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The Road to Nowhere: Everyone's Strategic Failures in Lebanon

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Introduction

No one can dismiss the role of luck, or the possibility of miracles, in war. No one can afford to count upon them. It is only luck and miracles, however, that are likely to give any side any kind of meaningful victory in Lebanon. Unless the current fighting somehow really does lead to the disarming of Hezbollah, a flood of aid to Lebanon, and a new approach to the Israeli-Palestinian war of attrition, the mid- to long-term outcome will be as bad for any apparent “victor” as the “defeated.” The Israelis will lose, Hezbollah will lose, and so will everyone else.

It is all too easy to take sides at times like this, or focus on the moment, but from a strategic perspective, everyone seems headed down the wrong road.

Israel’s Strategic Problems

Israel’s strategic problems go far beyond the immediate fighting in Lebanon and interact directly with its fighting with the Palestinians.

The Palestinian Prelude

The fighting in Lebanon has taken place in parallel with fighting in Gaza, and both raise serious questions about the core goals in Israeli strategy. Israel’s confidence in security barriers, unilateral boundaries, and selective acquisition and withdrawal never inspired much confidence. It was always a triumph of hope over experience: The hope that somehow an angry Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim world would not find ways to penetrate or bypass the barriers, and that unilateral separation and acquisition would not breed more anger, enemies, and radicalization.

Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza never had reason to create any Palestinian gratitude, and it did not. Palestinian radicals claimed victory, and Israel’s failure to establish any kind of meaningful post-withdrawal economic and political relations made things worse. Isolating Gaza, eliminating most economic options, and making barrier crossings more difficult compounded the weaknesses in Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, and helped Hamas and the PIJ.

It also created something approaching “mission impossible” for Egypt, having an Arab country seal off its border with Gaza to all illegal crossings, arms smuggling, and tunnels. Homemade rockets, imported rockets, mortars, and worse weapons to come are inevitable. So are raids across or under the barrier; a shift to Israeli targets on the West Bank and probably outside Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank; and attacks on IDF and crossing forces.

Anger without peace is a recipe for asymmetric war, and even when Palestinian “burn out” and fatigue affect a majority of the population, any passivity reflected in public opinion polls is meaningless. Israel’s problem has always been a relatively small minority of angry, radicalized young men and women willing to take extreme risks and use extreme measures. Half a decade of a war of attrition since September 2000 was bad enough; withdrawal from Gaza without any end game made things worse.

The same will inevitably happen on the West Bank and in Jerusalem. Palestinians may attack by avoiding the barrier now, but they won’t stop when it is complete. Unless the IDF virtually controls the entire West Bank, homemade rockets, imported rockets, mortars, and worse weapons to come are just as inevitable. Minor Israeli withdrawals from token settlements, while Israel encloses large new areas to the east of Jerusalem and Aerial and other key settlements in the north, will radicalize young men on the West Bank. Tensions in Jerusalem and with Israeli Arabs will create other problems. So will the broader reaction in the street in the rest of the Arab world.

The end result is that barriers may alter the course of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but Israel can only reduce the resulting adaptation of Palestinian forces if it is repeatedly willing to invade Gaza and the West Bank, attack suppliers of longer-range weapons overtly or covertly, crack down on Palestinians in Jerusalem and Israel proper, and establish new security measures to protect Israelis outside of Israel proper. The security barrier is at best a limited aid; not a solution. Unilateral withdrawal and more territory is a recipe for lasting anger and violence.

Israel’s Attacks on Hezbollah

Israel’s attack on Hezbollah and Lebanon is in many ways the same problem writ large. Israel had known for years that Hezbollah was not passively sitting near the Lebanese-Israeli border, with a few minor raids to save face. It was acquiring thousands of artillery rockets, more sophisticated systems like the C-802 anti-ship missile and light surface-to-air missiles, more modern anti-tank weapons, and even better motion detectors and designs for the kind of bombs and IEDs that helped drive the IDF out of southern Lebanon.

At the same time that it was relying on a security fence for Gaza and the West Bank, it was watching an enemy build up the capability to carry out much more lethal attacks deep into Israel across the security barriers in the North. This does not explain Israel’s reaction to Hezbollah kidnapping several IDF soldiers. Israel had already grossly overreacted strategically to a

similar kidnapping in Gaza. This is not to dismiss the importance of such lives, but when a state shows that it is so extraordinarily sensitive and easy to provoke into extreme action, it does not protect its soldiers or citizens. It offers every radical and extremist an incentive to use the same tactics in the future. It cannot deter its true enemies by such action, but it can breed new ones.

It is unclear what Israel's strategy was in the beginning with major strikes on the Hezbollah and Lebanon. The goal seems to have been to weaken and intimidate Hezbollah while forcing the Lebanese government and army to act. If so, the end results are likely to be just as strategically self-destructive as Sharon's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and attempts to create a Maronite-dominated partner. Going too far turned a victory against the Palestinians into permanent Shi'ite hostility and gave birth to Hezbollah.

Hezbollah has now shown just how vulnerable Israel is to radical non-state actors using rockets. Its strikes have not been particularly lethal, but they have disrupted much of Northern Israel, had a major impact on the Israeli economy, and warned that any form of sanctuary near Israel's borders offers its enemies the ability to launch far more lethal rocket strikes at any target in Israel in the future. Add even the crudest chemical, biological, or radiological warhead, and the potential threat is so great that virtually any attacker can force Israel to new extremes and to trying to occupy territory or create more buffer zones.

As has been the case with US forces in Iraq, Israel is also forced to use very high-cost systems operated by highly skilled soldiers to attack well-dispersed and hard-to-target, semi-skilled Hezbollah fighters. It is also attacking forces with weapons worth a few hundred to a few thousand dollars that Hezbollah does not have pay for.

Hezbollah fixed facilities have little valuable content, and once Hezbollah forces disperse, blowing them up is more a political act than a military one.

Israel can hit some bigger rockets and missiles, and some radars, but even the best net of UAVs, HUMINT, and various electronic intelligence systems can only find some of the biggest targets, and Israel must risk collateral damage in case after case to exploit potential targets of opportunity. The only thing surgical about such operations is the guided weapon.

If Israel strikes into Lebanon, as now seems the case, it walks into a strategic trap of a different kind. Hezbollah can easily hide and disperse. It can go north. It can sacrifice low-quality fighters that it can easily replace in highly publicized resistance actions and probably have a few successes. More significantly, it can regroup, wait, improve its ambush techniques, and

confront Israel with the reality of withdrawing or going right back into the morass in Southern Lebanon that it fled once before -- this time without the cover and help of the South Lebanon Army.

Every step north to shut off longer-range rocket attacks makes the problem worse. Israel seems less and less defensive, breeds more and more Lebanese and Arab anger, and has more problems with Europe. More troops are required and more troops are vulnerable.

Israel cannot succeed unless the Lebanese political structure, and Lebanese people, particularly the Shi'ites in the South turn actively against Hezbollah and act to disarm it, or some international force takes the pressure off the IDF. This is just barely possible, and may explain some of the scale and persistence of Israeli escalation, but it is very unlikely. Lebanese politics are too fragile, too divided, and too vulnerable to new confessional struggles.

The odds are that any Lebanese action would be a cosmetic effort to win a ceasefire. No one in the international community, including the US, wants to fight Israel's battles for it. Everyone remembers the aftermath of 1982 and attacks on the peacekeepers. This leaves Israel stuck in Lebanon or with a ceasefire that allows its opponents to pause and regroup. This might produce the initial appearance of victory for Israel, but is scarcely a meaningful result for the level of force that Israel must use.

It also raises the question of Iranian and Syrian resupply of Hezbollah. Efforts to shut off supply from Iran might well actually help the hard-line regime there use the Israeli card, although it seems to rely far more on authority than popularity. Pressure on Syria can have much the same effect. Syria usually gives way for a while under pressure, but then goes to covert operations, more support of proxies, and resumes activity the moment there is a new window of opportunity.

Finally, the broader impact is going to be the added radicalization of at least enough Palestinians, Lebanese Shi'ites, and other Arabs and Muslims to create more enemies, and more popular pressure on Arab regimes. It is more of an incentive for Syria and Iran to use Hezbollah, Hamas, and the PIJ as proxies and for non-state actors as diverse as Sadr and Al Qa'ida to step up their actions or become involved. It also means more problems for moderate regimes in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

The Strategic Problems of Israel's Opponents

None of Israel's strategic problems, however, mean its opponents are better off or have wiser strategies. In fact, they all suffer from the same basic strategic weaknesses. Their "victories" against Israel consist of provocation and escalation. Each step makes the situation of the people they claim to want to help worse, with no prospect of any decisive victory against Israel at either the tactical or strategic level. Enforcing pointless suffering on both sides has a horrible kind of equity but no value of any substantive kind.

Consider what each of Israel's opponents gains and loses:

Hezbollah

Quite aside from the casualties, virtually every Lebanese Shi'ite loses and many lose badly. Hezbollah's provocation of Israel has displaced what many estimate as half a million Lebanese, most Shi'ite. It may have hurt tourism for years, and the damage to infrastructure in the south has been critical.

Hezbollah may gain status as a fighter in Arab and Islamic radicals' eyes, but it may also find over time that it has provoked deep divisions in Lebanon and a great deal of antagonism in Lebanon. It already has alienated most Arab regimes, and many will now see it as presenting a permanent risk of new conflicts and wars.

This may not matter to ideological warriors who believe that God and time is on their side. It is a strategic tragedy, and self-inflicted wound, by any other standard.

Lebanon and the Lebanese Government

The Lebanese government may not be an enemy of Israel, but it has allowed Hezbollah to keep its arms, steadily build up its rockets and armaments, and control the south. At least some members of the government have also deliberately sought Hezbollah support, and should have known the price that Lebanon might have to pay.

Calling for humanitarian aid and a ceasefire is the political line of least resistance for a government that seems weaker and less effective by the day. It leaves Lebanon, however, with an open-ended strategic mess in the south, and the near certainty of another round of Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, if not another ongoing war of attrition in the south.

The prognosis is a new rise in Syrian and Iranian influence, more confessional and sectarian tension, less power to the government and army, and a much worse situation for the Lebanese people. Political opportunism is

a tactic, not a strategy, and it has helped turn the “Lebanese spring” into what has now become the “Lebanese summer.”

Iran

Iran has shown that it can conduct proxy wars against Israel at what so far has been no cost, and quite possibly without any planning or intent to produce anything like the current level of violence. The Hezbollah, after all, has done similar things before and Israel has negotiated, not escalated. Iran and Syria emerge as backing the Arab cause at least to some extent in popular or street terms. Iran’s influence will grow over Hamas and the PIJ as well, and Israel’s actions has certainly reduced the world’s focus on its nuclear activities.

That said, Arab governments in the Gulf, Jordan, and Egypt are going to be even more distrustful of the present Iranian regime and see its actions as even more dangerous in terms of their interests. There will be added Sunni-Shi’ite tensions because of the actions of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. Most of all, Israel’s strategic planners have even more reason to see Iran as an existential enemy and to find some way to strike back, prevent more Iranian arms shipments and aid to Hezbollah and Palestinian movements and consider striking to preempt Iran from getting nuclear weapons.

It seems likely that Israel was already planning to create a dedicated preemptive and survivable nuclear strike capability against Iran and its cities. This is going to reinforce such efforts or the calls for them.

Most of all, the most effective possible “spoiler role” has no strategic end game. The ability to cause trouble does not translate into the ability to benefit from it.

Syria

Syria has become the strategic stepchild of Middle Eastern radicalism. It plays the game, but is now seen as a second string player, and has no more probability of strategic benefits than Iran. This won’t help it take control back of Lebanon, it will make it even harder to recover the Golan, there will be more distrust by other Arab regimes although they find it easier to single out the Hezbollah and Iran.

No Syrian will benefit from Syria’s support of Hezbollah. Like Iran, the ability to cause trouble does not translate into the ability to benefit from it.

Al Qa'ida and Al Sadr

There is no doubt that the fighting has already spilled over into the entire Middle East and Islamic world. It will reinforce popular support for violent action against Israel and its allies in the near term. It will give them a tool to attack the US as Israel's ally.

But again, the political and tactical advantage they gain has no strategic benefits or end game. Far more Arabs and Muslims will suffer than Israelis, and the prospects for regional stability will decline. This may not matter to true believers; it will hurt everyone else.

The Strategic Problems of the US

The US will be another loser in this process. The Administration's posture of standing aside, and bipartisan pandering in the Congress, have left the US without any effort to create the kind of international forces that might actually create a meaningful buffer between Israel and Hezbollah, or help the Lebanese government disarm it. Passively waiting for Israel to make things worse for itself does not help it.

Failing to be seen to take visible action to resolve the crisis, or even presenting an option like trying to revive the peace process, makes the US seem to be a partner to Israel with little regard for the Arab world. This is not the posture that helps in Iraq, that helps regimes in Egypt and Jordan, or helps build up support for dealing with Iran and Iraq. It is not a strategy that helps in the war on terrorism.

Supporting Israel does not mean the US should not be constantly visible and aggressively active in pushing for peace. It does not mean a failure to take humanitarian action which helps restore America's image and ease pressure on Israel. It does not mean issuing passive blank checks when an Israeli government may have the wrong strategy. Discrediting America as a key mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict through sheer inaction and inertia does not help Israel or any of America's allies in the Arab and Muslim world.