of the particular circumstances surrounding the outbreak and evolution of the crisis. It is far from certain that Israeli and international – or even Israel and American – perspectives will overlap on the issues in the Lebanese arena that remain to be addressed, such as the disposition of Shab'a Farms, the release of prisoners, Israeli aerial overflights, the prevention of arms smuggling into Lebanon and, most significantly, the eventual disarming of Hizbollah.

Even more uncertainty attaches to perceived or proposed linkages between the Lebanese arena and other regional problems. For example, analysts and policymakers in Europe and the United States began almost

immediately after the fighting stopped to endorse the idea that Hizbollah can only be further undermined or at least prevented from rehabilitating itself by inducing Syria, which is widely seen to be the weakest or least natural link in the Hizbollah-Syria-Iran axis, to defect, and that Israel needs to contribute to that by agreeing to renew peace negotiations with Syria on the clear understanding that a major Israeli withdrawal in – and almost certainly from – the Golan Heights will be the focus of any such negotiations. It is unclear how international preferences or prescriptions will evolve concerning this logic, but the American administration currently shows little enthusiasm for it, regardless of the attitudes of others, and unless that changes, the reluctance of the Israeli government to embrace it will probably not be influenced by other attitudes in the international arena.

But that may not be the case with respect to other linkages, particularly the linkage between the Palestinian issue and international approaches to Hizbollah's other patron – Iran. On the Palestinian issue, American and Israeli approaches may also be generally convergent. But there is greater inclination elsewhere in the region and the world to be more responsive to Palestinian demands and requirements, at least concerning financial support and other measures to facilitate improved functioning of the Palestinian Authority. The American agenda vis-à-vis Iran also largely corresponds with Israel's, but the promotion of that agenda requires mobilization of regional and international support, and failure to promote a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or least a reduction of its profile, may well come to be seen as an irritant if not an obstacle to the formation of a broader coalition in support of American action against Iran. Sympathy for the Palestinian cause, especially in the Middle East, outstrips any sympathy for Hizbollah's cause and may actually be one of the few threads preventing the Sunni-Shiite fault line from turning into a real rift that could make it easier for the United States to deal more effectively with Iran. By the same token, clear evidence of engagement on behalf of the Palestinians would allow Europeans to convince themselves, if not others, that forceful diplomatic/economic and even military action against Iran could not be depicted as part of the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West that they desperately want to avoid. The United States may well conclude that it has to accommodate this reality. And if that happens,

the international system that allowed Israel so much freedom of maneuver in Lebanon could have a rather different impact on Israeli relations with the Palestinians.