

Deterrence and its Limitations

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The Meaning of Deterrence

Deterrence is a highly complex process that first and foremost includes the principle of threatening to use force as a preventive or punitive measure, with a view to preventing violence on the part of the enemy. However, the success of deterrence is contingent on a set of political, strategic, and psychological factors. The greater the punitive capability towards the party to be deterred (i.e., military advantage), the more effective the deterrence. On the other hand, the greater the frustration of the deterred party with the political situation, the greater its will-

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ingness to challenge the status quo. In addition, there is the resolve factor, in other words, the willingness of the deterring party to use punitive measures. The latter dimension is elusive and has complex ramifications.

The deterrence process has several dimensions. These include:

Mutual deterrence: in numerous conflict situations the two sides try to deter each other. In this regard there is sometimes even "deterrence dialogue" that involves the use of

different signals: declarations, "silent" moves through moving military forces, and occasionally even limited military action.

Israeli deterrence against regional countries: due to its clear military advantage on the one hand, and the peace agreements it has with Egypt and Jordan on the other hand, and also due to the absence of a clear basic interest of most of the other Arab states in launching an attack on Israel (with some states there are even shared interests), Israel enjoys a stable deterrence.

Israeli deterrence against non-state players: deterrence is generally effective when the deterred party is a state with a formal decision-making center that controls the state's elements of power. Nevertheless, one can also achieve

deterrence with sub-state elements under different conditions. Thus, for example, the deterrence equation with the Palestinians is based on two main components: the level of political achievements the Palestinians expect to achieve and their consequent level of frustration in the absence of political progress. At the same time, there is the harsh Israeli response to terror and guerilla activity, which also wreaks extensive and cumulative damage on Palestinian society. In

the absence of political progress, Palestinian violence repeatedly erupts in the face of Israeli repression. Fatah and Hamas accepted the ceasefire in January 2005 due to Israeli military pressure and the fatigue in Palestinian society on the one hand, and with expectations of a renewal of the political process on the other. The lack of a central element controlling the Palestinian public naturally makes it difficult for Israeli deterrence to bear fruit and in fact limits it, but it does not entirely prevent the possibility of creating a balance of deterrence within the context of some political process, even for a limited period.

Mini-deterrence balances: it is possible to create a limited deterrence balance between states or between a state and a sub-state actor. This does not cover the entire conflict but is limited to specific aspects within it. Such balances at times require "reinforcement," either by means of political settlements or through the use of limited force.

The Israel-Hizbollah Deterrence Equation

In May 2000 Israel withdrew its forces (and the South Lebanese Army) from southern Lebanon. This withdrawal took place as part of a political settlement that was ratified by the UN and enjoyed the support of the

international community, including the Lebanese government. Even so, Hizbollah sprang into action shortly after the withdrawal and launched its first attack on Mount Dov. Since then, Hizbollah has launched assaults every few months (other than during one longer period in which the violence ceased) from the eastern sector in south Lebanon. Over time these attacks became something of a regular ritual: opening fire on Israeli positions and (in general) avoiding attacking civilian settlements. The IDF responded by firing on Hizbollah positions and for the most part, clashes were of short duration only.

It seems that this mode of behavior generated a set of rules of the game for the north. These served Hizbollah's aims inside Lebanon and, apparently, they also served the interests of Syria and Iran. Naturally, they were inconvenient for Israel but at the end of the day, they did not disrupt civilian life in the north of the country. Rather, the pattern of civilian life was rehabilitated after years of disruption, and the economy flourished. Against this backdrop, there was nothing to be gained by reacting to Hizbollah provocations. Moreover, from 2005 there were initial hopes that the political system in Lebanon would change, and especially with the withdrawal of Syrian forces, there was some basis of hope for a change in Hizbollah's autonomous military standing.

These rules of the game are in practice the result of a reciprocal mini-deterrence balance. Israel de-

terred Hizbollah from resuming extensive strikes on civilian populations, while Hizbollah deterred Israel from launching a general assault aimed at destroying the organization.

not completely break the rules of the game, but it did significantly breach them. It shot at civilian targets (which it had done previously but only on a more limited scale). It operated in the

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This mutual deterrence was based on the mutual punitive military threat on the one hand, and socio-political elements on the other. Hizbollah was aware of the costs that would be borne by its political constituency – the Lebanese in general, but particularly the Shiites – if it breached the rules of the game. For Israel, it was convenient to resist being drawn into wider action that would disrupt life in its northern region.

Thus, despite Hizbollah being a sub-state actor, deterrence threats could still be used against it. The paradox is that because Hizbollah is an active political player in Lebanon that is looking to increase its political power, it was forced into two opposite directions: within the domestic Lebanese political arena it was constantly forced to demonstrate its unique ability to act as a “shield” against Israel, and therefore had to resort to its repertoire of violent provocations. Conversely, its role as a Lebanese player forced it to take care not to spark a large-scale Israeli offensive.

In its July 12 action Hizbollah did

western sector, and in a wide area. Finally, it carried out the kidnapping, which while reminiscent of the October 2000 abductions was a provocation it was unable to repeat since. The combination of all these factors ultimately broke Israel's deterrence threshold and prompted the heavy Israeli reaction. Since Hizbollah probably believed that it had not violated the rules of the game, it likely did not anticipate a massive Israeli response.

The Scope of the Israeli Response

In order to maintain the specific deterrence balance towards Hizbollah, it was sufficient to mount an intensive but limited military operation. But Israel, which in any case was not predisposed to the prevailing rules of the game imposed by Hizbollah, was looking to use military action to bring about fundamental changes in southern Lebanon. In order to achieve these objectives there was a need for larger forces and a wider arena of operations. Yet the realization of these broad goals is doubtful, and goes far

beyond just maintaining the deterrent effect.

As for Israel's deterrence image, Israel's overall military power ensures that its general deterrence capability against various elements in the region is maintained. That would be the case even if Israel did not re-

the kidnapped soldiers – was liable to impact on Palestinian conduct in the future.

The future of strategic-political relations between Israel and the Palestinians will ultimately be decided not by outside elements, but mainly by interaction between the two sides.

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spond, or responded at a later stage. However, Hizbollah's attempt to assume a degree of leadership in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, an attempt that was reflected in the organization's general behavior of late and was reiterated in the conditions it demanded – the release of thousands of Palestinian prisoners in return for

This is also the case with regard to Israeli-Palestinian mini-deterrence. However, outside elements are liable to interfere or may help to stabilize this balance. The massive Israeli response in Lebanon conveys the extent of the punitive action Israel is ready to inflict on parties that act against it and against its social infrastructures.

This may be of import if and when Israel begins to progress towards political accords with the Palestinians or towards a unilateral solution such as the convergence plan. It should not be assumed that Israel will be capable of implementing these measures while the violence and terror continues on the northern border or if waged in other arenas by any Palestinian organization.

In conclusion, deterrence is not the ultimate factor in conflict management or resolution. It is one strategy of several designed to stabilize conflict relations. In many cases it succeeds for a limited period. Moreover, it is not a substitute for political accords. Its role is to stabilize the military relations during conflict, and provide support for a political agreement when conditions are ripe for it to evolve.