

Deterrence in the Middle East: Consequences of the Lebanon War

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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In-Depth Reports

On September 16, 2006, Uzi Arad, Uzi Dayan, and Ephraim Sneh addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Mr. Arad is former head of research for Israel's foreign intelligence service, the Mossad. General Dayan is former head of Israel's National Security Council. Dr. Sneh is former deputy defense minister and current head of the Labor faction in the Israeli parliament. The panel was moderated by former secretary of the U.S. Air Force James Roche. Following is a brief summary of their remarks.

A discussion of the impact of the Hizballah war on Israeli strategy and deterrence posture produced some of the most provocative debate at The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference.

Uzi Arad began the session by highlighting the opening words in the first military directive issued by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) high command at the outset of hostilities against Hizballah: "restore deterrence." He noted the conventional wisdom -- in Israel and around the Middle East -- that Israel has been accumulating a "deterrent deficit" ever since it withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000 and then did not respond in force to actions against it, including cross-border attacks and Syrian and Iranian efforts to supply Hizballah. He noted that Israel's failure to establish a strong deterrent in Lebanon since 2000 was the root cause of Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah's miscalculation that there would be no substantial Israeli response to the kidnapping of IDF soldiers. The summer war reestablished deterrence, Arad noted, but at a high cost. On Iran, he argued, a deterrence deficit exists on the declaratory level, while Iran understands that Israel retains potent deterrent power in the real military sense. Arad believes that the summer conflict provides Israel with an opportunity to revise and strengthen its overall policy toward deterrence.

In his comments, Uzi Dayan agreed that Israel's deterrence had eroded and noted that the decision to fight a war is itself a sign that deterrence has failed. He explained that one way to restore deterrence is to make sure that there is a perception that the IDF can win a war clearly and unambiguously. Israel's current challenge, he argued, is to prevent Iran from achieving a military nuclear capability. Deterrence alone will not succeed. This goal also requires diplomatic means, sanctions, oil embargoes, and perhaps a last resort to the military option. In addition, he urged that Israel work to isolate Syria in order to break the chain that links Iran to Hizballah. Also, a goal of Israeli strategy should be to continue to hound Hizballah directly, portraying it as a pariah equivalent to al-Qaeda, and to pursue relentlessly the fight against Palestinian terrorism.

Ephraim Sneh opened his remarks by rejecting the often-heard argument that a nuclear Iran can be deterred the

way the Soviet Union was deterred during the Cold War. Not only is the imbalance in geographic proximity -- Iran/Israel vs. USSR/USA -- greater, he argued, but there is also an absence of rational leadership in the case of Iran, which was not necessarily true with Soviet leadership. The bottom line, he said, is that Israel cannot rely on deterrence vis-a-vis a nuclear Iran and must commit itself to preventing Iran's acquisition of nuclear-weapons capability. He went on to say that deterrence in the Middle East context means that Israel needs to be strong enough to prevent an adversary from even entertaining the idea of an attack, or from maintaining a strategic goal other than living in peace with Israel. In this regard, Israel's military superiority is a key prerequisite for progress in the peace process -- which, he believes, is also a strong Israeli interest. ❖

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