

The Israel-Hezbollah Ceasefire: Aftermath Or Interlude?

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Military commanders and historians often speak of "the fog of war"—the vague and uncertain perception of what is actually going on in the midst of an armed conflict. Southern Lebanon now lies in such a fog; the real nature of the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, along with its tenuous and ambiguous ceasefire, appears shadowy at best. In addition, Western news outlets have left many in doubt of what really occurred and what is happening in the wider region.

Hezbollah's provocation of Israel was not solely that terrorist organization's idea. Rather, Hezbollah's killing of eight Israeli soldiers and kidnapping of another two, plus the rocket attacks on northern Israel, coincided with Iran—Hezbollah's creator and primary patron—being under international scrutiny for its nuclear program. Hezbollah's incitement of Israel was diligently calculated, coming after several years of stockpiling weapons and supplies in hardened fortifications. Thus, even as Iran needed a distraction and another lever to pull to demonstrate its virility in the region, Hezbollah was pleased to start a war with the "Zionist entity" in which *it* determined the place and time.

Hezbollah's aim was simple: 1) inflict as many casualties on Israel—military or civilian—as possible, and 2) survive the inevitable Israeli onslaught. The latter was more important than the former, and the fact that Hezbollah withstood the Israeli counteroffensive without being entirely demolished made it feel as if it were victorious—despite not securing a single inch of Israeli ground and losing several times as many fighters as the IDF (Israeli Defense Force). Hezbollah's aim was to pick a fight, and then prove that it could survive. It is badly battered now, but it achieved that objective. Thus—facts notwithstanding—it has claimed victory, and the dictators of Iran and Syria both likewise claimed credit for defeating not just Israel, but America as well.

By far, Israel had the more complicated position. Its citizens demanded it stop the daily Katyusha rocket attacks and recover its kidnapped soldiers, but because events were playing out in the court of international opinion, it had to destroy Hezbollah while inflicting minimal civilian casualties. Hezbollah was under no such restraints, and in fact, civilian casualties—Israeli or Lebanese—played into its hands. Moreover, Hezbollah became notorious for hiding weapons and fighters—targets of Israeli strikes—in private homes.

Additionally, the clock was ticking for Israel because of the region's conventional wisdom that the IDF is an irresistible force. Israel felt a need to wrap matters up quickly and cleanly with a crushing blow, while Hezbollah benefited (in terms of reputation and respect) the longer events dragged out without a decisive Israeli victory. Due to its demographics, Israel could afford neither a prolonged ground war of attrition, nor an Iraq-style occupation and insurgency.

Under these conditions, the leadership of both Israel and Hezbollah calculated that the ceasefire was in their respective best interests. For Hezbollah, it was better to quit while it was ahead. Though battered, it had survived the Israeli air strikes and remained capable of firing rockets on northern Israel. Their forces in southern Lebanon, in their fortified bunkers, had resisted the IDF troops sent in to clear them out and had caused IDF casualties. Through its shrewd definition of success, Hezbollah could claim that it had done what no other Arab fighting force ever had. It was better for Hezbollah to cease in this state than to be eradicated in a long conflict.

On the other side, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert calculated that the cost of sending IDF ground troops against fortified Hezbollah positions had become greater than enduring the relatively ineffective rocket attacks—and the cost to the IDF would only increase. Katyusha rockets, though dangerous, do not threaten Israel's existence, but a war of attrition in southern Lebanon could certainly wear Israel down and make it vulnerable. Thus, a ceasefire would allow Israeli leaders to regroup without conceding defeat.

Israel remains in southern Lebanon, and will remain until an international peacekeeping force arrives. However, the ceasefire agreement contains so many conditions and loopholes that Israel may well stay indefinitely—or at least until it can finish the job. It can occupy southern Lebanon without the threat of further rocket attacks against northern Israel or guerilla attacks against IDF troops, for any such aggression would nullify the ceasefire and allow Israel to continue its destruction of the terrorist entity.

Will the ceasefire hold? The ceasefire agreement—U.N. Resolution 1701—calls for 15,000 peacekeepers to be deployed alongside Lebanese army forces by November 4. So far, not only has the "international community" not found its 15,000 troops, but also those nations that *have* pledged troops have done so under the proviso that Hezbollah voluntarily disarm first. Hezbollah refuses to disarm, asserting that it must protect southern Lebanon from "Israeli aggression." Since Israel will not withdraw its troops until U.N. peacekeepers are in place, a perfect catch-22 exists. It is doubtful that 1701 will be implemented by November 4, at which point all bets are off.

That said, however, neither side has a compelling reason to resume fighting. Militarily weakened, Hezbollah has also lost much of its popular support as citizens return to their destroyed homes. Israel is no longer threatened with rockets, and Olmert is busy enough with post-action inquiries that he is unlikely to initiate further action just for the sake of the IDF's reputation.

In the background stands Iran's President Ahmadinejad—flush with success—refusing to stop enriching uranium, influencing Iraqi Shi'a to intensify their belligerence, claiming victory against a "weakened" Israel, and even challenging U.S. President George W. Bush to a televised debate. Clearly, he feels things are going his way. Hezbollah has proven to be a useful tool, to be used again when the time is right.