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Center for Preventive Action

CONTINGENCY PLANNING MEMORANDUM NO. 8

A Third Lebanon War

Daniel C. Kurtzer

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This memorandum has been corrected since it was originally posted on July 16, 2010. The memo originally misstated the UN Security Council resolution that Syria responded to by pulling its armed forces from Lebanon, incorrectly referred to Muhammad Hussein Fadl'Allah as a "spiritual adviser to Hezbollah," and incorrectly referred to Hassan Nasrallah's title as "sheikh."

INTRODUCTION

Lebanon has been a flashpoint for Arab-Israeli violence and military confrontations since the mid-1970s. Its political system is weak and outside parties continue to vie for political advantage as part of a larger regional conflict. In particular, Syria and Iran provide support for the militant Islamist group Hezbollah as a strategic asset to pressure Israel. Hezbollah now controls most of southern Lebanon, while its political wing has developed a strong presence in the Lebanese parliament. In July and August 2006, Israel and Hezbollah fought what became known as the “Second Lebanon War,” which killed and displaced many thousands of people and destroyed much of Lebanon’s infrastructure. Since then Hezbollah has steadily rearmed in contravention of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which requires, *inter alia*, “the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that, pursuant to the Lebanese cabinet decision of July 27, 2006, there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state” and “no sales or supply of arms and related materiel to Lebanon except as authorized by its government.” Hezbollah’s arsenal is more potent in quantity and quality today than it was in 2006. Although the border area between Israel and Lebanon is quieter than at any time in the previous decade, speculation that a third Lebanon war will occur in the next twelve to eighteen months has been steadily rising. Israel could decide the security threat posed by Hezbollah has reached intolerable levels and take preemptive military action. Hezbollah, while outwardly showing no interest in confronting Israel at this time, may for various reasons choose or be pressured by Iran to flex its new military capabilities. As happened in 2006, even small-scale military engagements with limited objectives can escalate into a major conflict. Whatever the precipitating reasons, a new conflict over Lebanon would have significant implications for U.S. policy and interests in the region.

THE CONTINGENCY

There are two plausible scenarios for war in Lebanon. First, Hezbollah could initiate hostilities. The recent passing of Lebanese Shia cleric Muhammad Hussein Fadl’Allah, a man with many enemies inside and outside Lebanon, could spark strife within Lebanon in which Hezbollah could decide to attack Israel as a means of unifying its supporters. Alternatively, Iran could push Hezbollah to attack Israel as a means of deflecting international pressure on Iran over its nuclear program. In either case, Hezbollah likely would argue that it was responding to Israeli overflights or an incident on the border that resulted in Lebanese casualties. Hezbollah has so far shown little predisposition to do this—it ignored Israel’s recent firing of flares during an incident on the border and it has not reacted to persistent Israeli overflights of Lebanon. Hezbollah-provoked violence would cost it support in the Arab world, as occurred in 2006 and could unify the international community to support Israel’s retaliation. But continued Hezbollah restraint cannot be assumed, nor can a miscalculation by Hezbollah, for example, a limited attack that stimulates a major Israeli response, be ruled out.

Second, Israel could attack Hezbollah or lure it into a war to destroy capabilities that threaten Israel’s security. Israel could also decide to degrade Hezbollah’s capabilities in order to deny Iran a “second-strike” capability should Israel decide to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities. Israel could also use a conflict with Hezbollah as the catalyst and cover for an attack against Iran’s nuclear facilities. Any of

these circumstances could persuade Israel that a preventive military strike against Hezbollah is in its interest.

Of the two scenarios, the second is the more likely. Hezbollah has probably already breached the limits of what Israel considers acceptable behavior. The sheer number and enhanced quality of rockets Hezbollah has acquired in the past few years worry Israeli defense and homeland security planners, as does the effort by Hezbollah to acquire longer-range and more accurate surface-to-surface missiles. During the 2006 conflict, about one million Israeli civilians were forced to evacuate their homes in northern Israel because of Hezbollah rocket attacks; in a future war, that number would almost certainly rise because of the longer-range and greater accuracy of new Hezbollah weaponry. Israel views Hezbollah's acquisition of Scud missiles (some varieties of which could reach Israeli targets from as far away as northern Lebanon) or the Syrian M-600 rockets (which can carry a 500-pound warhead a distance of 155 miles with an advanced guidance system) as a strategic threat. Another Israeli "red line" is Hezbollah's acquisition of advanced surface-to-air missiles, such as the S-300, which would reduce Israel's air superiority over Lebanon. Israel views its reconnaissance missions over Lebanon as critical in light of the failure of the international community and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701. It also views as critical its ability to establish aerial dominance in the event of another war. The combination of these three factors—the size and quality of Hezbollah's missile inventory; the possible acquisition of long-range, accurate missiles; and the possible upgrading of Hezbollah's surface-to-air missile capability—changes the equilibrium on the ground to an extent that Israel views as threatening.

An Israeli military strike on Hezbollah could unfold in several ways. In the most likely scenario, Israel could exploit what its military planners call an "operational opportunity," that is, an attack against a convoy carrying long-range weapons or against a storage facility in Lebanon. Alternatively, Israel might choose to attack facilities and weapon storage sites in Syria that it claims Hezbollah is using. The September 2007 strike against a nuclear reactor site in Syria demonstrates that Israel is willing and able to carry out such an attack. Were Israel to attack Hezbollah sites in Syria, Hezbollah could retaliate across the Israel-Lebanon border, thereby precipitating a wider war. Alternatively, Israel could conduct a broader aerial campaign against Hezbollah, hitting targets throughout Lebanon as it did in 2006. Depending on how well this campaign achieved its objectives, it could be followed up with a ground invasion, which would further escalate the conflict.

It is unclear whether the recent Israeli assault on the Gaza flotilla and the resulting international pressure on Israel would restrain possible Israeli actions in Lebanon. Israel might now be hesitant to test international reaction. However, there is no evidence of this factor being considered in the Lebanon context, and thus this scenario assumes Israeli decision-making that focuses almost single-mindedly on the Hezbollah and contextual threats. It is also unlikely that Israel would strike Iran during a Hezbollah crisis; a possible strike against Iran would require the utmost concentration of resources by Israel, and Israeli planners would not want to be engaged on the ground in Lebanon while conducting a risky and complicated mission against Iran.

INDICATORS AND WARNING

The indicators and warning signs of an imminent war are already evident but need to be monitored for qualitative and quantitative changes. These signs include the following:

- *Increase in Hezbollah’s anti-Israeli rhetoric.* Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general and leader of Hezbollah, gave a fiery speech on June 4 in response to the flotilla incident. Nasrallah attacked Israel in strong terms but stopped well short of threatening retaliation. However, he did warn Israel publicly that attacks against Lebanon would be met with similarly targeted attacks against Israel, indicating that he believes Hezbollah has the capacity to hit such strategic targets. Although Nasrallah admitted in 2006 that Hezbollah would not have started that war had it known of Israel’s response, lately he has not shied away from keeping his rhetoric at a high pitch.
- *Increase in Israeli official statements and public commentary about Hezbollah and Iran.* In April 2010 Israel charged Syria with transferring Scud missiles to Hezbollah. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu later declared that Hezbollah fighters were now operating out of a secret base in Syria where they were training with the Scuds. (Israel apparently has no information indicating that Scuds have actually been delivered to Hezbollah in Lebanon.) Syrian officials have denied all Israeli charges related to Hezbollah. Since Israel’s announcement, the Israeli media have been debating whether Israel should be intercepting arms shipments to Lebanon, as was done in the November 2009 seizure of the Antiguan-flagged ship, the *Francop*, one hundred miles off the Lebanese coast reportedly carrying hundreds of tons of weapons to Hezbollah. Media stories on defense matters in Israel often result from background briefings of defense reporters by sources within Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), which suggests that this question is being debated within the defense establishment. Similar discussions directed at Iran would have warning implications for a possible preemptive strike on Hezbollah.
- *Heightened levels of Israeli military and civil defense preparedness.* Since 2006 and the appointment of Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi as IDF chief of staff, the Israeli military has devoted considerable attention to training and practicing to deal with the threat posed by Syria and Hezbollah. Ashkenazi maintains that the IDF is far more prepared today to deliver a stunning blow against Hezbollah. These Israeli preparations serve as much to deter Hezbollah military initiatives as they do to prepare the IDF for war. In February 2010, the IDF exercise “Firestone 12” was predicated on the introduction of new weapon systems into Lebanon that would threaten Israel’s security, such as long-range missiles and advanced air defense systems. In addition, the IDF’s Homeland Security Branch conducted a large-scale civil defense exercise in May 2010, which, even though an annual event, was played up in the Israeli media as a signal to Hezbollah of Israel’s readiness for war. The United States would have little warning of the imminence of an attack on Hezbollah. The United States would not see the mobilization of Israeli reserves or significant movement of military traffic until after the war has started. This means also that there would be almost no time at all for last-minute “preventive diplomacy” by the United States to consider persuading Israel against war. Indeed, the decision and timing of an Israeli strike against Hezbollah appear to be solely within Israel’s purview.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

Hezbollah is near the top of America’s list of most dangerous terrorist organizations. If the next Israeli-Hezbollah confrontation were to result in a sharp decline in Hezbollah’s military capabilities

and was not accompanied by substantial civilian casualties or destruction of Lebanon's civilian infrastructure, the result would be beneficial for U.S. interests. However, such an outcome is slim. The more likely unfolding of an Israeli-Hezbollah war would hold almost no positive consequences for the United States, which is focused on three Middle East priorities: trying to slow or stop Iran's nuclear program, withdrawing combat troops from Iraq, and helping Middle East peace talks succeed. Although the United States has essentially backed Israeli claims of Scud deliveries to Hezbollah, an Israeli attack, however efficient or successful, would arouse the Arab "street" and complicate the efforts of moderate Arab governments to support U.S. objectives in the region.

While Syria is unlikely to respond militarily to an Israeli attack against Hezbollah, it could resume its support for Iraqi insurgents to attack U.S. forces in Iraq. Syria would likely calculate that the United States would not retaliate against its support of Iraqi insurgents, but rather blame Israel for the increased danger to U.S. forces in the region.

The Middle East peace negotiations likely would enter another deep freeze. As in past military confrontations in Lebanon, Palestinians would find it impossible to keep negotiating as Arabs are fighting Israel in Lebanon.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS TO REDUCE LIKELIHOOD OF THE CONTINGENCY

To try to head off renewed fighting between Hezbollah and Israel, the United States could consider one or more of the following options, none of which is simple or assured of success.

- *Deter/reassure Israel.* The United States could tell Israel privately at the highest level that it would not support an Israel-initiated war and would withhold diplomatic or military support if Israel chose to attack Hezbollah. Specifically, the United States could threaten to initiate or support a UN Security Council resolution directed against Israel, should Israel start a war. Israel would likely mobilize its supporters in the United States to push back against the administration, and the Obama administration would face a firestorm of pressure from Capitol Hill and the pro-Israel lobby organizations. It is not clear that the administration could muster strong arguments for a policy position calling for Israeli restraint or threatening diplomatic action against Israel in case of war. At the same time, the administration could offer Israel new hardware or some other strategic enhancement as an incentive for not going to war.
- *Adopt preventive diplomatic measures.* Consideration can be given to resurrecting in some form the Israel-Lebanon Monitoring Group (ILMG), which operated for about three years in the late 1990s as a clearinghouse for the parties to defuse tensions and reduce the risk of conflict harming civilians. The presence of an international monitoring body could restore credibility to the effort to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701. The United States could also invigorate its diplomatic responses to local incidents on the border so as to prevent escalation. For example, as existed in the early 2000s, U.S. diplomats in Tel Aviv, Beirut, and Damascus could be given standing instructions to intervene immediately and at the highest levels of their respective host governments to prevent escalation after an incident on the border.

- *Pressure Syria.* The Obama administration with partners on the UN Security Council, in the EU, and in the Arab world could try to bring international pressure on Syria to prevent the transfer of sophisticated arms to Hezbollah and to shut down the supply line. Syria has responded to pressure in the past (for example, by withdrawing its armed forces from Lebanon after UN Security Council Resolution 1559 was passed). However, pressure on Syria to refrain from arming Hezbollah would have to be accompanied by the threat of enforcement, and strong international resolve in this regard seems unlikely. There are no reasonable incentives that could be offered to Syria to ratchet down its support for Hezbollah.
- *Negotiate with Hezbollah and Lebanese authorities.* The Obama administration could use the prospect of renewed violence in Lebanon as a catalyst to engage Hezbollah, directly or through a third party, and try to moderate its behavior. The administration could argue that Hezbollah is now a part of the Lebanese government and that dialogue could become a means of reducing Hezbollah's terrorist activities. This is a difficult option for the United States. The administration would also come under severe political pressure at home, including from Democrats, not to engage Hezbollah. More importantly, there seems little that the United States could offer or threaten to do to convince Hezbollah to moderate its terrorist activities.
- *Encourage a limited Israeli military strike.* As a means of forestalling a major military operation by Israel, the United States could suggest two preventive and preemptive military options: Israeli action against Hezbollah supply lines (whether Scuds are being transported or not) and/or an Israeli strike against Hezbollah training sites in Syria where long-range missiles are being stored. Both options hold out the possibility of engaging Syria in hostilities, especially if Israeli strikes take place on Syrian territory. But both options are limited to military targets, thus minimizing civilian casualties, and both target the exact threats that are causing Israeli concern. Such a preemptive strike also would remove the justification for a wider Israeli military operation. There is still the risk, however, of the conflict spreading to Lebanon as discussed above.

If the administration decides on one or more of these policy options, the United States needs to send a clear message to Israel. History shows that Israel will read U.S. ambiguity as supporting its own views.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS TO MITIGATE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE CONTINGENCY

The Obama administration would have several options to mitigate those consequences most detrimental to U.S. interests.

- *Condemn and seek to stop Israeli action.* In the event that Israel initiates the conflict, the United States could join or sponsor a UN Security Council resolution or statement condemning Israel's actions and calling for an immediate ceasefire. In this scenario, the United States could argue that Israel's right of self-defense does not extend to preemptive actions against Hezbollah that threaten regional security. The United States could also back up its verbal opposition to Israeli policy with the threat of withholding military supplies needed by Israel to continue fighting. However, this

option would be hard for the administration to justify, both substantively and politically. The United States is already on record criticizing Hezbollah's rearmament, and the domestic backlash against a condemnation of Israel would be severe.

- *Support but seek to restrain Israel's actions.* The Obama administration could indicate that Israel's right of self-defense includes the right of preemptive action to deal with Hezbollah's rearmament, such as military strikes against Hezbollah's supply lines and/or attacks against Hezbollah training facilities in Syria. At the same time, the United States could send private and public signals to Israel to confine its military ambitions to the immediate issues at hand. The administration's main arguments would be the impact on Israel's (and the United States') standing of civilian casualties and the diminishing effectiveness of Israel's military actions with time.
- *Support Israel unconditionally and condemn Hezbollah, Syria, and/or Iran.* The United States could use a military flare-up in Lebanon to mobilize diplomatic opposition to Hezbollah, Syrian, and Iranian behavior. The United States could point to the continued violation of resolution 1701 by these parties and the introduction of weapons systems in Lebanon that have destabilized the situation. In this scenario, the United States would seek to delay UN Security Council consideration of a ceasefire resolution until top Israeli military objectives had been secured.
- *Envelop the crisis in a broader diplomatic initiative.* Under any of these options, the United States could consider exploiting the crisis to launch a broader diplomatic initiative, such as unveiling a U.S. plan on the Israeli-Palestinian track of negotiations or attempt to launch Israeli-Syrian talks. There is precedent for Middle East crises spawning diplomatic initiatives (for example, Egyptian-Israeli diplomacy after the 1973 war and the Madrid peace conference after the 1991 Gulf War and the first Palestinian uprising), and for those initiatives to be led by the United States. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan might be supportive of a new initiative since they stand to benefit from the degrading of Hezbollah's military capabilities and the resultant decline in Iran's (and Syria's) ability to use Hezbollah as a proxy. However, this option would have to be handled carefully since these countries are wary of being associated with an Israeli military operation in an Arab country. Important Arab states—as well as France and other European countries traditionally interested in Lebanese affairs—would be consulted closely by the United States throughout the crisis.

All of these options require U.S. decisions in the hours and first days after the outbreak of war. This is the optimal time for the United States to try to shape the duration and scope of Israel's military actions. First, Israel will want the United States to provide the diplomatic "space" and time to accomplish its goals. Second, Israel may require military resupply, especially if aerial operations go on for some time, giving the United States significant leverage.

The most critical decision during this period will be how Israel defines its war objectives. Specifically, will its goal be to destroy Hezbollah, degrade its capabilities, or inflict significant damage on Lebanese infrastructure as a means of bringing home to the Lebanese public the danger of continued activity by Hezbollah? The United States would oppose an Israeli strategy of punishing the Lebanese people, and it is difficult to conceive of a scenario in which the United States would align itself with an Israeli goal of trying to destroy Hezbollah: Israel failed in 2006, and is unlikely to have enough time and energy to be more successful in another war. This argues for U.S. efforts to limit Israel's war

ambitions, recognizing that periodic wars in Lebanon may be inevitable to deal with continued Hezbollah threats in the future.

The experience in the first and second Lebanon wars indicates that the longer the fighting goes on, the greater the likelihood that Israeli military actions will result in mass civilian casualties and substantial destruction of civilian infrastructure. The United States cannot reduce the chances of this happening, since Hezbollah operates from civilian areas. Indeed, in the next war, the civilian battlefield is likely to widen, as Hezbollah has been digging in north of the Litani River. Israeli attacks against targets in civilian areas, however restrained and pinpointed, complicate U.S. efforts to provide Israel with the time necessary to complete its military mission. Not only will the Arab street erupt following reports of civilian casualties, but European public opinion may force U.S. allies to distance themselves from Israel's actions. The likelihood of this scenario has increased as a result of the international firestorm of criticism of Israel's assault in late May 2010 on the Gaza flotilla.

An additional reason for the earliest possible U.S. policy decisions is that U.S. policies do influence internal Israeli decision-making. In both 1982 and 2006, Israeli cabinet ministers indicated that moderate positions they advocated in internal government deliberations were undermined by the absence of a U.S. policy or by the perception of U.S. support for more extreme courses of action. Israeli politicians cannot be seen as less forceful in confronting Hezbollah than the United States. While U.S. policies alone do not determine Israel's policies, they carry influence.

Finally, history shows that Israel will not be the first to propose a ceasefire, but will need to be prodded into accepting one. Should the United States seek an early ceasefire, it will face a recurring Israeli paradox. On the one hand, early success on the battlefield increases Israel's interest in administering a more severe blow to the enemy, and Israeli war aims—even if limited at the outset—tend to expand if an opening exists for inflicting a more significant defeat against the enemy. On the other hand, early failures on the battlefield impel Israel to extend hostilities so as to turn the tide of battle. Thus, both success and failure tend to drive Israeli military action toward enlarging war aims and extending combat operations. One of the main roles of the United States, therefore, will be to assess the best time for a ceasefire and then make the case persuasively with the Israelis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States should work to avert another war in Lebanon, though its capacity to do so is limited. Israel's security is increasingly threatened by Hezbollah's rearmament, and the United States must respect its legitimate right of self-defense. Preventive diplomacy is constrained because of the absence of relations between the United States and Iran and Hezbollah, and the poor state of relations between the United States and Syria. The Lebanese government and the Lebanese armed forces are essentially nonplayers in this unfolding drama.

Given these circumstances, the United States should do the following:

- *Upgrade U.S. intelligence collection and analysis and U.S.-Israel intelligence exchanges.* U.S. intelligence assets should be redirected to ensure that U.S. policymakers have the best information available at the time of a crisis. Also, U.S.-Israel intelligence exchanges on Syria, Lebanon, and Hezbollah ought to be intensified now to reconcile possible differences of view and to fill in gaps.

- *Publicly restate U.S. support for Israel's right of self-defense and U.S. concerns about Hezbollah's rearmament.* Israel has legitimate security concerns about Hezbollah and Syrian/Iranian activities in Lebanon, and the United States should be clear that it understands Israel's position. The continued failure of the international community to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1701 ought to be stressed. This message should be designed to deter Hezbollah from acting, as well as to assure Israel of its security needs.
- *Resurrect an international monitoring effort and invigorate U.S. diplomatic responsiveness.* There is little cost and possibly large gain in resurrecting an international monitoring mission. Such a mechanism would lend credibility to the stalled efforts to implement resolution 1701; and it just might provide a forum to work through local incidents before they escalate. At the same time, the United States should empower its embassies in Israel, Lebanon, and Syria to intervene immediately and at the highest level to forestall escalation arising from incidents on the border.
- *Increase diplomatic pressure on Syria.* The United States should mobilize diplomatic pressure on Syria to desist from providing Hezbollah access to destabilizing weapons. Arab states and France, in particular, can be helpful to U.S. interests if the United States has a sense of what it wants to accomplish and a willingness to bring others into its diplomatic game plan. If such diplomatic pressure fails, the United States should go public with appropriate intelligence information and consult in New York on a Security Council resolution that mandates preventive action against Syria; such a resolution is unlikely to be adopted, but the diplomacy surrounding the New York talks will send a tough message to Damascus.
- *Prepare for the likelihood of a war.* Should hostilities break out, the United States should seek an outcome of hostilities that weakens Hezbollah and opens the door for international action to enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1701.
- *Prepare for possible postwar diplomatic initiatives.* The Obama administration should study now, on a contingency basis, the possibility of exploiting hostilities in Lebanon to launch a diplomatic initiative in the broader peace process. Providing leadership that reduces the time and scope of hostilities will translate into U.S. diplomatic capital to advance peace talks.

Mission Statement of the Center for Preventive Action

The Center for Preventive Action (CPA) seeks to help prevent, defuse, or resolve deadly conflicts around the world and to expand the body of knowledge on conflict prevention. It does so by creating a forum in which representatives of governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, and civil society can gather to develop operational and timely strategies for promoting peace in specific conflict situations. The center focuses on conflicts in countries or regions that affect U.S. interests, but may be otherwise overlooked; where prevention appears possible; and when the resources of the Council on Foreign Relations can make a difference. The center does this by

- Issuing Council Special Reports to evaluate and respond rapidly to developing conflict situations and formulate timely, concrete policy recommendations that the U.S. government, international community, and local actors can use to limit the potential for deadly violence.
- Engaging the U.S. government and news media in conflict prevention efforts. CPA staff members meet with administration officials and members of Congress to brief on CPA's findings and recommendations; facilitate contacts between U.S. officials and important local and external actors; and raise awareness among journalists of potential flashpoints around the globe.
- Building networks with international organizations and institutions to complement and leverage the Council's established influence in the U.S. policy arena and increase the impact of CPA's recommendations.
- Providing a source of expertise on conflict prevention to include research, case studies, and lessons learned from past conflicts that policymakers and private citizens can use to prevent or mitigate future deadly conflicts.