

U.S. Diplomatic Action Needed in Lebanon

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May 31, 2000

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Without U.S. diplomatic intervention, the most likely outcome of last week's Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon is that some radical group — acting under Syrian and Iranian pressure — will launch cross-border attacks on Israel. This could lead Israel to respond with intense artillery fire and air strikes, possibly against Syrian forces in Lebanon or even in Syria proper. Yet, such a cycle of escalating violence is not inevitable.

With much vigorous diplomacy and a little luck, there could instead be a shaky standoff with only sporadic cross-border attacks. The violence is not likely to be instigated by Lebanese groups. Much attention has been focused on the radical Hezbollah organization, which was created and is still largely financed by Iran for the purpose of disrupting the Arab-Israeli peace process. But despite agitation by more militant elements and by their Iranian backers, Hezbollah's leaders probably do not want to keep up the battle against Israel: They would rather declare victory and turn to the task of helping their community, the Lebanese Shiites, rather than keeping up terrorism as Iran wants.

The real problem is Syria. It has long insisted on — and imposed on Lebanon, a country it effectively controls — a dictum that no peace be made between Israel and Lebanon until a peace is also struck between Israel and Syria, including a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. Faced with the unpleasant prospect of an Israel–Lebanese de facto peace, Syria will try to keep up the pressure on Israel. It will pressure radicals in Lebanon — be they Lebanese extremists from among the Hezbollah guerillas or terrorists among the 350,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon — to attack Israel. Lebanon will follow Syria's lead; it is very unlikely that the Lebanese army will deploy to the former security zone. Instead, Lebanon will leave the "liberated area" to Hezbollah.

The key to achieving a lasting peace is vigorous, U.S. action to restore peace and stability to Lebanon and to the Israeli-Lebanese border. To prevent violence on the border, we should:

- Promote full compliance with United Nations resolutions. In practice, this means forcefully reminding Lebanon of its obligation and Syria of its responsibility to control the Lebanese side of the border. It also means insisting that the UN force in south Lebanon verify that Israel has fully withdrawn and that the force helps the Lebanese government in reasserting control.
- Bolster Israeli deterrence. The United States should vigorously promote international acceptance of the principle

that any attacks on Israel or Israelis are clear aggression to which Israel has the right to respond with preemptive and retaliatory strikes, in accordance with the UN Charter's right of self-defense. To that end, the United States should enhance Israel's ability to preempt and retaliate by giving political support and military–technical assistance and cooperation.

- Reward peace; penalize violence. The United States should ensure that Lebanon and Syria reap benefits for preventing attacks on Israel—or pay a price for tolerating post-withdrawal.
- Ensure post-withdrawal stability. The United States should promote a series of confidence-building measures such as the creation of joint Israeli-Lebanese committees to maintain a permanent line of communications and reduce tensions in the event of some isolated incident. The United States should be ready to help monitor compliance with informal arrangements that are quietly worked out between Israel and its adversaries.
- Engage in preventive diplomacy. The United States should seek to defuse potentially explosive issues that could spark renewed violence. First and foremost, that means ensuring the safety of former soldiers in the Israel-supported South Lebanon Army (SLA) now being held captive in Lebanon. But it will also be necessary to stabilize the economy of southern Lebanon, where most people have made their livings from the fighting — being paid from funds from Israel (for the SLA), Iran (for Hezbollah) or the UN (to provide services to the peacekeeping force).

Lebanon has traditionally been a sideshow for U.S. policymakers focused on the Mideast peace process. But following an Israeli withdrawal — with the potential for increased violence and escalation this could entail — Lebanon is going to be a major preoccupation for Washington. Accordingly, the United States should do all it can to ensure that an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon is a basis for building peace and stability in the region and not a cause for further bloodshed and deterioration.

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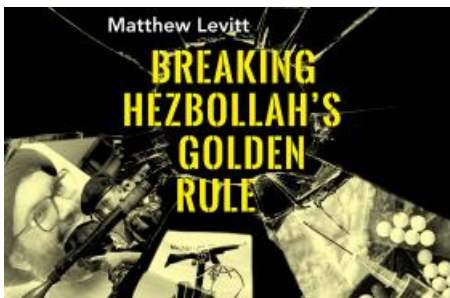
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