

The Lebanon-Syria-Israel Triangle:

One Year after Israeli Withdrawal

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Brief Analysis

While the violence in the West Bank and Gaza captures most of the attention, arguably more important developments in the last year have occurred in the Syria-Lebanon-Israel triangle.

The Collapse of the Syrian-Israeli Peace Process The collapse of the Geneva summit in March 2000 formalized the demise of the negotiations. The Geneva summit failure was not one of the ups and downs that the negotiations had experienced for years; it was the end of the process at least for now. There was nothing to expect afterwards because it was quite clear that neither side could deliver what the other insisted on. Consider the contrast with Anwar Sadat's strategy: he established the paradigm of smiling at Israelis and receiving territory in return. Syrian president Bashar al-Asad failed to smile at the Israelis, and Barak could not deliver the Golan. In the wake of this episode, there are no clear prospects for a resumption of negotiations leading to an agreement.

Unilateral Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon Pulling out of southern Lebanon was originally envisaged by Israel as part and parcel of an agreement with Syria that is, as a logical accompaniment to a Syrian-Israeli peace accord. Surprised by the failure of the negotiations with Syria, Barak was forced to fulfill his campaign pledge to withdraw from Lebanon in circumstances very different from those he had envisioned. The decision to pull-out on May 24, 2000 minus an agreement, coupled with the manner of execution, gave the impression of a collapse of Israeli will or capability. It also suggested that disputed land can be recovered through violence, without going through negotiations that the peace process is not the only game in town and, indeed, there are other options for achieving Arab political aims.

Syrian Succession The passing of Hafiz al-Asad in June and the emergence of his designated heir, 37-year-old son Bashar, changed the equation altogether. Bashar is not Hafiz al-Asad, nor is he the Bashar that many hopeful Middle East observers anticipated. While he is committed to his father's legacy and has reiterated his readiness to make peace based on a complete Israeli withdrawal, the atmosphere is no longer conducive to finding a solution.

Furthermore, issues other than making peace with Israel register higher on Bashar's agenda for the moment. Chief among them are: creating circles of close confidants and consolidating bases of support; managing Syrian interests in Lebanon; and maintaining Syria's relative status in the Arab world.

Destabilizing Factors and Challenges

Quite a few factors could lead to destabilization of the Lebanese-Syrian-Israeli triangle:

Hizballah Continuing its armed struggle against Israel is paramount for Hizballah in order: 1) to guarantee airtime for the spread of its reputation and the dissemination of its message; 2) to preserve its place above other armed yet much less significant Lebanese sectarian groups; and 3) to maintain its position at the vanguard of the struggle against Israel within the Arab and Islamic world. One factor that is not important in their calculations is their political survival in Lebanon: their position within the Shi'a community is too deeply entrenched to be threatened. While there is reason to hope that Hizballah will not escalate its attacks, Hizballah's latest attack just last week draws

attention to the fact that Israel may not be able to ignore them and restrain itself much longer.

SyrianLebanese Relations Anti-Syrian sentiment gained momentum in the wake of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon. The death of Hafiz al-Asad also served as an enticement to challenge the status quo.

Compounding the problem further for Syria, the credibility of Damascus' allies in Lebanon has eroded. Many in Lebanon feel that the new regime in Syria is weaker and that they are therefore freer to express resentment towards the Syrian presence. However, at least some Lebanese leaders feel that the Syrian presence secures their own political and personal interests, as well as guaranteeing the Taif agreement.

Intifada II The situation throughout the region today closely parallels the environment in early 1967. At that time, Arab governments encouraged a "war of popular liberation" by activists, calculating that this would be more successful than conventional war. But the attacks by these activists set in motion a cycle that led to precisely the kind of all-encompassing conventional war which none of the parties desired. The intifada has the same potential. In that respect, leaders throughout the region including Bashar feel threatened by the situation in the territories. Any escalation in southern Lebanon will only push Bashar further into a corner; he will then feel forced to lash out.

Inexperience Hafiz al-Asad personally experienced every modern war in the Middle East. Bashar Asad's experience, on the other hand, is limited to news accounts about the two intifadas; he knows the internet more than he knows wars. For him, the success of Hizballah's campaign in southern Lebanon is a powerful precedent thinking this way may lead him to miscalculate. Furthermore, he must establish his own credibility as a torch-bearer of the Syrian and pan-Arab cause. Meanwhile, Bashar has to worry about the opposition to peace from the generals and the intellectuals, who are much more hostile to Israel than the Arab street.

Where to Next

Despite ominous forecasts, Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon left the border surprisingly quiet. Only sporadic incidents have occurred in its wake, and those have been restricted to a single stretch of the border, where those targeted have been military personnel. Incidents have not erupted all along the border nor have civilians been targeted.

Ehud Barak chose to ignore Hizballah's actions along the northern front for the most part, knowing that Israeli reactions would draw an immediate retaliation, leading to a cycle of escalation on both sides. Ariel Sharon, too, has been cautious, preferring to send messages rather than attacking major targets, be they Syrian, Lebanese, or Hizballah. Bashar, for his part, has likewise demonstrated reluctance to let matters escalate in a recent episode rather than choosing to retaliate, he went on the record as saying there is a right time and place to do so.

Finally, the negotiations from 1991 through 2000 broke the taboo on peacemaking, and that augurs well for the future of SyrianIsraeli engagement. Consider that despite Bashar's vocal recriminations of Israel, he still claims a readiness to make peace, if the long-stated Syrian terms are accepted that is, he does not reject peace with Israel. Were there to be a reduction in the violence in the West Bank and Gaza, and an improvement in the general atmosphere, Syria would be ready to resume talks about an agreement. Indeed, whenever Israel reaches a preliminary understanding with the Palestinians, there will be a race between the Palestinians and Syrians to see who can conclude a final deal first.

This Special Policy Forum report was prepared by Michael Moskowitz.

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