

# The Price of Passivity

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Articles & Testimony

**T**he governments on both of our “hot” fronts, Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority, are on the verge of change, with practical, immediate implications for Israel—and unfortunately, not positive ones. Rather, the storm clouds continue to gather on the strategic horizon. In Lebanon, Fouad Siniora’s government is under vocal attack, accompanied by threats of violence, by Hizballah, which only recently left it. Siniora, backed by the anti-Syrian coalition known as the “March 14 camp,” has fought the challenge with determination and courage. But even in the most optimistic scenario, he will be forced to make significant concessions. It is already clear that even if Hizballah’s Sheikh Nasrallah does not carry out his threat to “go down to the street” and bring out the Shi’ite masses, the Siniora camp’s room for maneuver is guaranteed to shrink. Prime Minister Olmert’s superfluous public invitation for Siniora to meet with him now sounds hollow and even harmful. Siniora certainly won’t gain from Olmert’s unsubtle advances. I cannot forecast what the government of Lebanon will look like a few months from now, but it will surely be less critical of Syria, less stringent regarding the freedom of action Hizballah affords itself, and less keen to maintain calm on Israel’s northern border.

Jerusalem, for its part, doesn’t have the strength or the will, to contend with another crisis. Otherwise, it could mount an energetic public diplomacy campaign denouncing the rearming of Hizballah and UNIFIL’s turning a blind eye to the build-up of weaponry south of the Litani River, in blatant violation of Security Council Resolution 1701. The bitter truth, which Israel chooses not to dwell on, is that the three Lebanese Army brigades deployed in the south, like the UNIFIL force, have unwritten coexistence understandings with Hizballah, and have become a protective envelope for it.

In the Palestinian Authority, Hamas’s Ismail Haniyeh has declared that he is willing to concede the prime ministership. Likewise, all the senior figures of Hamas have agreed to forgo a seat in a “government of national unity.” On the surface, the Palestinian situation is the opposite of that in Lebanon: Ostensibly, the militant Islamists are giving up exclusive control of the government, and the secular moderates—President Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and his Fatah faction—are making a comeback. If only it were so!

What we are really facing is a strategem that some European countries—and more than a few Israelis—will convince themselves to buy. Put crudely, the idea is this: Hamas will no longer bear the formal responsibility for government, in the hope that stepping back will constitute the necessary lever for the restoration of financial aid from the West and the transfer of PA funds currently frozen in Israel. The new government will put on an “honest” face, by virtue of the appointment of ministers who have not been involved in terror, some of whom are even considered friends of the United States. At the same time, though, the decision-making authority for important political-diplomatic issues will be removed from the government and transferred into the hands of another body, such as the Forum of Palestinian Movement Heads or the PLO, once Hamas has joined this umbrella organization and effectively taken it over. Abu Mazen will have the right to negotiate with Prime Minister Olmert, but Hamas will rule out any recognition of, or peace with, Israel.

The Palestinians will offer a cease-fire, including stopping the firing of Qassam rockets across the Gaza border. And

Hamas will soften its conditions for a deal to release the captured soldier Gilad Shalit. Israel will be expected to guarantee calm to Hamas in Fatah clothing; to talk to Abu Mazen while Hamas's Khaled Mashal has him by the throat; and to release funds to a government that Hamas controls by means of its parliamentary majority and its popular support—in short, to approve Hamas ruling through Abu Mazen, and to abide by a time-out that will give Hamas the opportunity to consolidate its military control and expand it from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank. A hudna, or cease-fire, will only create much worse conditions two or three years down the road.

Here too, the Israeli government is being passive, with Olmert promising that “quiet will beget quiet.” Any proposal to finally carry out in Gaza an action like Operation Defensive Shield, the massive offensive undertaken by Israel in the West Bank in 2002, is met with absolute rejection by the so-called “defense minister,” Amir Peretz. Sometimes it seems that Israel's response to the salvos of Qassams at his home town of Sderot is to sit and wait for a Palestinian offer of a cease-fire.

Passivity comes with a price. The risks will only grow in the absence of mechanisms for dealing with them. Neglect of the Lebanon and Gaza fronts will lead to the creation of another more complicated, more threatening one—the West Bank. The re-militarization of the West Bank is the highest goal of the doctrine of muqawama (unremitting combat, or resistance). Only a blind fool would allow things to reach that point.

Ehud Yaari is an Israel-based associate of The Washington Institute and associate editor of Jerusalem Report. He is the author of *Toward Israeli-Palestinian Disengagement and Peace by Piece: A Decade of Egyptian Policy*. ❖

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