

The Crisis in Lebanon: An Interim Assessment

Zvi Shtauber

It behooves us to consider possible versions of the confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah had it taken place in the shadow of a nuclear Iran. Would we have reacted as we did to the abduction of soldiers? Would the United States have given us free rein? At this stage the answers to these questions are hypothetical only, but it appears nonetheless that what happens in the current confrontation in Lebanon is primarily a prelude to the next major confrontation (direct or indirect) between Iran and Israel.

The Middle East is undergoing a process of change, due in part to Iran's aspirations of hegemony, the Shiite revival, and the vanishing Iraq of Saddam Hussein, which served to curb Tehran's ambition to penetrate the Arab Orient. The Arab world is in distress, with a visible absence of Muslim leaders who can create broad coalitions and undertake "big moves." The sovereign state is losing power to sectarian players, and the regional balance of power is visibly shifting in favor of the Shiites (who for the first time have assumed power in Iraq) at the expense of Sunni dominance. The reactions of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan have demonstrated the extent to which the Sunnis feel challenged by today's regional tides.

It is still too early to determine the final balance of this confrontation's gains and losses, given that a particu-

lar achievement or show of weakness will impact on a long list of related issues, such as: confrontation of Islamic radicalism, the Palestinian challenge, and issues involving deterrence, decision-making processes in Israel, resilience of Israel's home front, and, of course, the military dimension to the fighting. Nevertheless we can already point to some intermediate conclusions:

1. The main problem in Lebanon is the absence of a sovereign authority willing and capable of enforcing its rule. This is a highly problematic obstacle because of Lebanon's sectarian composition and the Shiite majority, and no multinational force can be a proper substitute for such a sovereign authority. Ironically, the departure of the Syrians, who long served as traditional Israeli leverage to restrain Hizbollah, only made matters worse. Israel has an unquestionable

interest in creating such an authority, both in Lebanon (where this is more difficult) and among the Palestinians, who still constitute Israel's primary conflict arena.

2. In Lebanon, as on the Palestinian court, the gap between vision and complex political reality is clear. This gap does not allow any withdrawal / disengagement / redeployment outside the scope of a stable accord, with a party capable of and willing to enforce it.

3. For Palestinians, Nasrallah and his actions pose a problem, not only due to jealousy or competitiveness over abducting IDF soldiers. Palestinians can only envy the global attention focused on the Lebanese crisis, compared to the attention paid to them during the recent confrontation in Gaza following the abduction of IDF soldier Gilad Shalit. This is especially true in view of the gradual

decline in the importance assigned in recent years by the international community to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is safe to assume that the Palestinians are not unaware of the almost total carte blanche the IDF enjoys in Lebanon.

As for the war itself:

1. It seems that the objectives set for the IDF at the outset of the campaign were too ambitious, and senior government members have apparently undergone a process of disillusionment and recalibration with regard to what may be achievable.

2. In Lebanon, yet again, we are witness to the limits of Israel's military capabilities in successfully confronting a guerrilla organization rooted in the civilian population and supported by it.

3. The initial decision not to deploy significant ground troops in Lebanon was the key constraint in not achieving a decisive result in a short time. The decision to call up three reserve divisions serves mul-

challenging problem. Northern Israel will probably endure them until the ceasefire, even if the rate and numbers fired will diminish.

In Lebanon, yet again, we are witness to the limits of Israel's military capabilities in successfully confronting a guerrilla organization rooted in the civilian population and supported by it.

5. The emerging picture suggests that Israel will remain in Lebanon longer than it planned or desired, which in turn exposes its soldiers to the dangers familiar from the IDF's previous period in Lebanon.

6. What has happened in Lebanon poses a warning sign for Israel, in view of what is already to some extent in the process of occurring in Gaza. Israel has no answer yet to mortars and high trajectory fire, and the loopholes in supervising the entrance points to the Gaza Strip (despite efforts by the Egyptians and

8. Over the years the list of potential targets was significantly improved, and we may hazard a guess that most of the military targets Israel

had defined at the outset of this campaign have been attacked, with intelligence now based on "occasional hunting down of targets."

9. In any case, it is likely that the war in Lebanon will prompt the IDF to reevaluate its allocation of resources between the army and the air force.

As to the Lebanese arena, even should Hizbollah be successful in scoring some achievements in this war, the obvious impression is that the war will add to its distress in the domestic arena and will increase the criticism leveled at it, even by its supporters. At the same time, the war in Lebanon (as long as Hizbollah is not severely impaired and the war does not expand) is generally beneficial to Syria's interests, and even more so to Iran's. It is safe to assume that they have not been oblivious to the operational aerial capabilities shown by Israel, and they have no wish to get entangled. One should pay attention to the possibility that a significant increase in Israeli ground operations in Lebanon, for example, as far as the

The IDF is focused on targeting Hizbollah symbols and anything that may undermine the ethos of its military invincibility.

tiple purposes: deterrence (against Syria); increased pressure on Hizbollah and the Lebanese government; and readiness for actual deployment if mandated or enabled by the circumstances.

4. Katyusha rockets, and even more so short-range rockets, are a

international parties) allow weapons to be brought in. This emphasizes the future need for control and demilitarization arrangements.

7. Once again we see that the air force and standoff fire are not, in the absence of ground forces, sufficient to "deliver the goods."

Litani River, may place Syria under distress.

There is no doubt that Hizbollah is hit hard, but it is difficult to ascertain if the cumulative IDF action will bring it, or its operatives, to a breaking point. The impression is that IDF activity thus far has failed to yield a critical mass of operations that would lead to a decisive victory on the ground, and one may doubt whether this will happen before significant ground forces have been deployed in Lebanon, considering the well known issues associated with such deployment. Under these circumstances, the IDF is focused on targeting Hizbollah symbols and anything that may undermine the ethos of its military invincibility. Hitting Hizbollah leaders may serve as leverage to declare an end to the war. Ground operations are focused on an attempt to create a sterile strip up to five kilometers wide near the border, in order to foil future infiltration and attempted abductions. This strip is also controlled by Israeli strongholds on the border.

The major issue at this stage of the war is finding the leverage to bring

about its end. In a confrontation where perception is almost as important as reality, there is obviously no Hizbollah knock-out. Nevertheless, and even though this is the lesser of two evils, deploying a significant multinational force together with the Lebanese army on the Lebanon-Israel border, and possibly on the Lebanon-Syria border as well, is a positive regional development as far as Israel is concerned and helps create a new reality. It is most important that such a force be composed of elements from

ment, it is best not to harbor overly high expectations. It is unclear who if anyone will disarm Hizbollah in the area up to the Litani, should the IDF not do so. Past experience has shown that a multinational / international force shies away from armed conflict that may inflict casualties upon it (due to internal pressures in the countries sending their troops), and it is not clear how it will act in such a case.

Hizbollah will continue to exist as an armed organization, and most

In a confrontation where perception is almost as important as reality, there is obviously no Hizbollah knock-out.

the global powers; that its composition and mandate allow it to “flex its muscles”; that it act to disrupt supply lines from Iran and Syria to Hizbollah; and that Israel be allowed to participate in some way in the supervision of the force.

Yet even if deploying a multinational force in conjunction with the Lebanese army is a positive develop-

likely will continue to attempt infiltration back to southern Lebanon. In preparation for a future confrontation Israel has an obvious interest to create conditions that will increase Hizbollah’s distress in the domestic arena in Lebanon, including, among others, striving for a wider accord with the Lebanese and a resolution of the Shab’a Farms issue.