

# Deterrence and the Burden of Israeli Moderates

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**T**his week, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared that success in handing Hezbollah a major setback would help Israel as it seeks to withdraw from most of the settlements in the West Bank.

This may seem odd to some looking for a relationship between how fighting Hezbollah could minimize conflict with the Palestinians.

While Olmert's thinking in pressing this conflict is certainly related to the regional stakes in ensuring an Iranian proxy does not gain the upper hand against Israel, it is also related to a burden of Israeli moderates in ensuring that their willingness to withdraw from land is not misconstrued by their Arab enemies. This fear that Israeli action is driven by weakness and not coexistence has pushed the moderates to ensure that they are the ones seen to be restoring Israel's deterrence.

Specifically, Israelis have been haunted for six years by a speech that Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah gave to 30,000 cheering supporters on the heels of Israel's unilateral pullout from Lebanon in May 2000. It is probably the speech more than any other that ultimately galvanized them to act.

In his speech, Nasrallah not only claimed credit for Israel's departure from Lebanon that month but also exhorted the Palestinians to choose the path of violence over negotiation in dealing with Israel. He declared, "in order to liberate your land, you don't need tanks and planes. With the example of martyrs, you can impose your demands on the Zionist aggressors." He continued, "Israel may own nuclear weapons and heavy weaponry, but by God, it is weaker than a spider's web."

Some in Israel believe that the speech was instrumental in the outbreak of the Palestinian intifada that broke out between 2000 and 2004, which was characterized by dozens and dozens of Palestinian suicide bombs. In broad terms, many Israeli generals such as IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon would cite Nasrallah's "spider web" speech as suggesting that Israel had lost its deterrent as Arabs no longer feared Israel's military might.

Israel's current fighting can be seen as seeking to restore that deterrent. Some would argue that there is no way to deter suicide-driven guerrillas, since they are willing to die for their cause. However, while Hezbollah's movement has its component of suicidebombers, it also has at least 12,000 missiles by Nasrallah's public estimate. Hezbollah is a rejectionist group sworn to Israel's destruction, but it does seem to have its own cost-benefit calculations based on

anticipated Israeli responses, even if those calculations are wrong.

Hezbollah took the unprecedented step of admitting such a mistake last week. Mahmoud Komati, the deputy chief of Hezbollah's politburo, made clear that the Islamic militant group miscalculated the consequences of the July 12 cross-border raid that seized two Israeli soldiers. "The truth is—let me say this clearly—we didn't even expect (this) response," adding Hezbollah had expected "the usual, limited response" from Israel, Komati said. This statement may be interpreted as Hezbollah's attempt to ease the anxieties of those Lebanese who wonder why the group entangled the country in an unprovoked war after Israel withdrew from Lebanon six years ago.

As Hezbollah calculates or miscalculates its cost-benefit, Olmert's perception of their actions is one of Hezbollah probing weakness from a new leader who was elected on a platform of political moderation and has to fill the big shoes of the feared Ariel Sharon. Olmert has told people that he believes he is being tested as the new player in the Middle East. Some may equate it to a new and moderate John Kennedy in the Cuban missile crisis.

It is not coincidental that the three big offensives in Lebanon during the past 13 years were done by the moderate governments of Yitzhak Rabin in 1993, Shimon Peres in 1996, and now Olmert in 2006.

Indeed, a new equation can be seen. The more Israel is willing to yield land, the more important deterrence has become. This is especially true when Israel evacuated Lebanon and Gaza unilaterally. By attacking Israel this summer from Lebanon and Gaza, neither Hezbollah nor Hamas, respectively, is reversing Israel's occupation of land gained in the 1967 war, since Israel exited both. These are two groups dedicated to Israel's destruction.

Ending occupation, therefore, has not brought Israel greater security from either of these rejectionist groups. Olmert, like his predecessors Ariel Sharon when it came to leaving Gaza last year and Ehud Barak when it came to leaving Lebanon in 2000, was aware of this pitfall. However, they felt that ending occupation had other benefits: easing moral cohesion of Israeli society, lifting an economic burden, and hope of potentially bolstering the moderate elements of Gazan or Lebanese society. The alternative that Olmert, Sharon, and Barak saw was the open-ended grinding occupation that had been going on for decades.

However, when these moderate Arab elements did not assume central authority in Lebanon or Gaza in a manner that would halt attacks, the net effect had profound implications for Israel. Israel could not view its willingness to withdraw to lines close to the 1967 lines as being interpreted as weakness by rejectionists who did not accept Israel under any circumstances. As such, rejectionists are encouraged to keep using terrorism as a means of achieving Israeli destruction and quash any Israeli public support for further withdrawals from the West Bank. This is why Nasrallah's "spider web" speech spooked Israeli strategists: they felt an Israeli gesture of moderation was being misinterpreted, making no distinction between Israeli occupation and existence. Therefore, Israel feels it has to draw the brightest of bright lights between these two ideas.

Of course, the long-term goal is to strengthen a central authority of moderates among both Lebanese and Palestinians but in both cases, and hopefully, this can occur now in the Lebanese case, given world attention and a properly constructed multinational force. However, let us be clear that this was not happening for years. Hamas was showing no signs of moderating while in power in Gaza, and Lebanon did not feel it was worth the internecine price of patrolling the southern part of its country. This left Israel no choice, amid hope that the current military action will shortly give way to a broad-based political solution with international backing that would prohibit Hezbollah from arrogating to itself the right to be a state within a state and fire on Israel at whim.

In the end, when no effective central authority exists as has been the case until now, anyone supporting Olmert's moderation in seeking to end control of areas occupied since 1967 should support the flipside of that coin: Israel's willingness to exercise sharpened deterrence against those rejectionist groups whose definition of a legitimate grievance is Israel's very existence.

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