

Between Victory and Defeat: Israel after the War with Hizballah

Wars once had clear endings and definitive outcomes. They would end with surrenders and peace treaties, ceremonies and victory marches. Wars today rarely end so clearly, if they end at all. The vanquished do not accept defeat, and the victors do not reap the spoils of war. Troops do not return home to showers of confetti and cheering crowds; many instead continue fighting and dying. Such is the nature of contemporary asymmetric wars against insurgents, guerrilla armies, and terrorists.

This is something that Israelis must now learn in the aftermath of Israel's war with Hizballah. Although they are certainly used to a constant state of hostility, Israelis are also accustomed to quick and decisive military victories. The month-long war was neither as quick as Israelis had hoped nor as decisive as they had expected. Instead, it ended with a fragile cease-fire and both sides declaring victory. Moreover, with Hizballah battered but still standing, many Israelis fear that the next round of war is only a matter of time.

In the meantime, recriminations and accusations over the war are flying in Israel as the country comes to terms with a war that, for the first time in its history, many believe Israel lost. Whether or not this is the case—now a subject of great debate—the public perception that Israel lost the war with Hizballah, which is widespread in Israel and around the world, is highly consequential. It will likely have a great impact not only on Israeli domestic politics and the political fortunes of the Olmert government but also on future Israeli strategy and foreign policy in the Middle East. The lessons that Israel draws from its recent war with Hizballah will shape future Israeli thinking

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and, by extension, the future of its relations with the Palestinians and the rest of the Middle East. It is imperative therefore that Israel learns the right lessons from the war.

A War of No Choice?

Israelis have long distinguished between two kinds of wars: the unavoidable and the voluntary. Although the latter are always controversial—Israel's 1982 war in Lebanon falls into this category—the former, popularly dubbed “wars of no choice,” are considered just wars and receive massive public support (the 1948, 1967, and 1973 wars are believed to be in this category).¹ A war of no choice is a defensive war that is forced on Israel, thereby absolving the country and its leadership of any moral responsibility for its outbreak and the subsequent deaths incurred on each side.

Was the conflict with Hizballah a no-choice war? At the time, most Israelis certainly thought so, which is why it enjoyed their almost unanimous support. After all, Israel had completely withdrawn its forces from Lebanon in May 2000 and had no intention of sending them back in. On July 12, 2006, Hizballah brazenly attacked Israel across an internationally recognized border, killing three of its soldiers and capturing two, and another five were later killed during an initial attempt to rescue the kidnapped soldiers. While it conducted this cross-border ambush, Hizballah also launched a barrage of mortar shells and Katyusha rockets on Israel Defense Forces (IDF) outposts and civilian communities near the border as a diversionary tactic. What made this attack even more provocative was the fact that it occurred outside the disputed Shebaa Farms area, where all previous Hizballah assaults had taken place since the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon.² By targeting civilians and attacking beyond the Shebaa Farms, Hizballah broke the informal rules by which both sides had abided in the six years since Israel left Lebanon.

The mutual deterrence, effectively a “balance of terror” between Israel and Hizballah, that ensured caution on both sides collapsed as a result of Hizballah's July 12 attack and Israel's fierce response to it. Although Hizballah probably anticipated a stronger-than-usual reaction from Israel, it did not expect the large-scale military reprisal Israel conducted against Lebanese infrastructure, destroying runways at Beirut's airport and the main highway between Beirut and Damascus, as well as Hizballah strongholds.³ If Hizballah's initial attack constituted a minor breach of the rules of the game, albeit a highly provocative one, Israel's response ended the game completely. Israel had always played this game reluctantly but at that point decided that it was no longer willing to play at all.

Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert's decision to escalate the conflict with Hizballah was, paradoxically, born out of a sense both of Israel's strength and

its weakness, as well as of opportunity and danger. The opportunity lay in using Israel's military might to bring about a new order in Lebanon, one in which Hizballah would lose its de facto minstate in the south and the Lebanese government would finally extend its sovereignty over that region. The withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005 following the Cedar Revolution and the election of a pro-Western, anti-Syrian Lebanese government already increased pressure on Hizballah to abandon its autonomous military standing in the country and transform itself into a peaceful political party. Yet, Hizballah had been resisting this transformation; and its pacification, if at all possible, could have taken years. Hizballah's attack gave Israel an opportunity to facilitate and hasten this process.

For once, Israel largely failed in its military objectives but scored a diplomatic victory.

Israel hoped that if Lebanon, not just Hizballah, was made to suffer for Hizballah's adventurism, Lebanon's political will to reign Hizballah in would finally increase. This calculation explains Jerusalem's decision to bomb not only Hizballah positions but also Lebanese civilian infrastructure. In addition to its hopes of engineering a Lebanese political backlash against Hizballah, Israel felt that, for once, it was diplomatically in a strong position to take military action because it was reacting to a clear act of aggression. Israel could also capitalize on the existing support internationally, particularly U.S. and French, for Hizballah's disarmament and the deployment of Lebanese troops to the border with Israel, which was expressed most clearly in UN Security Council Resolution 1559, passed in February 2004.⁴

Israel's military escalation was also a response to a perceived weakness and growing danger: the steady erosion of Israeli deterrence. This erosion began with Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, which was hailed in Lebanon and around the Arab world as a victory for Hizballah and a sign of Israel's diminishing ability to withstand Arab resistance due to its society's aversion to casualties. One result of this perception, from this point of view, was the Palestinians' renewal of armed conflict just months later with the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000. Subsequent events only reinforced this perception of Israeli weakness. Hizballah's repeated attacks against Israel were met with only mild and ineffectual Israeli responses that merely emboldened the group. Most damaging was Israel's second unilateral withdrawal, this time from Gaza in August 2005, which once again appeared to be a triumph for armed resistance, with Hamas this time reaping the political rewards. In short, Israel's military restraint and territorial disengagements signaled to its adversaries that its once famed and feared willingness

to fight was a thing of the past and that the time was ripe to intensify attacks against it. For a state in a hostile region with many enemies, a loss of deterrence is a recipe for disaster. Military deterrence has been the cornerstone of Israeli strategy in the Middle East since the state's establishment. Even though Israel had undoubtedly retained its military might—if anything, the military balance of power in the region has continued to tilt in Israel's favor—its enemies began to doubt its will to use force decisively.

The continued firing of Qassam rockets into southern Israel after Israel's disengagement from Gaza; the June 25 killing of two Israeli soldiers and

Hizballah, Hamas, Syria, and Iran are now perceived to be an axis of extremism.

abduction of a third by Palestinian militant groups, including Hamas's military wing; and Hizballah's subsequent cross-border ambush and seizure of Israeli soldiers had the cumulative affect of demonstrating to Israel's leadership that its deterrent effect had eroded. In this respect, the three kidnapped soldiers personified Israel's new vulnerability and the humiliation of the once-vaunted and highly symbolic IDF. A limited military retaliation,

third-party negotiations, and a prisoner exchange—Israel's past *modus operandi*—was now deemed insufficient. Instead, Olmert decided that the time had come for a devastating Israeli response that would serve to restore its deterrence capability. It would deliver a stern message to all of Israel's enemies, not only Hamas and Hizballah but also their Syrian and Iranian patrons, that Israel would not be bullied into submission but would strike back with a vengeance.

There was another strategic consideration behind Israel's decision to escalate the conflict with Hizballah. It was well known that Hizballah had amassed thousands of short-range Katyusha rockets (approximately 13,000 in total), roughly 500 medium-range rockets (the Fajr-3 and Fajr-5), and dozens of long-range rockets (the Zelzal-2) that were capable of striking deep inside Israel. This missile capability represented a strategic threat to Israel, giving Hizballah the ability to terrorize much of Israel's population and paralyze its economic life, both of which are concentrated in the narrow coastal strip from Tel Aviv to Haifa. It also meant that Iran had an indirect but highly effective means of retaliating against Israel in the event of an Israeli or U.S. strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, a scenario that was by no means far-fetched given the growing concern in both countries over Tehran's alleged clandestine pursuit of nuclear weapons. Hizballah's ability to launch a massive missile attack against Israeli towns and cities, whether of its own accord or on behalf of its patron state, was something that Israel could not tolerate indefinitely. Thus, the logic of preventive war was another factor

that convinced Olmert to abandon restraint and take decisive action to eliminate or at least degrade Hizballah's missile capability when the opportunity presented itself.

Mission Accomplished?

The results of Israel's war with Hizballah, although still ultimately uncertain, for now appear to have fallen short of Israel's ambitious objectives. The Olmert government's conduct of the war is widely faulted. Critics accuse it of poor planning, intelligence failures, and an overreliance on airpower and of providing insufficient ground troops and inadequate supplies to those troops. Heavy-handed military tactics incurred large numbers of civilian casualties and destroyed infrastructure, embittering local populations and providing the enemy with new recruits. Finally, the inability of the larger, better armed, and more technologically advanced IDF to defeat small bands of guerrilla fighters calls into question the Israeli military's all-powerful image.

Even the most advanced and adept armies can find it difficult to accomplish the ambitious military and political objectives set by their civilian leaders. Even when more modest goals have been achieved, the public's high expectations, established by their governments, can remain unsatisfied. This is essentially where Israel now finds itself. After 34 days of war in which 156 Israelis were killed, including 39 civilians, and some 4,000 Hizballah rockets hit Israel, paralyzing life in the north and forcing hundreds of thousands of Israelis into bomb shelters and more than half a million to flee their homes,⁵ many Israelis are left wondering what the war achieved and if it was really worth it. According to a poll taken on August 13, 2006, the day the UN-sponsored cease-fire went into effect, 58 percent of Israelis thought that the country had achieved "few if any" of its goals in the war.⁶ Is this an accurate assessment?

Certainly, the war achieved less than Israelis were led to believe it would. The bombastic rhetoric of Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz in the early days of the war and their vows to destroy Hizballah fed public expectations of a decisive victory. Peretz boasted that Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah "is going to get it so bad that he will never forget the name Amir Peretz."⁷ In a speech to the Knesset a few days into the war, Olmert declared that there "are moments in the life of a nation when it is compelled to say 'No more'" and ended by vowing, "We will triumph!"⁸ As Hizballah's rockets kept falling and their fighters continued to kill IDF troops, however, it became clear that such a victory would not materialize. Not only did Hizballah continue to fight, but the Lebanese population and the Siniora government in Beirut increasingly rallied behind it. In a country long divided by sectarianism, hatred of Israel became the one issue on which the Lebanese united.

For this, Israel had only itself to blame. Israel's bombing of Lebanese infrastructure and civilian buildings proved to be a serious miscalculation.⁹ Instead of the political backlash against Hizballah that Israel desired, the Lebanese public blamed Israel for its suffering. Israel succeeded neither in destroying Hizballah¹⁰ nor in undermining Hizballah's political standing in

Israel could end up turning inward and focusing all of its efforts on strengthening its defenses.

Lebanon, at least in the short term. On the contrary, Hizballah emerged from the war stronger than ever. Certainly, its military capabilities and infrastructure have been degraded by Israel's ferocious assault, but its political influence, not only in Lebanon but across the Arab and Muslim world, has been enhanced. Nasrallah has become the Nasser of his day, a new pan-Arab and pan-Islamic hero. Most ominously for Israel, the model of "resistance" that Hizballah cham-

pions—violent, uncompromising, and Islamically inspired—now appears, correctly or not, to be strikingly successful and hence is likely to gain more adherents elsewhere, especially in the Palestinian territories.

Israel may have won most of the battles and inflicted heavier losses on Hizballah, but Hizballah undoubtedly won the propaganda war. It reaped this reward primarily because it established a very low threshold for success at the outset of the war, whereas Israel's threshold was set very high.¹¹ Nasrallah defined victory for Hizballah as survival; Olmert defined it for Israel as eliminating Hizballah as a threat. Thus, all Hizballah had to do to "win" was to survive Israel's onslaught, whereas Israel had to completely rout Hizballah to "win." By these criteria, therefore, Hizballah won simply by not losing.

For Israel, such a perception of loss is potentially very dangerous; more is at stake than just wounded pride. Just as the perception that Hizballah's resistance forced Israel to withdraw from southern Lebanon in May 2000 encouraged Palestinian militants to take up arms against Israel and helped foment the second Intifada, so too the perception that Hizballah has once again defeated Israel may embolden militants, secular and Islamist alike, to step up their attacks against Israel. Far from restoring Israeli deterrence, the war with Hizballah may have only further eroded it. The war has dramatically exposed the vulnerability of Israel's home front to missile attacks and badly tarnished the image of the IDF, as it proved unable to defeat a small guerrilla army, albeit a well-trained and well-armed one fighting on its own territory.¹² If the IDF is no longer able to inspire fear in the hearts of Israel's enemies, then Israel is less able to deter these enemies, whether they are Hizballah, Hamas, Syria, or Iran. Of course, this does not mean that Syria or Iran is now likely to launch an all-out attack against Israel, as some fear. The

traditional military balance of power is still overwhelmingly in Israel's favor, a fact of which the Syrian and Iranian regimes are surely well aware. It could mean, however, that both states will increase their support for Hizballah and Hamas.

The outcome of the Israel-Hizballah war is likely to be a boon for extremists in the region. The potential growing allure of armed resistance against Israel in the wake of Hizballah's perceived success will deal yet another blow to the attempts of Arab and Islamic moderates to promote compromise and acceptance of the Jewish state. In the Palestinian context, it will further weaken President Mahmoud Abbas in his power struggle with the Hamas government and weaken those within Hamas who have been pushing for a change in the movement's steadfast opposition to the existence of Israel and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹³

A Diplomatic Success

Historians of Israel have often observed that Israel is good at winning wars but bad at winning the peace. Israel has been chronically unable to translate its stunning military accomplishments into lasting political gains, specifically peace agreements with its defeated adversaries. The only peace agreement that Israel obtained following a war was with Egypt in 1979 after the 1973 war, which was widely considered to have been a disastrous war for Israel, notwithstanding its victory. In the case of its war with Hizballah, the opposite may be true. For once, Israel largely failed in its military objectives but scored a diplomatic victory.

The basis of Israel's diplomatic achievement is UN Security Council Resolution 1701, passed unanimously on August 12, 2006, to end the fighting.¹⁴ Drafted by the United States and France, the language and terms of the resolution were more favorable to Israel than to Lebanon, let alone Hizballah. The resolution blamed Hizballah for the outbreak of the hostilities and called for it to cease "all attacks," whereas Israel only had to cease "offensive military operations" without defining what that meant, allowing Israel in effect to justify continued military activity in Lebanon as defensive in nature. The resolution also demanded the unconditional release of Israel's kidnapped soldiers, whereas no call was made for Israel to free the three Lebanese prisoners it holds. Israel was also not required to withdraw its troops immediately from southern Lebanon. Instead, they were allowed to stay until the Lebanese army and a strengthened UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) of up to 15,000 troops were deployed to the area. Most importantly from Israel's perspective, the resolution called for the establishment between the international border between Israel and Lebanon and the Litani River of "an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the gov-

ernment of Lebanon and of UNIFIL.” The resolution also imposed an arms embargo to prevent Hizballah’s rearmament by Syria and Iran. In essence, the resolution accepted that Hizballah’s military presence in southern Lebanon was the cause of the conflict and called for the Lebanese government to assume full control over this area with the assistance of UN peacekeepers.

Israel had been calling to no avail for the deployment of Lebanese troops to the border since its withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. Although the Security Council issued the same demand in February 2004 in its Resolution 1559, no Lebanese government had been willing to risk a direct

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confrontation with Hizballah or its Shi’ite constituency. Nor were they under any serious international pressure to do so, as the Bush and Chirac governments, as the sponsors of Resolution 1559 and being aware of the weakness and fragility of the Lebanese state, had preferred simply to adopt a hopeful wait-and-see approach. Resolution 1701 signaled a decisive change in the attitudes of the international community, led by the

United States and France, and of the government of Lebanon. The deployment of Lebanese troops to the border became a matter of domestic and international urgency. What might have taken years to accomplish would now happen in days. Indeed, only five days later, on August 17, Lebanese troops began moving south of the Litani River. Having arrived in southern Lebanon for the first time in decades, the Lebanese army looks set to stay.

Ironically, for a state that has long regarded the UN with a mixture of scorn and suspicion, it was in the chambers of the UN and not on the battlefield that Israel secured one of its central objectives. Resolution 1701 has made it possible to establish the new order in southern Lebanon that Israel sought. On paper, it paves the way for the end of Hizballah’s state within a state. That said, passing resolutions is one thing; enforcing them quite another. For the resolution to deliver the decisive change in southern Lebanon that Israelis and many Lebanese desire, its words must be backed up by forceful actions both by the Lebanese government and the expanded UNIFIL force. Regrettably, it is difficult not to be skeptical about the prospects for such forceful action.

The most significant challenge in enforcing the resolution lies in bringing about the disarmament of Hizballah. Although Hizballah has accepted the deployment of Lebanese troops to the south, which it opposed before the war, it still refuses to disarm, which is hardly surprising. Perceiving itself as the victor in the war, it will not surrender now. The Siniora government remains too weak and internally divided to confront Hizballah over its arms.

Even if it were willing to do so, which is unlikely given the fact that two of its ministers are from Hizballah, it lacks the means. Roughly 35 percent of the all-conscript Lebanese army is Shi'ite, and many or perhaps most are supporters of Hizballah. These troops cannot be relied on to disarm Hizballah fighters with whom they share religious, local, and sometimes family ties. Thus, aware of its limitations, the Siniora government has already made it clear that it will not forcibly disarm Hizballah.

Nor is UNIFIL likely to risk a confrontation with Hizballah by trying to disarm it. Despite having a more robust mandate and rules of engagement than the ineffectual and discredited 2,000-member-strong UNIFIL force stationed in Lebanon since 1978, the new and improved UNIFIL II will still be hamstrung by the political and security concerns of the many governments that provide its troops. These governments will not want the multinational force to act against the wishes of the Lebanese government or appear to act as Israel's handmaiden in Lebanon. The danger in this regard is clear. One has only to recall the fate of the last multinational force, made up of U.S., French, and Italian troops, which was sent to Lebanon in 1982 following Israel's invasion that same year. On October 23, 1983, two suicide truck bombings widely believed to have been carried out by Hizballah militants killed 241 U.S. and 58 French troops. Despite immediate U.S. and French pledges to remain in Lebanon, the multinational force was quickly withdrawn.

Therefore, expecting the imminent disarmament of Hizballah, a key condition for a new order in southern Lebanon to arise, is unrealistic. The Lebanese and UN troops will at best be able to stabilize the tenuous cease-fire by preventing Hizballah from firing rockets into northern Israel and stemming the flow of Iranian and Syrian arms to the group. Hizballah fighters will remain in the south, but they will make their presence less visible by melting into the local population and hiding their weapons. This will not reassure or satisfy Israelis. It is hardly the outcome of the war they were promised by the Olmert government. Nor will it silence the government's many critics. On the contrary, if Israel's diplomatic victory turns out to be a hollow one, as it may well, Olmert will be deprived of the one accomplishment of the war that he has been able to claim. This could be fatal to his already embattled premiership and even to his party.

Domestic Fallout

In the early days of the war, Olmert and Peretz were riding high in Israeli opinion polls as the public, convinced of the war's necessity and justness, rallied behind their leadership. A nation renowned for its fractiousness and bitter political arguments was overwhelmingly united against the Hizballah

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foe.¹⁵ According to a poll taken on July 17, 2006, 86 percent of the Israeli public felt the war was justified, 87 percent were satisfied with the IDF's performance in the war, and 78 percent were satisfied with the prime minister's performance. Opposition both on the left and right was unusually quiet as a palpable sense of national unity enveloped Israel's Jewish population. Its

minority Arab population, on the other hand, was not part of the domestic consensus in support of the war. The war gave Olmert an opportunity to prove his security credentials and his leadership ability, both of which were previously in doubt. He could finally emerge from the long shadow of his predecessor, Ariel Sharon, to whose sudden coma in January 2006 he owed his unexpected political ascendance. The war was also a chance for

Peretz, the former trade union boss, to burnish his security reputation. If he succeeded, his own prospects for one day becoming prime minister would be significantly enhanced.

Weeks later, Olmert and Peretz were fighting for their political lives. Widely blamed for mismanaging the war, their popularity plummeting in opinion polls. They faced mounting calls for their resignations, spearheaded by a protest movement of reserve soldiers who fought in the war.¹⁶ Responding to the tide of criticism, Olmert acknowledged deficiencies in his government's handling of the war and promised an examination.¹⁷ This did little to appease his critics, who continued to demand the resignations of Olmert, Peretz, and IDF Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, as well as the establishment of an independent, public commission of inquiry to examine the failures of Israel's military campaign in Lebanon and with the power to dismiss government ministers. Just months after coming into office following the March 28 general elections, the future of Olmert and his Kadima-led government is in serious jeopardy. At the time of writing, talk flourished of possible challenges to Olmert's and Peretz's leadership of the Kadima and Labor parties, respectively, and of cabinet reshuffles, new government coalitions, and early elections.

Although making concrete predictions is difficult, given the tumultuous nature of Israeli politics, a few things appear likely. First, Olmert and Peretz will almost certainly face major leadership challenges from former high-ranking military and security officials, such as Shaul Mofaz in Kadima and Ehud Barak as well as Ami Ayalon in Labor. Many Israelis consider Olmert's and Peretz's lack of security experience to be one of the factors responsible for the campaign's failure. Politicians with security backgrounds will no doubt appear attractive candidates to an Israeli public that now fears a renewal of hostilities with Hizballah and a possible military showdown with Iran over

its nuclear program. One can expect a return of the generals to the top of Israel's political echelon.

Second, if early elections do come about, the Right will be the major beneficiary. After being trounced in the last election, Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party looks set to make a major political comeback. An opinion poll published on August 25 in *Yediot Aharonot*, Israel's largest daily newspaper, showed that if elections had been held then, Likud would have gained eight seats, giving it 20 compared with the 12 it won in the March election. Kadi-ma would have lost 12 seats, reducing its total to 17 from 29; and Labor would have lost 8 seats, giving it a mere 11 seats, down from 19.¹⁸ The same poll gave the far-right Yisrael Beiteinu party led by Avigdor Lieberman 17 seats in an election, an increase of 6 from its current tally. Asked who they would rather have as prime minister, 45 percent of Israelis chose Netanyahu and only 24 percent Olmert. A majority (63 percent) also felt that Olmert should resign. Thus, if Olmert gives in to public pressure and resigns or if he fails to hold his fragile coalition together and the Knesset passes a vote of no confidence in his government, the ensuing elections could well result in a right-wing coalition government. The likelihood of such an outcome depends on how long the current government remains in office. At present, its chances of surviving for a full four-year term appear slim. The sooner it falls, the more likely it is that a right-wing government will succeed it.

Third, even if Olmert and his government ride out the political storm, it has already claimed one casualty: the West Bank convergence plan that was the centerpiece of his government's program. This ambitious plan unveiled by Olmert in the run-up to the March 2006 election called for Israel to withdraw from large parts of the West Bank unilaterally, holding on to only the large settlement blocks and abandoning the smaller and more isolated settlements. It would involve the evacuation of 20,000–80,000 settlers.¹⁹ The likelihood of implementing the plan was in doubt even before the war with Hizballah, as it faced opposition from within Olmert's own party, from the Likud party, and from the settlers themselves. Whatever its prospects before the war, after the war they vanished altogether, a fact that Olmert himself has acknowledged.²⁰ It is not just Olmert's postwar political weakness that is responsible for the death of his convergence plan. Rather, what really killed it is the prevalent belief now in Israel that unilateral withdrawal endangers Israeli security, signaling weakness to Israel's enemies and ceding territory from which these enemies can launch rocket attacks on the Israeli population.

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The price: Israel will have to make peace with the Palestinians.

This latter concern is clearly well founded. Hizballah's launches of Katyusha rockets into northern Israel from southern Lebanon and the Palestinians' launches of Qassam rockets into southern Israel from Gaza following Israel's August 2005 withdrawal starkly illustrate the risks of further unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank, which would put most of Israel's

population centers within range of Palestinian missiles. Contrary to initial hopes, neither of the unilateral withdrawals succeeded in bringing Israelis more security; if anything, they put Israelis in greater danger. Netanyahu forcefully conveyed this view in his speech to the Knesset on the day the cease-fire in Lebanon went into effect. "The policy of unilateral withdrawals has been shown to be weak and,

no less important, to be perceived as weak by our enemies," he declared. "Unilateral withdrawals not only eroded our deterrence, they also gave our enemies improved positions from which to shell and rocket our cities and towns. The concept of unilateral withdrawal has vanished, and if it hasn't, it should!"²¹ For once, few Israelis could disagree with Netanyahu.

The demise of Olmert's convergence plan portends not only the end of a policy of Israeli unilateralism but also, more ominously, the end of a policy of territorial withdrawal. It is not just the unilateral nature of Israel's withdrawals but the very withdrawals themselves that are now considered to be misguided and dangerous. Israeli commentator Gideon Levy wrote, "The prevailing wisdom now is that not only is there nobody to talk to, there is nothing to talk about. Not only did we withdraw from Gaza and get Hamas and Qassams, we withdrew from Lebanon and got Hizballah and rockets. The conclusion: no more withdrawals."²²

If this prevailing public sentiment shapes the future policies of Olmert's government or its successor, there is little hope for the resumption of a peace process with the Palestinians, let alone negotiations with Syria, which some in Israel and the United States desire. Instead, Israel could end up turning inward and focusing all of its efforts on strengthening its defenses against its enemies—Hizballah, Hamas, Syria, and Iran—all of whom are now perceived to be an axis of extremism bent on the destruction of the Jewish state. A restoration of Israel's military might and deterrence capabilities would in this scenario become Israel's top priority. An editorial in *Ha'aretz* has already warned of this bleak possibility:

The main danger of the unsuccessful war with Hizballah is that the wrong conclusions will be drawn from it. The fear is that instead of exploring every possible way to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, instead of

urging the international community to help us find a solution to the conflict, the “solutions” will be found in military training, additional force allocations, and extended military service and reserve duty, so that everyone will be well trained for every mission.²³

The Silver Lining: Unlikely Allies and Opportunities

If Israelis decide against future territorial withdrawals and rely solely on their military for security, they will miss a new opportunity to make peace with their neighbors. In the bitter aftermath of a failed and costly war that seems to have only strengthened Israel's adversaries and intensified the hatred toward it across the Arab and Muslim worlds, such an opportunity may seem remote, if not illusory. Yet, just as the war underscored the ferocious opposition of Israel's enemies, it also revealed its potential friends and allies. At the outset of the war, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia all strongly condemned Hizballah's “adventurism” and unequivocally blamed it for starting the hostilities.²⁴ Although these denunciations ceased as Arab public opinion became inflamed by the mounting Lebanese civilian casualties caused by Israel's aerial bombing campaign, their significance should not be dismissed. For the first time in an Arab-Israeli war, Arab states did not automatically publicly align themselves against Israel. Something that was once unimaginable happened: Arab leaders openly condemned aggression against Israel.

Of course, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia were not motivated by their sympathy for Israel but by their own regional and domestic interests, basically a desire to counter the regional rise of Iran and the domestic rise of militant Islamism. Nevertheless, these interests align with those of Israel. Israel and these moderate, Sunni-dominated Arab states all have an interest in promoting regional stability, blocking Shi'ite Iran's bid for regional hegemony, and stemming the rising tide of Islamist extremism. The initial reactions of the moderate Arab states to the Israel-Hizballah war has clearly revealed that the region is now split along radical-moderate and Shi'ite-Sunni lines. The Arab-Israeli divide that has dominated the politics of the region for so long has now been usurped by these growing divisions.

As the fault lines in the region have shifted, Israel now has a chance to draw closer to the moderate Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia.²⁵ They can form a defensive alliance of sorts against their common threats, primarily Iran. Such an alliance is the key to Israel's long-term security in the region, but it will not come without a price. To gain admission into this new moderate camp, Israel will have to make peace with the Palestinians. As long as the Palestinian issue festers, Israel cannot hope to be embraced by moderate Arab and Muslim states. Yet here too, recent events have provided an open-

ing for a positive change. Hamas's acceptance of the Palestinian "National Reconciliation Document," which called for the "establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital on all the territories occupied in 1967,"²⁶ its attempt to form a national unity government, and its willingness to adhere to a cease-fire indicate a softening of its traditional hard-line position toward Israel. Its desperate need for an end to the Western aid embargo it has endured since coming to power in February 2006 gives it a strong incentive to find some kind of accommodation with Israel.

**Syria is the key
to neutralizing
Hizballah.**

A mutual cease-fire could pave the way. If Israelis and Palestinians were able to enjoy a period of quiet—no Qassam rockets landing in Israel and no Israeli incursions or targeted assassination in the territories—then peace talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, represented by Abbas, could finally resume. If a peace agreement is eventually reached, international peacekeepers could be deployed in the West Bank and Gaza to help enforce it.

Now that Israel has agreed to such troops in southern Lebanon, it may drop its longtime objection to the deployment of UN peacekeepers in the territories, depending of course on how UNIFIL performs.

A renewal of Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations, which abruptly ended with the failure of the last round of negotiations convened by the Clinton administration in 2000, is now also possible. Israel's inability to destroy Hizballah militarily has led many to argue that the only solution to dealing with Hizballah's continuing threat lies with Syria.²⁷ Shortly after the cease-fire agreement with Hizballah went into effect, a number of Israeli officials and commentators suggested a resumption of talks with Syria, most prominently Peretz, although he later backtracked after Olmert shot down the idea.²⁸ Syria is the key to neutralizing Hizballah. It may not simply control Hizballah, as President George W. Bush seems to believe, but its supply of weapons and its role as a transit route for Iranian arms is critical to the group's military capability. Without Syrian or Iranian weapons reaching it via Syria, Hizballah will not be able to easily rearm, and its military potential will be severely degraded.

Pressure alone is unlikely to persuade Syria to end its longtime support for Hizballah. As long as Israel occupies the Golan Heights, which it captured from Syria in the 1967 war, Syria will continue to support Hizballah as one of its few means of leverage against Israel. Because Syria's alliance with Hizballah is purely instrumental, however, it would most likely be willing to end its support for Hizballah as well as other extremist groups, most notably Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both of which have offices in Damascus, in return for the Golan Heights. An Israeli-Syrian peace agreement could also help pry Syria away from its alliance of convenience with Iran, reportedly a Bush adminis-

tration idea to isolate Iran.²⁹ Finally, once Israel makes peace with Syria, it could also make peace with Lebanon. The key issue of the disputed Shebaa Farms—occupied by Israel, claimed by Lebanon, but formally Syrian territory—cannot be resolved if Syria does not renounce its sovereignty over the area. If it is still being shunned by Washington and Jerusalem, Damascus will not likely play a constructive role in this respect.

Israel's Next Move and the U.S. Role

Israel now stands at a crossroads. As a weary and wounded nation coming to terms with deflated expectations from its war with Hizballah, the country can concentrate on strengthening the IDF in the hopes that next time it can deliver a decisive victory or it can unite with moderate Arab states and leaders through peace agreements. The debate over these two choices is already underway in Israel, with the former option currently enjoying more public and political support, but its outcome will be decided by the fears and wishes of Israelis as well as by signals sent from Washington.

As Israel's closest ally, the United States maintains a powerful influence on Israeli public opinion and on the policies of Israeli governments. If it wishes, Washington can now use this influence to encourage Israel to return to the negotiating table with the Palestinians and Syrians. Instead of trying to isolate the Hamas government and Assad regime, the Bush administration could begin to engage both and prod Israel to do the same. It could go even further by launching a regional initiative aimed at resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, using as a basis the 2002 Saudi peace plan that offered Israel full peace and normalized relations with all 22 Arab states in return for solving the Palestinian problem, and by establishing a new security forum in which Israel and moderate Arab states could address their common security threats, including Iran, Islamic extremism, and jihadism.³⁰

Bush could begin by convening a major Middle East peace conference to initiate an Arab-Israeli dialogue, as his father did in Madrid in October 1991 at the end of the Persian Gulf War.³¹ This conference could be held in June 2007, timed to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. After all, it is the results of the momentous 1967 war that such a conference would have to address. This undertaking would certainly be ambitious and politically risky for the Bush administration, but ambitious and politically risky undertakings are not out of character for this administration, as its invasion of Iraq most clearly demonstrates. Surely now is the time for it to be as bold in its pursuit of peace in the Middle East as it was in its pursuit of war. As Bush said in 2003 when announcing his forward strategy of freedom, "[I]t would be reckless to accept the status quo" in the Middle East.³²

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