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The Opening Round of Iran's War Against the West

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- Since the 1982 Lebanon War, the United Nations Security Council has repeatedly demanded that all foreign forces leave Lebanese territory. This evacuation of outside armies and terrorist groups was rightly seen as the prerequisite for the pacification of the volatile Israel-Lebanon border and the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty.
- It was disturbing to see Secretary-General Kofi Annan shaking hands with Hizballah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah on June 20, 2000, during a visit to Beirut. The UN strategy was to give Hizballah some recognition and thereby obtain good behavior on its part.
- In 2002, Lebanese media reported the arrival of Iranian Revolutionary Guards to train Hizballah in the use of Fajr 3 and Fajr 5 medium-range missiles with a range of 70 kilometers, deployed in southern Lebanon and aimed at Israel's northern cities. So in return for Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, it acquired a more powerful Hizballah, as well as Iranian forces taking up positions directly on its borders.

- The chief aims of the entire Western alliance — including Israel — in the current conflict are: full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions that call for the complete dismantling of Hizballah and the deployment of the Lebanese army along the Israel-Lebanon border; and the removal of all Iranian forces and equipment from Lebanese territory, along with any lingering Syrian presence.

- Defeating Iran's opening shot in this Middle Eastern war is not just Israel's interest, but the collective interest of the entire civilized world. Israel's strategy depends upon isolating the Hizballah insurgency in Lebanon from any reinforcement from Iran and its allies by air, land, or sea.

The UN and Lebanon

Since the 1982 Lebanon War, the United Nations Security Council has repeatedly demanded that all foreign forces leave Lebanese territory. This evacuation of outside armies and terrorist groups was rightly seen as the prerequisite for the pacification of the volatile Israel-Lebanon border and the restoration of Lebanese sovereignty. When the Israeli government completed its withdrawal from its security zone in southern Lebanon in 2000, one might have expected that this international principle would have been asserted, and a concerted UN effort begun to rid Lebanon of the Syrian army and other foreign forces — notably those of Iran.

Unfortunately, the situation in Lebanon was totally neglected, and ominous developments followed. Israel's withdrawal to what the UN called the "blue line" was recognized by Secretary-General Kofi Annan as a full Israeli withdrawal from Lebanese territory. His determination was confirmed by the UN Security Council on July 27, 2000, with the adoption of Resolution 1310. But the Iranian-backed terrorist group Hizballah claimed that Israel actually had more land to give to Lebanon. In particular, they wanted a tiny sliver of Golan territory, called the Shebaa Farms, that had been disputed between Israel and Syria.

This outstanding grievance, which had no international backing, was used to justify Hizballah's continuing war against Israel. But rather than forcefully reject Hizballah's stand, different UN agencies seemed to treat the organization as a legitimate party to Lebanon's conflict with Israel. It was disturbing to see Secretary-General Kofi Annan shaking hands with Hizballah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah on June 20, 2000, during a visit to Beirut. The UN strategy was to give Hizballah some recognition and thereby obtain good behavior on its part. To make matters worse, UNIFIL, the UN peacekeeping force, sent liaison officers to Hizballah. But this approach only legitimized an organization that, prior to 9/11, was widely viewed as more dangerous than al-Qaeda.

What made Hizballah's decision to maintain its dispute with Israel so dangerous was Iran's decision to deploy medium-range missiles in southern Lebanon, aimed at Israel's northern cities. In 2002, Lebanese media reported the arrival of Iranian Revolutionary Guards to train Hizballah in the use of these new weapons, known as the Fajr 3 and Fajr 5, which, unlike the older Soviet-made Katyusha rockets, had a range of up to 70 kilometers. Israel had withdrawn from Lebanon, but in return, not

only had it acquired a more powerful Hizballah, but also Iranian forces taking up positions directly on its borders.

The situation was eerily reminiscent of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Then, the Soviet Union had only unreliable intercontinental ballistic missiles for striking the U.S., so they positioned shorter-range missiles in nearby Cuba instead. Today, the Iranians have a 1,300-kilometer-range Shahab missile for striking Israel, and are working feverishly to improve its capabilities, while investing in longer-range missiles aimed at Western Europe. Teheran doubtless calculates that if the West tries to take measures against its nuclear program, its Lebanese arsenal could hold Israel hostage. The difference between 1962 and 2006 is that, while President Kennedy made sure that the Soviets withdrew their missiles from Cuba, the international community has done nothing about the growing missile threat in Lebanon.

International attention was drawn again to Lebanon in 2005 after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri by Syrian agents and the “Cedar Revolution” that followed. The UN Security Council called yet again (in Resolution 1559) for all non-Lebanese forces to leave Lebanon. This time it added a call “for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias,” and repeated its 2004 call to the Lebanese government “to ensure its effective authority throughout the south, including the deployment of Lebanese armed forces.” The UN Security Council wanted the Lebanese Army sitting on the Israeli-Lebanese border — not Hizballah.

Had UN resolutions on Lebanon been implemented, then no Israeli soldiers would have been kidnapped in northern Israel this month and there would be no Hizballah rockets raining on Israeli civilians in Haifa, Nahariya, Safed, and Tiberias.

So what should be the aims of the entire Western alliance — including Israel — in the current conflict? The chief goals are:

- First, full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions that call for the complete dismantling of Hizballah and the deployment of the Lebanese army along the Israel-Lebanon border instead.

- Second, the removal of all Iranian forces and equipment from Lebanese territory, along with any lingering Syrian presence.

A Regional War

At the same time, there is a need to recognize that this is a regional war. Iran is seeking to dominate Iraq, particularly its southern Shia areas — the provinces where British troops are deployed — and hopes to encircle both Israel and the Sunni heartland of the Arab world. Syria is Iran's main Arab ally in this effort. There is no question that Iran's main aim is to dominate the oil-producing areas by agitating the Shia populations of Kuwait, Bahrain, and the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia.

Defeating Iran's opening shot in this Middle Eastern war is not just Israel's interest, but the collective interest of the entire civilized world. Israel's strategy depends upon isolating the Hizballah insurgency in Lebanon from any reinforcement from Iran and its allies by air, land, or sea. Hence, Israel has had to bomb the runways of Beirut International Airport and the Beirut-Damascus highway, and impose a naval blockade around Lebanon.

The Gaza Front

Finally, there is a second front in this war: the Gaza Strip. The Hamas movement, which came out of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, has decided to throw in its lot with Shia Iran and Hizballah. Indeed, just after Israel withdrew its settlements from the Gaza Strip last August, Hizballah moved its headquarters for coordination with the Palestinians from Beirut to Gaza itself. Iran is paying for Palestinian attacks against Israeli civilians. Like Hizballah, Hamas has embedded its military capabilities in civilian areas. Israeli planes drop leaflets to warn Palestinian civilians of impending attacks, even if they give the terrorists advance warning as well.

Israel must protect its own civilians from ongoing missile attacks, whether from Lebanon or the Gaza Strip. The first duty of any government is the defense of its citizens. It is also Israel's legal right as enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter. International media are focusing on Israeli air strikes on Beirut, leading viewers to forget that Israel is the victim in this conflict. Its air force would not be in the skies of Lebanon and its tanks would not be in northern Gaza if Israel had not been attacked first.

In this context, primary responsibility for what is happening rests squarely with Iran and its local proxies. Our common adversaries want to replace the hope for Arab democracy with a dictatorial theocracy. The international community must see the UN resolutions on Lebanon implemented and international security restored. That is the first step towards securing a pluralistic Middle East, founded on representative government and respect for international law.

Dore Gold is the President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and served as Israel's ambassador to the UN from 1997 to 1999.