

FROM WAR TO DETERRENCE? ISRAEL-HEZBOLLAH CONFLICT SINCE 2006

Jean-Loup Samaan

For 7 years, the border area between Israel and Lebanon has witnessed calm and stability. At first sight, this has all the appearances of a paradox. The 2006 war between the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the Lebanese organization, Hezbollah, was followed by neither a peace agreement nor merely a diplomatic process. Both sides prepared their forces to wage the next war, and have also been confronted with major changes in the distribution of power in the Middle East caused by the so-called “Arab Spring.”

The IDF started planning a rapid high intensity military campaign targeting South Lebanon and strategic locations inside Beirut (namely its southern suburbs, *Dahya Janoubia*, which are controlled by Hezbollah). Meanwhile, Hezbollah not only rearmed but also increased the lethality of its weaponry. Hezbollah also trained its militiamen in a fashion that approached the quality of Special Forces training in neighboring states. In particular, Hezbollah’s missile and rocket strike force is now able to reach major urban areas in Israel.

Against all odds, the area comprising north Israel and south Lebanon remained very quiet these last years. This monograph argues that the key to understanding this paradox is the game of deterrence played by both Israel and Hezbollah. Specifically, an informal deterrence dialogue has been developing between Israel and Hezbollah, and that strategic stability prevailed because of this indirect exchange. Because both sides understood that a next round would be devastating and that each could not entirely eliminate the threat of retaliation in a first wave of deterrence, the solution has been to bargain deterrence, meaning to deter the other party from attacking its homeland by pledging a full-scale retaliation.

But to say that stability has been preserved between Israel and Hezbollah thanks to deterrence does not mean that this is a perennial state. Such a deterrence system remains precarious. The stand-off between Israel and Hezbollah reached this level only through specific measures and conditions that can be reversed in the future. In particular, exogenous factors such as the unravelling of the Syrian civil war or the developments of the Iranian nuclear issue can jeopardize this equilibrium. Moreover, the study of Lebanese politics emphasizes the uncertainties related to the logic of deterrence with a nonstate actor like Hezbollah. Therefore this monograph offers a cautious look at deterrence theories in the Middle East and reminds all that such situations are neither naturally engendered nor eternally established.

This matters for practitioners in the U.S. national security community. In particular, they should be mindful of the potential ramifications of the crisis in Syria or the Iranian conundrum over the Israel-Hezbollah struggle. We have seen, for instance, that Israeli air strikes in Syria in the spring of 2013 did not intend to escalate the conflict but rather to disconnect it from the Lebanese theater. Likewise, the current and future role of missiles and rockets in Hezbollah’s strategic culture gives an important meaning to American-Israeli cooperation in the field of missile defense system.

Understanding of all the implicit rules of the game in this deterrence system may prove crucial for U.S. decisionmakers when addressing on-going events. If a conflict was to occur again in the Levant, and given the readiness of both parties, it is likely to be wider in its scale than the 2006 war. This is the very reason why the U.S. Government needs to be fully aware of

the inner logic of this conflict so, if necessary, it can rapidly identify ways to deescalate such.

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