The Last Arab-Israeli Battlefield?

Implications of an Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon

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An Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon would mark a major change in the status quo that has prevailed in the Middle East for the last twenty years. This will create both risks and opportunities for the peoples of the region and for U.S. policy.

What happens after an Israeli withdrawal is contingent on two factors: the circumstances under which the withdrawal occurs, and the response of key regional and international actors—including the United States. In this study, we have identified three possible scenarios for an Israeli withdrawal:

• Unilateral withdrawal without any coordination with the actors on the ground.

• Withdrawal with tacit or informal understandings about who will assume security responsibility for areas vacated by Israel.

• Withdrawal in the context of agreements between Israel and Lebanon, and between Israel and Syria.

Without U.S. diplomatic intervention, the most likely outcome of a unilateral withdrawal would be that Hizballah, splinter groups affiliated with it, or Palestinian rejectionists—acting under Syrian and Iranian pressure—launch cross-border attacks on Israel. Lebanon will leave the "liberated area" in the hands of Hizballah, and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) will not deploy in the South. Israel's likely response would be intense artillery fire and air strikes. If the cross-border attacks are serious enough the Israeli targets could well include 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, unilateral withdrawal could instead lead to a shaky standoff with only sporadic cross-border attacks.

At the other extreme, were withdrawal to come in the context of agreements between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, the

most likely outcome would be a dramatic reduction of cross-border attacks and a reassertion of Lebanese government authority in the South. A destabilizing factor would be Lebanon's strong grievance against Israel over the Palestinian refugees. The solidity of the peace would depend on support from the international community, whether the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is adequately reinforced, and whether Israel's deterrent capabilities are strengthened. Meanwhile, Hizballah or splinter groups would continue to carry out terrorist attacks in Israel either directly or through support to Palestinian rejectionist groups in Lebanon or in the West Bank and Gaza.

Exactly how each of the various regional actors—Hizballah, the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, UNIFIL, Lebanon in conjunction with Syria, and Israel—will react to each of the three scenarios is detail in the study, along with implications for U.S. policy

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