

An Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon: Implications for the Middle East and U.S. Policy

Apr 7, 2000



Brief Analysis

On April 5, 2000, The Washington Institute released a new report, [The Last Arab-Israeli Battlefield? Implications of an Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon. \(templateC04.php?CID=25\)](#) and hosted its seven contributing authors at a Special Policy Forum. The contributors include Nicole Brackman, Patrick Clawson, Michael Eisenstadt, Steven Hecker, John Hillen, Frederic Hof, and Gal Luft. The authors spoke separately and do not necessarily give their entire assent to the following summary.

After years of being treated as a sideshow in the Middle East peace process, Lebanon is likely to become a major preoccupation for Washington after an Israeli withdrawal. Without U.S. diplomatic intervention, the most likely outcome of a unilateral withdrawal will be that Syria would find some group (Hizballah, its splinter groups, or Palestinian rejectionists) to launch cross-border attacks on Israel. Israel's likely response would be intense artillery fire and air strikes, with targets potentially including Syrian forces in Lebanon or even Syria proper. Yet, such a cycle of escalating violence is not inevitable; with much vigorous diplomacy and some luck, unilateral withdrawal could instead lead to a shaky standoff with only sporadic cross-border attacks.

What happens after an Israeli withdrawal depends upon the reactions of the key regional actors and the steps taken by the United States.

The Key Regional Actors

Syria will be the driver of post-withdrawal developments. Damascus seeks to prevent a resolution of the southern Lebanon problem that would come about independently of Syria. Syria has established, and Lebanon has fully accepted, an unbreakable linkage between Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon and Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights. In the event of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, Damascus will try to maximize the risks to Israel. It will pressure Hizballah (accompanied perhaps by instructions to Palestinian rejectionist groups) to harass Israeli troops during the withdrawal, declare "perpetual resistance," and prepare for cross-border operations. What happens after a unilateral withdrawal is not predetermined. Syria might make a virtue of necessity, publicly claim victory, and lobby for the immediate resumption of Syrian-Israeli peace talks. There could be a "wait and see" period of relative quiet, but if it becomes clear that nothing is moving on the Syrian-Israeli track, Syrian-inspired attacks on Israel are likely.

Lebanon's main goal is to remain shoulder-to-shoulder with Syria. After a unilateral withdrawal, it is very unlikely that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) would deploy to the South. By contrast, in an agreed-upon withdrawal, Syria would probably give the green light for a reassertion of Lebanese government control in the South, including a deployment there of the LAF.

Hizballah's intentions are ambiguous. In the event of a unilateral Israeli withdrawal, Hizballah may wish to declare victory and suspend its armed campaign against Israel, yet it would face pressure from Damascus and Tehran to continue attacks. If the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) remain on even the smallest portion of Lebanese territory,

Hizballah will continue attacks with the backing of Damascus. If Israeli withdrawal is in the context of a peace agreement with Syria, the voluntary disarmament of Hizballah's guerrilla forces is likely, and Damascus and Beirut would show little tolerance for any militant splinter groups attempting to conduct cross-border attacks, while Iran, out of concern for its continued relations with Syria and Lebanon, would be unlikely to act contrary to their wishes. Hizballah, however, would be likely to retain its Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO), which carries out terrorist attacks, and might provide covert assistance to Palestinian terrorist groups.

The Palestinian refugees are a wild card. Because Lebanese of all persuasions want to see the Palestinian refugees leave their country, relations between Israel and Lebanon will remain troubled until their status is resolved. After an Israeli withdrawal, the refugees will provide a pool of people in Lebanon willing to continue armed struggle against Israel even if Hizballah ceases its attacks, and Lebanon might turn a blind eye to Palestinian attacks staged from Lebanon in order to ensure that the refugee problem remains on the international agenda.

Israel will be taking a serious strategic gamble if it withdraws unilaterally. The potential risks brought about by a withdrawal include a considerable reduction in Israel's intelligence capabilities in Lebanon, possible cross-border incursions (which Hizballah has never conducted), cross-border direct fire or katyusha attacks, cooperation between Hizballah and Palestinian organizations in international terrorism, and the possibility of Beirut and Damascus converting southern Lebanon into a theater of conventional military operations. In the event of serious attacks, Israel's likely option would be to retaliate by means of intensive air strikes and artillery fire. But the lessons of the wars in Iraq and Kosovo show the limitations of air power against camouflaged ground forces-let alone small guerrilla units hosted by a supportive civilian population. Israel is likely to find itself adopting a strategy of punitive air attacks against Lebanese, and maybe even Syrian, infrastructure or military targets.

UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) will be more willing to assume additional responsibilities the more the principal actors move to a constructive solution. Even a reinforced UNIFIL, however, will insist that it act only as a supporting player whose actions should complement the intentions of the principals.

U.S. Policy

In the near term, the key post-withdrawal U.S. interests in Lebanon are preventing-or, if necessary, containing-possible post-withdrawal violence and restoring peace and stability to Lebanon and to the Israeli-Lebanese border. Policies to that end should include the following:

Promote full compliance with UN Security Council Resolutions 425 and 520. In practice, this means forcefully reminding Beirut of its obligation and Damascus of its responsibility to control the Lebanese side of the border. The United States should also insist that UNIFIL fulfill its mandate to verify that Israel has fully withdrawn-which may be disputed, given that much of the border is undemarcated-and to assist the Lebanese government in reasserting control.

Bolster Israeli deterrence. The United States should vigorously promote international acceptance of the principle that, once Israel has fully withdrawn, any further attacks on Israel or Israelis should be constituted as clear aggression to which Israel has the right to respond 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.

Reward peace; penalize violence. The United States should ensure that Lebanon and Syria reap benefits for preventing attacks on Israel-or, alternatively, pay a price for tolerating or encouraging post-withdrawal violence. For instance, military assistance to the LAF should be suspended if Hizballah retains its arms, or be substantially increased if the LAF deploys to the south.

Ensure post-withdrawal stability. The United States should support peacekeeping operations-financially,

logistically, and politically-and help to implement confidence-building measures.

Engage in preventive diplomacy. The United States should seek to defuse potentially explosive issues that could spark renewed violence by ensuring the safety of former South Lebanon Army members and the economic stability of southern Lebanon, addressing the problems of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and demanding that Lebanon end the presence of international terrorists on its soil-or face be adding to the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

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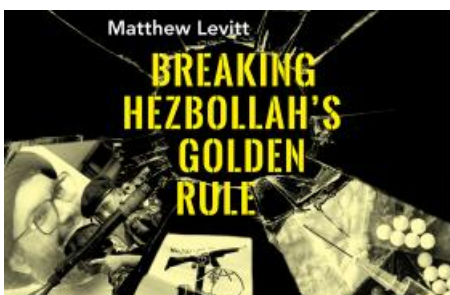
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