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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Getting Hezbollah to Behave

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ONE year after Israel's devastating 34-day war with Hezbollah, it seems as though both sides are readying themselves for another round. Recent statements by American and Israeli officials, as well as the United Nations, assert that Hezbollah has largely re-equipped and refortified, compliments of Syria and Iran. On the other side of the border, the news media report that the Israeli Defense Force has done the same, with, of course, the help of American military aid.

Given what may be a regional movement toward conflict, the United States and Israel would do well to pause and take stock of the nonviolent alternatives that Hezbollah itself says would lead it to shun military action. Indeed, the best way to contain Hezbollah may be to give it some of what it says it wants.

Since its official founding in 1985, Hezbollah has seen its argument, not to mention its capacity, for violence repeatedly buoyed by what the group calls the "open wars" waged by Israel against it (and invariably against the rest of Lebanon, too) in 1993, 1996 and again in 2006.

In contrast, when the confrontational approach has receded — most notably after Israel ended its 22-year occupation of Lebanon in 2000 — Hezbollah's ability and desire to use violence receded as well.

And therein lies an alternative strategy available to Israel and the United States: gradually and peacefully containing Hezbollah violence by undermining public support for resistance operations.

For without widespread public support from Lebanese of all religious persuasions, Muslim and Christian alike — especially now that the Syrian enforcers have ostensibly left Lebanon — violent operations would not only be extremely difficult, Hezbollah leaders acknowledge, but also domestically hazardous for their Shiite base.

This is precisely the reason that Hezbollah, since the 2000 Israeli withdrawal, has reduced its overt military presence and taken part in Lebanese politics in ways that it once would have avoided as corrupting or unnecessary, including a cabinet portfolio in 2005 and a surprisingly sturdy alliance in 2006 with the main Christian leader, Gen. Michel Aoun. This may be also why Hezbollah has been so uncharacteristically quiet in the confrontation between the Lebanese Army, which is enjoying a surge of public support at the moment, and Qaeda-inspired militants at the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr al Bared in northern Lebanon.

Undermine the rationale for violence directed at Israel — a rationale which, like it or not, is accepted by a great many Lebanese — and you have gone a long way toward reducing Hezbollah's ability to act violently

both along the border and even farther afield (that is if the American assertions of Hezbollah involvement in Iraq are to be believed).

In the meantime, you will have also pushed Hezbollah further into the muck of “normal” Lebanese politicking – an unflattering arena in which the Party of God is already uncharacteristically flip-flopping a- round, hurling accusations of “collaboration” at one moment while at the next suggesting the formation of a “national unity” government with some of those same “collaborators.”

For this oblique form of containment to work, however, the United States must first address what Hezbollah’s leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, has long termed the “four bleeding wounds” that engender public support for his party’s use of violence against Israel.

These are the handing over of maps of the land mines the Israelis left in South Lebanon during the occupation; the return of all Lebanese prisoners; an end to Israeli overflights of Lebanon (which are arguably unnecessary in any case); and, finally, Israel’s relinquishing of the disputed Shebaa Farms area, which, according to a report last week in the Israeli daily Haaretz, the United Nations may declare as Lebanese by the end of the month.

As Mr. Nasrallah put it shortly after the last successful prisoner exchange with Israel in 2004, “These fools do not learn from their past mistakes: when they withdrew from Lebanon, they continued to occupy the Shebaa Farms and kept our brothers in custody.” By doing that, Mr. Nasrallah said of the Israelis, “they opened the door for us.”

Of course, one could argue that even if these “bleeding wounds” were removed, Hezbollah would simply invent other excuses to justify attacks. That’s certainly plausible, given that the Party of God views “resistance” as a fundamental principle, but the point is that these new excuses would undoubtedly be viewed as such: as false choices presented by one party bent on accomplishing its own narrow, even non-Lebanese interests.

And that possibility is one that would only further restrict Hezbollah’s actions, just as it finds itself already restricted by its ever-expanding web of political alliances.

By heeding Mr. Nasrallah’s advice and removing the “bleeding wounds,” the United States and its allies in Europe could then help to unleash exactly the kind of broad-based political, economic and military reform that would further convince Hezbollah and its supporters that the use of violence has become both unnecessary and, ultimately, counterproductive.

In the process, Israel and the United States too might also finally begin to learn some of the lessons of their past and present mistakes in Lebanon.

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