

Israel Hoping Attacks on Hezbollah Serve as Warning to Iran

Interviewee: Gerald Steinberg **Interviewer:** Bernard Gwertzman

Gerald M. Steinberg, an American-educated Israeli expert on military and diplomatic affairs, says behind the stepped-up fight against Hezbollah in Lebanon is the Israeli perception that Hezbollah is a "proxy" for Iran. He says Israeli officials are convinced Iran is working toward nuclear weapons and hope after this year's congressional elections in the United States, President Bush might seriously consider force against Iran if the United Nations fails to act. "There is a growing view that Iran is not going to be stopped by the United Nations, by the international community," says Steinberg, professor of political studies at Bar Ilan University in Israel and director of the Interdisciplinary Program on Conflict Management and Negotiation. He says in the absence of U.S. action against Iran, Israel will have to examine its options. "To some degree, one of the aims of this war is to make sure in Tehran, when they look at the pictures of Beirut, they also think about Tehran," Steinberg says.

The ferocity of the Israeli response to the abduction of two Israeli soldiers from the border with Lebanon surprised a number of people. Was this a long-planned attack?

Israelis have seen that the Hezbollah presence in Lebanon, particularly in southern Lebanon, and the proxy position it is playing for Iran, has become more and more dangerous. It was not just the kidnapping of the soldiers. This was the fourth or fifth attempt; there were also eight Israelis killed, there was a barrage of missiles and rockets fired at the same time. This has been happening once a month. 14,000 or 16,000 missiles stored in concrete bunkers—you couldn't miss it.

This response was something the Israeli military explicitly prepared as a scenario it was likely to face. The Israeli public understood the implications, meaning that there would be this length of bombardment. It was generally expected to last about three weeks; it may take a little bit longer. But the Israeli public was prepared mentally, psychologically, and I guess one could say strategically. They understood the stakes, and the stakes are huge.

Was the first response supposed to be mostly air strikes?

Yes. The expectation was a week to a week and a half would be only air strikes or primarily air strikes. At that stage the Hezbollah command structure and the positions in southern Lebanon would be weakened and ground troops would be able to go in—which is more or less what is happening. There are less ground troops now than was originally envisioned at the beginning, and there were more Israeli casualties—a dozen or so Israeli casualties for Israel is painful—but in the military sense, that is more or less what is expected.

The bombing of that apartment structure in Qana on Saturday night—has that caused any second thoughts in Israel public opinion or do people accept that as a fact of war?

It is clearly a central topic for debate. Israelis watch TV and listen to the radio; it is all war coverage except for a very few Israelis who have had enough and tune out, but that is the talk. You go for a cocktail with diplomats, journalists—it is a small country. We all know each other, and we all talk about this. The rumors of who has been killed come to us before they are made public. We know Hezbollah has been using human shields. We know human rights groups have totally ignored what is fundamentally a war crime. Nobody should lecture us about morality because the world has been immoral in their silence. I think Ehud Olmert, the prime minister, who has a very good political ear, spoke for all Israelis.

Was the two-day pause in the bombing forced on Israel by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice for political reasons?

There are three reasons why: the first was the American pressure, the second was to change the headlines in the media. To some degree that was successful, away from Qana and towards Israel's agreeing to a forty-eight hour cease-fire. The third was the terms were not an absolute cease-fire. The war goes on. The first time that announcement came out, there was across-the-board criticism of it by many of the Israeli pundits and ex-generals. The initial announcement came from American sources. "Why are the Americans telling us this? Why doesn't it come from Israel?"

That was strange, I must admit.

Yes, that was a screwup in terms of the way it was handled. As soon as it was clear this was not a cease-fire and Hezbollah has not won the war, then it was something Israelis understood as part of the public diplomacy where we have been losing.

What is the feeling in Israel of the degree of support in the United States right now? This is always a very touchy issue. I can remember previous wars. At some point the United States says "All right, you've got to stop it; there is too much world criticism of the United States on this."

These are big stakes here and Israelis understand that. They understand how this is consistent with the war on terror, the Bush administration's policies, and how it is such a sharp contrast to the Europeans. Now more than ever the contrast between American strategic understanding and European ignorance or self-interest grows every day. In the Israeli street, there is a broad appreciation that we are in this with the United States. The United States is giving us backing. Also, it is in the American administration's interest.

But there is also a certain degree of concern that now everything is lumped together with the United States. Whatever we do, the United States gets blame; when the United States acts as it does in Iraq, then it reflects badly on Israel.

There is a little bit of liability in being seen as too close to the United States. In Europe and much of the Arab world, there is an automatic instinctual reaction: "If the United States is for

this, then it has got to be something we have to oppose, regardless of the situation." So we are getting a lot of hostility directed at us. We probably get it anyway because we are Israel, but even more so because of this "Zionist -American neo-con conspiracy theory."

You started out by talking about Iran and Hezbollah. I take it there is no question in Israel that Iran is working toward nuclear weapons.

No question.

What is the perception in Israel about the efforts in the United Nations to get Iran to halt its nuclear program?

There is a growing view that Iran is not going to be stopped by the United Nations, by the international community. There is still some expectation or hope that Bush after the [U.S.] congressional elections will decide that he has to do what he has to do. But if not, then the question is what is Israel going to do? To some degree, one of the aims of this war is to make sure in Tehran, when they look at the pictures of Beirut, they also think about Tehran.

When you say Bush will do what has to be done, you are saying Israel would like to see the United States attack Iran militarily?

It is not a matter of like to or not like to. It is a matter of trying to get an assessment. Will the U.S. government present a military attack against the Iranian nuclear sites as the only option? If not, what are the Israeli options? If yes, what are the implications for Israel? It is trying to take a look at it analytically.

Why is Israel so certain they would be targeted by Iran?

It is not a matter of being targeted. Israel is certain that Iran is an expansionist and revolutionary leadership that basically doesn't understand Israel. They don't know what the red lines are. There will not be a stable deterrence between Iran and Israel because the Iranian leadership does not understand Israel. This is not going to be the United States and the Soviet Union. I teach this to my students when I teach them strategy in a nuclear age. Everyone studies the Cuban missile crisis and the India-Pakistan nuclear crises. But in all those cases, there were diplomatic representatives and diplomatic relations between the countries, between the adversaries. There was a steam valve that could be opened to relieve the pressure. You don't have anything like that with Iran. Iran understands Israel through a very, very distorted set of filters. Although the leadership may not want to get in a confrontation with Israel, they could find themselves in one, manipulated by Hezbollah. I always saw Hezbollah as the fuse that could lead to a confrontation with Iran because Iran would then, when it has nuclear weapons, feel much freer to support Hezbollah.

What about the timing of all this—do you think Hezbollah launched that attack because of Israel's ongoing problems with Hamas or was this just fortuitous timing?

Hezbollah has been trying to kidnap soldiers since October 2000, five months after the Israeli withdrawal. Hezbollah launched an attack, kidnapped the bodies of three dead soldiers—we did

not know it at the time. They have done this periodically. It is something they know how to do. They tried it six weeks before [the latest incident] when there was an Israeli ambush. One of the questions that has been raised, but we do not have time to deal with it: Why did they succeed the second time? What did we do wrong? I think this was all part of the constant salami tactics that may have been used because Hamas stole some of the thunder and kidnapped an Israeli soldier a couple of weeks earlier. It might have been done because of the Iranian nuclear issue.

In Israel itself, are the polls very high in support of the military response?

Absolutely, over 80 percent. There is criticism. "The military should have been sitting in southern Lebanon, there should have been massive call-ups," but again these are from the Israeli street. People who are more involved understand the cost that would have been involved and are more sympathetic or supportive of the slower approach.

You reject the feeling that Israel is weakened right now? There seems to be a feeling outside of Israel that somehow Hezbollah is coming out ahead on this.

It is not over until it is over. It is just like in the United States after the 2003 war in Iraq: Journalists across the board and pundits and commentators were all talking about how the United States was not doing well in the war in Iraq until all of a sudden they showed up in Baghdad. This is a much more complicated war. We have allowed Hezbollah—we meaning Israel, United States, Europe, everybody—to build these huge concrete bunkers, and prepare some 15,000 missiles for this type of confrontation. Anybody who thought that Hezbollah was going to be wiped off the map and that we were dealing with guerrillas with no experience and no planning clearly were wrong.

So right now, what is happening? Troops are being sent into southern Lebanon?

There are tough battles going on. There are probably more casualties as Israel takes back what is very difficult terrain, where Hezbollah is holed up in these reinforced bunkers, and Israel is taking back the territory slowly on the ground. But the bigger picture is that once Israel takes back the territory, there will continue to be low-level skirmishes, there will continue to be firing here and there. There is no question about it because you are not going to be able to find every missile launcher. When a truck or a plane or anything comes over that looks like it has weapons from Syria or Iran, Israel will continue to hit those. It will be a war of attrition.

I've heard reports that Syria is on high alert. They are not going to try to get into this one, are they?

Rationally they are not, but you have got [President] Bashar al-Assad with no experience who could conceivably step over the edge, and the Israeli message is "Don't." You have got a rusty army, and this is a set-piece battle. Israel is fighting a guerrilla war right now in southern Lebanon, but most of the Israeli forces are not engaged there. I think something like 20

percent of the air force is being used and now even less as the war goes on in Lebanon. There is a huge amount of capability available for this purpose.

It would be foolish for Syria to get involved; they do not have the capability. The general consensus is the Syrian regime manages to stay in power by having kept a low profile after the assassination of [former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik] Hariri last year and not getting overly involved because if they stick their neck out, they will become a much greater target.