After IDF's Withdrawal from South Lebanon

In This Edition

Israel's Deterrent Power After Lebanon

Shai Feldman

*T*he distinction between the efficacy of Israel's deterrent power in the "basic security" realm and that in matters of current security dates back to the beginnings of the State of Israel. The former focuses on threats posed to the existence of the state or its vital interests by the regular armies of the Arab countries, while the latter focuses on threats emanating from irregular elements, ranging from adolescent stone throwers to international terrorists and other irregular fighters.

Since the Gulf War - when the issue of Israel's ability to deter Arab countries from using chemical and biological weapons first arose - its deterrent power has been perceived on three levels: the strategic level, i.e. deterring adversaries from the use of mass destruction weapons; the conventional level; and the low-intensity level, i.e. the range of activities from stone throwing to terrorism.

From the beginning, Israel has had problems in translating its basic security

deterrent into the ability to forestall threats to its current security. Since the mid-seventies this difficulty became even more manifest in strife-torn Lebanon, where no clear address existed for Israel's deterrent threats. From its early involvement in Lebanon and throughout the intifada, there was an increasing gap between Israel's ability to prevent the Arab countries from launching militarily against it - including the use of non-conventional weapons - and its difficulties in coping with irregular forces in Lebanon, as well as in Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip.

In the absence of an effective deterrent capability against irregular forces, Israel's efforts to ensure normal life in the northern towns and settlements from the mid-eighties were based on the security zone erected north of the border. Activity in this zone was carried out by the SLA, supported by IDF units and strongholds. Also present in the zone and its environs from 1978 were UNIFIL forces. Israel's declared aim of the zone was to prevent

infiltration of its northern border; its undeclared aim was to reduce the likelihood of attacks on the northern settlements by drawing fire toward SLA units and IDF strongholds. These outposts were intended to ensure that these aims would be achieved with minimal losses.

From the purely military aspect, the IDF was very successful in dealing with the challenges it faced in the Lebanese arena. Its units, which faced guerrilla fighters who were able to trigger about a thousand incidents in south Lebanon annually, were able to prevent attacks from disrupting the lives of Israel's northern residents. Moreover the IDF's losses in Lebanon were relatively small compared with those of other countries experienced in anti-guerrilla warfare. However, these losses - tens of dead and many dozens of wounded every year - were extremely hard on the families whose sons fell during the long years of the anti-terrorist struggle in Lebanon and the cumulative effect of the losses affected the nation's determination to maintain a military presence there.

Moreover, while the army was making every effort to carry out its tasks with minimal losses, the Hizbullah succeeded in challenging the ethos on which the IDF fighters had been raised. The IDF, prompted by the effort to minimize losses, placed its troops in strongholds. Thus the army, taught from its inception prior to the establishment of the state in the Haganah and the Palmach to be the initiator, the launcher of offensives, found itself under attack and on the defensive. The Hizbullah, for their part, made every effort to consolidate their successes and shatter

the army's ethos by video-taping their attacks on IDF positions in south Lebanon and making sure that the tapes reached the broadcast media in Israel so that the public would see its sons defending themselves against the Hizbullah fighters.

The situation on Israel's northern borders during the last decade can be summed up in two sentences: firstly, the strategy it adopted to ensure a more or less normal life in the northern settlements did not receive enough support from the Israeli public due to the losses it entailed and

Hizbullah's successful attempt to destroy the IDF's ethos. Secondly, Israel's failure to effectively deter the irregular forces facing the IDF in south Lebanon did not, however, erode its ability to deter regular armies or attacks involving strategic weapons. This is borne out by the fact that Israel's difficulties in the Lebanon campaign did not lead Syria to conclude that it could launch a conventional attack on Israel. The Golan Heights front therefore remained surprisingly calm, while the fighting continued in south

Lebanon just a short distance away.

Deterrent power is a matter of perception and it must therefore be hoped that the difficult and distressing scenes that accompanied Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon at the end of May will not influence its ability to fend off basic security threats. There are good grounds for such hope: the US withdrawal from Vietnam and pictures of the last helicopters circling over the roof of the US embassy in Saigon did not spur the Soviet Union to confront the US with strategic threats and to test NATO's conventional strength or America's nuclear arsenal.

However, unlike the US, which could dissociate itself completely from South East Asia, Israel has no similar option where threats from south Lebanon are concerned. Therefore the Israeli government is now endeavoring to convert this front from the current security realm - in which it failed - to one of conventional deterrence. To this end it is making the Syrian government the element responsible for any outbreak of violence against Israel - regular or irregular - emanating from Lebanon.

The threat that further hostilities directed against Israel will be met with harsh and painful military measures targeted at Syrian interests in Lebanon, therefore marks Damascus as the element which has replaced the anarchy existing in south Lebanon and which will, from now on, be held responsible for any anti-Israel terrorist acts.

The hope that this new strategy can succeed is founded on three basic premises: first, in the event of an attack

against Israel - in light of Israel's withdrawal from all Lebanese territories and its strict compliance with all clauses of UN Resolution 425 - Jerusalem's reaction will be deemed legitimate by the international community and its institutions; second, the various considerations that confront Syria as a result of Israel's threat will lead it to prefer the prevention of anti-Israel actions. Finally, if Damascus opts for obviating hostile acts against Israel, it has the capability to impose its wishes on all the irregular organizations and elements operating in the Lebanese arena.

The third of the above premises seems the most persuasive: Even if Syria cannot prevent every single terrorist act by individuals or small insurgent groups, it may reasonably be assumed that the many means at its disposal and the leeway enjoyed by its government, which is not bound by international moral and legal constraints, provide it with an impressive ability to enforce its desires on the Hizbullah movement and on the various Palestinian factors operating in south Lebanon.

The second assumption, that Syria will prefer to prevent anti-Israel actions, is more difficult to sustain. Syria will be facing a grave dilemma in the coming months. On the one hand, it is facing the new threat of Israeli reactions if hostile anti-Israel acts from Lebanon will be renewed. On the other hand, its virtual agreement to fulfill the role allotted to it by Israel's new strategy denotes its readiness to accept as given that Israel - in light of the withdrawal from south

Lebanon - has deprived Syria of its last means to pressure Israel into withdrawing from the Golan Heights under conditions acceptable to Damascus.

The first of the above assumptions - that a strike against Syrian interests in Lebanon will be internationally validated - is the most difficult to justify. At this early stage such a threat by Israel directed against Syria meets with the understanding of important international elements, and possibly the first phases of a future Israeli reaction will also incur widespread international understanding. However, the circumstances which led Israel to adopt its deterrent strategy in Lebanon - its withdrawal from south Lebanon in accordance with Security Council Resolution 425 - will gradually be forgotten and the European community will mainly be influenced by what it sees on television. If the painful blows result in heavy civilian casualties covered by the television networks - as happened in "Operation Grapes of Wrath" - international support of Israel's deterrent strategy will dwindle rapidly.

Beyond the problems implicit in the premise upon which Israel's new deterrent policy are based, there remains a fundamental question that applies to any attempt to implement a deterrent policy on low-intensity fighting: What degree of violence on the part of one or more elements active in the Lebanese arena will lead Israel to carry out its threats? Will this capacity endure should Israel attempt to prevent unnecessary escalation by exercising restraint in the event of a limited attack consisting of, say, an isolated

katyusha firing? In its efforts to implement an effective deterrent policy, could Israel react harshly even if attacks against its northern settlements border remain limited at first?

The IDF's withdrawal from south Lebanon is likely to have two contradictory effects on the direct deterrent balance between Israel and the Hizbullah. On one hand, the manner of the withdrawal, the collapse of the SLA, and the pictures that accompanied the event further undermined Israel's deterrent image vis-a-vis the irregular forces. Hizbullah's feelings of triumph could, therefore, lead them to crave additional victories over Israel. On the other, Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon could decrease the motivation of Hizbullah and the Lebanese population within which it operates to continue the armed struggle against Israel.

Israel's unwillingess to remain in south Lebanon was directly affected by Israeli public's belief that this presence was not essential. The motivation of Hizbullah members to continue the fight against Israel after the IDF's withdrawal could be influenced by their own feeling and that of the population in Lebanon among which Hizbullah operates that the "liberation of Palestine" is not a goal that justifies the price they will have to pay in the newly created political environment. Moreover, while Hizbullah was strongly motivated to fight Israel until the IDF withdrew, Israel and its government would be prepared to employ strong, even extreme, measures against any attempt to prevent its citizens in the north from leading a normal life.

To sum up, the following three findings determine Israeli deterrence in the wake of the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon:

Firstly, Israel 's deterrent power is effective against conventional and strategic threats from sovereign countries and there is no indication that this deterrent power has been adversely affected, despite Israel's weakness in the struggle against terrorist organizations and popular movements. It may therefore reasonably be assumed that this deterrent power will undergo no significant attrition, harsh pictures of the IDF withdrawal from south Lebanon notwithstanding.

Secondly, Israel's balance of deterrence vis-a-vis the Hizbullah will remain complex. On the one hand, the pictures have a positive impact on the Hizbullah fighters; on the other hand, the IDF pullout from Lebanese territory will diminish Hizbullah's motivation to persist in its violent struggle against Israel.

Finally, Israel's attempt to deal with low-intensity threats from Lebanon by making the Syrians the focus of Israel's deterrent threats is based on certain premises of doubtful validity. The efficacy of its strategy will require that Israel commit itself to carrying out its threat to respond to any development that sabotages the normal lives of its northern residents, even if such an attack is limited in scope and results in limited losses. Israel will need to persevere in its active deterrent policy even if its implementation fails to meet with continuing international validation and support. Finally, Israel will need to project a readiness for escalation vis-a-vis Syria, while Damascus will find it difficult to accept the new situation that has been created following the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon - the loss of its principal leverage over Israel on the Golan Heights issue.