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A Decade for the Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon: How Much Has Changed?

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By Yaniv Voller

Ten years ago, in May 2000, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) withdrew from Lebanon after almost two decades of military control over South Lebanon and ended direct political interference in Lebanese political affairs.

The IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon, popularly described as Israel's Vietnam, was perceived by commentators to bring a radical change to the region's geopolitics. Some, particularly in Israel and outside of the Middle East, saw the withdrawal as yet another phase in the ongoing peace agreements between Israel and its neighbours and a necessary step toward a comprehensive peace agreement with Lebanon. But those remained a minority amidst sceptics on both the Israeli and the Arab side.

For many in Israel, and particularly those in the military circles and the right wing parties, the withdrawal meant the loss of Israel's deterrent force vis-à-vis its enemies in the region. The combination of the withdrawals' hasty and chaotic nature, the fact that it was done overnight and two months before the planned withdrawal date in order to surprise Hezbollah and to avoid Israeli casualties (perhaps the only success of the withdrawal), and the abrupt collapse of Israel's long-time proxy, the South Lebanese Army, all served to further the beliefs Israelis who viewed the withdrawal as a colossal defeat. Retired senior officers, commentators and MPs predicted that soon Hezbollah, the Palestinians and the Syrians would use the opportunity to attack Israel in its weakness. They also predicted that South Lebanon would soon become a front between Israel and Iran – the state now free to position its armed forces in “Hezbollah-land.” Those who warned against the withdrawal were further vindicated when the Second Intifada erupted in the occupied territories less than four months after the withdrawal, Hezbollah kidnapped three Israeli soldiers and attacked Israel (marking the beginning of the summer 2006 war).

On the other hand, Arab commentators saw the IDF withdrawal as a cosmetic operation which provided an excuse for Israel to use excessive force against its enemies and an opportunity to dodge a peace agreement with Syria and the Palestinians. Indeed, for these commentators as well, the Israeli operations in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2008 were perceived as an Israeli effort to regain its deterrent power.

Yet, a brief review of the last decade reveals that, at least in the short term, the withdrawal has had no significant implications on regional geopolitics. In fact, most regional developments perceived as a direct outcome of the withdrawal are better attributed to internal state dynamics rather than changes due to the withdrawal. Firstly, when it comes to deterrent power, Israel still acts as a regional superpower – yet it cannot handle guerrilla fighting and popular uprising, as evidenced by the Palestinian Intifadas or Hezbollah's guerrilla attacks. In other words, Israel began losing its deterrent power before the withdrawal, when it proved incapable of containing the first Palestinian Intifada or preventing Hezbollah from shelling Israeli border towns. The Second Palestinian Intifada, erupted not because of Israel's loss of deterrent power – but because the Palestinians realised that Israel could not be defeated militarily or by diplomatic means – as happened in the First Intifada. Hezbollah's attacks on Israel indicate an improvement in Hezbollah's capabilities more than they indicate greater boldness from its side. These attacks served those within Israel who argued that the withdrawal would lead to Hezbollah's strengthening – but such an argument means ignoring the fact that Israel never controlled the whole of Lebanon – and that Hezbollah could obtain and store weapons in other parts of Lebanon. Finally, Israel's withdrawal indeed brought with it some immediate political gains for Hezbollah including widespread support in Arab public opinion as the first Arab force to defeat Israel. Yet, even this achievement has been eroded as Hezbollah has been increasingly perceived by large segments of the Arab public as an Iranian proxy in an Arab state.

On the other hand, the withdrawal did not change much in Israel's regional security conception. The IDF may have learned tactical lessons from the withdrawal, but Israel's defense policies remain the same. Israel's attacks on Lebanon and the Gaza strip, though devastating, reflect some rational calculation and some consideration of international public opinion, rather than being only a desperate move to regain deterrence power (here it should be clear that albeit being utterly destructive, both offences in Lebanon and Gaza, the IDF did not use its full military capabilities).

Hence, whereas Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 had a dramatic impact on the geopolitics of the region, its withdrawal from Lebanon seems to have had an effect mainly within Israel and Lebanon. Of course, time may unfold further implications of this action – but at least for now it seems as though it has been overestimated.

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