

Dispelling Beliefs: The War in Lebanon as a Test Case

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The current war in Lebanon has exposed some ideas and beliefs common among much of the political leadership and Israeli society regarding the State of Israel, its use of force, and the goals it pursues in using force. Some of these beliefs have accompanied the State of Israel for years and have surfaced previously in various confrontations and military clashes. There is no doubt that these conceptions wield great significance vis-à-vis Israel's overall strategic behavior in recent years, and particularly in the present war in Lebanon. Precisely because of their weight within Israeli society and their impact upon the formulation of Israel's strategies, these beliefs invite critical examination, which in turn can pinpoint the weaknesses and risks they incur. Three central conceptions will be analyzed below.

There is no justification for Israel to initiate military actions unless it is significantly provoked.

In the wake of the fighting, many have asked in amazement how it was possible for the State of Israel to allow an enemy organization like Hizbollah to amass so much power in recent years without undertaking any action to stop it. The massive and prolonged shooting of rockets, artillery shells, and Katyushas on the northern areas of Israel, despite the wide-ranging aerial and ground activities carried out by Israel against Hizbollah and its infrastructure, clearly shows the immense firepower accumulated by Hizbollah over the last few years. Apparently Israel had detailed information on the increas-

ing power of the organization and the strategic weapon systems it received from Iran and Syria. Nonetheless, it refrained from initiating military activity, which might have obstructed the ongoing buildup.

Hizbollah did not limit itself to this rearmament process. Following the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, it built a long line of fortified positions along the border, close to the IDF positions, blatantly ignor-

ing the relevant UN decisions. Even this provocative activity of Hizbollah did not prompt Israel to attack the organization in order to push it back from the northern border. It should be noted that Israel's restraint essentially contradicted warnings of senior Israeli leaders, in the wake of Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon, to the effect that Hizbollah's provocative behavior against Israel would prompt a massive reaction by Israel against the organization.

From Hizbollah's perspective, Israel's reactions towards its challenging behavior were likely interpreted as an obvious reluctance on Israel's part to overturn the status quo. Israel, the organization probably conjectured, would not welcome Hizbollah's behavior and would retaliate appropri-



ately against the deviant and hostile actions they engaged in. At the same time, it seemed to be ready to absorb a fairly high number of injuries if the threshold of hostile activity did not exceed too high a level. Israel, the organization most probably assumed, was still haunted by the trauma of the war in Lebanon that began in June 1982, and its leaders would do their utmost to avoid entanglement in a similar situation.

Today it is clear that Israel's passive reactions in the face of Hizbollah activity and the growing risks to Israel cannot be explained by a lack of information. It is also not likely that it was widely believed that time was on Israel's side, and that it would ultimately be possible for Israel to achieve its aims against the organization without resorting to the use of force.

It seems fair to assume that the main reason for the Israeli leadership's refusal to engage in military initiatives against Hizbollah is rooted in the belief that such a maneuver would not be granted legitimacy in public opinion in this country, and certainly not abroad. This assessment is based on a system of values and norms that has become increasingly prevalent in Israeli society, especially following the war in Lebanon in 1982. According to this system of values, the State of Israel is only "authorized" to initiate a military-type action as a response to a violent and challenging activity against it, of a type and scope that does not allow it any other alternative but to react in that way. Even

then, its reaction must be proportionate to the damage it sustains.

One of the focal points of criticism against the 1982 war in Lebanon (called Operation Peace for the Galilee) emphasized that in the period preceding the campaign there was a relatively quiet time on the Israel-Lebanon border. As such, the military activities of Israel were to a large extent perceived as an indication of Israel's eagerness to bring this "calm" period to an end and the fac-



tor that actually ended the "respite." Similar criticism was voiced against the IDF in the wake of targeted killings of Palestinians that occurred unprovoked by specific prior acts of terror. The most apparent criticisms followed the targeted killing of Salah Shehadeh in late July 2002. This targeted killing, so the critics claimed, brought an end to the period of calm, and thwarted an anticipated agreement with militant Palestinian orga-

nizations on a ceasefire with Israel.

It seems to me that this line of opinion, which still prevails among leading sectors within Israel, made it very difficult for the State of Israel to engage in military initiatives against Hizbollah throughout the process of its armament and force buildup. Only now, after an "excess" of provocative and lethal activity on the part of the organization against Israel, which included kidnapping and killing three engineering corps soldiers in October 2000; abducting an Israeli businessman, Elhanan Tannenbaum; sporadic shooting, sometimes deadly, onto IDF positions and against settlements along the border; and finally a planned military operation that resulted in eight IDF soldiers killed and two others abducted, did a general sentiment form that "enough is enough," that Hizbollah went too far, and that by now its activities justified a massive military incursion on Israel's part.

There is no justification for an attack on Israel after its retreat to the international border.

The claim that there is no justification for attacking Israel once it withdrew to the international border was heard in official statements and at the highest political levels. Israel has reiterated repeatedly in the last few years that it fulfilled its obligations and withdrew in May 2000 to the international border with Lebanon; it even received the approval of the UN secretary-general and therefore there

is no justification for hostile action against it.

Israel indeed withdrew to the international border with Lebanon. Yet it is questionable if the very emphasis of this argument serves the interests of the State of Israel. The peace process that was concluded with peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan and with the Oslo agreements was based on a fundamental principle that even if issues of contention remained between the parties, they would henceforth be resolved by diplomatic means alone, by negotiations, and without the use of force. No controversy can justify the use of force against Israel. It seems to me that emphasizing Israel's withdrawal to the international border as an argument that delegitimizes militant provocations against Israel jeopardizes and even undermines the validity of the above principle.

Moreover, the emphasis on Israel's withdrawal to the international border to negate the legitimacy of aggression against it contains within it yet another great risk. The corollary is that in the areas where Israel has not withdrawn to the international border, for example in Judea and Samaria, its enemies have a "license" to act against it. And finally, such an argument can diminish and even wrest from Israel one of the main achievements of the disengagement from Gaza, namely, the recognition

by the United States of Israel's right, in the framework of an agreement, to extend its sovereignty to areas where there are Jewish population centers, even if they exist beyond of the Green Line.

Israel has no argument with Lebanon or with its government.

Formal declarations by Israel and of its leaders repeatedly emphasize that Israel sees the government of Lebanon as responsible for all the activity taking place on its soil against Israel. Lebanon, it is agreed, is also the party that is responsible for the fate of the Israeli captives and for their safe return to Israel. At the same time, however, there are repeated statements that there is no hostility between Israel and the government of Lebanon, and that the only quarrel that Israel has is with Hizbollah. One ought to question whether these latter statements serve Israel's interests.

It should be stressed that the issue does not relate to the practical policies of Israel regarding Lebanon. These tend, and rightly so, to be responsive to the demands of the American government, which calls upon Israel to prevent harm to "the fragile democracy in Lebanon." In other words, Israel must focus its attacks on Hizbollah and perhaps on Syria too, but not on targets that may disturb the stability of the Lebanese regime. Under

these circumstances, the question that arises here is whether it is advisable for Israel to give Lebanon a "credit allowance" when issuing its political statements. The aggressive acts by Hizbollah against Israel emerge from the geographic area of a sovereign state. Not only is the government of Lebanon not prepared to take de facto responsibility for what is happening in its territories; it is also not ready to announce its reservations about Hizbollah activity against Israel, as did, for example, the Druze leader Walid Junblat, and it certainly is not ready to take any practical action to limit Hizbollah activity against Israel. Under these circumstances it is unclear if there is any point in Israel removing Lebanon from the indicted and asserting that Israel has no quarrel with this country. At the very least, silence is called for.

Conclusion

The war in Lebanon has exposed conceptual flaws in the positions that the State of Israel has adopted and presented to the outside world. Some of these flaws have plagued Israel for years. It is therefore appropriate for a public debate to take place on the benefits and harm that are caused by these positions. This debate will facilitate the consolidation of solid principles by the State of Israel and by Israeli society on these important topics.