

## After the Withdrawal from Lebanon

# The Implications for Israel-Palestinian Relations

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**T**he nature and timing of Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon left in its wake a host of uncertainties with respect to the future of Lebanon, Syria's relations with Lebanon, and Israel's relations with both those countries. But it also raises issues with potentially serious implications for the Palestinian track of the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The Palestinian dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict has had major implications for Israel's relations with Lebanon and will continue to do so. Israel was originally embroiled in Lebanon because of the Palestinian civil and military presence there and the use made of Lebanese territory by Palestinian organizations to pursue their struggle against Israel. Because of the continued presence of some 250,000 unwanted Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including an agreed resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue, remains of one Lebanon's conditions for a peace agreement with Israel. The other condition is an Israeli-Syrian agreement. And as long as a settlement of the refugee issue and the Israeli-Syrian conflict remain out of reach, there is a strong possibility that Palestinian elements based in the refugee camps will, with Syrian approval or active encouragement, prevent the stabilization of the Israeli-Lebanese border and precipitate military escalation and Israeli reengagement.

But the chain of causality also runs in the opposite direction, in the sense that recent developments in Lebanon may have at least an indirect impact on the Israeli-Palestinian track. The reason is that many Palestinians, along with other Arabs, view the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon as a defeat that provides not only a general cause for celebration, but also a precedent and a model to emulate. More specifically, they believe that the Hizbullah campaign forced Israel to withdraw completely and unconditionally, without any political agreement, concessions or commitments on the part of the Lebanese. In other words, they believe that Hizbullah accomplished the complete liberation of Lebanese territory through violence, and since that is the only method capable of persuading Israel to grant Arab demands, the Palestinians can and should use the same means in order to accomplish their goal. Thus, the example of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon may provide an additional inspiration, if any is needed, for Palestinians, especially among the more radical and rejectionist forces, to escalate their use of terrorism, armed confrontation, or other forms of violence in the pursuit of maximalist goals.

Admiration of, and identification with, Hizbullah by Palestinian radicals did not begin with the withdrawal from Lebanon. Direct contact between Hamas and Hizbullah was facilitated by the temporary deportation of 400 Hamas activists to

Lebanese territory north of the security zone in 1992. And in early 2000, students in Bir Zeit University (not all of them Islamists) mounted a violent demonstration against visiting French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in response to his characterization of Hizbullah as "terrorists."

But from a historical point of view, it is ironic that Palestinians should now want to adopt the "Hizbullah model." In fact, it is Hizbullah that adopted a model elaborated in the 1960s by the Palestinians themselves under the intellectual influence of the Algerian war of independence against France. (For a brief period after 1967, Syrian military thinkers also toyed with the idea of resorting to guerrilla war as a more promising alternative to the strategy of conventional war.) The difference is that the Palestinian fedayeen failed to implement the model before 1967 or even afterward (when conditions were theoretically more promising), whereas Hizbullah succeeded. That the idea of launching a guerrilla war should be revived now is mostly a function of the general euphoria provoked by the sight of the IDF withdrawing from Arab territory rather than of any change in the Palestinians' circumstances, because the problems of replicating in the West Bank and Gaza what happened in Lebanon have not become any less complicated following the dismantling of the security zone.

The applicability of the Lebanese



model by Palestinians depends primarily on the similarity of circumstances. And the circumstances in south Lebanon and the West Bank/Gaza, though perhaps superficially analogous, differ in several important respects. In south Lebanon, the IDF operated in or through populated areas, and the Lebanese population provided the proverbial "sea" in which the guerrilla "fish" could swim. In the West Bank and Gaza, most of the Palestinian population is now in Areas A and B under the control of the Palestinian Authority, while the IDF is deployed outside and around the population in Area C.

Secondly, the Lebanese government outside the security zone sympathized with the guerrillas; but even if it hadn't, it did not exercise effective authority either in the security zone or in the rest of the country. Thus, it could not be compelled by Israeli counter-actions to restrain Hizbullah guerrillas. More importantly, it could not pursue the common objective of Israeli withdrawal by alternate means — negotiations. In other words, the Lebanese government had no choice but to pay whatever cost was inflicted on Lebanon as a result of Hizbullah's campaign. The Palestinian Authority would almost certainly sympathize with a similar campaign in the West Bank or Gaza, but its cost-benefit calculation is different. The PA has at least the option of pursuing potentially promising negotiations and a greater degree of control over the population for which it is nominally responsible. Most importantly, it has more at risk if it fails to exercise that control: at a minimum, what it might achieve by other

means, at a maximum, what it has already achieved in the past.

Finally, there is a difference in the Israeli approach to the territories at issue, hence, to the probable response of public opinion and of the political/military echelons to an upsurge of Hizbullah-type violence. Israel never had territorial claims in Lebanon. Its presence there was purely utilitarian — "What is the best or most cost-effective way to protect northern Israel?" — and the debate about that,

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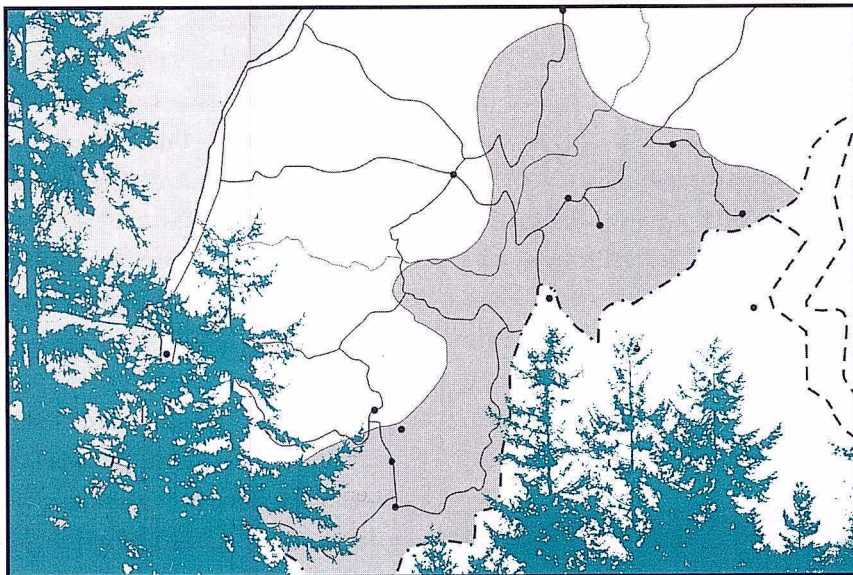
though not devoid of emotional elements, was largely pragmatic. What decided its outcome was Hizbullah's ability to convince the Israeli public that the cumulative material cost of remaining in Lebanon (i.e. the cost in lives) had exceeded the marginal benefit (i.e. security for Israeli towns and villages in the north). By contrast, Palestinian territorial aspirations in the West Bank, and especially in Jerusalem, touch on highly sensitive ideological issues for Israel, not to speak of the complicating factor of a large population of Jewish settlers. In addition, Israel does have claims to at least some of the territory that Palestinians

demand it evacuate. Theoretically, this does not preclude a similar cost-benefit calculation from operating in Israel, but it does mean that the cost that the Palestinians would have to inflict on Israel would be far higher (as would be the cost of Israeli countermeasures, across a broad spectrum of economic, political and military options, that the Palestinians would incur).

For all these reasons, the Palestinian Authority apparently has no intention of pursuing this strategy or permitting others to do so. Yasser Arafat had no choice but to praise the liberation of Lebanese territory. After all, the method by which it was accomplished was entirely consistent with the original ethos of the PLO, grounded in "armed struggle," and with the evolving national narrative of the Palestinians, which has elevated the intifada, in form and content, into the totality of their historiography.

Nevertheless, Arafat was careful on the morrow of the Israeli withdrawal to signal that his own intentions are different and to dampen the expectations of others, indirectly warning those Palestinians who might nevertheless be tempted to pressure him or undertake initiatives of their own. In an interview on Israel's Channel Two Television on May 25, Arafat scoffed at the suggestion that Israel had actually been forced by guerrillas to flee Lebanon. "Do you want to tell me," he asked rhetorically, "that Barak gave the instruction to withdraw because of Hizbullah?" "Barak ordered the withdrawal," he insisted, "to implement United Nations Resolution 425." In other words, Arafat attempted to





rebuff calls for a Palestinian guerrilla war against Israel by denying that guerrilla war had produced victory in Lebanon. Instead, he expressed the hope that Israel would agree to peace with the Palestinians on the basis of other UN Resolutions that, in his interpretation, would allow the Palestinians to fulfill their aspirations, despite the fact that those resolutions (unlike 425) are subject to different interpretations and do not contain unequivocal prescriptions with respect to the territorial or other obligations of the parties concerned.

This approach does not necessarily mean that the PA will refrain from any violence or act vigorously to prevent violence by non-PA elements. Occasional outbursts of violence have been tolerated or encouraged at various times in order to express Palestinian frustration, elicit Israeli concessions, stimulate more energetic outside involvement in the negotiations, or respond to Israeli actions. The most

recent round of hostilities centered on demands for the release of prisoners and culminated on May 15, (Palestinian "Catastrophe Day") in widespread exchanges of fire between the IDF, on one side, and Fatah-organized demonstrators and Palestinian security forces, on the other. Similar events may well take place again. But the PA will also restrain itself and others, lest that violence get out of control and threaten essential Palestinian interests. And if the PA is wary of the consequences of sporadic incidents of violence, it will certainly refrain from becoming an active sponsor of, or participant in, something resembling the guerrilla war waged by Hizbullah in Lebanon.


Arafat's calculus is likely to change only if something happens to narrow the differences between Lebanese and Palestinian circumstances. One such development, highly improbable but not altogether inconceivable, would be IDF

reinvestment of Palestinian-populated areas (especially in Area A) following outbursts of limited or localized violence. But the most critical would be the disappearance of the major alternative to the "Hizbullah model", which could result from the collapse of negotiations or even the loss of all hope that anything useful could still be expected from them. In that case, the "opportunity-cost" side of the "cost-benefit" equation for the PA of a guerrilla war would diminish, perhaps to the point where even the uncertain benefits would no longer act as a deterrent.

The policy implications for Israel are fairly clear: however unpromising for the Palestinians the prospects of guerrilla war may be, a major incentive for refraining from it is the prospect of progress in negotiations. Israel, therefore, has every reason to ensure that this prospect not be discredited.

The same conclusion applies to a slightly different variant of the Lebanese precedent. Of those scenes associated with the termination of the security zone in south Lebanon, the most graphic, though not necessarily the most significant, involved the disintegration of the South Lebanon Army. It was the collapse of the SLA that precipitated a more hasty and undignified withdrawal by the IDF than had been planned or anticipated. And the catalyst for the SLA's collapse was not a military attack by Hizbullah, but rather a march by unarmed civilians on the weakest link in the SLA chain, the predominantly Shiite sector in the center of the zone. The refusal of the IDF to fire on these civilians and the inability of SLA





elements to resist the challenge has given rise to speculation that in the West Bank and Gaza Israel's presence might be more effectively challenged by an influx of unarmed civilians than by a Hizbullah-type guerrilla campaign.

But here, too, there are several dissimilarities that need to be borne in mind. The first is that the Lebanese civilian march began after Israel had already decided to withdraw (largely because of casualties inflicted by guerrillas) and begun to implement that decision. Secondly, it took place in areas acknowledged by Israel to be Lebanese and to which Israel had no competing claim. Thirdly, it was primarily directed, not against the IDF, but against a proxy force that lacked sufficient legitimacy to stand on its own against the Hizbullah-led marchers.

The first two of these circumstances do not apply in those parts of the West Bank and

Gaza still under exclusive Israeli control. That has not prevented ongoing calls for a revival of intifada-type actions, though it is not clear where advocates of this course expect that the new intifada would take place. On the one hand, a mass civilian march into Area C would confront the IDF with serious dilemmas, since it would be extremely reluctant to open fire on unarmed civilians. On the other hand, the IDF and other security forces in the West Bank and Gaza, unlike the IDF in Lebanon, are trained, equipped and prepared to deal with confrontation with civilians and might be able to contain this challenge with non-lethal means. Even so, the main burden of avoiding the risks of such a confrontation will fall on the PA. And the PA's willingness and ability to bear this burden will be a function of the extent to which in imposing restraint, it is seen to be serving Palestinian national interests rather than Israeli ones, that is, the extent to which it avoids being seen as a proxy

force. Palestinian rejectionists already compare PA security forces to the SLA, and depict Arafat as a Palestinian Antoine Lahad who prevents the Palestinian people from waging the same kind of jihad that produced victory for the Hizbullah. This accusation already has some resonance among rejectionists, but it is almost inconceivable that Arafat will act in a way that will give it widespread credibility. Therefore, there is little probability that this variant of the "Lebanese model" can be applied either.

Insofar as Israeli policy is concerned, the implication here is that it should act to ensure that this probability not change to its own detriment. In addition to maintaining the disincentives to unilateral Palestinian actions, it means helping to sustain Arafat's ability to ward off accusations of "proxyism" by pursuing negotiations with the maximum vigor and intensity consistent with its own essential needs.