Israel's Security and U.S.-Israeli Defense Cooperation

May 6, 1999

Brief Analysis

Lebanon: The problem of greatest concern for an Israeli defense minister is southern Lebanon. Dealing with the problem effectively requires correctly identifying it: Syria is waging a proxy war against Israel through Hizballah. It is inappropriate to regard Lebanon as a sovereign state independent of Syrian control or to view Hizballah as a group of freedom fighters attempting to liberate southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation. Despite all of the trappings of sovereignty, everything that happens in Lebanon is dictated by Syria and nothing happens there without either Syrian direction or approval. And while Hizballah's ideological inspiration is Iran, it gets its weapons via Damascus. Hizballah, therefore, could not perform its operations against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Lebanon if Syria did not want it to do so.

If Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad is serious about peace with Israel, he should not escalate tension in southern Lebanon. He may, however, be relying on the logic that continuing IDF casualties and civilian concern for Israeli soldiers will push Israel to accede to Syrian demands -- including a withdrawal from the Golan Heights -- in return for an end to the fighting in southern Lebanon. This logic is mistaken. Yielding major concessions in the face of small groups like Hizballah would set a dangerous precedent. The best way to promote the Syrian-Israeli peace process is first to stabilize the situation on the Lebanese border. Israel is prepared to withdraw immediately provided it receives the necessary security assurances -- that terrorist activity against Israeli towns and citizens will not be launched from southern Lebanon. Syrian approval is a prerequisite for these assurances, and Syria is not prepared to grant its approval. One can hope Asad will take into account his weakened position economically and militarily, as well as his political isolation, when he decides what he is prepared to do and prepared not to do. Unfortunately, concern over succession is higher on Asad's priority list than is making peace with Israel.

Ballistic Missiles: The thirty-nine Scud missiles that rained down on Israel during the Gulf War reminded Israel that ballistic missiles were a new dimension of the conflict in the Middle East. Israel's air superiority could no longer act as the guarantor for protecting Israeli citizens from above -- the best air forces and aircraft in the world cannot intercept these missiles in flight.

The ballistic missiles being developed by Iran threaten not just Israel. With aid from North Korea and Russia, Iran is developing ballistic missiles with ranges well beyond the distance between Iran and Israel. Iran is also working on developing nonconventional warheads to fit on these ballistic missiles, which could then threaten many countries besides Israel. It is not easy to apply the leverage needed to get Russia both to stop the technology flow to Iran and to forgo the hard currency it would earn in the process; the United States is the only country that possesses such leverage and can bring about a positive result.

Systems to intercept ballistic missiles in flight were not pursued during the Cold War, for they were viewed as destabilizing to the equilibrium established between East and West. Now, however, the presence of rogue regimes has rendered interception essential. The Arrow program -- an Israeli program with U.S. cooperation and partial funding -- is probably the most advanced intercept system at the moment. These programs deserve continued and increased support. One idea being discussed is intercepting missiles early in flight -- near the launch site -- rather

than upon reentry into the atmosphere. Meanwhile, Israel is being approached by countries interested in acquiring the Arrow system because they feel they are potentially within the range of rogue missiles.

The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process: The Middle East peace process moves at an almost glacial pace owing to differences in religion, culture, and interests. The drastic changes people would like to see to bridge these gaps take more than five years to occur. Even with the best intentions on both sides, elements of the Wye River Memorandum were almost impossible for either side to implement in a short amount of time. On the Palestinian side, the fight against terrorism requires that the Palestinian Authority (PA) dismantle the terrorism infrastructure, going well beyond what it has already done in combating individual acts of terrorism and cooperating with Israel to prevent certain terrorist acts. On the Israeli side, territorial withdrawals would be very difficult for any Israeli government to implement in a short time, and they are nearly impossible to undertake right before an election. Many of the dates in the process may move. What is important is that the process move forward in the right direction.

As for the issue of settlements, the existing settlements have not increased in number for several years. An issue has been raised about the "hilltop outposts" which probably will not last and do not change the situation on the ground. The important settlement issue is not those outposts but the large settlements -- actually towns and cities -- which nobody realistically anticipates will be handed over to the PA.

On a positive note toward reaching an accommodation, the extent of economic integration between the PA economy and the Israeli economy is greater than that between any two European Union countries.

The Oslo agreements also hold an important lesson for Israeli politicians: a one-vote majority is not sufficient to make decisions that have long-range consequences for Israel's future. The one-vote majority that passed Oslo II led to the change in government in the 1996 elections. This problem could be avoided by a national unity government, which would command a larger majority for its decisions. This would itself be a positive contribution to the peace process.

Israel's Election System: Israel's experience since 1996 shows that a two-ballot election -- one ballot for prime minister and one to elect the Knesset -- does not work well, given Israel's proportional representation system. One negative effect of the direct-election law has been the unprecedented large number of politicians who have switched parties. A party is about principles and should not be something one changes from day to day. Another problem has been that the two-ballot system weakens the two larger parties -- Labor and Likud -- to the advantage of the smaller ones, as the average voter uses the second (Knesset) ballot to vote for a particular constituency group. After the 1996 election, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had only twenty-two Likud members of Knesset as the foundation of his coalition. This proved insufficient to hold the government. The coming election may further weaken Labor and Likud and strengthen the smaller parties.

One potential benefit of this outcome is that it might necessitate the formation of a national unity government, if either major party is too weak to hold a coalition on its own. This national unity government could then, among other things, repeal the direct election law. Any changes in the election system should, however, be done slowly. Drastic reforms can lead to unforeseen, negative consequences. In this vein, Israel should not get rid of proportional representation but reform it, perhaps by raising the minimum threshold for representation in the Knesset. In general, anything that strengthens the two major parties is a step in the right direction.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Adam Frey.

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