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Israel's Response: A Strategic Misstep with Global Implications?

Kumar Ramakrishna, Tom Quiggin and Hoo Tiang Boon*

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ISRAEL'S rapid response to the capture of three of its soldiers has been strong. After the abduction of an Israeli soldier by the Palestinian radical group Hamas on June 25, Israel felt compelled to launch aggressive military offensives in the Gaza Strip. Then approximately two weeks later, Hezbollah in Lebanon captured another two Israeli soldiers.

Israel's response in Lebanon proved to be even harsher than in Gaza. The Israeli military bombarded Lebanon and enforced an air and sea blockade. When Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that Israel would resort to "extreme tactics" and "very, very, very painful" responses; he was not exaggerating.

The powerful Israeli armed forces have long believed that the threat of a tough response is needed to convince its enemies that the country will not be cowered. In the current fighting, Tel Aviv in all likelihood believes that a demonstration of raw power would wrest the initiative from Hamas and Hezbollah, and put them under pressure to capitulate.

To be sure, Prime Minister Olmert's hand has been strengthened by a strong level of public support: Israeli public opinion has been hawkish since the abductions. What should not be overlooked is the fact that there is also conscription in Israel - so the abductions of soldiers have touched a very raw nerve. As one assessment puts it: "Having a soldier kidnapped by Arabs hits every family in Israel."

A Flawed Response?

The Israeli response, however, may be flawed. Israel's strategy of force escalation is unlikely to achieve its twin objectives: recovering its soldiers unscathed and eliminating Hamas and Hezbollah for good.

The current Israeli air strikes in Palestinian territories and Lebanon make it clear that these militant organizations can be hurt -- but not destroyed. Even though Israel has managed to damage some of the physical infrastructure of these groups, Hezbollah, in particular, has continued to send rockets across the Lebanese border towards Israel, hitting as far as Haifa, inflicting Israeli fatalities. Moreover, without top-notch intelligence that is never easy to procure, air strikes are unlikely to hit their designated individuals all the time. Indeed, at the end of the fifth day of the bombing, it was reported that Hezbollah's chain of command was still intact. Meanwhile, sending Israeli troops deep into Lebanon raises the prospect of Israeli forces getting mired in a bloody guerilla war of attrition — something that Hezbollah

incidentally is so adept at that Israel's past Lebanon experience has been likened to its own "Vietnam".

The current Israeli bombardments may have considerable "shock and awe" value but are at the same time unlikely to compel neighbouring authorities to rein in the militants. In the case of Hamas, the Palestinian authorities, given their historic animosity toward Tel Aviv, have little reason to urge restraint. The current Lebanese government, moreover, lacks the capacity to control, let alone disarm Hezbollah. More importantly, the Lebanese government risks civil strife if it is seen as acting against Hezbollah. In fact, Hezbollah remains popular with Lebanon's large Shiite community and is largely considered by many Lebanese as national heroes for driving out the Israelis in 2000 and the Americans in 1983. As far as Lebanese national leaders are concerned, to be publicly perceived as doing Israel's bidding now would be simply political suicide.

Israel's mailed fist-response, unfortunately, will have one unequivocal impact: it will exacerbate civilian casualty rates on both sides. This, perversely, will strengthen, not weaken, Hamas and Hezbollah. Mounting civilian casualties will only give these militant groups the opportunity to radicalize the ground while boosting their fortunes at the expense of the moderates in Lebanon and Palestine.

A Strategic Misstep with Global Implications?

In the cold light of strategic cost-benefit calculus, moreover, Israel's disproportionate response sends an unhelpful message to its foes: the relatively low-cost strategy of kidnapping Israeli military conscripts can inflict prohibitive political costs. So while Hamas and Hezbollah can never compete with Israel in force-on-force military terms, they may no longer need to, because in the all-important psychological domain, they may well have stumbled upon Israel's new Achilles' heel. Hamas and Hezbollah could now be emboldened to abduct more Israeli soldiers (or even civilians). Moreover there is little incentive for both militant groups to release the abducted soldiers. After all, time is on their side. The longer the dispute drags on, and Tel Aviv persists in its "current strategy", mounting Arab civilian casualties, images of which are already making their rounds in cyberspace, will soon have two significant wider repercussions.

First, the low-cost but apparently high-return kidnapping modus operandi of Hamas/Hezbollah may well be applied elsewhere. In fact the US-based *Stratfor Intelligence* warns that Hezbollah may soon start to target US citizens as hostages.

Second, against the wider backdrop of global radical Islamist extremism, sustained Israeli assaults in Lebanon will join the US intervention in Iraq as another powerful driver of the so-called "globalization of jihad". In this connection, the BBC on 19 July reported that a previously unheard of Indonesian group calling itself Palestine Jihad Bombing Troops (PBJ) will be deploying 217 members, including other Southeast Asians, to the Middle East to "attack vital Israeli installations". More than that, PBJ spokesmen also promised to "target the destruction of Israeli and American vital installations across the world".

One can understand the domestic pressures the powers that be in Tel Aviv are currently facing. However, precisely because of the wired-up, messy and intimately interconnected global village in which we all live, and the symbolic resonance of the Israel-Arab conflict in worldwide jihadi narratives, the blood now being spilled on the streets of Beirut and the West

Bank may well lead to blood being spilled elsewhere as well. For instance, convicted Indonesian terrorist Imam Samudra once declared that one reason for the Bali bombing of 12 October 2002 was to take revenge for the US air campaign in Afghanistan to root out Al Qaeda and its Taliban allies a year earlier.

In other words, there is no longer such a thing as a purely local quarrel, certainly not where Israel and the Middle East are concerned. This is why the international community should urge Israel to seriously consider more proportionate, creative and yet effective solutions to the troop abduction impasse.

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* Kumar Ramakrishna is Associate Professor and Acting Head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), Tom Quiggin is Senior Fellow and Hoo Tiang Boon is Research Associate at CENS, a unit of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies (IDSS), NTU