

July 16, 2006

Drawn Back Into the Gyre

By [ETHAN BRONNER](#)

IT was not supposed to be this way. Just when Israelis had turned their backs on years of military occupation of [Lebanon](#) and the Gaza Strip, to international acclaim, they are again fighting in both places with no clear exit strategy.

The sense of shock is not limited to [Israel](#). Lebanon, which last year took on a heroic hue in the West as its “Cedar Revolution” pushed Syrian troops out, thought it was on the verge of moving beyond civil war and offering a model of Middle Eastern democracy. Yet, after [Hezbollah](#) guerrillas crossed the border into Israel to kill and kidnap soldiers, Lebanon finds itself again cut off from the world, its airport runways turned into craters, its port blockaded by Israeli warships.

And the Palestinians of Gaza, who thought they finally gained a measure of control over their lives when Israeli troops and settlers left last summer, are living in semi-feudal darkness after Israel bombed its power plant and government offices. Funeral wails fill the air.

What is going on, and where will it all end?

What seems to be unfolding is an acid test of Israel’s recent strategy of seeking to extricate itself from conflict by building a barrier and generally going it alone, rather than negotiating with its adversaries. On two fronts, its antagonists have found a way to draw Israel back into the gyre. And the Israelis are again trying to extricate themselves — by making the fight even more painful than its enemies had thought it could be.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is a lawyer, not a general. His defense minister, Amir Peretz, spent his career as a union organizer. They were supposed to be leading a government focused not on extensive military action but on domestic unification in a period of territorial retrenchment rather than expansion. Yet they have sent the military into a two-front war, north and south, that looks to all the world like 1982 — the year Israel, while already occupying Gaza, invaded Lebanon and stayed there for 18 miserable years.

At first glance, it does look the same as “Operation Peace for Galilee” in 1982 — and there is a real risk that it will end up being so. But the intent and motivation seem to reflect new Israeli thinking, not old. Mr. Olmert, the successor to [Ariel Sharon](#), was elected on a platform of reducing Israel’s control of territory beyond its borders. He was an advocate of the Gaza withdrawal and has spoken frequently about the need to pull Israelis out of large portions of the West Bank.

In 1982, Israel had the grandiose notion that it could remake Lebanese politics, as well as drive Palestinian guerrillas back from its northern border. Israel backed a Christian political party and its militia, and sought to outplay the Syrians at their own game of controlling Lebanon itself.

It proved to be a bad miscalculation. This time, given Syrian and Iranian sponsorship of Hezbollah, it would be easy to imagine an expanded replay, with an escalating conflict aimed at undercutting Syrian and Iranian power, just as the Hezbollah raid on Israel last week was partly an Iranian and Syrian effort to stir the regional pot. While that might indeed happen, it is not the Israeli plan now. And Israel believes it can keep the current forays under control.

It may seem paradoxical, but a helpful way to look at Israel's military push is as an extension of Mr. Olmert's plan for unilateral territorial reduction. From his perspective, a secure, geographically reduced Israel can not tolerate armed, hostile groups sneaking across widely recognized borders to grab Israeli soldiers, and lobbing rockets into its towns. The Israeli attacks seek to make the border areas free from such incursions.

"The real issue is the rockets that are being shot at Israel," noted Yoel Esteron, managing editor of the newspaper Yediot Aharonot. "There is no plan whatever to stay in Gaza or Lebanon. Any Israeli government that suffered two such attacks would have done more or less the same thing."

Israeli intelligence officials say they have evidence that the Hezbollah attack was partly ordered by Iran and its ally Syria to take attention away from international pressure on Iran over its nuclear program. If so, it would surprise no one to see Israel flex its muscles in their direction. But so far the contrary has been true. Israel has insisted that it holds the Lebanese government, rather than Iran and Syria, responsible for Hezbollah.

"In 1982, Sharon tried to create a new order in Lebanon and that was his big mistake," observed Oded Ben-Ami, a former military spokesman and now a television journalist in Israel. "We learned our lesson — at least I hope we did."

Uri Dromi, a former government spokesman who is now at the Israel Democracy Institute, said lessons were indeed learned, but he added that what is happening in Lebanon cannot be separated from what is happening in Iraq — the "regional superstory," in his words. He said that Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah, a Shiite movement — like the dominant force in Iraq today — is trying to impress Arabs everywhere by working with the Palestinians against Israel.

The conflict already has had some effect in Iraq. On Friday, the firebrand Shiite cleric [Moktada al-Sadr](#) said in Baghdad that Iraqis would not "sit by with folded hands" while Israel strikes at Lebanon, signaling a possible increase in attacks from his militia on Americans in Iraq.

Mr. Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader, said Friday that Israel's leaders were playing with fire. "For the people of the Zionist entity in this hour, I tell them," he said in a statement, "you will find out how much your new leadership and new government are stupid and do not know how to evaluate the issues and have no experience at this level."

In Israel, however, most analysts have offered praise for Mr. Olmert, saying he has carried out the attacks in Lebanon with relative restraint given the stakes. And most say no broader war seems imminent.

"Israel doesn't want to mess with Syria now, I don't think," Mr. Dromi said.

What is unfolding in Gaza is similar. There was a cross-border attack by militants that killed two Israeli soldiers and captured a third, as well as rocket barrages aimed at Israeli towns. And again, such actions are what most concern the Olmert government if it is to carry out its plan for reducing the hostile territory it controls.

But unlike in Lebanon, Israel has little interest in influencing the central government there. It considers the Palestinian president, [Mahmoud Abbas](#), well-meaning but impotent and the rest of the government, led by [Hamas](#), nothing more than a terrorist group. While in Lebanon the Israelis hope to push the central government to rein in Hezbollah, in Gaza they feel there is no meaningful distinction between the militants who seized its soldier and the central authority.

This has left the Israeli government in an unusual card game there, what a top adviser to Mr. Sharon two years ago called “playing solitaire.” The adviser, Dov Weisglass, said then, in an interview in the newspaper Haaretz, that “when there is no one sitting across from you at the table, you have no choice but to deal the cards yourself.”

In other words, Israel must carry out its territorial withdrawals essentially alone.

Mr. Olmert and his commanders believe that after enough bombardment in Gaza and Lebanon, Israeli towns will be safer, at least in the short term. Hamas and Hezbollah will run out of rockets, supply routes will be cut, and the rocket attacks will slow or stop.

What they do not know is how long that process will take — or what other regional dynamic involving Iran, Syria or the Shiites of Iraq they will unleash along the way.

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