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Time to Tame Syria

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Executive Summary: The current Israeli operation in Lebanon focuses on removing the threat posed to Israel by Hizballah missiles and on destroying Hizballah's military infrastructure. Israel's use of force is fully justified and proportionate, considering the magnitude of the threat. However, Israel's employment of force is strategically misdirected. Israel should be targeting Damascus. Subduing Syria is the key to resolving the Lebanese crisis, to rolling back Hizballah, and to weakening Iran and its radical Islamist influence in the Middle East.

The Misdirection of The Current Israeli Operation

The current Israeli operation seeks to eliminate the serious threat posed to Israel by Hizballah missiles and to destroy the organization's military infrastructure. Israel's use of force is fully justified, and proportionate, considering the magnitude of the threat. If the operation, including an inevitable ground offensive, is fully and successfully prosecuted, the IDF campaign could paralyze the terrorist organization for some time.

Nevertheless, Israel's employment of force is strategically misdirected. The IDF's mode of operation is unlikely to be able to bring about Hizballah's disarmament and the reduction of its political power in Lebanon. Israel should be targeting Damascus. Subduing Syria is the key to resolving the Lebanese crisis, to rolling-back Hizballah, and to weakening Iran and its radical Islamist influence in the Middle East.

Despite the demands of the international community to disarm Hizballah (UNSC Resolution 1559), the weak Lebanese government has been unable to assert its authority over all of Lebanon. Additional Israeli pressure on Beirut is not going to generate a process whereby the Lebanese army will achieve a monopoly over the use of force in Lebanon. Replacing the ineffective UNIFIL force in south Lebanon with another international contingent, even a NATO force with better martial qualities than UNIFIL, will not solve the problem. Hizballah will find other areas in Lebanon to operate from, and could even start a guerrilla war against the new force.

The main obstacle to Lebanese sovereignty is Syria, which still mingles in Lebanese affairs, while supporting Hizballah and providing the channel for Iran to do likewise. Even now, Syria is

allowing reinforcements and supplies for Hizballah to flow into Lebanon from its territory by way of roads and tunnels.

That being the case, the strategic address for promoting change in Lebanon remains Damascus. Only military pressure on the regime of Bashar Assad can deny Hizballah the support that enables its resistance to the central authority in Beirut. Syria is Hizballah's only lifeline. In contrast to Afghanistan or Iraq, it is easy to impose a *cordon sanitaire* on Lebanon, which only borders Israel and Syria, and whose Mediterranean coast can be easily blockaded.

Israel and the West should be emulating the behavior of Turkey. In October 1998, Ankara forced Hafiz Assad to cease long-time Syrian support for the Kurdish terrorist organization, the PKK. The Turks issued a forceful ultimatum to Syria, and made their determination to use force against Syria explicitly and demonstratively clear. This proved sufficient in order to coerce Damascus into cooperation.

Similarly, in the current case, the international constellation of 2006 renders Syria susceptible to military pressure. Syria is internationally and regionally isolated, relying primarily on its alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The 2006 Favorable International Constellation

Syria has long been the *bête noire* of the Americans. Syria disrupted American and French attempts to restore Lebanon's independence particularly following Rafik Hariri's murder in February 2005. Today, in addition to its support of the Hizballah, Damascus continues to house the headquarters of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, despite past promises to the US to close their offices down. Washington has good reason to support the exertion of military pressure on Bashar Assad, whose regime allows the infiltration of insurgents into Iraq from Syrian territory. President Bush has already made it clear that he holds Syria partially responsible for the current crisis.

Moderate Arab states, such as Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf emirates would also prefer to see the radical Islamist Hizballah seriously weakened. Most try to suppress such groups at home. Even Saudi Arabia, whose Islamic credentials seem impeccable, has criticized Hizballah. The Shiite Hizballah is correctly seen by the Arabs as an Iranian proxy, while the involvement of Iran, a historic rival of the Arabs, fuels the recent growing fears of a Shiite ascendance in Middle Eastern politics.

The time is therefore ripe for Israel to act as Turkey did in 1998 and to isolate Hizballah from its sources of support. An ultimatum should be issued to Syria to cease the transfer of supplies to Hizballah. If the ultimatum is not taken seriously, Israel should begin bombing the crossing points on the Lebanese-Syrian border and gradually expand its military attacks on Syrian targets. Israel may also decide that the time is also suitable for an attack on the Syrian long-range missile infrastructure, whose threat hovers over most of Israel. Such a course of action seems likely to elicit the Americans' blessing and tacit approval from many Western states as well as capitals in the Arab world.

Results of a Successful Campaign Against Syria

A successful campaign against Syria would weaken Hizballah and restore Lebanon's sovereignty. The return of Lebanon to the Western fold and its further democratization would be an important landmark in the ambitious plan of the Bush administration to change the political dynamics within the region. More than the political future of a small Arab state is at stake. Freedom and democracy in Beirut could have ripple effect in the authoritarian Arab world, giving hope to the courageous, albeit weak, liberal circles. The democratic impulse may prove powerful enough to encourage the creation of stronger oppositions to the Arab dictators currently ruling the Arab world and may bring a breath of change to stagnant Arab societies.

The strategic implications of snatching Lebanon away from the embrace of radicals are no less important than encouraging the spread of democracy in the Middle East. Lebanon is the weakest link in the Iran-Syria-Lebanon axis, which harbors the radical Shiite strategic challenges to the West, i.e. terrorism and nuclear proliferation. In accordance with the strategy of indirect approach, it is in the Lebanese arena where much of the future direction of Iranian foreign policy can be decided, since truly liberating Lebanon will also block the Iranian attempt to create a radical corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean. Lebanon is the most vulnerable point for the rollback of the radical forces in the Middle East. Thus, forcing Syria to sever its links to Hizballah would weaken Syria's potential for regional mischief and would diminish the influence of Iran in the region.

Hizballah's demise as an armed force would also clearly signal Israel's determination to deal with terrorist threats and with Iranian proxies, enhancing its deterrence. Moreover, it would reduce Iran's capability to retaliate in the event that its nuclear installations were attacked. Closer to home, the Palestinians, who have been much influenced by Hizballah's past successes and who are currently conducting their own war of attrition against the IDF, would have to pay attention, learning to calibrate their goals accordingly.

No less importantly, such a campaign would serve as a lesson to all radicals who advocate terror against militarily superior powers. Hizballah's defeat is strategically important in that it would discourage weak groups from challenging conventional armies by engaging in asymmetric wars. The misfortunes of the Hizballah would have a domino effect not only on the Palestinians, but also on the Iraqi and Afghani insurgents, on Kurdish terrorists and on other disgruntled factions in the Middle East.

Conclusion

It would be a pity to squander the opportunity that Hizballah's actions have provided. Much of the world wants Israel to act boldly and decisively, understanding that much more is at stake than the future of the Hizballah. Otherwise, we will all be condemned to suffer the consequences of the continuation of the present cycles of violence and to the ascendance of a nuclear Iran.

The correct strategic address is Damascus. Taming Syria is the key to both resolving the Lebanese crisis and to weakening Iran and radical Islamist forces in the region. In short, the time has come to speak Turkish to the Syrians.

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