

After the Withdrawal from Lebanon

Three Scenarios

Shlomo Brom

Israel's unilateral withdrawal from south Lebanon has created a new situation which is expected to alter the profit and loss evaluations of each of the major adversaries. These changes entail opportunities as well as risks for Israel. So far the actions of both sides in the short period of time that has elapsed since the withdrawal and the calm that prevails in south Lebanon indicate that parties are weighing their future steps very carefully.

Incentives and Constraints of the Parties

HIZBULLAH has considerably enhanced its prestige and political standing in Lebanon as a movement that can justly be credited with having accomplished the IDF pullout from the security zone. The organization's ideological commitment to resist Israel's existence, coupled with its sense of triumph and the harm inflicted on Israel's image, could encourage it to continue its attacks against Israel – this time on Israeli soil beyond the international border, even if the organization finds it difficult to define a practical target for its actions. Internal pressure in the organization to continue its operations could be augmented by outside pressure from Iran and possibly even from Syria. On the other hand, Hizbullah is an authentic Lebanese Shiite organization. Its power base within the Lebanese Shiite community and the interests of that community are important to it. In the wake

of long years of civil war and fighting against Israel in south Lebanon that have exacted a heavy toll from Lebanon in general and the Shiites in particular, the impression is that the Shiite community now wishes above all to focus on the rehabilitation and amelioration of the socio-economic situation. It is hard to imagine that the Hizbullah would want to jeopardize all this for the sake of an ideological commitment, the

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implementation of which could be put off to the distant future, especially since it could also endanger all the political profits it has garnered from its success in the conflict with Israel.

SYRIA had a vested interest in using south Lebanon to continue anti-Israel activity as the only leverage that could pressure Israel to return to the negotiations with it under Syria's conditions. However, in light of the unequivocal warnings sounded by Israel and the US, Syria

apparently realizes that the risks and probabilities of a rapid escalation, which would speedily and directly affect Syrian interests, have risen considerably. Syria furthermore understands that Prime Minister Ehud Barak's actions, in the negotiating framework and by implementing the unilateral withdrawal from south Lebanon, have created a new political situation in which Israel has the wall to wall support of the international arena. Under these conditions, Syrian-backed attacks from south Lebanon could result in sharp international reaction against Damascus that would return it to the status of an outcast.

IRAN, it may be assumed, will continue to push Hizbullah to carry on its attacks on Israel, particularly the part of official Iran that dominates the ties with Hizbullah (i.e. Ayatollah Khamenei's camp). If such attacks should lead to a limited confrontation between Israel and Syria, they would be even more welcome as this would preclude a resumption of negotiations with Israel. Nevertheless, should Hizbullah decide that its interests require a cessation of its anti-Israel activities, this could lead to a general rethinking of the situation, also in Iran, as the status of Hizbullah in Lebanon is one of Iran's few successes in "exporting the revolution" - one it would not wish to compromise.

It would be interesting to ascertain whether Syria and Iran are capable of

persuading Hizbullah to operate against Israel if the organization feels that such actions contradict its interests. So far this has not been put to the test because Hizbullah had a standing interest in operating in south Lebanon, and Syria, for example, only pressured Hizbullah to use more restraint when this served its own interests. Iran was never obliged to pressure the Hizbullah to act. Hizbullah is affiliated to both Syria and Iran; it depends on Iran for financing and supplies, and on Syria for its domination of the supply route and the freedom to operate in Lebanon. But if the fighting against Israel is halted, the organization's needs for aid from those two countries will also diminish. In any event, the conclusion to be drawn from the above is that the Hizbullah's success vis-a-vis Israel could, paradoxically, to some extent lead it to part ways with Iran and Syria.

The LEBANESE GOVERNMENT will no doubt wish to regain its control over south Lebanon in a situation of calm and stability. However, its ability to achieve this aim depends on Syria's consent. In recent years the government of Lebanon, with Syria's backing, has succeeded in stabilizing the political, economic and security situation in Lebanon and has disbanded, if only formally, all militias except Hizbullah. Unless Syria objects, the rehabilitated Lebanese army is capable of maintaining order in south Lebanon.

The ORGANIZATIONS OF THE PALESTINIAN REJECTIONIST FRONT that maintain a presence in Lebanon will be eager to exploit the new situation, to renew attacks on the security fence, and

infiltrate its gangs to execute attacks inside Israel. These organizations have been weakened over the years and their operational ability is limited for the time being. Given their total dependence on Syria, they will not be able to operate unless they at least have Syria's tacit consent. Should the Syrians decide that, risks notwithstanding, they want attacks launched from south Lebanon, it is quite possible that they will find it more convenient to impel these groups – not Hizbullah – to stage attacks. The Syrians may also believe that the leads linking them to the attacks will thus remain invisible.

The INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, including the US, France and the UN as active players, desires a continuing stabilization of the situation in Lebanon and continuing calm in south Lebanon under the rule of the Lebanese government. It is even prepared to invest in this cause, including the dispatch of an international force, an expanded UNIFIL, and an aid package for the rehabilitation of south Lebanon.

ISRAEL has knowingly created a situation that leaves itself very little leeway, and it must place its trust in the decline of the other side's motivation to attack it, as well as on its own deterrent power and on international support. Its vulnerability in the new situation compels it to retaliate sharply to any provocation in order to maintain its deterrent capability, and messages to this effect are being relayed to Syria and Lebanon. In the short term, at least, the new status quo creates a feeling of insecurity among the residents

of northern Israel, deriving from the uncertainty of what the future holds. The decision-makers must take this into consideration in arriving at their conclusions.

Scenarios

Given the considerations of the various players, three likely scenarios emerge with regard to the post-withdrawal situation on the northern front.

- Syria and Hizbullah concur that it is in their interest to preserve calm and stability in south Lebanon.

- Hizbullah has no interest in further fighting, but Syria wants the front heated up on a limited scale, using the armed Palestinian groups for this purpose.

- Syria and Hizbullah want the fighting with Israel to continue on a monitored scale. In this scenario they will probably prefer to attack military targets inside Israel. However, this could escalate rapidly to encompass civilian objectives as well.

In the first scenario, which is optimistic where Israel is concerned, UNIFIL and Lebanese the government system, including the police and gendarmerie, and subsequently perhaps even the Lebanese army, deploy in south Lebanon, to enforce calm and stability; Syria would endorse these steps, with the agreement of Hizbullah, which has halted its war against Israel. The main danger likely to occur in this scenario is an attempt by disaffected Hizbullah-veterans and marginal Palestinian groups to stage attacks and, despite their limited operational ability, to obtain occasional successes. In that case,

there is a risk that a disproportionate Israeli retaliation will result in a renewed conflagration of the fighting against Hizbullah and Amal, which would then respond by shelling the northern settlements. This scenario reflects the sensitivity of the new status quo on the Lebanese border to incidents and mishaps, as well as the danger of unintended deterioration not controlled by either side.

In the second scenario, where Syria uses the Palestinians against Israel, the number of attempted attacks will presumably be higher, as well as more effective, due to Syria's support. Hizbullah might let the Palestinians have more elbowroom and even provide them with logistical aid. In this scenario Israel will need to carry out its threat and retaliate firmly and massively against Lebanon and Syrian interests there. This reaction could result in rapid escalation, leading to a direct confrontation between Israel and Syria, albeit neither side desires an all out war, and they will endeavor to limit the escalation to a lower level.

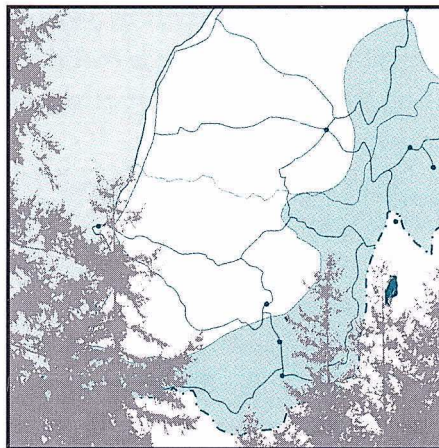
The third scenario is pessimistic, and at this time the lowest probability among the three. It is also the most difficult of all for Israel, taking into account the threat to the northern residents and the IDF, in light of Hizbullah's military capability. However, it is also the simplest where decisions required by Israel are concerned. In this case a rapid escalation is inevitable, and will even result in war with Syria.

The behavior of Syria and the Hizbullah, and the statements made by them since the withdrawal from south Lebanon, indicate that the first two

scenarios are more likely to occur. It is harder to estimate which of the two Syria will prefer in the longer term.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The impression, in light of statements made by various figures in Israel, is that Israel believes that the pullout from south Lebanon has relieved it of the need to carefully consider its measures in the event




of attempted attack from Lebanese territory. Any such attack must entail a near-automatic massive retaliation. An analysis of the various scenarios indicates that a massive reaction does not serve Israel's interests in every scenario. It is important to know whether an attempted attack is the result of Syrian and/or Hizbullah policy or a sporadic attempt by a marginal group, and for Israel to react accordingly. There is no way to avoid the careful and thorough weighing of the reaction, if and when such attempts are made. The statements made by Israeli figures regarding automatic sharp

reactions have a deterrent value but could make it difficult for the government of Israel to implement a sensible retaliation policy when the need arises because of very heavy public pressure favoring a harsh response to every incident.

Israel's political and military leadership must also make it clear to the Israeli public that rapid escalation following attempted attacks also exacts a heavy price on Israel, because the ability of Hizbullah and the other armed groups in Lebanon to strike at northern settlements has increased following the withdrawal from south Lebanon, and a direct confrontation with Syrian forces also takes its toll, despite the obvious military superiority of the IDF. The public must be advised of the various considerations in order to be psychologically prepared to pay these prices, if necessary, in order to retain Israel's deterrent strength. The advance preparation of public opinion could also have a price, however, because we might ourselves be deterred from taking the required action when the need arises. This preparation must therefore be carried out with extreme care.

The chances of Israel's successful deterrence vis-a-vis Syria and other power groups in Lebanon in the new status quo depend to no small measure on two factors: Israel's success in lowering the other side's combat motivation, and continued international support for its actions. To help strengthen these two factors Israel must resist the temptation of any form of involvement in south Lebanon (even if it believes that its initiatives are favorable and its intentions are good; for



instance, in the case of initiating renewed passage for Lebanese workers into Israel). Israel must abstain from any and all activity in this area and must create a situation in which it is clearly perceived as fully complying with UN Security Council Resolution 425. All this can be effected in full cooperation with the UN and its forces in the region.

There is a dilemma on how the IDF presence on the northern border is perceived. On the one hand, the residents feel insecure due to the uncertainty that is an inevitable part of the new situation, and a conspicuous military presence could provide them with a greater sense of security. On the other, Israel is anxious to create a feeling of normalization and demonstrate its self-confidence – goals better served by a less conspicuous

military presence. Moreover, the northern residents also long for normalization, and a reduction of the perceived military presence would seem to be the correct step. This consideration should not, of course, affect any real military measures required to defend the settlements, but military considerations also prefer a mobile defense system based on a combination of the security fence, sensors, and rapid reaction forces deployed in permanent positions along the border.

In the new situation, the reinforcement of the northern settlements is of utmost importance. Reference is not only to material reinforcement, but also to encouraging the presence and flow of Israeli visitors and tourists to the region. The risk is that the unilateral withdrawal

could lead the northern residents to feel that all the other Israelis "got away safely", i.e. that their sons will no longer have to enter Lebanon, while they have been left to deal with the end result and the dangers. If they feel that they are not alone and that the situation on the border will remain stable, these doubts will cease.

The overall picture of the situation will presumably become clearer in the coming months, as will the intentions of Syria and Hizbullah. This state of affairs, however, will not facilitate the work of Israeli decision-makers to pinpoint the significance of incidents on the northern border, nor distinguish between an isolated incident and a change in Syrian and Hizbullah policy that calls for a different response.