

# The Ground Offensive in Lebanon: An Opportunity

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## Brief Analysis

Earlier this week, Israel began its long-anticipated ground offensive in Lebanon intended to degrade Hizballah's military apparatus, pacify Israel's northern border with Lebanon, and lay the foundation for what is now frequently referred to as a "sustainable ceasefire." Reaching a consensus on the precise meaning of the term "sustainable" will be a difficult prerequisite. But however such a ceasefire is defined beyond the presence of a robust international force, there is widespread agreement that it must include the participation of Syria -- particularly a commitment by Damascus to adhere to UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1680. So far, Syria has given no indication that it will agree to such a course, and, given the events of the past several weeks, it is difficult to imagine the circumstances under which Syrian president Bashar al-Asad might change his mind. That said, Israel's new ground offensive in Lebanon represents a significant change in the status quo, one that may force Syria to reconsider.

## Changes in Israeli Strategy

To understand how Israel's ground operations in Lebanon might affect Syrian policy, it is important to examine how Israeli strategy has evolved during the past week. Israel's initial goal in this campaign was to degrade Hizballah's military capability through large-scale aerial attacks and limited ground assaults across the Lebanese border. Although this strategy achieved some success, it became evident by the end of the conflict's third week that sustained ground operations would be necessary. The announcement that 30,000 reservists had been activated and that the Israeli cabinet had authorized an expansion of operations inside Lebanon confirmed that a strategic reorientation was indeed underway.

According to briefings by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), this most recent activation of reserve troops will give Israel the ability to conduct an aggressive campaign in Lebanon focused on the area south of the Litani River. Interestingly, the IDF's most recent thrust into Lebanon indicates another strategic modification, differing not only from early stages of the current conflict but also from previous military operations in Lebanon over the past two decades. Both in recent weeks and in the campaigns of 1982, 1993, and 1996, the IDF entered Lebanon along Israel's northern border and progressed in a northward direction along an east-west front. While this strategy had the advantage of

allowing a rapid ingress for Israel's armored vehicles, the steep terrain of the border region forced the IDF to use Lebanese roads in order to negotiate the terrain. In the current reality of tank-killing roadside bombs, this strategy is no longer viable, as the IDF learned on its first day of engagement with Hizballah this summer. As a result, the Israeli military has decided to enter along Lebanon's eastern and southeastern borders with Israel this week, executing the attack from east to west. In so doing, the IDF will take advantage of more favorable topographical conditions that allow its armored vehicles to minimize movement on Lebanon's major transportation arteries.

The size of the reserve call-up also suggests that Israel will have the military capability to go beyond the strategic goal of pacifying southern Lebanon. In particular, Israel has three additional combat divisions poised to enter the conflict, which can assist the five brigades already in Lebanon. It is these additional divisions that will most strongly affect Syria's calculus of events taking place on the other side of its border with Lebanon. Specifically, these divisions provide Israel with a surplus of military strength that will enable the IDF to conduct uncontested thrusts northward across the Litani River and, if necessary, into the Bekaa Valley. Despite assurances from the Israeli government that no military action against Syria is contemplated, this new capability will undoubtedly raise concerns within the Syrian government regarding Israel's ultimate aims. Those concerns will likely be further heightened by Israel's intense bombing campaign along the Syrian border, which follows the recent IDF special forces operation in Baalbek, deep inside Lebanon and close to the Syrian border. Syria's Options

Given the surplus of Israeli power close to its border, Damascus will be forced to weigh its foreign policy decisions carefully. Indeed, Syria's options under these circumstances are quite limited. Syria's military has been in steady decline since the demise of its previous backer, the former Soviet Union. Contrary to the situation extant during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon in which Syria had three divisions deployed in the Bekaa Valley, Damascus presently has no credible military resources along the Syria-Lebanon border with which to engage Israeli forces. Moreover, given both the restrictions of Resolution 1680 (which calls upon Syria to prevent the movement of arms into Lebanon) and the events following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri (which forced Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon), it is unlikely that Syria could, or would, consider such a redeployment.

Notwithstanding this growing list of problems for Syria, the expanded presence of Israeli troops along the Lebanon-Syria border is unlikely, by itself, to persuade Damascus to comply with demands originating from within the international community. To achieve concessions from Assad, more political pressure will be necessary, and this can only come from the United States, Europe, and the United Nations.

#### U.S. Policy Options

Given Syria's pivotal role in this and other regional violence, it is imperative that the United States continue pressuring Syria to modify its policies. Accordingly, the Bush administration should take advantage of the current situation by continuing to support Israel's Lebanon campaign and new ground operations, thereby keeping up the military pressure on Syria. This pressure should be supplemented with a U.S.-led campaign to continue isolating Damascus from the international community. Economic sanctions beyond those already being applied should also be considered. The combination of military, political, and economic pressure may not be sufficient to bring about Syrian compliance. But the application of this pressure in conjunction with, but independent of, other international efforts -- most notably, the investigation into the Hariri assassination and the U.S.-led pressure to halt the resupply of Iraqi insurgents across Syria's border with Iraq -- may lead Syria (as with Libya) to seek solutions to its internal problems that are more acceptable to the international community.

In addition to these negative sanctions, positive inducements might also be considered, such as holding out the possibility of restoring higher-level relations between the U.S. and Syrian governments (something in which Assad has indicated clear interest). Certainly, Syrian adherence to Resolutions 1559 and 1680 would be a prerequisite for such an overture. But without some positive inducement, it is unlikely that Syria will be persuaded to mend its ways,

and will instead remain a major source of instability in the region.

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