The Hizbullah-Israeli War: an American Perspective

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It was unusual for an Israeli Prime Minster to break open a bottle of champagne in front of American negotiators at a formal meeting. But that's exactly what Shimon Peres did. It was late April 1996, and Peres was marking the end of a bloody three week border confrontation with Hizbullah diffused only by an intense ten day shuttle orchestrated by Secretary of State Warren Christopher. Those understandings negotiated between the governments of Israel and Syria (the latter standing in for Hizbullah) would create an Israeli-Lebanese monitoring group, co-chaired by the United States and France. These arrangements were far from perfect, but contributed, along with on-again-off-again Israeli-Syrian negotiations, to an extended period of relative calm along the Israeli-Lebanese border.

The April understandings would last until Israel's withdrawal. The recent summer war between Hizbullah and Israel, triggered by the Shia militia's attack on an Israeli patrol on July 12, masked a number of other factors which would set the stage for the confrontation as well as the Bush administration's response. Six years of relative quiet had witnessed Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in June of 2000, a steady supply of Katushya rockets—both short and long range—from Iran to Hizbullah, the collapse of Israel's negotiations with Syria and the Palestinians, and the onset of the worst Israeli-Palestinian war in half a century. A perfect storm was brewing, spawned by the empowerment of both Hizbullah and Hamas, Iranian reach into the Arab-Israeli zone, Syria's forced withdrawal from Lebanon, a determination by Israel to restore its strategic deterrence in the wake of unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon and Gaza, and an inexperienced Israeli prime minister and defense minister uncertain of how that should be done.

But that's not all that had changed. Perhaps the single most important factor that would set the point of departure for the American response to the crisis was the 9/11 syndrome. The attacks in 2001, the Afghanistan campaign, the invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the war against terror would fundamentally alter the United States' perception of the world and how best to protect American interests there.

The new priorities were clear: fighting terror abroad to safeguard American security at home; spreading democracy through regime change in Iraq and Palestine while pressing a reformist agenda throughout the Arab world to ensure that democratic regimes would be anti-terrorist and pro-western in character; and using preemptive, preventative military power and counterterrorism instead of conventional diplomacy to address the problem.

This new and dangerous world required toughness and a moral clarity and consistency which almost by definition reduced the incentive and opportunity for traditional engagement in the Arab-Israeli arena, particularly on the Israeli-Palestinian problem. Standing by Israel in this new world was critical as two democracies

confronted terror. But from the administration's standpoint, dealing with Arafat (an acquiescor in terror) or Hamas (a proponent) or Syria (a junior member of the Middle Eastern axis of evil) was neither possible nor desirable.

With Abu Mazen too weak and Ariel Sharon headed off in the direction of unilateral withdrawal (a policy the administration rightly hailed as withdrawing Israeli settlers, soldiers, and moving toward ending Israeli occupation) there appeared little else to be done. Indeed, anyone looking at the prospects for significant breakthroughs in Arab-Israeli negotiations between 2001 and 2005 might have turned and run. There were no negotiations; no trust between the parties, no mutually agreed framework (the Quartet Road Map, a convenient fiction which neither Israelis nor Palestinians really accepted); and of course no third party mediator willing to take the problem on in a serious way. In short, Arab-Israeli peace was not a top priority for the Bush administration.

It should have come as no surprise then that the administration responded to the Lebanon-Israeli crisis with the software that had guided its overall Middle East policy. Iran had changed the status quo by providing Hizbullah with a new and more dangerous rocket capacity; Hizbullah had provoked the crisis; and Israel needed to be supported. From Washington's perspective, this was never about kidnapped prisoners or a localized border confrontation. There were broader strategic goals that needed to be achieved: a Hizbullah defeat, a setback for Iran, and a change in the Lebanon situation that would strengthen central authority, build on the Cedar Revolution, and keep the Syrians at bay.

The goals may have been worthwhile but the administration lacked the wherewithal to achieve them. Conventional diplomacy was never an option. This was not 1996 where an administration could use Israel and Syria to broker an accord. The administration was not going to engage with Bashar al-Assad, a man already tarred with the assassination of a Lebanese prime minister, and who seemed to have all the flaws of his father but none of the strengths. In any event, Syria wasn't eager to rush in. It saw Israel's destruction of Lebanon as a payback to the Lebanese for forcing Syria out; and it relished Hizbullah's capacity to rocket northern Israel with impunity.

Moreover, if the administration was counting on Israel to hand Hizbullah a strategic defeat, it quickly became apparent that this was not to be. After relying on airpower, then on limited ground forces, the Israelis finally used mobilized reserves in an attempt to clear Hizbullah fighters and infrastructure south of the Litani. That Hizbullah succeeded on the final day before the UN ceasefire took effect to launch more rockets into northern Israel than on any previous day of the confrontation demonstrates just how short Israel fell in accomplishing its goals.

The administration's efforts to defuse the crisis through a UN Security Council resolution may have been somewhat paradoxical given Washington's suspicion of New York corridor diplomacy, but it was a pragmatic calculation. A UN initiative would not only reinforce UN Security Council Resolution 1559 but it would share the responsibility for post-ceasefire arrangements with others, particularly a UN mandated international force. That said, the administration really had no choice. Israel lacked the military

strategy to stop Hizbullah rockets; and there was no negotiating process that would have either. Four weeks after the crisis began with American credibility (and power) much diminished, the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 gave Hizbullah and Israel what both now wanted and needed: an excuse and justification to stand down.

It may take months for the full impact of the Israel-Lebanon war to play out in the region. Uncertainties abound: the effectiveness of an international force in Lebanon; the political future of Ehud Olmert; developments in a confrontation between Israel and the Palestinians; and Syrian and Israeli calculations in the wake of the current crisis. What is safe to assume, however, is that the new Middle East will likely be as messy and complicated as the old—if not more. Looking at the region in September 2006, the post-war environment would appear to be decidedly unfriendly for the United States. Bogged down in Iraq, facing an emboldened Iran and Hizbullah, allied with a weakened Israeli government with few good options on the Palestinian and Syrian tracks, and with damaged credibility throughout the region, America confronts many problems and few genuine opportunities. As it seeks to navigate this unpredictable and unstable region, there are key elements that it ought to bear in mind as it seeks to protect its interests and restore American credibility.

1. **Lebanon may be better but it won't be perfect:** The summer war could actually help stabilize the border area and enhance Lebanese central authority south of the Litani. To have any chance of succeeding however, the United States needs to make Lebanon a top priority. That means appointing a high level presidential envoy to serve as a facilitator and expeditor to work with the Lebanese, the Israelis, the UN, the Arabs, and the Europeans in an effort to marshal economic assistance, stabilize the security situation, and facilitate the implementation of as much of UN Security Council resolution 1701 as possible.

2. **Engage Syria with eyes open and expectations low:** Stability in Lebanon will not be possible without Syrian acquiescence. The administration should probe the Syrians on Lebanon looking for areas of congruence and determine what may be possible on broader issues such as negotiations with Israel on the Golan and to enhance stability in southern Lebanon. Israeli-Palestinian peace is still the core issue but Hizbullah's rockets have emerged as a much greater threat to Israeli security than Palestinian terror. That's enough reason for the United States (and Israel) to see what's possible with Damascus.

3. **A reassuring but honest dialogue with Israel:** The Israelis are defensive and unsteady and will be look for ways to demonstrate their reach, particularly in Lebanon. Killing Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah and interdicting Iranian and Syrian resupply of Hizbullah may be on their agenda. The administration needs to work closely with the Israelis to enhance stability in Lebanon and to understand Prime Minister Olmert's thinking on both the Syrian and Palestinian tracks.

4. **Manage the Israeli-Palestinian impasse:** Options on the Israeli-Palestinian front are bleak. Prime Minster Olmert's realignment plan is almost certainly dead and the prospects for a negotiated solution between Israel and Hamas are remote. But the adminsitraiotn needs to focus on stabilizing the Palestinian front beginning with a negotiated solution to the problem of the kidnapped Israeli soldier and those Palestinians taken by Israel. Broader goals should be a longer term ceasefire and economic development in Gaza and the West Bank.

5. **A new Bush vision:** There is no possibility for a negotiated solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the creation of a Palestinian state by the end of this administration's term. At the same time, American interests would be well served if the administration were to lay out at an appropriate time its vision for an end game. It's up to Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate the details. The administration could lay out parameters on the four core issues: territory, Jerusalem, refugees, and security. Reaffirming the desirably and the feasibility of a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians is important for American credibility and the advancement of our interests in the region, even if for the time being that goal is unachievable.

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