

The Third Lebanon War: Target Lebanon

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Introduction

More than two years have passed since the Second Lebanon War, and there is a general sense that this time the lessons have been learned, with the correct conclusions drawn and implemented. Most of those who held key positions during the war are no longer at the military helm (including two division commanders, the OC Northern Command, the chief of staff, and the minister of defense); the reserve forces have resumed active training; and even the government is trying to mend its ways. Thus as a direct lesson of the war, the Knesset recently passed the National Security Council Law, which is designed to improve the decision making process. If the Third Lebanon War erupted now, logic suggests that the outcome would necessarily be a major improvement over the results of 2006.

This essay contests that assumption and argues that if another war breaks out between Israel and Hizbollah, its outcome will likely not be better, and for two reasons. First, the balance of power between Israel and Hizbollah has not changed: while Israel can certainly claim noticeable improvement in its military capabilities, so can its opponent. The net assessment is that the improvement in Israel's capabilities is offset by the improvements on the other side.

The second reason is based on the contention that it is not possible to defeat an effective and well-equipped guerrilla organization if three conditions exist: the organization operates from country A against country B; the organization enjoys the full support of country A; and country A, along with its army and infrastructure, is entirely immune

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to offensive attacks launched by country B. The State of Israel failed in the Second Lebanon War (and may also fail in a subsequent encounter) because it targeted the wrong enemy. Israel fought against Hizbollah instead of fighting against the Republic of Lebanon.

In part this situation reflects a change in the nature of wars over the last several decades, whereby countries that are militarily weak set up or support an existing military or terrorist/guerrilla organization. Such sponsorship enables these countries to level a painful strike against other countries via proxy, but at the same time absolves them of responsibility for the aggression and allows them to defend themselves against possible responses from the countries attacked. Syria and Iran operate in Lebanon in this way with the full cooperation of the Lebanese government. All three support Hizbollah in one way or another.

Comprehending this phenomenon, the United States is willing to fight with all its might against sponsoring countries, so long as it itself is the target of the terrorism/guerrilla activity (North Vietnam for its support of the Vietcong, Afghanistan for its support of al-Qaeda). The administration is less patient when other countries – including Israel – adopt the same approach. Consequently, the first objective of Israeli strategy with regard to the Lebanese issue is to persuade the US that Israel too is compelled to fight the sponsoring state, in addition to the terrorist organization benefiting from the state sponsorship.

This article examines the circumstances that require Israel to change its strategy and launch an operation against Lebanon if and when war erupts. There are four parts to the argument. The first section analyzes the fortification within the IDF and Hizbollah, and reviews the current preparedness of the two sides and what is expected in the coming years; the second section describes the political reality in Lebanon, wherein Hizbollah enjoys full political sponsorship from the Lebanese government; the third section reviews why Hizbollah cannot be defeated unless Lebanon is involved; and in the final section the necessary conclusions are drawn.

The Strengthening of the IDF and Hizbollah

The IDF

The IDF studied the lessons of the Second Lebanon War seriously and there has been a genuine effort to implement them. It is possible to

divide these lessons into four groups. Of these, there has been definite improvement in the first two groups, while there is some question regarding the latter two. The doubts exist both because these categories lend themselves less to measurement and because there is no guarantee that the military indeed managed to tackle the core of either problem.

Ground forces preparedness comprises four elements: the level of training, the technical state of the equipment, inventory stocks (ammunition and spare parts), and the knowledge and skill to carry out the anticipated missions (this fourth element is usually measured by operational plan drills). There has undoubtedly been considerable improvement in the IDF over the last two years in this quantifiable area.

Quality of command teams and command and control processes. This issue encompasses the operating concept and the clarity of language, but above all is based on effective procedures that will ensure coherence and synergy in operating the force. Here too great effort has been invested, reflected in the increasing number of command center drills, changes within the organization (some of which reversed the decisions of the previous chief of staff), the revision of doctrines, the revision of operational plans, and more. Presumably in the next war clearer and more implementable commands will be issued. The goal is that the giant machine known as the IDF will operate more effectively than in the previous war.

Values and fighting spirit. This matter is particularly troubling. Too often in the last war commanders preferred to remain behind instead of assuming their natural position, at the front line of the fighting. In too many cases adherence to the mission was lacking. Commanders found “good reasons” for not carrying out a mission or postponing implementation. There was an exaggerated tendency to worry about the soldiers’ welfare (bringing entire battalions to kibbutzim during the war to “refresh”) at a time when hundreds of thousands of citizens, whose safety the army is charged with protecting, continued to suffer attacks. The IDF has tried to tackle this matter, but there is no certainty that

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it has succeeded. One of the obstacles to improvement in this area is the limited degree of authority granted to the field commanders in ongoing security operations, which is characterized by low tolerance for mistakes. This approach may prevent the rise of commanders who take responsibility naturally, something that is essential in “the big war.”

“Military Thinking.” Managing a war on the general staff and regional command level requires intellectual thinking, constant and critical review of basic assumptions, and a creative approach. By nature, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of military thinking. Success in local operations, even if they are of strategic importance (such as the operation in September 2007 attributed to Israel), does not necessarily prove that the top echelons will perceive the situation correctly and know how to make the right decisions in a drawn out and complex war.

The general assessment, then, is that in two of the four areas, there has been considerable improvement, and with regard to the other two, there is at the very least awareness that improvement is needed.

Hizbollah

Hizbollah improved its military capabilities in three and perhaps even four areas. First, Hizbollah’s rocket arsenal has increased enormously over what it possessed on the eve of the war in 2006. Since this is the organization’s main weaponry, the greater the quantity, the greater the organization’s ability to maintain fighting. Second, the range of the rockets increased. The number of long and medium range rockets within the overall arsenal skyrocketed, which will enable Hizbollah to continue firing even if Israel occupies the entire area between the border and the Litani River. Occupying this area would significantly reduce the striking ability of the short range Katyushas, which constituted Hizbollah’s main power in the previous war, but would not address the matter of longer range rockets. In other words: what could have been an effective move in the previous war may not be enough now. Third is the relocation to built-up areas. One of the IDF’s difficulties in the Second Lebanon War was dealing with “the nature reserves” – the Hizbollah outposts in open spaces. Despite Hizbollah’s success in organizing and operating these outposts, it made a sound decision and

over the last two years has built underground outposts under the built-up areas of Shiite communities. If in the last war the IDF's limitations were intelligence-related and operational, in the next war the Hizbollah outposts amid densely populated areas will add another difficulty.

In addition to these three developments, there is unclassified information on Hizbollah's arming itself with new anti-aircraft missiles, the most dangerous of them being the SA-18. These missiles pose no threat to fighter jets, but may create a serious problem for helicopters.

An overall assessment of the balance of power suggests that at least as far as is known, the balance of power has not changed in Israel's favor. The improvement ascribed to Israel is offset by the parallel improvement on the other side. This situation is not expected to change dramatically until after an effective tactical solution is found for dealing with the rocket launchings, which in any event will not be operational in the coming years.

The Political Situation in Lebanon

The withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon sparked hope among many in Israel and around the world that this would lead to the strengthening of supporters of the West in Lebanon. This proved to be a barren hope, and Hizbollah filled the newly created vacuum. The organization, which had already enjoyed a respected political status, gradually expanded its power.

While the Second Lebanon War subsequently forced Hizbollah to maintain a low profile, this period is now over. Two recent events symbolize Hizbollah's strong position in Lebanon. The first is its insistence on establishing an independent communications network. During this crisis Hizbollah proved that it is the only force in Lebanon capable of mobilizing a military force and thereby subduing its opponents. Not only did the Lebanese government accede to its demands; the Arab world did so as well and compelled the Lebanese government to accept the Doha agreement, which gave Hizbollah the right to veto decisions of the Lebanese government.¹

The second event was the election of the Lebanese president. Upon the completion of Lahoud's term as president, there were those who hoped that the Syrian puppet would be replaced by an independent president. Syria and Hizbollah made their opposition clear, and the

result was the election of Suleiman as president. The new president knows he was elected thanks to Hizbollah's support and since his first day in office has made it a point to show where his allegiance lies. The way in which he welcomed Samir Kuntar was a symbolic example of this.

Indeed, Hizbollah has embodied the accepted principle in the Arab world whereby political power allows the bearing of arms while the arms protect the political power. Today, the Lebanese president and government recognize not only Hizbollah's right to continue bearing its own arms, but also see these arms as a vital and legitimate means for achieving the national interests (see the Doha agreement).² Moreover, recent remarks by the Lebanese president and prime minister likewise offer national support for Hizbollah's arguments regarding the need "to liberate Shab'a Farms" and its right to be a defensive shield that protects Lebanon from "Israeli aggression."³

Today's situation is optimal for Hizbollah. On the one hand, there is a legitimate and pro-Western government, which has the support of the United States, France, the UN, and the international community. On the other hand, this same government is entirely subservient to Hizbollah dictates. In effect, while Hizbollah is a proxy of Iran and to a certain extent of Syria as well, so the Lebanese government is a proxy of Hizbollah.

The Impossibility of Defeating Hizbollah

The advantages of a modern military such as the IDF emerge most prominently when three conditions exist, one strategic and two operative.

The strategic condition is that the enemy is a country that is accountable to its population and the international community and responsible for its infrastructure. Such an enemy has something to lose and therefore pressure can be exerted on it. It is relatively easy to bring an enemy that is a state to a situation where the losses it incurs from sustained fighting outweigh the benefits.

The first operative condition is that the enemy's armed force consists of "hard targets" such as tanks, planes, command posts, and so on. Today's intelligence gathering capabilities joined with the capabilities of precision ammunition enable an effective assault on

vehicular targets, which refer to both the size of the target and its “life span.”⁴ Effectiveness plunges when the pinpoint targets are people or expendable launchers. The second operative condition is that the battlefield be far removed from civilian population centers. This refers to both sides of the equation, that is, the battlefield is removed from both sides’ civilian populations.

Hizbollah as a military organization epitomizes the other side of the spectrum. If and when there is a third Lebanon war, its results will resemble that of the previous war. Even if the IDF is more successful in its operations against Hizbollah fighters, it is likely that Hizbollah will have greater success in striking Israeli civilians. There are three reasons for this, first, the number of rockets, their size, “the life span of their targets,” and their operation from within built up areas. All of these will preempt their destruction. In the best case scenario, it will be possible, after substantial effort, to reduce the number of daily launches to several dozen. For Israeli civilians located in the areas that are threatened, this has almost no practical significance. Second, occupying a large area (for example, up to the Litani River) will affect Hizbollah and reduce the number of launches, but will not stop them. Third, Hizbollah will not rush to agree to a ceasefire because unlike a state’s armed forces, it is relatively indifferent to the loss of fighters, the loss of arms, and the loss of territory. In addition, unlike the government, it is less sensitive to the pressure of public opinion and international pressure.

Significance and Risks

A change in the Israeli approach may damage Israel’s legitimacy, incur international pressure, and even prompt a clear directive from the United States to stop the destruction of Lebanon.

This is reminiscent of the world’s reaction, including the US, to the start of Operation Defensive Shield in April 2002 following the terrorist attack on the Park Hotel in Netanya on Passover eve, which killed over thirty Israelis. Hamas carried out this attack and many of the ones that preceded it. The US sanctioned an Israeli operation against Hamas,

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but had a hard time accepting the operation as Israel planned it – an operation against the Palestinian Authority.

The US at first demanded that Israel leave all West Bank cities (area A) within forty-eight hours. Notable Israeli steadfastness maintained that this time it was impossible to return to the familiar rules of the game whereby only the terrorists are targeted, and the sponsors (the Palestinian Authority) remain immune. Israel's firmness, which stemmed from a lack of other options, was successful. Israel had to concede on one matter only, stopping the siege of the muq'ata in Ramallah, home to Arafat at the time. On the other hand, the new policy (Israeli control over all Palestinian areas) was well received and commended by the international community.

The same is true regarding Lebanon, whereby Israel strikes at the "bad guys" (Hizbollah) but refrains from striking the darlings of the West and the UN (the Lebanese state and its government). It is convenient and desirable for the others, but for Israel it spells disaster. There is no choice for Israel but to persist firmly on this matter, and if necessary confront its allies over it.

Conclusion

There is one way to prevent the Third Lebanon War and win it if it does break out (and thereby prevent the Fourth Lebanon War): to make it clear to Lebanon's allies and through them to the Lebanese government and people that the next war will be between Israel and Lebanon and not between Israel and Hizbollah. Such a war will lead to the elimination of the Lebanese military, the destruction of the national infrastructure, and intense suffering among the population. There will be no recurrence of the situation where Beirut residents (not including the Dahiya quarter) go to the beach and cafes while Haifa residents sit in bomb shelters.

Serious damage to the Republic of Lebanon, the destruction of homes and infrastructure, and the suffering of hundreds of thousands of people are consequences that can influence Hizbollah's behavior more than anything else. The impact on Hizbollah and its willingness to end the war following Israeli actions of the kind described here would result from both internal and external effects. The internal effect stems from Hizbollah's political status and ambitions, as it portrays itself

as a Lebanese national organization fighting for the interests of the Republic of Lebanon. It may lose its status if Lebanese public opinion blames it for the unnecessary destruction brought upon the state. The external effect stems from the organization's sensitivity to Iranian and Syrian interests. Neither Iran nor certainly not Syria wants Lebanon to be destroyed.

The Israeli message has to be clear and unequivocal: if Israel has to fight against Hizbollah alone again, while the sponsor, the state of Lebanon is "out of bounds," it cannot guarantee victory. There are, therefore, two possibilities: risk a loss (even a draw would be deemed a loss), or fight against a country that chooses to allow Hizbollah to control it. Israel must embrace the second option, and this message must be stated clearly, starting now. If Israel waits until the day the war starts, it will be too late.

The way to convey this to the United States, France, Germany, and other countries requires that there be a high level professional military dialogue between Israel and those countries. If the military leaders in these countries are persuaded by the professional explanation, they will provide the requisite support for the political echelons in their countries.

Notes

1. <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=44023&MID=115&PID=2>.
2. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2008/05/the-united-stat.html>.
3. <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=63679§ionid=351020203> and <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=48401>.
4. The target life span is measured from the time the target emerges until it is attacked.