

# Israel's Conflicts with Hizbollah and Hamas: Are They Parts of the Same War?

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At first glance, there appears to be a tight linkage between the crisis on the northern border and the recent escalation of Israeli-Palestinian violence. In both cases, the spark was the killing of some Israeli soldiers and the abduction of others by non-state Islamist actors (Hamas and Hizbollah), supported by Syria and Iran, who infiltrated across internationally recognized borders from territories from which Israel had unilaterally withdrawn. In both cases, the attacks/abductions were preceded or accompanied by rocket fire onto Israeli territory. In both cases, the attacks/abductions provoked large-scale Israeli military responses meant to secure not only the release of the abducted soldiers without any concessions in return but also a fundamental change in the political reality along and across the borders in question. Finally, the action of each non-state actor resonated positively with the other (and its public). Indeed, some of the explanations/justifications of Hizbollah's action referred to support of the Palestinian cause and specifically stipulated the inclusion of Palestinian prisoners in any exchange that might be carried out to secure the release of the captured Israeli soldiers.

These apparent similarities go some way toward explaining the re-

gional and international reactions to the two events. In the major countries of the Arab world, governments except that of Syria have candidly expressed misgivings about the adventurism of non-state actors who hijack national agendas and arrogate to themselves decisions about war and peace. And in the international arena, there has been significant tolerance if not approval of Israeli military escalation.

Upon closer examination, however, the linkage begins to fray. The first distinction concerns the identity of the perpetrators. While Hizbollah appears to be a uniform and highly disciplined actor, Hamas has been showing growing signs of organizational confusion. The exact identity of the Palestinians who precipitated the crisis on the Gaza front by attacking at Kerem Shalom is not certain. Initial communiqués following the kidnapping of Corporal Gilad Shalit indicated that three groups had taken part in the operation: the Hamas military wing (Izz a-din al-Qassam Brigades), the Popular Resistance Committees, and a previously-unknown entity calling itself the Army of Islam. Whatever the precise composition of the operational unit, the more significant uncertainty concerns the coordination with/subordination to Hamas's political wing, which is itself divided between an "inside" branch

that since Legislative Council elections in January has controlled the government of the Palestinian Authority, and an "outside" branch – the Political Bureau – that is located in Damascus and headed by Khaled Masha'al and his deputy, Musa Abu Marzouk. Judging by the somewhat confused response to the abduction by the "inside" leadership – Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and even the reputed "militant," Foreign Minister Mahmoud al-Zahar – the operation that precipitated the Gaza crisis was launched without their approval or even their prior knowledge. The Damascus-based leadership, however, immediately expressed its unreserved support for the operation. This does not necessarily mean that the military wing does not act independently, but it does suggest that if it takes any political direction at all, the direction comes from outside.

If so, that would reflect the differing perspectives, hence, divergent interests of the "inside" and "outside." Since taking office, the former has had to deal with demands that it provide something to the Palestinian public beyond fleeting emotional gratification – demands that it has thus far been unable to meet and cannot possibly expect to meet so long as it is tainted by the "terrorist" label and subject to Israeli boycott and international sanc-

tions of one sort or another. The “outside” leadership bears no such burden and therefore has much less reason to be concerned with the implications of being tarred by the same brush as Hizbollah – a pariah in the international community, in parts of the Sunni Arab world, and even in the non-Shiite sectors of Lebanese society.

A second distinction concerns the prism through which events in Lebanon are viewed by the political leadership of Hamas, and in this respect the Palestinian perspectives from Gaza and Damascus do converge to some extent. Hizbollah’s challenge to Israel has unquestionably raised Hassan Nasrallah’s political stock among Palestinians. Large-scale demonstrations of support have taken place in Palestinian towns, Hizbollah’s flag is very much in evidence, and pictures of Nasrallah are widely displayed alongside (though not in place of) Yasser Arafat and Ahmed Yassin. In this sense, Nasrallah has emerged in 2006 as the non-Palestinian champion of the Palestinian cause, much like Saddam Hussein in 1990 and Gamal Abd al-Nasser in 1956 and again in 1967. But Palestinian political leaders who themselves aspire to that status may well view this development with some measure of ambivalence. After all, a Hizbollah victory (however defined) in the confrontation with Israel might cast a shadow over their own personal prominence, whereas a defeat, however dispiriting in general terms, would still leave them – especially the “inside” – free to continue pursuing their local agenda.

That perspective points to a third distinction: the implications of international involvement and possible intervention. Until the outbreak of the Lebanese crisis, any international attention to the region that could be spared from Iraq was focused on Israeli attacks on and incursions into Gaza; the damage inflicted there was attracting growing sympathy, and not just in Arab countries – even those whose governments had reservations about the Palestinian attack at Kerem Shalom. This focus sustained hopes that intervention would restrain Israel and perhaps halt the Israeli campaign without imposing on the Hamas leadership unreciprocated, hence, unacceptable political conditions, i.e., an obligation to return Gilad Shalit and enforce a total ceasefire. It even raised the possibility that a show of constructive involvement by the local Hamas political leadership in the prisoner issue, which it signaled some desire (if not any proven ability) to undertake, might pave the way to greater international respectability and acceptance of the Hamas government as a legitimate interlocutor – and recipient of international aid. Those hopes evaporated, at least in the short term, with the outbreak of the crisis on Israel’s northern border, which fixed the world’s attention firmly on Lebanon and allowed Israel to pursue its military actions in Gaza with far fewer constraints. However, international intervention still holds much greater promise for Hamas than it does for Hizbollah. For the latter, almost any intervention will be a setback that could well set in motion a

highly negative dynamic. The only exception would be an imposed unconditional ceasefire that restores the status quo on the eve of Israel’s assault, and that seems an unlikely scenario given the apparent general understanding of the issues at stake, even among major Arab governments.

Notwithstanding these distinctions, however, (and in some respects because of them), one important linkage does exist. The outcome of the confrontation in Lebanon will have major implications for the future of Hamas in particular, and of the Palestinian-Israeli relationship in general. Nasrallah and Hizbollah cannot emerge entirely unscathed from the crisis with Israel. But given the framing of the issue throughout the region, it is enough for them not to incur a humiliating defeat in order to make a credible claim of victory. Should that happen, the discourse and logic of “resistance” will be given a further boost, and any argument in favor of moderation or pragmatism by Hamas will be discredited for the foreseeable future; instead, the urge to emulate Hizbollah will become even more powerful. By contrast, if some combination of Israeli military action, outside involvement, and Lebanese domestic dynamics results in the discrediting of what Hizbollah represents, then greater Israeli deterrence together with greater underlying regional and international responsiveness to Palestinian political needs may well strengthen Palestinian preferences, if not for the replacement of Hamas, then at least for its pursuit of an alternate path.