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July 13, 2006

THE CONFRONTATION WITH HIZBULLAH

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The Hizbullah operation that resulted in the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers and the death of eight others has ignited a major confrontation between that organization and Israel. Unlike previous clashes in recent years, which could be expected to terminate quickly because of the interest of both sides in preventing escalation and returning to acceptable rules of the game, the provocation and its consequences are too great this time to allow Israel to return to the status quo ante. That would signal to Hizbullah and other factors operating against Israel that they can carry out ever-greater provocations without incurring a major response.

This operation was not a bolt from the blue. Hizbullah repeatedly broadcast its intention to kidnap Israeli soldiers in order to secure the freedom of Lebanese prisoners remaining in Israeli hands after the so-called "Tenenbaum deal," and it tried and failed several times before its recent success. It is also likely that the timing of this operation was tied to developments in the Gaza Strip. After all, Hizbullah is fully aware of the need for domestic Lebanese and Arab legitimacy for its operations and it senses that when Israel is battling Palestinians and the Arab and international television screens are full of images of Israel striking at Palestinians, it can more easily justify its own actions. That may explain why its first operation following Israel's

withdrawal from south Lebanon in the spring of 2000, in which it carried off the bodies of two Israeli soldiers, was mounted shortly after the outbreak of the second *intifada*.

But this latest attack is a blatant violation of the rules established after that action in late 2000. According to these rules, Hizbullah acts only against military forces and only in the Mount Dov (Shab'a Farms) sector, and Israel responds in kind. This time, the operation took place in the western sector of the border and included the shelling of Israeli civilian settlements. Hizbullah might have refrained from launching this operation if Israel had reacted more vigorously to previous Hizbullah attempts to breach the rules, which are based on mutual deterrence. Both sides have the capacity to inflict serious damage on the other's civilian population, and Hizbullah is fully aware that since the Israeli withdrawal, it has no domestic support for actions that can escalate and lead to serious damage in Lebanon, thereby setting back the lengthy reconstruction process in that country.

Many of the international constraints on Israeli reactions have diminished since the withdrawal. In responding to this latest attack, Israel has apparently set for itself several objectives. The first is to exact a high price, both directly – by inflicting casualties on Hizbullah – and politically – by striking at Lebanese targets such

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

as electricity plants and Beirut Airport and by cutting off the south from the rest of the country in order to undermine Hizbullah's political standing. The assumption behind those strikes is that internal pressure on Hizbullah will force it to restrain itself and ultimately disarm. All this is meant to rehabilitate Israeli deterrence in Lebanon.

The second aim is to prompt international pressure on Hizbullah's Syrian and Iranian patrons so that those countries, too, will act to restrain Hizbullah, on the assumption that the international community wants to avoid another implosion in Lebanon. The third is to inflict a serious blow on Hizbullah's ability to hit civilian targets in Israel. It may be true that here, as in Gaza, Israel cannot completely eliminate the threat of rocket fire, but since 2000, there has been a marked improvement in the IDF's capacity to locate launch teams, which once enjoyed virtual immunity because of their low signature, and there is a reasonable prospect that those teams will now be much more vulnerable, like their Palestinian counterparts in Gaza.

It is unclear whether Israel's current response will actually produce the desired effects and Israel may be compelled to escalate even further, particularly since Hizbullah also has the means for more destructive action, which it has not yet activated. For example, the organization possesses long-range rockets supplied by Iran and Syria with which, according to Israeli intelligence, it can hit cities inside Israel as far south as Hadera. Their range covers sensitive targets such as the city of Haifa and the industrial zone in Haifa Bay. If Hizbullah decides to react to attacks on Beirut with these weapons, a much greater escalation can be expected.

Israel would then have several options available. It could intensify its strikes on Beirut and other Lebanese cities, but in that case Israel would have to walk a fine line between achieving effects and causing damage so widespread that

the international reaction would minimize the chances of it accomplishing its aims. Israel could also expand the fighting to Syria, which serves as Hizbullah's main source of weapons, both from Syria and from Iran. Thus far, Syria has paid no price for its policies but its military weakness makes it very vulnerable to Israeli air strikes. Finally, Israel could target Iran's interests and presence in Lebanon.

Moreover, Israel might well initiate ground operations in south Lebanon and perhaps other areas, as well. Such operations would be a low-priority choice because Israel has no desire to get sucked back into a Lebanese quagmire and understands the implications of a prolonged physical presence there. But they could take the form of time-bound incursions, like those mounted in Gaza, intended to draw out Hizbullah forces and inflict casualties on them.

In any event, the confrontation this time is likely to be protracted and involve substantial costs for Israel because of Hizbullah capabilities, which far outstrip those of the Palestinians. The costs could include significant casualties and the disruption of normal life in a broad swath of Israeli territory, which would put the public's resilience to the test. The duration of the confrontation will also be a function of the ambitiousness of Israeli goals. If Israel aims at completely disarming Hizbullah by itself, that goal could well prove elusive, and Israel may have to content itself with implementing new rules, such as moving Hizbullah further away from the border, and hoping that the current confrontation will stimulate domestic political processes in Lebanon that could eventually, albeit indirectly, accomplish the more far-reaching objective.

KEYWORD: Lebanon