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Prospects for Mediation of the Lebanon Crisis

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The U.S. Institute of Peace was the venue for a roundtable session in mid-July to discuss the prospects for mediation of the current crisis in Lebanon. The discussants included former White House and State Department officials, as well as regional experts with experience in mediating previous conflicts between Israel and Lebanon. This USIPeace Briefing highlights the central points made during that discussion and does not represent the views of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

Participants at the meeting agreed that prospects for an international mediation effort in the near future are bleak due to the dynamic of escalation and absence of compelling channels for mediation. Among their conclusions:

- Israel will continue its campaign as long as it believes that it can use military means to weaken Hezbollah. However, Israel is unlikely to achieve that goal militarily, and current operations could achieve the opposite effect of strengthening Hezbollah's political standing in the country and the region.
- A mediated solution is unlikely to emerge in the near term despite growing recognition that the operation will fail to achieve its stated objectives. The conflict is likely to continue to escalate because there are no acceptable, credible interlocutors who can bring the parties to the table--at least not until a humanitarian crisis or dramatic military confrontation compels international intervention.
- If and when parties finally reach the negotiating table, mediators are likely to be confronted by adversaries whose positions have been radicalized by the fighting. They will also have to address demands for a more comprehensive solution than simply an end to the fighting and the return of the captured Israeli soldiers.

Impact of Military Operations on Hezbollah

Israel's objective for the military offensive against Hezbollah is to destroy its military infrastructure, generate local resistance against Hezbollah, and strengthen the Lebanese state's capacity to control it.

However, the consensus at the meeting was that Israel's strictly military operation underestimates the complex nature of Hezbollah. Israel's objectives cannot be achieved through military force, they said, and the military campaign has the potential to bolster Hezbollah rather than weaken it. Hezbollah is designed to resist dismantlement by conventional means, and will win a



An Israeli soldier carries artillery shells at an army

psychological victory just by withstanding the onslaught.

position near the Lebanese border in northern Israel on July 27. (Courtesy: AP/Wide World)

The assumption that Hezbollah's supporters would criticize it for dragging them into a destructive war is "wishful thinking," participants agreed. On the contrary, Israeli actions have radicalized many Lebanese, including those who may have been initially critical of Hezbollah's unilateral action who now hold Israel responsible for the subsequent destruction of their country. Attitudes are even more inflamed among the Arab public throughout the region, which regard Hezbollah actions as an admirable response to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, and as a symbol of solidarity with the Palestinians in the ongoing fighting in Gaza.



Lebanese airport workers unload aid supplies from an Egyptian military plane on July 28. (Courtesy: AP/Wide World)

Israel's campaign therefore has enhanced Hezbollah's relevance as a regional player as well as a factor in Lebanese politics. Although much has been made of the condemnation of Hezbollah's action by several Arab states, there has been little progress in leveraging these statements to have an impact on Hezbollah's freedom of maneuver. These governments are unlikely to sustain their criticism in face of continued Israeli attacks and media coverage that highlights the suffering of Lebanese civilians.

Participants also agreed that Israel's military campaign has weakened both the will and capacity of the Lebanese government to confront Hezbollah and to deliver on Lebanon's "project of peace,"--that is, on the process of national reconciliation and efforts to integrate Hezbollah into a national framework. The attacks on Lebanese civilians and infrastructure will deter moderates from advocating positions of compromise and from pushing for the implementation of UN Resolution 1559, a stance now identified with the Israeli agenda. Finally, Israeli military intervention will only hinder the Lebanese army's capacity to take control of those zones.

Even those aspects of Hezbollah's influence that are more vulnerable to military attack, such as its military infrastructure and access to weaponry, can only be degraded permanently if steps are taken to prevent it from being re-supplied by its allies. The military campaign must be complemented by measures to address the transfer of weapons and supplies to Hezbollah from Syria and Iran. In addition, given the increased sophistication of weaponry available to Hezbollah, a more comprehensive solution is needed than simply removing Hezbollah's forces from a buffer zone along the border.

A more effective approach would address the social and economic base upon which Hezbollah is built by drawing Hezbollah's traditional constituency away from the movement through alternative social and economic programs. It is also important to recognize the dual nature of Hezbollah as both a Lebanese and a regional player, and caution against viewing Hezbollah simply as an Iranian or Syrian proxy. Hezbollah has its own strategic goals, even if some of these may serve others' interests in the region.

Replacing Mediation with Escalation

Participants noted that these observations about the limits of a military campaign are not new; many of them, in fact, are based on previous Israeli military engagements in Lebanon. In the past, however, mediation proved a viable alternative as parties recognized that the military option alone would not achieve their objectives. This time, even if the parties recognize the risks posed to their strategic objectives by the military operation, there are no shared goals among the players that would encourage compromise or



even communication.

Smoke rises above the southern Lebanese village of Kham after an Israeli strike.
(Courtesy: AP/Wide World)

For example, following hostilities in Lebanon in 1996, efforts to restore the status quo ante were successful partly because the parties were engaged in a peacemaking enterprise involving the Syrians. Today, there is no ongoing peace process put at risk by Hezbollah's actions and Israel's response. Instead, the dominant U.S. agenda has been to isolate Syria and Iran and to minimize their influence on internal Lebanese affairs. The Arab states have a convergent interest in preventing Iran from becoming the "gate to resolution of Arab issues." The result is that no one is prepared to deal with the very actors who could apply pressure on Hezbollah, which leaves escalation as the parties' only means of pursuing their objectives.

Despite dim prospects for effective mediation at this stage of the conflict, several suggestions emerged for future peace efforts:

- Assign a lead role to the Lebanese government, which has the most to lose from a prolonged conflict.
- Design the mediation team to be effective in this context, understanding that a UN-led effort may be more acceptable than a U.S. one.
- Use as a framework the 1989 Taif Accords, which received the support of all the Lebanese factions and which provide a basis for addressing Israeli security needs.
- Consider whether a package deal addressing the ongoing crisis in Gaza and the West Bank would facilitate a resolution to the Lebanese conflict, by offering progress on the Palestinian issue as an incentive for Hezbollah to make concessions in Lebanon.
- Structure the role of Hezbollah in a broad reconstruction effort in a manner to prevent it from capitalizing on a military defeat.

Progress toward peace will require the collaborative engagement of the UN, the United States, the EU, and key Arab states. At the moment, prospects of deploying an international force in southern Lebanon are increasing, but expectations of an immediate ceasefire remain low. A grim logic has set in: continued escalation will probably exacerbate the humanitarian crisis or lead to a military standoff, ultimately compelling these actors to intervene. But the longer they wait, the greater the risk that the prevailing dynamic of escalation and radicalization will make a settlement harder to secure.

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