

ISRAEL VS HEZBOLLAH *Hagai Segal*

Dangerous days in the Middle East

As the conflict across the Israeli-Lebanese border threatens to explode into all-out war, attention naturally focuses on the likely intentions and strategy of the two key protagonists – Israel, and the Lebanese Shi'ite Hezbollah guerillas.

The current conflagration erupted after Hezbollah, in an attack across the border into Israel, captured two Israeli soldiers and killed eight others. The timing of the raid, after months of calm in the border region, could not have been more deliberate. As the world watched the growing tension and bloodshed in Gaza, Hezbollah acted – no doubt with the blessing of its patron, Iran – to radically affect the regional dynamic.

Hezbollah's desire was to re-energise its mystique as Israel's regional nemesis. That reputation was built on its guerilla war against Israeli forces in Lebanon, which resulted in their departure from the country in 2000; that,

and the fact that they are the only Arab element willing to stand up for Palestinians against "the Zionist invaders".

Hezbollah today is a potent and technologically proficient military force. Iran and Syria have supplied it with the radar-guided, land-to-sea missiles and mobile, medium-range rockets that it has used in the past week.

As a consequence, Israel's strategy goes well beyond the retrieval of its kidnapped soldiers; it is determined to nullify the geostrategic threat posed by Hezbollah's rocket arsenal. Defence Minister Amir Peretz has confirmed Israel's intent to create what would amount to an unmanned buffer zone in the immediate border area.

But beyond that, Israel's medium-term strategy will be to help create a context in which the international community will rein in Hezbollah – something Lebanon cannot and will not do. Efforts in that direction are

gathering pace, with the idea of a "stabilisation force" being pushed by the Group of Eight leading industrialised countries and the United Nations.

What is being sought is a force with real teeth. Addressing the House of Commons this week, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was at pains to emphasise that the role of any such force would be not just to bring order to Lebanon, but to stop such a crisis occurring again. For that to happen, Hezbollah must be disarmed – as required by the 20-month-old UN Security Council Resolution 1559.

But any international force, especially one with such a mandate, would bring with it a significant danger. Hezbollah, other local Islamists and even local Palestinian militants may see it as a western invasion under the guise of a peacekeeping force.

In the interim, the likelihood of a major Israeli ground offensive into Lebanon remains low. Israel does not

wish to antagonise an international community that, for once, is expressing understanding for an Israeli military adventure in Lebanon. And few Israelis want a repeat of the 1982 Lebanon war – Israel's Vietnam.

However, the volatility of the current crisis cannot be overstated, and such an Israeli offensive cannot be ruled out. Neither Israel nor Hezbollah is budging from its core demands: Israel wants the unconditional release of the captured soldiers; Hezbollah wants to exchange them for prisoners in Israeli jails. Neither side accepts the other's conditions.

Tensions will increase, leaving only a small window of opportunity for diplomatic intervention before the crisis escalates. These are dangerous times indeed.

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