

EXECUTIVE POLICY BRIEF

PHILIPPINE PERSPECTIVE ON THE ISRAELI-HEZBOLLAH CONFLICT*

August 2006



The National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP) is the government's key educational institution for training and research on defense and security.

The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) is the NDCP's main research arm.

INSS conducts regular research on national security issues and submits policy inputs to the Secretary of National Defense with inputs from the Strategic Studies Group (SSG).

The SSG is composed of eminent academics and retired military officers representing a wide range of expertise to significantly contribute to policy formulation in the Department of National Defense.

Background on the conflict

A month-long conflict in the Lebanese border started when Hezbollah abducted two Israeli soldiers in a cross border raid in 12 July 2006. Israel retaliated by launching air strikes and imposing blockade in Southern Lebanon. Last 14 August 2006, a ceasefire agreement brokered by the United Nations took effect.

Hezbollah is a legitimate political party in Lebanon with a mass base and complex organization and structure which includes political and development components and an armed wing called the "Islamic Resistance," regarded as the most powerful militia in the Middle East.

However, Hezbollah is considered as a terrorist organization in full by the United States, the Netherlands and Canada, and in part by the United Kingdom and Australia.

Strategic Assessment: The crisis is likely to escalate

Ceasefire will not hold up

The fragile ceasefire is characterized by sporadic attacks by both parties. Israel and Hezbollah maintain military capabilities to launch another round of attacks. Hezbollah's psychological victory over Israel will embolden it to retaliate should Israel attack again. When Israel left Lebanon in 2000, Arab states considered it as an erosion of Israeli deterrence. For

Israel, the July 2006 conflict was meant to regain a sense of respect, an issue which is larger than border and missile concerns.

At the same time, traditional anti-Hezbollah forces in Lebanon have stepped up criticisms against Hezbollah and its patrons, Iran and Syria. This opens up the possibility of heightened antagonism and deeper fissures within Lebanese society.

Hezbollah Will Not Disarm

Hezbollah has repeatedly defied UN Security Council Resolution 1559 and faced no serious consequences from the international community for failing to disarm. It is reported that the Lebanese government concluded a deal with Hezbollah which allowed the latter to retain its structure and equipment in Southern Lebanon discreetly.

Currently, the Lebanese military is incapable of gaining full control of Southern Lebanon. It is weak despite training, funding and military support from the US, France and Egypt. As long as Iran and Syria will continue their financial, technical and moral support, Hezbollah will remain strong, both militarily and politically.

UNIFIL is greatly challenged

The second UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL2), the guardian of the ceasefire, lacks a clear mandate and adequate manpower to carry its mission. Its predecessor, UNIFIL 1 has been criticized as a failure during its 28-year existence.

For comments and suggestions,

email us at
inss@ndcp.edu.ph
or call
0063-(0)2-9129125
or visit us at
Camp Gen Emilio Aguinaldo
Quezon City.
www.ndcp.edu.ph

*The authors, Christine June P Cariño, Charithie B Joaquin and Mary Louise Castillo of the INSS, express their profound gratitude for the invaluable insights and comments from the Fellows of the Strategic Studies Group (SSG), namely: Atty Pedro G Banzon, MNSA; Dr Aileen San Pablo -Baviera; Commo Plaridel Garcia, AFP (Ret); Dr Jose C Gatchalian; Amb Rosario G Manalo; Prof Nestor N Nisperos; Col (ret) Cesar P Pobre, PhD; Prof Solita Monsod; and, Mr. Delfin Wenceslao.

This paper was presented in two SSG Meetings attended by representatives from the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Department of National Defense, and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

The Three O's of Philippine National Interest

The Lebanon crisis brings to the fore once again the country's vulnerability to instability in the Middle East, central to which are three fundamental interests, namely, the overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), Oil, and the Organization for the Islamic Conference (OIC).

OFWs

Despite pronouncements by the government that it does not promote overseas employment as a means to sustain economic growth and achieve national development, the deployment of Filipino migrants has been a de facto policy that has kept the national economy afloat amid the countless oil shocks, regional financial crisis and other fluctuations in the international economic system. The large volume of OFWs especially in the maritime sector is well recognized as the country's concrete contribution to the global economy.

According to the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), the number of documented OFWs has exceeded the one million mark last year, registering a total of 1.205 million. Of the 750,000 land-based OFWs deployed as new hires and rehires, half of them went to the Middle East alone. In fact, among the top 10 destinations for newly-hired

OFWs, 6 are Arab countries with Lebanon ranking 8th.

There are an estimated 30,000 OFWs in Lebanon, three-fourths (25,000) of whom work as domestic helpers and the rest working in hotels or UN missions. Geographically, 68% (17,769) of the OFWs can be found in the capital city of Beirut with around 2,000 more OFWs spread across southern Lebanon in the cities of Zahle, Sidon, Jazzin, Ez Zahrani, Tyre, and Noquora.

Since, the Philippine government declared alert level 4 in Lebanon requiring the mandatory evacuation of all Filipinos from the country, a total of 6,143 OFWs or 20.47 % of the estimated number of OFWs in Lebanon have been repatriated. With the ceasefire taking effect,

most OFWs refuse to return home despite the clear danger posed on their lives due to economic reasons.

In 2005, OFW remittances posted a record of 10.3 billion dollars, a 15.38% increase from the previous year. The Middle East accounts for 13.3 % of the total OFW remittances in 2005 and ranks as the 3rd top source of remittance next to the United States and Europe.

Oil

The Philippines remains highly dependent on oil for its energy needs and the Middle East continues to be its primary provider accounting for 92.8 % of the country's total crude oil imports.

At present, the Philippines sources its crude oil from 6 major oil exporters in the world. However, 2 Middle East countries already account for 81 % of our oil imports, namely, Saudi Arabia (56 %) and Iran (25 %). Thus, conflicts in the Middle East make the country vulnerable not only to disruptions in the supply of oil but also to price fluctuations in the world market.

OIC and the Mindanao Peace Process

The country's interest in relation to the OIC is not as well articulated as its interests on the welfare of OFWs and on sustainable energy sources. However, whatever decisions we make with regard to finding permanent solutions in the Middle East will always have to consider their impact on our own significant Muslim population.

Based on various government pronouncements, a permanent observer seat of the country in the OIC is crucial to a lasting resolution of the conflict in the Southern Philippines. It is this same principle that has guided the country in actively seeking the support of the 57- member countries of the OIC in its bid for inclusion in the organization.

The OIC provides significant support to the numerous development projects being undertaken in Mindanao. Likewise, it performs the important role of brokering peace negotiations between the government and the secessionist groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Since 2001, the OIC and the countries in the Middle East have played an increasingly

Top TEN Destinations of OFWs in 2005 Newly Hired

Saudi Arabia	65,256
Japan	38,803
Taiwan	34,369
UAE	33,969
Kuwait	24,917
Qatar	17,671
HK	17,633
Lebanon	13,210
Bahrain	4,817

Source: *Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA)*

significant role in preventing the radicalization of our own Muslim communities. The support of Middle East countries to the Philippine government is a crucial element in curbing the rise of radical Islam in the country and in stemming the flow of funds to radical Islamic groups such as the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Rajah Sulayman Islamic Movement (RSIM).

Recommendations

The recent conflict in the Middle East underscores the importance of the region to the Philippines for three reasons: the presence of a significant Muslim population in the country, the country's need for oil, and the safety of OFWs.

At the same time, the underlying factors of the Lebanon conflict have deep historical roots. As such, the various courses of action identified to address immediate concerns such as the evacuation of OFWs in Lebanon need to fall under the scope of more strategic and far-ranging solutions.

1. Adopt a Comprehensive "Middle East" Policy

The recent conflict highlights the need for the country to adopt a strategic "Middle East policy" that can adequately address immediate issues arising from the conflict and, at the same time, serve as an overall framework for our future engagements in the region.

The policy has to be comprehensive and balanced, one that adopts a short-and long-term vista, and takes into consideration our country's diplomatic and economic concerns (labor and trade issues such as oil needs and market opportunities for our products) vis-à-vis defense and security requirements.

A peaceful Middle East is in our country's strategic interest. For this to happen, a lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has to be found. Without that, the Middle East will remain a troubled region.

With regard to the Lebanon crisis, the Philippines should rally support for the full implementation of the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. This is based on three fundamental assumptions, namely:

(1) Israel requires security from foreign

incursions; (2) Lebanon needs full sovereignty over its territory; and (3) The commitment of Iran and Syria is crucial to the process.

2. Implement a National Energy Strategy

With or without the Middle East conflict, the competition for finite energy sources will most certainly escalate in the coming years. Therefore, the country needs to reduce its disproportionate dependence on the Middle East for its oil requirements by diversifying its sources to include Central Asian states and the former Soviet territories.

At the same time, the country should vigorously pursue new/renewable and alternative energy sources. This is not the task of one government agency alone. The approach has to be holistic, one that requires greater coordination among government agencies such as the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to ensure that our energy requirements are included in our foreign policy.

3. Exercise prudence in deciding whether to send a Philippine contingent or not

The decision to send a contingent to Lebanon in the near term require utmost prudence on the part of the government.

As stated in the "Policy Framework and Guidelines for Philippine Participation in UN Peace Operations," our national capabilities, domestic peace and order situation, national interest and national goals must be carefully weighed and balanced.

Prior to any decision of deploying a Philippine mission, therefore, some fundamental issues need to be addressed such as: First, is this in line with our current security priorities? How would the deployment of a peacekeeping force in Lebanon affect current AFP and PNP operations which are focused on internal security?

Second, can we fully support and sufficiently equip our contingent in Lebanon knowing fully well that our troops are simultaneously deployed elsewhere in the world? Are contingency measures for our troops being thought

Sources of RP Crude Oil Imports 2005

Saudi Arabia 53%

Iran 24%

Qatar 7.1%

Malaysia 6.5%

UAE 3.7%

Australia 0.4%

Philippines 0.3%

Source: Philippine Oil Industry Competition and Monitoring Division, DOE

out in the likely scenario that the situation will worsen before it even improves? Should our international commitment come first before the safety of our own people in case a similar "Angelo de la Cruz" incident arise?

Third, has careful consideration been made with regard to the possible implications of

sending a contingent to Lebanon? Although the United Nations will fully compensate Filipino troops or any humanitarian contingent, Philippine involvement will entail serious political consequences. These may include unfavorable reactions from Middle East countries which are our major oil suppliers or radical Muslim groups which may be inspired to retaliate by attacking soft targets in the country.

Given the rifts within Philippine society, any political involvement will likely be hostaged by partisan interests. The country must be prepared to deal with these possible consequences should some sectors find the presence of Filipinos in Lebanon inimical to their interests.

4. Craft a National Security Strategy

As in all situations, the recent conflict in the Middle East involves various Philippine national interests. While in some instances these interests do work together, oftentimes

they do not. For instance, while it is in our desire to fulfill our obligation as a responsible member of the international community through active participation in peace support operations, serious internal security threats need to be addressed immediately.

In the face of the country's limited financial capability, the government has to prioritize our national interests. This is best articulated through a national security strategy that is comprehensive, unifying the elements and dimensions of our country's national security. It ensures that efforts are properly coordinated and that all actors are moving towards a common goal.

In the July Lebanon crisis, such strategy considers solutions to political and socio-economic concerns which tie the Philippines closely to the Middle East. For one, the plan endeavors to address the underlying causes and consequences of Filipino labor migration while, at the same time, seeks to build a skilled workforce suitable for the industrial requirements both of the foreign and domestic markets. It also addresses the security threat posed by radical Islamic groups without downplaying the need to address the underlying factors of the problems in the Southern Philippines.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, the country needs to set out its national priorities with regard to its actions and decisions. In situations such as the recent crisis in Lebanon, the government is expected to have the persistence to weigh all these considerations, the wisdom to decide which interests are most vital to the country, and the will to pursue them in the face of their possible consequences. •

RP Contribution to UN Mission as of July 2006

MINUSTAH Haiti	172 Troops 42 Police
ONUB Burundi	3 Observers
UNAMA Afghanistan	1 Police
UNMIK Kosovo	44 police
UNMIL Liberia	170 Troops 27 Police 3 Observers
UNMIS Sudan	55 Police 20 Observers
UNOCI Cote d'Ivoire	2 Troops 11 Police 4 Observers
UNOTIL Timor Leste	5 Police
TOTAL	559

Source: United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO)



About Executive Policy Brief

The Executive Policy Brief is intended to provide strategic assessment on specific current issues on national security. It aims to contribute to strategic thinking in the defense community as well as propose alternative policy inputs.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this Executive Policy Brief are those of the authors, and do not in any way reflect the views of the Philippine Government or represent a formal position of National Defense College of the Philippines on any particular issue.