



Political Report

Potential Implications of the Recent Escalation of Violence on the Peace Process in the Middle East and the Palestinian Authority

The violent escalation in the Middle East in the summer of 2006 has been caused in particular by two events:

- the **kidnapping** of an Israeli soldiers on Israeli territory a few meters behind the border of the Gaza Strip and later the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers on the Lebanese border and
- the shelling of Israel with **rockets** of varying range and explosive force from the two areas mentioned above by Palestinian militias in the first and the Shiite Hezbollah in the second case.

The massive reactions of the Israeli army to these events demonstrate how much **Israel has been hurt in its most elementary security concerns**. Shortly after the kidnapping at the border of the Gaza Strip, tanks of the Israeli army have invaded the area it had left one year ago while the Israeli air force destroyed essential parts of the infrastructure, amongst them the water- and electricity supply of large parts of the population.

In Lebanon, the Israeli air forces have conducted massive air strikes since the kidnapping on July 12. A ceasefire seems to be possible only after the radical-Islamic **Hezbollah will have lost its capacity of threatening Israel with rockets or other attacks**. On the other hand, neither Israel nor Syria has an interest in escalating the conflict to a regional war.

It remains unclear to what extent Israel will be able to achieve its goal with the military means used so far - mainly air strikes and a limited ground offensive. In the long run, it remains to be seen how long the effects of such measures will last. Hezbollah at least will do everything it can after a military defeat against Israel to rearm itself as soon as possible. The question if an **international peace corps** or a **consolidated Lebanese government** will be able to prevent this in the long run, is still to be decided.

Referring to Gaza, it seems possible that a solution containing the following key elements will be agreed upon:

- release of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit,
- ending of the shelling with rockets on Israel from the Gaza-Strip,
- retreat of the Israeli army from the Gaza-Strip,

- future release of the Palestinian government and parliamentary members imprisoned by Israel.

Background and History:

Israel has been threatened by rockets from the Gaza-Strip since a long time, whereas the range as well as the damage caused by the rockets is less significant than on the Lebanese border. The Palestinian “**Qassam**”-rockets fired since the denouncement of the ceasefire by Hamas and by other groups before are, unlike the Iranian and Syrian rockets of Hisbollah, in most cases self-made. **The escalation of this conflict has been caused mainly by the kidnapping of the soldier Gilad Shalit on June 25, 2006.**

In the evening of June 24, the political wing of the ruling Hamas-Party and President Abbas’ Fatah had agreed on a modified version of the so-called “**Prisoners` Document**”. The name of the document refers to its authors, all of whom are **leading members of the most important Palestinian parties and armed groups** (Fatah, Hamas, PFLP, DFLP and the Islamic Jihad, the latter, however, does not support the modified version of the document) **detained in Israel.**

The crucial content of the agreement is the “restriction” of armed attacks to the occupied territories which means the **end of terror attacks** in Israel, including the shelling from Gaza. The formation of a government of national unity, made up by Fatah and Hamas, was also agreed upon. Additionally, the document deals with the **PLO-membership** of Hamas.

Although the agreement has been declared as “irrelevant” by Israel right away, it could have been a **breakthrough** for the complicated internal situation in the Palestinian territories, since the PA has become virtually insolvent after the cutting of direct budget aids by international donors and the interruption of the passing on of customs- and tax revenues by Israel. As a consequence, non-governmental-organizations have to deal with many tasks that are actually governmental. After the kidnapping in Gaza **many cabinet and parliamentary members have been finally detained by the Israeli army.** As a result, other ministers have gone underground, which further adds to the inability of the government to function.

The kidnapping of an Israeli soldier – on Israeli territory and by means of a tunnel dug under the border installations and planned beforehand – certainly did not take place by chance only a few hours after the agreement mentioned above was signed. Responsibility for this act can be most likely put on **militant Hamas-militias**, who do not agree with the – rather moderate - Prime Minister **Ismail Haniyyeh**, but with Hamas-leader **Khaled Meshal**, who is acting from his Syrian exile. Probably the order for the kidnapping came from there – with the goal to sabotage the agreement.

This strategy has worked out only partly. The public focus has drifted away from an agreement – particularly after the beginning of the fighting in Lebanon – but the

agreements' supporters still seem to stand to it. This could **contribute substantially to a ceasefire in the Gaza-Strip.**

Outlook:

Regarding the **peace process with Israel**, the overall atmosphere for direct negotiations of Israelis and Palestinians has become very disadvantageous after the armed clashes in Gaza and southern Lebanon, but also after various military operations in many cities of the West Bank. On the other hand, new chances might arise after the ending of the military actions.

“Disengagement” – “Convergence” – “Disconnection”

Much depends on how the recent escalation will be assessed by the Israeli side with regard to the concept of the unilateral determination of borders and the disengagement from the Palestinians. First, the events of July 2006 show that this concept, in the form it has been applied until now, has proven unsuitable to serve the Israeli security needs.

Unilateral disengagement means, in the first place, the autonomous drawing of the future borders of the state of Israel and their safeguarding against terrorist activities by barricades, which should render permanent status negotiations, as well as further occupation unnecessary. Demographic criteria have been particularly decisive here: The future borders should be drawn in a way that would secure a Jewish majority in the Israeli territory and do not respect the internationally recognized borders of 1948.

The retreat from southern Lebanon in the year 2000 can be seen as a forerunner of this concept; the implementation culminated in the retreat from the Gaza Strip (yet without giving up the control of the coast and the air space); regarding the West Bank it has been discussed intensely in the last months. It was a constituting factor for the founding of the Israeli government party Kadima, presumably it was decisive for the legislative elections in March 2006.

These two Israeli retreats were perceived by the Palestinian side, however, as a success of violent action, of armed resistance in Gaza or in southern Lebanon itself but also in the form of suicide bombings in Israeli cities. Regardless of the problematic nature of this view, the present fightings prove that unilateral disconnection alone is not able to at least prevent violent clashes. Rockets can fly over security fences and, unlike civilians, terrorists do succeed in passing over barricades.

If the concept of unilateralism is to play an important role in the future, it can only do so after preceding military operations on a larger scale, which would eliminate the Palestinian capacity of shelling, kidnapping of people or using violence against Israel at all in the long run. In a certain way the acts of war taking place in the Gaza-Strip and in southern Lebanon can be considered as a belated implementation of this course of action which has been proposed by military officials for a long time beforehand. The characteristics of the fightings so far certainly support this interpretation.

If the Israeli policy of **unilateral disengagement is to be continued**, the actual course of the border and the concrete definition of the disengagement will be of crucial importance. This scenario would implicate, however, the Israeli army further presence in the West Bank and the dismantling of only a few settlements in the beginning. Thus such a development would prevent an **agreement between Israelis and Palestinians** for the foreseeable future.

However, if the policy of disengagement is not continued, the coming months will be of decisive importance. **Serious negotiations** with the Palestinians cannot be avoided, if Israel does not want to occupy the entire West Bank again. As described above, a Palestinian government formed by all parties represented in the PLC would create the preconditions for this development also on the Palestinian side.

In the course of such negotiations, there is a chance for a new start. The three major questions, the course of the border, the status of Jerusalem and the fate of the Palestinian refugees will have to be dealt with. After the recent clashes, it seems hardly conceivable that a ceasefire will simply turn back time to the "status pro ante".

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