

Call It a Victory and Give Diplomacy a Chance

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I have published a number of articles on the Israeli-Hezbollah/Lebanon conflagration. They were highly critical of Israeli resort to excessive force, and questioned both the utility and morality of these actions. Unsurprisingly, these arguments invoked a fair amount of criticism. Of these, two questions are probably the most pointed and contribute to a continued debate on these matters. First, what should Israel have done instead of the current military campaign? And, second, what could it do now? Monday morning quarterbacking comes easy in such crises, but proposing creative alternatives to the current Israeli policy is much more difficult and demanding.

It is true that leadership and responsibility often require tough choices and even tougher action. Sometimes these actions are painful both to their targets and to their initiators. Policy is the art of the possible. Political leaders often choose the least of all evils, and their solutions are almost always imperfect. Trying to come up with ideal and “clean” solutions to political problems often leads to greater calamities than finding an imperfect but reasonably good response.

One may argue—as many of my critics did—that Israel’s response was an imperfect but reasonable solution. So far, Israel has not re-invaded Lebanon, at least not on a mass scale. Its aerial strikes were surgical for the most part and focused on infrastructural targets or on suspected Hezbollah hideouts. Its ground campaign was minimal and focused on attacking Hezbollah strongholds. Although the death-toll among Lebanese civilians was high, it was not exorbitant, considering the scope of Hezbollah attacks on Israeli population centers. Israel had to re-establish its deterrence which seems to have eroded since its withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. This need to balance between a resolute action and the preservation of the fragile government in Lebanon dictated the Israeli choice of strategy. Would it have been better to launch an all out ground offensive or to be less selective in the choice of targets? Alternatively—should Israel have avoided a military strike altogether thereby granting the Hezbollah a major political victory that would have only tempted it to escalate its terrorist attacks? Between the choice of a massive land invasion and of serving the other cheek, the limited military campaign was arguably the most reasonable thing Israel could do under the circumstances.

What can Israel do in the near future, given that it had already embarked on this strategy of limited aerial offensive? One may reasonably argue that even if this was not the optimal strategy, abandoning the campaign before any of its objectives have been accomplished would further erode Israel’s deterrence, thereby encouraging further aggression. An early cease fire would be bad not only for Israel, but for the western world in general; it would encourage fanatics to launch more terrorist attacks. Even if the initial strategy was ill-advised, abandoning it now would be even more so.

Both arguments deserve serious consideration. Decisive military action is not always deplorable and immoral. Rather, it is deplorable and immoral when it is unrelated to the political objectives it seeks to serve. An effective crisis management strategy is one that combines the threat or use of force with creative and effective diplomacy. Israel has

exercised the former elements and has nearly abandoned the latter one. It is time that both Israel and the international community gave diplomacy a chance. Returning to a military campaign is always feasible, but the damage caused by the absence of diplomacy and negotiation may well be irreparable.

I believe that had Israel's first reaction been a combination of diplomatic pressure on Lebanon and a threat of force if diplomacy failed, it could have accomplished much more than it did through the disproportionate use of force, and this could have been significantly less costly to Israel as well. Yet, whether or not this would have been the case is something we would never know. Paradoxically, however, Israel has another chance at proactive diplomacy, and—in some ways—the time now may be even riper for taking this chance than a week ago.

Israel, the United States, the Western World, and the moderate Arab states have all a vested interest in a stable, prosperous, and democratic Lebanon. So do most Lebanese people. Lebanon's Prime Minister Seniora himself noted that Hezbollah has become a major problem for Lebanon, forming a state within a state. Continuing with the campaign would only serve to defeat this objective. Israel has made its point during two weeks of massive use of force and severe destruction to Lebanese infrastructure.

Now is the time for Israel to unilaterally declare a cease fire and send an ultimatum to the international community: act to bring about the full implementation of U.N. Resolution 1559, and disarm all militias in Lebanon. This should be done by an international force made up mostly of Arab troops and commanded by an Egyptian or Jordanian officer. Allow a short but reasonable time for such a force to form and carry out its mission. Hezbollah may be allowed to operate as a legitimate political party in a democratic Lebanon, but there can be only one central authority in that country. In the course of this process it would be possible to arrange for an exchange of the abducted Israeli soldiers for Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails. This was done in the past.

If this works out, both sides could declare—at least a partial—victory. Israel could argue that its demonstration of force jump started a diplomatic process that resulted in an outcome favorable to its interests. The Hezbollah could argue that it got the exchange of prisoners it had wanted all along. Most important, the international community and the Arab world could score a major diplomatic achievement in conflict resolution by removing the root causes of the conflict and bringing peace and stability to Lebanon and northern Israel.

If this diplomatic move does not work out, renewed violence is always a fallback option. When the Eshkol government—at the height of the May-June 1967 crisis—when there was a real clear and present danger to Israel—decided to give diplomacy another chance, Zalman Aran, then Minister of Education explained the decision: “I wasn't sure it [diplomacy] would prevent any war—I had no illusion. But if there was one chance—we must find it. The war would not run away and diplomatic activity would continue. Nasser is not the only one who can exploit time.”¹ If diplomacy fails, Israel would have a valid case in arguing that it had exhausted diplomacy, and that the failure of the Lebanese government, the Arab world, and the international community necessitates Israel to bring this crisis to a

¹ Cited by Michael Oren. *Six Days of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 124.

decisive military outcome. As I pointed out previously, Israel has little to lose and a great deal to gain by shifting from military options to diplomacy. Now, after nearly five hundred Lebanese and fifty Israelis dead, scores of wounded and over a million refugees and evacuees on both sides, this is more pertinent than a week ago.