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The No-Win Zone

An After-Action Report from Lebanon

Daniel Byman & Steven Simon

LEBANON HELD the attention of the world for weeks after a successful Hizballah kidnapping operation on July 12, 2006, led Israel to pummel the country in a sustained air campaign and a limited ground offensive. Almost all observers agreed the clash had enormous implications—former House Speaker Newt Gingrich even claimed the conflict was “World War III.” But unlike other wars, the winners and losers were not clear when the dust settled.

Pundits were quick to proclaim Hizballah the winner, but Hizballah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah openly admitted that the raid was a strategic mistake. Other analysts point to Israel’s degradation of Hizballah’s long-range missile capabilities, but Israelis take small comfort in this, knowing their own performance was flawed both militarily and politically. Lebanon itself suffered horribly, and though its fledgling democratic government survived and became a major player in the diplomacy that led to the ending

of the conflict, militarily it was forced to stand by helplessly during the crisis.

Nor do other parties come off looking good. The United States emerged looking both cruel and ineffective in Muslim eyes. European states engaged in typical hand-waving during the war and in even more typical bickering over who would do what in a post-clash peace-keeping operation, even though this at best looks like a fig leaf. Iran and Syria, Hizballah’s patrons, did better, but even they may eventually find the results a mixed blessing.

BEFORE WE can assess the results of the war, it is important to be clear on several points. Reports that Iran prodded Hizballah to attack to divert attention from the Iranian nuclear program seem to be false: The dispute over the Iranian program has been going on for years with no end in sight, and Hizballah had tried other operations in the past as well.

Similarly, the claim that this conflict was a proxy war initiated by Iran to test whether a foe like the United States (using Israel as the stand-in) could be defeated by an opponent that would fight hard and be willing to take casualties ignores the fact that far more important in Tehran’s calculations are the successes that various fighters in Iraq have had against the United States. Iran did not need to launch a war in Lebanon for a

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reminder that Washington is vulnerable to terrorists and guerrillas.

Finally, there should be no mistake that Hizballah suffered serious losses. Though exact figures are hard to come by, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) claim to have killed about 500 of Hizballah's most trained fighters. Many of those who remain were at least pushed—more or less—out of the area south of the Litani, at least temporarily. Air strikes and infantry sweeps probably eliminated about half of the longer-range rockets that were not expended, as well as a large number of launchers. Hizballah's elaborate infrastructure in south Lebanon was disrupted, and many of its facilities in the Beirut suburbs were razed. By the time Hizballah was pushing for a cease-fire, which winners do not normally do, its fighters were trapped in a box between the Israeli border, a blockaded coast, blown bridges and roads leading north, and a large IDF force in Marjayoun, poised to march up the Beka to the east. Both Hassan Nasrallah and Mahmoud Koumati, the second in command of Hizballah's political arm, have told interviewers that Hizballah was completely surprised by the ferocity of Israel's response to the raid. Nasrallah, in a rare confessional moment, claimed that if he had known the Israelis were going to react so violently, he would not have ordered the kidnapping.

ALTHOUGH THERE is a dispute over whether Hizballah or Israel came out ahead, it is clear that Lebanon—both its people and its government—lost. The Lebanese government suffered the ultimate indignity for any regime: It was ignored. Once again it is clear to all factions in Lebanon that their government cannot protect them from foreign threats or strong domestic groups like Hizballah. In the early 1970s, the impotence of the Lebanese government in the face of Israeli-Palestinian clashes in Lebanon was a

major precipitant of the Lebanese civil war. Convinced (correctly) that their government could not protect them, all of Lebanon's communal factions began to arm and organize to defend themselves, a spiral that led to civil war. We may see a return to this logic in postwar Lebanon.

The war also hurt the "March 14" alliance of anti-Syrian leaders who after the "Cedar Revolution" have schemed against Damascus and its Lebanese allies like Hizballah in order to re-establish the independence of the state. This position was always uneasy. The anti-Syrian foes were divided amongst themselves, and they recognized that they could not govern Lebanon without incorporating pro-Syrian factions, particularly Hizballah, into the government. One of Hizballah's successes is that it painted the anti-Syrian voices as pro-Israeli; the charges of Hizballah's critics that Hizballah precipitated the war and that it did so at Syria's behest were quickly drowned out by cries of anger as the war went on. Pro-Syrian politicians, long on the defensive, are now emboldened.

There is some hope, but only some. The Lebanese government did survive, while many observers feared its complete collapse. Also, Prime Minister Siniora emerged as a skilled operator, becoming the key interlocutor for Lebanon with the international community. Nevertheless, today, the Lebanese government's bargaining position *vis-à-vis* Hizballah is far weaker. UN resolutions that call for disarming Lebanese militias like Hizballah are thus even farther from fulfillment.

In contrast, Damascus emerged as a winner. Since the collapse of the Syrian-Israeli negotiations in 2000, Jerusalem had simply ignored the al-Asad regime's political demands regarding the Golan Heights and other disputes. Even more worrisome for Damascus, the "Cedar Revolution", combined with French, U.S. and Arab pressure, forced Syria into a humiliating military withdrawal from Leba-

non in April 2005. An unusually tough-minded UN investigation into the death of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (who Syrian agents probably killed) implicated the highest echelons of the Syrian regime. Both at home and abroad, Bashir's regime was in a corner.

This picture has changed completely. Many of those displaced from the war fled to Damascus, increasing Syria's leverage and, as noted above, fewer Lebanese are now ready to challenge Syria. The Hariri investigation, which depends heavily on cooperation from Lebanon, is dead for now. Lebanese are now cowed, rather than emboldened, in their willingness to confront Damascus. Syria has emerged as the only credible guarantor of Hizballah's future good behavior there, and Israel has been reminded that it will not have peace with Hizballah unless it has peace with Syria. Similarly, Syrian cooperation is necessary to prevent Hizballah from being rearmed, particularly with regard to larger conventional systems. This dual role as Hizballah's backer and Hizballah's controller has long fit with Syrian foreign policy. As Michael Doran contends, "Ever since the 1980s, Syria has played this game of being both the arsonist and the fire department."¹

The situation for Syria is not risk free. Should the conflict reignite, Israel might decide that it is more effective to punish Hizballah's sponsor rather than the weak Lebanese government. Syria must also worry that Hizballah, its long-time ally and proxy, is becoming the dominant partner in their relationship. There is no sign that Hizballah is going to break with Syria, but Damascus in the past has always preferred to keep its proxies dependent and vulnerable.

IRAN IS basking in the reflected glory of its Lebanese proxy. Iran has long seen Hizballah as a triumph for the Islamic revolution, having helped create and sustain the organiza-

tion in its early years. And, in contrast to a number of Arab states that criticized Hizballah at the onset of the conflict, Iran could once again point to its demonstrable record of support for anti-Israel forces.

Because Hizballah's defiance reflects well on Iran, the clerical regime is likely to rearm Hizballah, helping it replace (and probably upgrade) the systems that Israel destroyed. This rearming is almost impossible to stop, as Syria is likely to covertly cooperate with this effort and Lebanon's porous borders and tradition of smuggling make a sustained interdiction campaign difficult. Israeli leaders will fulminate against this rearming and perhaps launch a daring commando raid to stop a particularly troubling weapons system from entering Lebanon, but such limited efforts will have at best a marginal impact on Hizballah's effort to resupply and would be seen as reflecting a lack of faith in UNIFIL (which may be deserved).

Hizballah, of course, needs Iranian assistance to rebuild from the material losses it suffered. Nonetheless, the fight greatly enhanced Hizballah's prestige outside of Lebanon. Its capacity to rain missiles on targets as far south as Haifa at the height of Israel's ground incursion electrified Arabs on both sides of the Shi'a-Sunni divide. Hizballah, once again, showed it is the only Arab force that can stand up to Israel militarily.

Hizballah is even stronger in Lebanon itself. Most Lebanese think that Hizballah won the war.² The leadership's ability to put massive aid from Iran to use as soon as the guns were silenced confirmed its status as the only effective organization in Lebanon, in marked contrast to the Lebanese government (and

¹As quoted in John Burns, "Syria Turns Over a Top Insurgent", *The New York Times*, February 28, 2005, pp. 1.

²"Majority of Lebanese believe Hizballah won war", *The Daily Star*, August 26, 2006.

the West), which has not provided relief to devastated areas and is torn by infighting on what to do next. The post-hostilities phase has reinforced Hizballah's position among its core constituents as the party of courage, integrity and reliability, and it still retains the initiative militarily.

Yet despite the largely positive results from Hizballah's defiance, Nasrallah and other leaders are likely to be cautious about another future round. There is no appetite among Lebanese, Shi'a included, for another month of devastating Israeli strikes. A large European force that cannot be attacked without risking Hizballah's larger diplomatic position is now between Hizballah fighters and the Israeli border. Hizballah, like every other faction in Lebanon, must also watch its back with regard to the al-Asad regime in Syria. Iran's commitment to Hizballah is unquestionable at this point—Tehran will still at times try to rein in its proxy or use it for Iranian interests, but in general Iran is strongly committed to the relationship. Syria, however, has historically had an instrumental view of the organization. For now it serves Damascus's interests in Lebanon and against Israel to keep close to Hizballah—interests reinforced by the additional domestic legitimacy that Bashir's regime gains from ties to Hizballah. Nevertheless, it is always possible that Damascus would sacrifice Hizballah's freedom of action on the altar of Syrian self-interest.

Nasrallah miscalculated but turned up trumps because Israel overplayed its hand—the next time the cards may not fall the same way.

PRIME MINISTER Ehud Olmert seized on the Hizballah kidnapping as a way to demonstrate that he would be tough when Israel was threatened, but Israel's poor showing left the government humiliated and reeling politically.

A steady drumbeat of missile launches

from Gaza, followed by Hamas's clear victory in the Palestinian Authority elections, ate away at the credibility of Olmert's "Convergence" policy (his touchy-feely moniker for Sharon's "Severance" initiative, which in essence called for withdrawing from parts of the West Bank where few Jews lived while building up the security barrier around Israel proper and the most populous settlements in the West Bank). The vulnerability of the Olmert government and the hollowness of its agenda accounted for the harsh response to a Hizballah provocation that Ariel Sharon might have waved off, or at least avoided committing his government's prestige to the fight by engaging in a less massive retaliation. Olmert, however, was in no position to ride out a small disgrace, especially after the killing and kidnapping initiated by Palestinian militants in Gaza almost three weeks earlier.

And the military outcome was far from stellar. Israel's losses were considerable, particularly given Israel's ostensible superiority to what is still, by comparison, a poorly armed guerrilla group. Israel lost over one hundred soldiers, with almost 1,000 wounded. Israeli officials seemed overconfident, and military leaders underestimated Hizballah's determination and skill, both of which are surprising given the many times Hizballah fought Israel to a standoff in skirmishes in the past.

The navy's complacency and the common problems of the Mossad and military intelligence left a Saar 5 destroyer at the mercy of an Iranian C-802 cruise missile. (Flawed targeting data exacted civilian casualties at Qana—again—that complicated the lives of politicians but had no adverse effect on operations.) Hizballah's adroit use of anti-armor missiles not only against Merkava III tanks, but also to destroy improvised IDF defensive positions, was extremely effective and could not be countered in the short duration

of hostilities. This will raise questions about budget cuts that deprived the IDF of larger numbers of the Merkava IV, a tank so heavily armored that Hizballah fighters apparently did not bother to fire on them. The failure to insert the two divisions deployed to northern Israel at the outset of hostilities, and to rely instead on airpower, will also be heavily criticized, but this was a political, not military, decision.

The source of these problems lay mostly in the focus of the IDF on the intifada, which erupted just three months after Israel's 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon. Israel will have to rebalance these security priorities and, in the process, divert resources from social services to the military. In a country where political coalitions form on the basis of budgetary rewards, this will add to the coming political volatility.

What is the fate of Kadima after the war? As a party without a *raison d'être* or charismatic leader, Kadima's prospects were already diminishing. As a party perceived to have squandered an opportunity to lay waste to Hizballah, rather than Lebanon, its odds of surviving an electoral challenge are declining. The premise of convergence, that withdrawing from territory will reduce the number of attacks, is now widely questioned. And defenestrating the Labor leader and Defense Minister Amir Peretz for the years of IDF budget cutting that preceded his accession to the ministry will not be enough to stave off elections within six to nine months. A resuscitated Likud will claim that Kadima's policy of pre-emptive capitulation created the test that the party's leadership failed to pass. High flyers in Kadima, like Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, will be invited back to Likud with a promise of a place on the electoral list. Barring a sudden reversal, Kadima will go to the polls as a spent force, and Israeli politics may revert to a polarized and paralyzed *status quo ante*. Likud is hardly the

dream party for most Israelis, but by default it may reemerge to lead the country. Israelis will not be the only ones to pay a high price for the Lebanon war; Palestinians will share the pain, perhaps for years, if a less compromising Israeli government takes power.

U.S. policy in the region also suffered a serious setback. The Bush Administration stood by Israel as a matter of principle: Israel had been unjustly attacked by terrorists, and it had a right to respond. Moreover, Lebanon was the "Western Front" of a momentous struggle with Islamic extremism; this was an opportunity for rollback. Washington thus moved slowly on a ceasefire resolution, hoping that Israel would smash Hizballah.

The Bush Administration's principles were right, but their implementation hurt both U.S. and Israeli interests in the region. Many Arabs believe that Israel's attack on Hizballah was done in part on Washington's behest. The suffering of the Lebanese was seen as something condoned (or, worse, encouraged) by Washington. Delays in getting a ceasefire compounded the impression that the United States cared little about the wellbeing of ordinary Muslims—especially after watching graphic images of the deaths of noncombatants from an Israeli military campaign.

This perception proved particularly troubling for moderate U.S. allies in the Middle East. Showing a degree of public political courage they usually lack, fueled perhaps by worries about Shi'a assertiveness, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan initially criticized Hizballah, implicitly endorsing Israel's campaign. But as the violence wore on and the suffering of the Lebanese increased, these governments feared popular criticism and backed away from Washington and towards the radicals. Their willingness to defy the Arab street and take a pro-U.S. stance on other issues is likely to diminish. Future U.S. efforts to rally Arab regime support for

U.S. initiatives in Iraq or to restart the stalled peace process will be that much harder.

THE CLASH also led Europe to re-engage in the Middle East. The humanitarian catastrophe that Hizballah and Israel visited on Lebanon animated the European press; the resulting public outrage forced reluctant and unprepared European governments to declare that this was the hour of Europe. Europe responded better than it did when Jacques Poos made a similar declaration in 1992 and the EU was humiliated by the Serbs—but this is faint praise. This time there was no American power in the wings to offer oomph to the European force, and it could only come in after the belligerents had agreed to a ceasefire.

The Italians were the first to offer a sizable number of troops, but the French, who lost 58 peacekeepers in Beirut in 1983 to Hizballah (a near-simultaneous Hizballah attack killed 241 U.S. Marines who were part of the same mission), were more reticent. For Chirac and his military advisors, the force size and rules of engagement stipulated by UNSCR 1701 would put too many soldiers in too much of an exposed and unstable situation. Once again, peacekeepers would be at the mercy of local warring factions. The pressure to act decisively and effectually in a Middle East crisis, however, proved irresistible. Chirac reversed himself and the French increased their troop concentration by a factor of ten, including a Leclerc tank company and a 155MM artillery unit. This in turn shook the Germans out of isolation, resulting in Angela Merkel's decision to send Germany to patrol the Lebanese coast.

Whether or not the overall UNIFIL-2 troop level reaches the level envisaged by the Security Council, European governments will have assumed security responsibility for a situation over which they

have little control. Hizballah fighters remain in southern Lebanon and the border between Syria and Lebanon is open to the transfer of weapons to Hizballah to replenish its depleted inventories. For over two decades before the latest fighting, Hizballah proved able to resist Israel and even prosper, and no one thinks UNIFIL will be more skilled or more aggressive than the Israelis were. The organization also retains some long-range missiles it can fire over the heads of UNIFIL troops into northern Israel. Israel has corresponding capacity to strike at its enemy. The likelihood for renewed fighting, therefore, is high. Despite uncommonly tough rules of engagement, the odds are that capitals will not give commanders on the ground authority to open fire when they should. The odds are only slightly smaller that a panicked unit will fire when it shouldn't. Either way, its peacekeeping utility will quickly fade and the deployment will be seen in Europe as a massive liability. If Europe cannot yet be put into the category of "loser", it can fairly be labeled as out there, swinging in the breeze.

DETERMINING THE true winners of the fighting between Israel and Hizballah may take years, as the lessons are chewed, swallowed and digested by all the parties. Yet while the jury is out, some interim conclusions are appropriate for Israel, the United States and other powers confronting strong terrorist movements.

One obvious lesson concerns the danger of power vacuums. A major triumph of the Bush Administration was to oust Syria from Lebanon; a major failure was to put nothing in its place. When the United States coerces oppressive occupiers like Syria or helps topple brutal regimes, it must have a plan to build up a new government in its place. In Lebanon, and in Iraq and the Palestinian territories, the destruction of a bad regime has led to its replacement by radicals.

A second lesson is that powerful states, even if they are rogues, cannot simply be ignored. Syria, Iran and other regional powers have sharp claws. They can back terrorist movements, sow unrest in neighboring countries, stir up the “street” in the Muslim world and otherwise make life difficult for U.S. allies. Simply ignoring these states is not an option. Indeed, diplomacy is also necessary if we are to coerce or punish them more effectively.

Finally, Lebanon proved the need for an information strategy when fighting terrorist and guerrilla groups. Israel seemed blithely unconcerned about how its military operations were being portrayed. The disastrous strike on Qana is one example, but more broadly the images of the suffering of the Lebanese people were not effectively countered by a concerted Israeli message that placed responsibility on Hizballah. As a result, the surprising sympathy Israel initially received from Europe and several Arab states dissipated over time.

What remains unclear is whether Israel’s unrelenting use of firepower, combined with its willingness to inflict civilian casualties, could boost the country’s deterrence against attacks both in Lebanon and in the region. This was a game of chicken in which Israel threw its steering wheel out the window—and no other state was prepared to intervene on Hizballah’s behalf.

But the long-term lessons on deterrence will be heavily guided by perceptions and misperceptions. Already Palestinians are “learning” that stalwart defenders can vanquish Israel, conveniently ignoring that Israel’s intelligence against the Palestinians is far superior than against Hizballah and that the Palestinian groups are a pale shadow of their Lebanese heroes when it comes to tactical skill. Hizballah is trying

to convince itself and its followers that its game was worth the candle. For now its leaders appear sober about their losses, but the Arab world has a way of turning marginal victories and even limited defeats into brilliant triumphs.

Similarly, Israel is for now focusing on the negative. Israelis seem to forget that Hizballah did not anticipate this fight and thus may wrongly conclude that Hizballah cannot be deterred, when the history of the last 15 years at least suggests that Hizballah is highly sensitive to regional conditions and to the scale of any Israeli response. From the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000 until this war, Hizballah had largely complied with the tacit rules of the road in terms of how far it could provoke Israel. Its infractions were designed to burnish the party’s reputation as the defender of Lebanese sovereignty, to help the Palestinians wage their own struggle, and to humiliate Israel, without forcing a massive response. The comments of Nasrallah and other senior Hizballah leaders indicate that they thought the kidnapping operation fell into this category of provocation. Whether these tacit rules of engagement are still in operation remains unclear, as either or both sides may conclude that the latest round of fighting rendered them irrelevant.

The Lebanon war, in the end, showed that sometimes in the Middle East, there are no good options. Israel’s use of force against Hizballah was bound to be inconclusive given Hizballah’s ability simply to survive the onslaught and then transform a bad situation on the ground into a stirring propaganda victory. Yet, to downplay the provocation would only invite renewed attacks. The curse of Middle Eastern politics now is that these no-win situations are increasingly the norm rather than the exception. □