

Europe's Disproportionate Criticism

Gerald M. Steinberg

July 17, 2006
Wall St. Journal

JERUSALEM -- In early 2000, the European Union was an enthusiastic supporter of unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the security zone in southern Lebanon. Paris was about to take over the EU presidency in July and played a dominant role in the discussions. The French foreign and defense ministers pressed Israel to return its military forces to the international border. In detailed talks that took place at the French ambassador's residence in Jaffa, in which I participated as an academic consultant, the Europeans assured us that once Israel retreated, Hezbollah would lose its *raison d'être* as a "militia" and transform itself into a political party. France and its partners would send peacekeepers to prevent terror and missile attacks against Israel, help the Lebanese army take control of the border, and disarm Hezbollah.

In May that year, the Israeli military left Lebanon. The United Nations certified that the withdrawal was complete. But Europe did nothing. Hezbollah's leaders celebrated a great "military victory," and Iranian "advisers" provided intelligence, training and thousands more of missiles, some with ranges of 75 kilometers and more that could penetrate deep into Israeli territory and for the first time hit Haifa, Israel's third biggest city.

Instead of the promised transformation, Hezbollah took positions right across Israel's border and prepared for the next round of the war. Fearing international and particularly European condemnation, Israel did nothing to prevent this dangerous buildup. Emboldened by Israeli restraint, Hezbollah staged the first cross-border attack and kidnapping only five months after Israel's withdrawal, in October 2000.

Europe's reaction back then was limited to repeating the usual mantras, calling on Israel to "act with restraint" and to "give diplomacy a chance."

Now, after steady escalation and attrition to which Israel is particularly vulnerable, Hezbollah triggered a full-scale confrontation by firing another round of missiles at Israeli cities and staging a kidnapping attack, in which eight Israeli soldiers were killed. In tandem with Palestinian assaults from Hamas-controlled Gaza, which also featured missiles and kidnapped soldiers to be traded for terrorists, this opened a two-front war.

This time, though, Israel moved quickly to finally dismantle the strategic threat in Lebanon. No state can simply stand by while its citizens are being killed and abducted, its cities routinely shelled, and part of its population forced to live in fear and sleep in bomb shelters. Hezbollah erroneously thought its missiles and the support from Iran and Syria would allow it to continue attacking Israel with impunity.

Europe's role, once again, is limited to repeating the same old tired phrases. The EU called Israel's response and attacks on Beirut and in Gaza "disproportionate" and violations of international law. France in particular was outraged. "For several hours,

there has been a bombardment of an airport of an entirely sovereign country, a friend of France... this is a disproportionate act of war," French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said. It may have escaped the minister that the initial act of war originated from Lebanon and that the target of this unprovoked aggression is supposedly also a "sovereign country" and "friend of France."

The knee-jerk condemnation of their country was not lost on Israelis who recall the broken promises from 2000 and the visceral antipathy toward them when they had to fight Arafat's terror war. Beyond the rhetoric, European officials offer no framework for a proper and "proportionate" level of force in response to mass terror aimed at the ultimate goal of "wiping Israel off the map."

Few in Europe probably realize that the EU's failure to act in response to Iran's nuclear weapons efforts, and the three years that were wasted in negotiations while Iran began enriching uranium, only strengthened Israel's decision to act forcefully against the terror threats posed by Hezbollah and Hamas, who act as Tehran's proxies.

Israel's strategy is twofold. The immediate goal is to remove Hezbollah's acute threat by crippling its military capabilities and driving their troops from the border zone. Attacks on Lebanese infrastructure are designed to prevent the resupply of Hezbollah and to pressure the Lebanese government to establish full sovereignty over the country. It is Lebanon, not Israel, that is in violation of international law as Beirut still has not implemented U.N. resolution 1559, which demands that Hezbollah be disarmed.

At the same time, and this is Israel's medium-term goal, going forcefully after Iran's prodigy in Lebanon sends a powerful message to Tehran. It restores Israel's deterrence capability, a crucial move in preventing future confrontations with Iran on a much larger scale. But many idealistic European policy makers cannot see that a small war stopped prematurely now may only pave the way for a much larger war later. In order to understand Israel's military actions, it is imperative to consider the two powers standing behind Hezbollah. The larger strategic threat to Israel is the Damascus-Tehran axis. To view Israel's actions in Beirut and Gaza as "disproportionate" means ignoring the radical Islamic regime in Tehran, which threatens to destroy Israel and is bent on acquiring the weapons to actually carry out its threat.

At the same time, Europe -- particularly France -- has invested heavily in the reconstruction of Lebanon and the international isolation of the Syrian regime. From this perspective, the damage to Beirut's airport and infrastructure and the strain on the Lebanese government are justifiably worrying.

But if European leaders are serious about preventing instability and promoting their own economic and security interests, they will also have to share the costs of containing terror groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. To help resolve the immediate crisis and prevent further damage to Lebanon's fragile economic and political structure, Europe's leaders can stiffen Beirut's backbone by conditioning aid to the release of the kidnapped Israeli soldiers. Cease-fire initiatives must lead to Hezbollah's disarmament. By tying further economic assistance to an end to terror attacks, Europe can actually help create the basis for long-term stability. And of course, it must pressure Tehran and Damascus. Instead of reflexively labeling Israel's

belated use of force as "disproportionate," the leaders of the EU must learn to make their own security policies proportionate and realistic.

Mr. Steinberg directs the conflict management program at Bar Ilan University and is a fellow at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.