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## **The Palestinians and the Second Lebanese War**

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### **Introduction**

Many commentators have suggested that Israel's questionable military performance in the second Lebanese war and the resulting increase in Hizballah's power and prestige have impacted negatively on Israel's ability to deal with the Palestinians. This article demonstrates the error in this view and discusses the negligible effect of the war in Lebanon on Israel's security policy regarding the Palestinians.

The recent war revealed that the tendency to see the conflict in broader terms, such as a clash of civilizations, is very much exaggerated. Essentially, Israel's adversaries act independently, resulting in bilateral conflicts. This was exemplified by the Palestinian's quiescence while the Hizballah waged war in Lebanon and vice versa. While it is difficult for Israel to fight simultaneous low-intensity conflicts on two borders; ultimately, the impact on Israeli capabilities is minor.

### **The War's Impact on the Palestinians**

Recently, the Palestinians have been pushed to a lower rung on the world's priority ladder. As the secondary aspect of Israel's security priorities, the Palestinians are affected by regional conflicts that receive competing headlines, especially when those conflicts do not involve the Palestinians. The regional conflicts detracting from Palestinian status include Iran's nuclear ambitions and its ramifications for regional nuclearization, Iraq, Darfur and most recently, Somalia. Thus, the Palestinians face the bitter reality of fighting Israel almost alone. Consider for example the Iraqi-Jordanian-President Bush meeting on December 1, 2006, which hardly touched on the issue of the Palestinians.

During the summer's fighting, the Palestinian's were not relegated to a lower rung, but rather lost their position as a central issue in world politics. The Israeli-Hizballah war might be for the Palestinians what the first Lebanese war was for pan-Arabism. Just as the first Lebanese war confirmed Fouad Ajami's pronouncement of the end of pan-Arabism as a political project, the second Lebanese war might indicate the end of the Palestinian state option.

Recall that Palestinians were at center stage during the first Lebanese war. The Palestinians then claimed with great confidence that without resolution of the Palestinian problem there could be no peace in the rest of the Middle East. In the second Lebanese war, the Palestinians played no role. The truth has come to light. Lebanon's stability has nothing to do with the Palestinians. It emanates from the corollary weakness of the Lebanese state center and the relative power of outside actors—Syria, Iran and Israel—in exploiting these weaknesses to achieve their own state interests.

### *Palestinian Internal Relations*

In addition to losing world attention, Palestinian state-building efforts internally were affected by the war. Despite the lack of connection between the Palestinian and Lebanese conflicts, there are emerging similarities in their political situations. Both peoples have failed to produce a state center after over eighty years of efforts. Their prospects are made even dimmer by international and regional influences.

International alignment politics solidify the bifurcation of the Lebanese center, with the March 14 forces aligned to the West and Hizballah, while Nabih Biri's Amal and Michel Awn's forces aligned with Iran. Similarly, the Palestinian arena is becoming increasingly split between the Abbas' security forces alliance with the moderate Arab states, and the United States; versus Hamas' alliance with Iran and Syria. Such divisions negatively impact the Palestinians because they have tremendous geographic and political ramifications of a Hamas-dominated Gaza and an Abbas/Fatah-dominated West Bank.

### *Palestinian Regional Relations*

Relations between Hizballah and the Palestinians are problematic, largely due to their source of funding. Hamas and Hizballah compete over the same Iranian purse. Both realize that Iranian interests and their own do not always coincide and that this gap is greater for the Hamas than it is for Hizballah.

Hamas' main problem in its relationship with Iran is linked to Egypt. For the Palestinians, Egypt is the most important Arab state. Thus far, Egypt, a realist player par excellence, has turned a blind eye to Hamas-Iranian cooperation on the assumption that bleeding Israel is more important to Egyptian interests than the penetration of Iranian influence into the Palestinian arena through Hamas, or even the implications of Hamas' power on Egypt's domestic attempts to contain its local Islamists, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas knows there are limits to this relationship, which they can transgress at their peril. Egypt is the life-line to Iranian aid. Once the Egyptian state feels too threatened by this relationship it could move against Hamas with great force.

Since the establishment of the Hamas government, Jordan has been firmly against Hamas in part because of the impact this relationship is likely to have in strengthening what they perceive as the Shiite arc/heterodox alliance in the Middle East.

Gulf States with Shiite populations—Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar—are weary of Hamas after the Lebanese war. For them, the war is perceived to have strengthened

Shiite Hizballah. This skepticism is apparent since the establishment of the Hamas government. An International Monetary Fund study on aid and transfers to the PA in the past year reveals that all Arab state finances have gone to President Abbas. Saudi Arabia, which is engaged in a cold war with Iran in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan, is a critical actor in this regard. Consider the likely impact on Gulf-Hamas relations as a result of the rise of the main Shiite party in the recent Bahrain elections.

An Israeli analyst presciently noted that the Gulf States are in a tacit alliance with Israel as a means of "balancing" the Iraqi and Iranian threat. This unspoken association is likely to be strengthened from the growing Iranian nuclear threat, increasing domestic Sunni/Shiite polarization, and the penetration of Iranian influence into the Palestinian arena at great cost to the Palestinians.

### **Moral Encouragement for the Palestinians**

Offsetting the war's negative impacts on the Palestinians is the positive impact on their morale stemming from Hizballah's success in withstanding a month-long Israeli assault. This small spiritual and moral triumph was widely expressed in the Palestinian press, although less heady voices warned of drawing parallels between the two different conflicts. Despite the positive psychological effect, Hizballah's victory was offset by the political ramifications of the war, principally by the increased possibilities of future Lebanese and Palestinian civil wars.

The crucial difference between the conflicts is Hizballah's advantage of enjoying logistical and military support from two states in a way the Palestinians will only enjoy if an Islamist revolution succeeds in Egypt. Israeli politicians talk of Gaza becoming Lebanon and Hamas militarily becoming Hizballah. Analysts have exaggerated this threat. Iran's inability to train and provide logistics to the Palestinians is of crucial importance in this regard.

### **Israeli Successes**

The truth is that Israel, through a combination of military means - artillery shelling to reduce the accuracy of the Qassams, selective penetration to reduce the number of launchings, and targeted killing against those improving these crude missiles' capabilities - has significantly curtailed the accuracy of Qassam launches. Before the cease fire, Israeli penetration was becoming so effective that the IDF was able to make preventive arrests – the beginning of replicating Israel's major counterinsurgency success against the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria in the wake of Operation Defensive Shield, which allowed preventive arrests on a massive scale. The Palestinians cannot be blamed for the Israeli government's erroneous decision to initiate a cease fire as the campaign against the Qassams was beginning to succeed.

### **Conclusion**

Palestinian terrorism is not a new phenomenon. Palestinian and Hizballah violence certainly present challenges to Israeli security policy makers and its security services, but the upshot is roughly the same. Just as terrorism in the past could not prevent the Jewish Zionist enterprise from achieving statehood and increasing the Jewish population ten-fold, it will not prevent Israel from continuing to prosper. For

Palestinians, this is the worse news possible. Becoming a society perpetually on the verge of civil war—unable to either effectively wage war or achieve peace—is a close second. The ramifications of the second Lebanese war only made the situation worse for the Palestinians.

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