

The Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon: One Year Later

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One year has passed since Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon. As is often the case, looking back can provide better judgement on the validity of the policy that led to the decision to withdraw unilaterally from Lebanon, and yield valuable lessons concerning possible developments along the Israeli-Lebanese border. Did those who supported the withdrawal correctly analyze the various motivations and conditions existing among the various actors? Has the decision by Ehud Barak's government to withdraw from Southern Lebanon stood the test of time? This article will attempt to briefly sketch out the pros and cons.

The Israeli public remains divided on this issue. Many believe withdrawing from Southern Lebanon was the most outstanding decision taken by Ehud Barak during his entire term as Prime Minister; in a single, well-executed action, Israel was freed from the 'Lebanese swamp', without the loss of so much as a single soldier. By contrast, others claim that the withdrawal from Southern Lebanon was a huge miscalculation. Those who opposed the withdrawal noted that its hasty execution did serious harm to Israel's deterrent capability, and triggered a process that contributed to the ongoing, painful and violent confrontation between the Palestinians and Israel, which commenced in September 2000.

This article will analyze the claims put forth by the adherents and

opponents of the withdrawal, using the events of the past year to gain new perspective on their various arguments. It will also attempt to derive lessons from the experience with regard to expected developments on Israel's northern border.

A Unilateral Withdrawal: Summarizing the Pros and Cons

Those who supported the withdrawal noted that, upon its withdrawal from Southern Lebanon, Israel's strategic situation would improve for the following reasons:

- *The Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) withdrawal from Lebanon would remove Hizballah's motivation for fighting Israel.* According to this claim, Hizballah was to be seen as a grassroots Lebanese organization, which rose out of the ranks of the Lebanese Shia community. Its establishment was associated with protecting and furthering the interests of Lebanon in general and the Shia community in particular. As such, its decision to fight was based its desire to liberate occupied Lebanese territory. Once satisfied in this regard, its motivation for conducting operations against Israel would decline significantly.
- *A withdrawal would give Israel greater international legitimacy.* Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution

425 and in coordination with the UN would give international legitimacy to the border between Israel and Lebanon. This would make it harder for Hizballah to undertake operations against Israel, and would facilitate Israel's ability to respond, should the need arise.

- *Tactical considerations favored a withdrawal.* From a military standpoint, it was argued that defending the Galilee would be better accomplished from the Israeli side of the border. The security zone in Southern Lebanon, it was noted, did not provide a solution for the main threat against Israeli population centers in Northern Israel — Katyusha rockets. Furthermore, the very nature of Israel's deployment in the Security Zone — at fixed outposts which required movement of forces and supplies along fixed and known transportation lines, and passing amidst a hostile populace — made it easy for Hizballah to find and inflict casualties on the IDF. By contrast, deployment along the border with Lebanon, behind an electronic fence, would enable better coping with Hizballah, even if the latter were to continue fighting against Israel.

- *A withdrawal would enhance Israeli deterrence.* Withdrawal, it was argued, would strengthen Israeli deterrence *vis-à-vis* Hizballah, Syria, and Lebanon. There were two reasons for this: first, Israel would be free to

respond forcefully to cross-border incursions, because it would be easier for the country to defend its actions in the international arena. Moreover, withdrawal would reduce Israel's tolerance for attacks, essentially forcing it to respond severely to any provocation. Since Israel's rivals to the conflict would presumably also be aware of this, they would be amply deterred from attacking Israel.

- *A unilateral withdrawal would improve Israel's negotiating position vis-à-vis Syria.* A unilateral withdrawal, it was claimed, would upset the linkage that Syria had attempted to dictate between quiet in Southern Lebanon and a negotiated settlement over the Golan Heights. This would improve Israel's bargaining position vis-à-vis Syria.

- *The withdrawal would set in motion a stabilization process in Southern Lebanon.* Israel's departure would force the Lebanese government to enforce its authority over the region, commencing a process of economic rehabilitation. Since economic growth is dependent on stability and quiet, this would encourage residents of the region to maintain peaceful relations with Israel.

Barak was well aware of these arguments. It was for this reason that he undertook to coordinate the IDF withdrawal closely with the UN, while at the same time issuing appropriately serious deterrent threats. Similarly, he stood firm against pressures from those in the IDF that wanted to maintain a number of outposts on the Lebanese side of the border.

Those who opposed withdrawal

viewed it as highly dangerous, justifying their stance with the following contentions:

- *Hizballah's perceived implacability regarding Israel.* The Hizballah, it was maintained, was a radical Islamic organization. Its ideology, as expressed in declarations by its leadership, maintained that Israel had no legitimacy as a state, and that it must be fought until Jerusalem is liberated. This would provide ample motivation for its fighters to continue

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the fight against Israel.

- *Hizballah's patrons would have an interest in ongoing violence.* The Hizballah is entirely dependent on Iran and Syria, and hence both states have considerable influence on its actions. Both of these states, moreover, were perceived as having an interest in seeing the organization continue to fight Israel: Syria, in order to pressure for the return territories conquered in 1967; and Iran, for more purely ideological reasons.

- *Tactical considerations in the event of ongoing fighting.* If, as many expected, Hizballah were to continue its battle

with Israel, it would be able to do so from improved positions right on the border. This would enhance its ability to do harm to Israel via any number of means, including flat-trajectory weapons, such as rifles, machine guns, etc. In particular, its ability to target Israeli population centers would increase.

- *The withdrawal would hand a victory to one of Israel's most bitter opponents.* The withdrawal would be perceived in the Arab world as a great Hizballah victory. This would encourage others from among Israel's rivals, particularly the Palestinians, to sustain military pressure on Israel rather than negotiate with it. A withdrawal in the face of the Hizballah, moreover, would demonstrate that the Israeli people do not have the necessary staying power for this type of warfare; that it is possible to exploit the Israeli media and its left-right political division in order to erode Israeli resolve.

- *The perception that Israel had abandoned its allies would do it long-term harm.* Israel would be perceived as having turned its back on the South Lebanon Army (SLA). This would make it difficult for Israel to find other allies in the region in the future.

Examining the Outcomes

What has actually happened in the year since the withdrawal? As is often the case, the truth lies somewhere between the two positions that have been presented above. Hizballah, while still undertaking some actions against Israel, appears to have lost much of its motivation since the liberation of Southern Lebanon. This can be concluded from the fact that the

number of actions taken by organization against Israeli targets has fallen from a rate of thousands per year to only a handful of isolated actions over the past year.

Nonetheless, the organization still has a high level of motivation for continuing to act against Israel in a limited fashion. This derives from a number of reasons. Hizballah retains, after all, an ideological commitment; Iran and Syria for their part still have interests of their own in encouraging the organization to continue pressuring Israel. Along with this, Hizballah also has *political* interests for continuing to be perceived by the Lebanese public as a fighting organization. Were the organization not to do so, it would risk losing much of the prestige that it garnered by driving Israel out in the first place. From being the premier liberation movement in the country, Hizballah would become just one of a number of sectoral/political parties in Lebanon, each vying with the others for power and prestige.

Within the reality created by the withdrawal, it would appear that perceived legitimacy, both internationally and locally within Lebanon, have great weight. The decline in the number of Hizballah actions is a product not only of a decline in motivation: Hizballah is having trouble operating in areas where it lacks legitimacy, both in the eyes of the international community, and in the eyes of the Lebanese people, who would bear the brunt of Israeli retaliations. It is for this reason that the majority of Hizballah actions have taken place in a relatively limited area, known in Israel as Har Dov, and among the Lebanese as Shaba Farms.

This area is convenient for the Hizballah since it is claimed by the Lebanese government as part of its territory and, in any event, is not part of Israel proper. While the international community, acting through the UN, has ruled that the area in question is not Lebanese territory, international law does consider the area as occupied Syrian territory, since it is part of the Golan Heights. This means that Hizballah can tenably argue that its opposition

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to Israeli 'occupation' of the area is legitimate. If Israel were to accept Lebanon's demand and concede the Shaba Farms area, it is fair to assume that Hizballah would seek a different territorial pretext for continuing its fight. Here it is necessary to recall that Israel's withdrawal was unilateral, and not the product of an agreement between Israel and Lebanon. As a result, the delineation of the border was not accompanied by a resolution of outstanding Lebanese-Israeli border disputes. When one examines the records of the Lebanon-Israeli Mixed Armistice Commission which met after the 1948 War, it becomes apparent that there are any number of Lebanese

reservations regarding its border with Israel that could serve as possible pretexts.

Another development that has emerged clearly over the last year is that it is not always easy to implement deterrent threats. There are any number of reasons for this, but two in particular are significant, in part because they were not taken into account at the time that the decisions were being made. The first was the outbreak of the violent confrontation with the Palestinians in October 2000; the second was the death of Syrian President Hafez Assad and his replacement by his son, Bashar Assad. The Intifada made it difficult for Israel to take the decision to respond to Hizballah provocations, because it was reluctant to have a second front open in Lebanon while immersed in the struggle with the Palestinians. Moreover, there was concern that, should Israel become embroiled in a two-front conflict, the confrontation with the Palestinians would spill over into a regional crisis. The confrontation with the Palestinians also generated concern in the international community that the regional situation would further deteriorate, leading the US and European powers to pressure Israel to avoid the opening of an additional front in Lebanon. At the same time, the international community also put increased pressure on Syria and Lebanon.

At first, the death of President Hafez Assad contributed to calm in Southern Lebanon. The Syrians and Hizballah had to adjust to their new situation, and a conflict with Israel would have been inconvenient for them during that period. After the

period of adjustment, however, it emerged that Bashar Assad was potentially problematic for Israel. He seemed swept up by the energetic demonstrations of support for the Hizballah, giving them the feeling that they enjoyed Syria's unequivocal support. The elder Assad had kept the Hizballah at arm's length, recognizing that while the organization could serve Syrian interests, it bore watching closely. Hafez had also demonstrated his ability to bear down on the organization when, in his opinion, it deviated from the Syrian line. The fact that this line seemed to have been blurred by the new president made it difficult for Israel to calculate how Syria would respond to retaliations against the Hizballah, increasing the risks attendant in such retaliations.

Nonetheless, Israel's freedom of action does seem to have increased. This may be evidenced by the Israeli decision to respond to Hizballah attacks on the IDF by attacking Syrian targets in Lebanon, among them a Syrian radar position in Dahar al-Bader, on the Damascus-Beirut Highway. This made it clear that it was within Israel's capability to ratchet up a step and directly attack Hizballah's patron – Syria – without the need for any transitional steps. Reaction around the world to the Israeli action was entirely moderate, indicating there was a measure of understanding for Israel's need to respond to such provocations. Syria's conduct demonstrates it is having difficulty finding an appropriate answer to Israeli responses such as these, caught between an unfavorable combination of military inferiority and the absence of international legitimacy.

Israeli expectations *vis-à-vis* the

Lebanese government did not materialize. Lebanon did not deploy its armed forces in the southern part of the country as expected, and has contented itself so far with setting up a fragile civil administration there. By default, Hizballah is the real power in the area; the forces deployed along the border fence are its own, rather than those of the Army of Lebanon. In parallel, the organization's capabilities for hitting targets in the northern parts of Israel have increased, owing to its

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acquisition of extended-range rockets.

The withdrawal from Southern Lebanon increased the opposition in Lebanon for Syria's continued control of the country and the presence of Syrian forces within it. Initially, protests against Syrian occupation were limited to the Maronite-Christian population; in time, other sectors of Lebanese society, such as the Druse, also joined in. Lebanon seems to yearn for a return to normality following the IDF withdrawal from Southern Lebanon. This creates pressure on the Syrian authorities, especially given the relative inexperience of its new leader. The Syrians must take this into account when they examine the

question of Hizballah's continued efforts against Israel.

A central issue is the connection between the Lebanese arena and the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. An analysis of the developments prior to the onset of the El-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000 would lead many observers to believe that the Palestinian confrontation would have erupted regardless of the withdrawal from Lebanon. Nonetheless, it appears that the withdrawal from Southern Lebanon had a great influence on the Palestinians – it is surely not coincidental that Hizballah flags have begun to appear at Palestinian demonstrations. The withdrawal from Lebanon reinforced the perception among them that Israel is vulnerable to terrorism and guerrilla warfare, and that the staying power of the Israeli public has been damaged. This example encourages them to keep on with the struggle, based on the assumption that Israel's resolve will break first. In this limited sense, the unilateral withdrawal may be seen as having given the Palestinians an incentive to continue the violent confrontation.

Looking at the same issue from the other direction also reveals a connection. There can be little doubt that the confrontation with the Palestinians has amplified the motivation and commitment of Hizballah to act against Israel. To be sure, there are indications that Hizballah had planned to carry out operations in the Shaba area (including the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers, which was carried out in October 2000) prior to the Intifada. However, it is fair to assume that the Intifada made it easier for Hizballah

to finally take the decision to act. With that, the organization's involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not necessarily going to develop in the form of confrontations along the border with Lebanon. Rather, the it will likely try to extend its influence into the areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority, in an attempt to organize Palestinian cells that will commit attacks against Israel. Israel has already found evidence of such attempts.

Drawing Conclusions

From what has been related above, it seems reasonable to draw the following conclusions:

- *Hizballah's actions have been greatly reduced.* Compared to the scope of activities that took place prior to Israel's withdrawal, the scope of Hizballah actions has declined dramatically in number, and have been limited geographically to the Shaba Farms area. As a result, the number of Israeli casualties has decreased over the past year. It is expected these casualty rates will decline still further, once the IDF completes the reorganization of its forces behind the new international border.

- *Attacks against Israeli civilians have not taken place.* During the past year there have been no attacks against the civilian populace of northern Israel, allowing the residents to conduct normal lives.

- *The vulnerability of Israeli civilians remains higher than before.* Notwithstanding the aforementioned, the vulnerability of the population centers in the north of Israel to Hizballah rocket attacks has increased. The organization is capable of

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mounting a massive attack on broader and deeper swathes of the north of Israel, using hundreds of rockets. The balance of deterrence has thus strengthened, with the civilian populations of each side being held

hostage to threat and counter-threat. While the balance of deterrence is fairly stable, it is sensitive to errors and incorrect assessments of the situation by either side. This situation can create a feeling among the residents of the area that they are living at the foot of a volcano, a situation that carries with it long-term psychological implications.

- *Hizballah-Palestinian cooperation.* There is a danger of possible escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, which could include activity on some limited level by the Hizballah.

- *The Syrian predicament.* Syria is caught in an extremely uncomfortable situation. It cannot use Southern Lebanon as a pressure point against Israel with the same effectiveness that it could in the past, when Israel was deployed in the Security Zone. Consequently, the likelihood that it will be able to force renewed negotiations between itself and Israel to take place on terms that are advantageous for it have been diminished.

- *Growing opposition to Syria in Lebanon.* The growing demand within Lebanon for the removal of Syrian

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies
expresses its deep gratitude to

Marcia Riklis (New York)

for the support she provided to the Center's Outreach Program,
in the framework of which *Strategic Assessment* is published.

troops is contributing to Syria's feeling of distress. In June 2001, this brought about a Syrian decision to remove its forces from Beirut.

In conclusion, with the passing of a year, the balance of outcomes following the withdrawal is positive for Israel. Nonetheless, continuing Hizballah activities, notwithstanding their diminished scope, pose a risk of escalation. If such escalation materializes, Israel must avoid engaging in a duel with Hizballah in which civilian targets of both sides are harmed. Israel should seek to avoid this by transferring the confrontation

to the Israeli-Syrian playing field.

It will be difficult for Hizballah to justify to the Lebanese public why it is responding to Israeli attacks on Syrian targets with attacks on Israeli civilians, given that the latter places Lebanese civilians at risk. Syria can restrain Hizballah if it wishes to do so, given the organization's dependence on it for keeping supply lines from Iran open, and for its freedom of movement in Lebanon.

Israel must continue its efforts to reduce the negative impact of its withdrawal from Southern Lebanon on what is happening in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. It must prevent the

formation of a perception among the Palestinians that there is a genuine resemblance between that confrontation and the one in Southern Lebanon. Israel's steps must make it clear that the confrontation with the Palestinians – unlike the situation in southern Lebanon – is taking place in areas which are critical both to its objective security needs, and to the subjective sense of security of its citizens. The Palestinians must understand that Israeli resolve in their conflict is firmer than it was in the Security Zone, and that its responses will thus be entirely different.