



Executive Memorandum

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HOLD SYRIA RESPONSIBLE FOR PEACE IN LEBANON

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Israel's military withdrawal from Lebanon on May 24 has bolstered the strength of radical Lebanese and Palestinian forces opposed to peace and allowed the militant pro-Iranian Hezbollah (Party of God) to expand its control to the Lebanese-Israeli border. Israel is gambling that Hezbollah and its Islamic Palestinian allies will now halt terrorism at the border. But this is unlikely; those organizations believe that terrorism has paid off handsomely, and their patrons in Syria and Iran are interested in keeping the Lebanese pot boiling. It will take time to clarify how much risk Syria is willing to bear to continue supporting terrorism against Israel. Meanwhile, Washington should continue helping Israel build up border defenses and maximize deterrence of terrorism while helping the Lebanese government gain control over southern Lebanon and warning Syria that it will be held responsible if it continues its terrorist proxy war.

The Lebanese Cockpit. Lebanon long has been a convenient arena for proxy wars between regional powers. Syria, which intervened in 1976 ostensibly to protect Lebanese Christians from a coalition of Lebanese Muslim factions, has exploited Lebanon's factional fighting for its own ends. Damascus supported attacks against Israel by Lebanon-based Palestinian terrorists in the late 1970s, which provoked Israel into invading Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 to smash Palestinian terrorist bases in the south. Since then, Syria patiently but ruthlessly has eliminated independent Lebanese leaders and gradually extended its control. Today, 35,000 Syrian

troops occupy northern and eastern Lebanon, and 300,000 Syrian workers have colonized the country.

Although Israel's 1982 military victory expelled the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon, it also sparked Hezbollah's growth. Hezbollah launched a terrorist war against Western peacekeepers in the Multi-National Force (MNF), including the 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut and the U.S. Marine barracks at the Beirut airport. The MNF withdrew in 1984. Continued Hezbollah attacks led Israel in 1985 to withdraw from all but the 9-mile-wide security zone established to prevent Palestinian or Hezbollah terrorists from attacking Israeli civilians along the border.

Over the years, although cross-border attacks have lessened, Hezbollah has refined its tactics, upgraded its weaponry to include *Katyusha* rockets from Iran, and gained the upper hand in the war of attrition. Bowing to public weariness, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak vowed to withdraw by July

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2000 to pressure Syria to negotiate a peace deal before it lost its "Lebanon card." But Syrian President Hafez Assad broke off negotiations in January 2000 when Israel failed to meet his rigid territorial demands, including the return of territory that Syria had seized before the 1967 war.

The Barak government hopes that withdrawal from Lebanon will deny Hezbollah an excuse for terrorism, but Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah has threatened to continue the terrorist attacks unless Israel releases all Lebanese prisoners, including terrorists. Moreover, secular and radical Islamic Palestinian groups based in Lebanon remain violently opposed to peace. Syria and Iran supported them in the past and are unlikely to abandon them now. The Hezbollah victory is likely to embolden them and inspire more terrorism in the West Bank and Gaza, which could derail Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

Syria, which retains decisive control over Lebanon's future, has kept its options open with an ambiguous policy regarding southern Lebanon. The ailing Assad is likely to want to avoid a crisis along the border until after the June 17 Baath Party congress, at which he is expected to anoint his son Bashar as heir apparent. Then Syria is likely to resume its proxy war to pressure Israel to withdraw from the Golan Heights on its terms.

America's Role. To stabilize the border and reduce anti-Israeli terrorism, Washington should:

- **Enhance Israeli deterrence against terrorist attacks.** Washington should warn Syria that, due to its dominant role in Lebanon and cooperation with Iran in supplying Hezbollah with arms and training, it will be held responsible for cross-border terrorism. Now that Israel has threatened to launch severe reprisals against Syrian troops in Lebanon in retaliation for cross-border attacks, Washington should warn Syria and Iran that it will diplomatically support such acts of self-defense and offer satellite intelligence to help Israel target Syrian and Iranian forces inside Lebanon.
- **Help restore Lebanon's independence and sovereignty.** Many Lebanese, if given a choice, would opt for peace with Israel. In fact, Lebanon signed an American-brokered peace treaty with Israel in 1983 but later was forced to abrogate it by Syria. Most Lebanese resent Syria's occupation, and student protesters have called for a Syrian withdrawal. Washington should give strong diplomatic, economic, and political support to the restoration of the Lebanese government's authority over all Lebanese territory. The U.N. peacekeeping forces deployed in southern Lebanon should help the Lebanese Army to reestablish government control over the border area. Washington should pressure Syria to withdraw its army from Lebanon as mandated by the 1989 Taif agreement brokered by the Arab League. If the Assad regime does not abide by the commitment it made to other Arabs, then it can hardly expect Israel to accept its grudging promise of peace in exchange for the return of the Golan Heights. Washington should make clear that it considers the evolving situation in southern Lebanon to be a litmus test of Assad's intentions about Arab-Israeli peace and Syrian-American relations.

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