

A misstep away from disaster

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With violence on Israel's northern (and southern) borders set on a seemingly escalatory spiral, there are real fears Israel's next move in this conflict will be a ground invasion of Lebanon. This certainly cannot be ruled out. But there are good reasons Israel will try to avoid this option if it can.

One key reason is the objective of the military operation. What appears - and indeed is - a disproportionate retaliation is not simply an exercise in political machismo. There is method to Israel's seeming madness.

Israel is attempting to deliver two blows to Hezbollah: one military and one political. Militarily, it hopes to diminish, if not destroy, Hezbollah's ability to fire rockets into Israel, largely through the use of the Israeli Air Force. Whether this is possible or not is debatable, though it appears Israel's Chief of Staff - the first air force officer Israel has ever had in that position - seems to think it can be done.

Politically, Israel hopes that by targeting infrastructure it will turn ordinary Lebanese against Hezbollah and force the Lebanese Government to take control of the southern border region with Israel. This is harder than it sounds, given that the Lebanese army is no match for Hezbollah's battle-hardened militia and Iranian-supplied weapons.

But a growing number of Lebanese have begun asking why Hezbollah should be allowed to maintain its own militia when other political factions have long since disbanded theirs and the *raison d'être* for such a force - the Israeli military presence in the south - disappeared in 2000. Israel would be hoping that forcing Lebanon to pay a heavy price for the militia's latest attack will encourage domestic moves for Hezbollah's disarmament to snowball.

Whether this occurs or not depends on the price Israel exacts from Lebanon's long-suffering people and economy. Too little and nothing will change. Too heavy a price and people will forget Hezbollah started the shooting in the first place.

Incidentally, this is the reason the Bush Administration has so far done little to stem the fighting beyond issuing calls for "restraint". It does not reflect weakness in Washington, as some commentators have suggested, but shared US-Israeli objectives with respect to Hezbollah's disarmament and political marginalisation. It is also, to some degree, a continuation of a longstanding US approach in these situations.

In 1982 the Reagan administration sat by and watched Israel invade Lebanon, only becoming alarmed once it realised that the Israeli government's real objectives were more far-reaching than it had originally been led to believe. In 1996 the Clinton administration did little to restrain then prime minister Shimon Peres's military campaign against Hezbollah, until an Israeli artillery shell killed about 100 civilians sheltering in a UN compound. Likewise, Washington knows now precisely what it is not doing.

So far the strategy seems to be working, albeit at the cost of many civilian lives - Lebanese and Israeli. Beyond the reflexive condemnation of Israel across Lebanon's political factions, it was noteworthy that in his address to the nation over the weekend, the Lebanese Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora, made the point that his country could not grow and develop if the Government was "the last to know" about Hezbollah's military operations but the "first to pay the price".

The problem for Israel (and the US), however, is that its strategy is always going to be one misdirected artillery shell or one civilian massacre away from disaster. And this is why a ground

invasion would be risky and potentially counterproductive. To send masses of troops across the border would revive Hezbollah's role as a "resistance" movement in the eyes of most Lebanese.

Nor would it do much for Lebanon's present Government, viewed by Washington as refreshingly anti-Syrian. Indeed, an Israeli ground invasion might well provide the Syrians with a political opening into Lebanon, and maybe even a military one.

As a patron of sorts of Hezbollah, Damascus would be shedding few tears about the damage the movement's actions have done to the Siniora Government. And while it has studiously avoided doing anything that would compel Israel to extend its military campaign to Syrian targets, it would undoubtedly welcome an opportunity to reassert itself in Lebanon, after the assassination of prime minister Rafiq Hariri precipitated a popular and successful Lebanese movement for Syrian military withdrawal.

Likewise for Iran, Hezbollah's key patron, the present violence poses both opportunities and risks. On the one hand it deflects attention from Iran's own difficulties with the international community over its nuclear program. On the other hand, Iran would not want to see Hezbollah wiped out by an Israeli ground invasion, thereby losing one of its key levers of influence with the United States and Israel.

Of course, the problem with making predications in the Middle East is that dispassionate analysis is often overtaken by events that stir passions. There is a risk that Hezbollah will cross a red line by using longer-range rockets to strike at Tel Aviv, or a shorter-range strike might cause a large number of casualties. Either way, the longer the attacks go on, the more doubts will grow about Israel's present approach and the greater the chances of a ground invasion. Indeed, the real danger is that this is precisely what Hezbollah is trying to invite.

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