

# The Second Lebanon War: Achievements and Failures

Dan Haloutz

In the three years since the Second Lebanon War there has been absolute calm on the northern border, the likes of which no one can remember since the 1970s. This reality was purchased with the lives of civilians and soldiers who fell in battle, with the pain of the injured, both soldiers and civilians, and with the cost of those whose lives were destroyed and who bear the scars and wounds of that war to this day. My heart goes out to them.

At the outset, I would like to make a personal comment on the disgraceful use some make of bereavement. The heroism of the soldiers is an indisputable fact. Linking it with the failures of the more senior echelons, most of whom are still serving in the IDF and some of whom are candidates for the most senior positions, is unacceptable. The heroism of IDF soldiers has been indisputable, from the War of Independence down to our own times. Anyone who has ever been in command is liable to be exposed to this type of low settling of scores, including the person who made the statement.<sup>1</sup>

The Second Lebanon War generated masses of commentary and criticism, even an official commission of inquiry. The degree of satisfaction of those sitting on the sidelines at that time could not have been greater. Already in the course of the war, they were able – today we can say quite unsuccessfully – to foresee how things would develop. A national lesson that all of us ought to learn is a goodly dose of humility about our ability, as individuals and as a society, to assess the results of moves that are seen in one light while underway, but as time passes acquire different significance.

Lt. Gen. (ret.) Dan Haloutz, IDF chief of staff, 2005-2007

In the reality of the Middle East, the achievements of a war are measured first and foremost by the change in the situation that caused the war to break out, by an increase in the lapse until the next confrontation, and by the ability to take political advantage of military gains. In the Second Lebanon War, like in all other Israeli wars, there were achievements and successes, failures and flaws. All of these were thoroughly investigated by extensive, unprecedented, and searching analyses that examined everything down to the last detail and became the basis for a corrective working program for the IDF and the state. The systemic and personal failures have been discussed at length and I do not deny that these existed, but the achievements have received far less attention.

In this context, it was recently stated that while the northern border is calm the situation is explosive. There is calm – that is a fact. The question of explosiveness is one of assessment. I would go even further: the Middle East as a whole is explosive. This assessment, therefore, is subject to debate, as are many estimates on a whole range of issues made day in and day out by seemingly authoritative people. Here one could, for example, mention the assessment made by various experts just before the end of the war that predicted that the calm in Lebanon would last at most a month or two, or the forecast that Hizbollah would sweep the most recent Lebanese elections, held in June 2009.

The root causes of the war in Lebanon in 2006 are to be found in May 2000. The political decision, correct in my opinion, to withdraw unilaterally from Lebanon and to deploy along the international border without generating any deterrence lost its significance due to the policy of inaction adopted later on. This policy was expressed through fairly tentative responses to Hizbollah challenges and acts of terrorism along the border. From May 2000 until the war in Lebanon, the organization carried out 27 terrorist acts and attacks against our forces. From the very first test we faced, the abduction of three IDF soldiers in October 2000, the late Benny Avraham, Adi Avitan, and Omer Souad, our responses were weak, contradicting our declarations before the withdrawal when we committed ourselves to making Lebanon burn should Hizbollah act against us. From this point onwards, we adopted a policy of restraint, moderation, and symbolic response; this simply encouraged the other

side to push the envelope farther and farther towards the edge by repeated acts of terrorism.

Hizbollah studied our pattern of response. Indeed, in general Hizbollah is a learning organization. It continued to walk a fine line, just like its Iranian masters do on the nuclear issue, and in doing so managed to sedate us with a slow, continuous process lasting six years, until July 2006. During that time, a fortified, well equipped guerilla terrorist organization, entrenched at the doorsteps of our settlements on the line of confrontation, was constructed under our very noses. This was a guerilla terrorist organization that created its own equation of deterrence vis-à-vis our capabilities, holding our northern towns and our soldiers in their fortifications hostage, as it were.

The action I recommended on July 12, 2006, the day the war broke out, had been taking shape in my mind for a long time. It was not a spur of the moment idea that sprang up on the day that Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser were abducted. The idea behind my recommendation was to push Hizbollah over the line it was walking by taking an action that exceeded their expectations, an action that would make it clear to them that the cost we would extract from them would be much greater than the potential reward available to them.

In fact, it might have been possible to continue our ostrich policy of sticking our heads in the sand and imagine their missiles gathering rust. It might have been possible to propose a targeted response. It might have been possible to recommend a long waiting period and extensive preparation for action, which in all realism would likely have never been carried out. At the time, I felt differently. Today too, given the same circumstances, I would make the same recommendation for a response based on extensive firepower, with the possibility of a ground maneuver.

The decision made by the Israeli government to take action in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 was correct and justified. It reflected the understanding that the reality prevailing on the northern border was untenable and demanded change. Leadership is not measured by the ability to shirk fateful decisions. Rather, it is measured by the readiness to make recommendations and decisions, even unpopular ones, by the ability to stick to them while listening to other opinions and understanding other approaches, and by the willingness to bear responsibility and pay a personal price for these decisions, for good and for bad.

Does anyone really think that the recommendation to the political echelon to act the way we did was a decision that dawned the moment the soldiers were abducted on July 12, 2006? If so, I must say that that opinion is based on nothing but personal speculation, nonsense, even absurdity. My own philosophy regarding Lebanon had been formulated over a long period of time, before my appointment as chief of staff. It was based on an analysis of the situation undertaken with my colleagues, on the lack of success of the previous policy, and on a desire to change it. As I have said, the core of my recommendation consisted of a high intensity response, much beyond the scope expected by the enemy. This philosophy was founded on the belief that if we desire to live as an independent state in the Middle East, we must be able to generate deterrence, act decisively, and at times even act outrageously.

My recommendation was accepted and approved unanimously by the government of Israel, which as you may recall also included three former ministers of defense in addition to the minister of defense then in office. Use of military force is made when political means of handling a security or political problem prove ineffective. It is supposed to produce a new situation, one that political officials can use to reapply their political tools in order to solve the root problem.

Should we measure the achievements of the war in Lebanon by the length of the period of calm attained as a result of the war, we will find that this war is not inferior in its successes to other wars we have had to fight. However, that is not the sole criterion, and certainly not the decisive one. Today, when we seek to examine the results of the Second Lebanon War, we need to find a barometer that will allow as objective an examination as possible and a comparison with other wars. The problem is that no such index exists. Every war has its own unique features: the enemy, our political system, the enemy's political system, the international system, the means at our disposal, the type of enemy, and so on.

Therefore, the most significant test is the test of achievements compared with the goals that were defined for the Second Lebanon War, and the political and strategic outcomes of the war. One may criticize the goals – criticism is legitimate – but it is impossible to examine an action against goals that were never defined for it. The outcome of a war is examined not on the basis of alternatives that were never pursued, nor on the basis of hypothetical questions raised with the wisdom of hindsight.

The road not chosen will always be more attractive because it embodies all the theoretical advantages without having to face the test of reality that would reveal all of its practical disadvantages.

Since the Yom Kippur War, the nature of the threats Israel faces – from conventional military threats to complex terrorist threats, not to mention the developing nuclear threat, which is not the subject of this presentation – has changed radically. Instead of coping with the enemy's armored corps bearing down on us, Israel started having to deal with terrorist groups filled with blind hatred. Israel's home front has become the primary target through a variety of terrorist acts, which peaked with the suicide bombers and the rocket fire aimed at population centers. A war of terrorism is by nature a war of attrition, and coping with it requires unique abilities as well as an extended period of time.

The pattern of war in the modern era has changed. Today most of the world's confrontations involve nations waging war against terrorist or guerilla organizations. A quick glance at the current global map shows several decades-long conflicts involving the war on terrorism whose end does not seem to be in sight. We have the United States in Iraq, the American-led NATO war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the IDF's war in Lebanon and against Palestinians in the territories, and low intensity but nonetheless ongoing wars on terrorism elsewhere in the world. Here it is worth learning from others' experience, and in general, it is wise to frame things in their proper proportions when we discuss ourselves and others. In all the examples I mentioned, the wars have lasted many long years and no decisions are on the horizon. What is decision? This was also the question for us with the events that began in September 2000 and died down slowly in Judea and Samaria over six years of fighting and at the heavy cost of more than 1,100 dead, both soldiers and civilians.

From the outset, the Second Lebanon War had defined, limited goals. Not one of the goals defined the objective as destroying, crushing, or erasing Hizbollah from the map of Lebanese reality.<sup>2</sup> As Professor Eyal Zisser has noted, Hizbollah is not only a terrorist organization but also an ideological and social movement. Our experience shows that it is not a simple matter to try to change Lebanon's political reality. According to our assessment, the definition of achievements other and broader than these would have required an action of a completely different nature than that which was taken and would again have left us mired in Lebanon.

From day one it seemed to me that we have to view Lebanon as a single entity and as the address for our operational moves. My position on this was rejected. There were many times – this was by no means the only one – when I failed to mesmerize the political echelon with my positions.

Before referring specifically to the goals and the degree to which they were realized, I would again like to mention our most glaring weaknesses, errors, and failures, in no particular order of importance. I imagine that I will be repeating what my friend Moshe Kaplinsky said, but I feel compelled to mention them nevertheless:

1. We did not call up the reserves at the right time, thus threatening the other side with a ground maneuver much earlier. I say the threat of a ground maneuver, though not necessarily realizing the threat in practice.
2. There were failures in the dialogue between the various command echelons.
3. There was a longstanding neglect of the level of training and battle-worthiness of the field corps; I stress longstanding neglect.
4. The home front and the systems to attend to it by the official authorities responsible, including the IDF, were improperly prepared.
5. There were lofty expectations, stemming in part from a faulty set of explanations of the reality we were facing.

These were joined by failures, errors, and shortcomings that were located and defined in debriefings undertaken by the IDF. One of these, to which I shall return shortly, touches on the level of preparedness of our commands.

The strategic goals defined for the Second Lebanon War were formulated, presented, and approved in clear terms. I am quoting what was presented and approved: “expanding Israel’s deterrence in the sphere and stabilizing Israel’s inter-relations with Lebanon; stopping terrorism directed at the State of Israel from Lebanese sovereign territory.” In this context, no time frame was defined. Additional goals were: “significant damage to Hizbollah; forcing the Lebanese regime and the international community to fulfill their political responsibility, including control of security in southern Lebanon; applying pressure on Hizbollah to release the abducted soldiers.” I opposed the objective of “releasing the captives” because that was a mission doomed to failure from the outset. I did not think it was achievable by means of a direct military action. The last goal

articulated was “leaving Syria out of the campaign and reducing its link to the Palestinian arena.” These were the aims that were defined for the war.

The expectation of military blitz moves such as were seen in the Six Day War was created by others, not by the IDF. We knew full well that this was not warfare against armies and states, rather against terrorism located in and operating from urban areas under the protection of civilian populations, most of whom were completely uninvolved. Not every Shiite is an enemy of the State of Israel.

If we want to examine the success of the military campaign through the prism of time, it is necessary first to put the strategic aim I quoted and the extent to which it was achieved to a professional examination. I have no intention of seeing everything in rose-tinted glasses. I have no intention of using the word victory or evading criticism, which in part was justified, but I also have no intention of accepting indiscriminately every comment and critique. With all due respect to those who were sitting on the sidelines, not everything that was said was formulated on a professional basis. There were other reasons for some of the statements, but this is not the place to discuss them.

An examination of the achievements of the war in relation to the goals leads us to a number of conclusions: Israel’s deterrence in the sphere has grown stronger. Since the Second Lebanon War, certain operations attributed to us by foreign sources have gone unanswered by the enemy, and there is a reason for that.<sup>3</sup> Hizbollah terrorism from Lebanese sovereign territory has ceased in the last three years. Hizbollah suffered an unprecedented, strong blow. Some 700 of its men were killed, and some 1,000 were injured in a single month of action. We too had losses. I enumerated them and talked about them at the beginning of this address. Hizbollah is no longer deployed along the Israeli border, although yes, it may be that in the future Hizbollah will return there. The organization’s center in the Dahiya neighborhood of Beirut was destroyed. The long range rocket batteries were destroyed and Hizbollah’s logistical rear in the Beqaa Valley was damaged. Moreover, the Lebanese regime is fulfilling its political responsibility according to its own interpretation. It has deployed more than 10,000 of its soldiers in southern Lebanon in addition to the multinational force of 12,000 operating in this sector.



As an aside, I would like to point out to Oded Eran, the head of INSS, that if unrealistic political goals are formulated, there is little wonder afterwards that they are impossible to attain. In general, we often tend to assume that we are playing by ourselves, so it is important to remember that every equation has two sides; hence the word “equation.” The expectation that the Lebanese government and army will fight against their own countrymen in order to serve our goals is one that has no chance of being realized, not now and not ever.

The pressure to bring back the abducted soldiers was at first unsuccessful; unfortunately, they were returned to us for eternal rest only two years after the war. Syria remained out of the battle, and no link was created between the Lebanese arena and the Palestinian one.

The Second Lebanon War also had strategic effects on other arenas. In Lebanon, Nasrallah, Hizbollah’s leader, is still living like a fugitive in the cellars of Beirut. According to his own statement, had he known ahead of time the price he would be forced to pay he would not have undertaken the abduction on July 12. The price for challenging Israel has been deeply etched into the minds of the Lebanese. The process of reconstruction has yet to be finished. Public opinion polls and various publications that I too read from time to time reflect remorse for Lebanon’s having joined the axis of evil. Hizbollah lost the elections recently held in Lebanon. Its loss stemmed from the Lebanese political system itself but it was also an expression of the Lebanese public’s understanding of the significance of the heavy damages incurred by the organization in the summer of 2006.

Since the war, Hizbollah has rearmed itself with tens of thousands of rockets. This fact must be noted, and later on in this address I will refer to the issue of armament in general, not just in Lebanon. In some scenarios, thousands of rockets are liable to be launched at the State of Israel, and in other scenarios they are liable to explode in Lebanon. Today it is clearer than ever that from our perspective the Lebanese government is the address for what is happening in that country and from that country.

In Operation Cast Lead, conducted against Hamas in the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and January 2009, Hizbollah avoided acting against us – this in contrast to Operation Defensive Shield in April 2002, when Hizbollah fired hundreds of rockets and mortar bombs at IDF settlements and outposts on the northern border.



Syria in certain respects has been deterred. Beyond the public bravado that praised Hizbollah and its conduct in battle, the Syrian regime understands the model of action we applied in the war in Lebanon and seems to fear it. Syria is looking for ways of fostering closer ties with the Western world. Just recently there was talk of a dialogue about a United States ambassador returning to Damascus at some point in the future. Perhaps this is an expression of the Syrian regime's having internalized the meaning of joining "the axis of evil."

Iran's involvement in Lebanon has been exposed much beyond what we knew in the past. Today Iran is asked to support the post-war reconstruction and Hizbollah's rehabilitation and rearmament, at tremendous cost. One cannot rule out the possibility that the uprising after the recent elections in Iran was an expression of the fact that many Iranians are sick of their government's policy of supporting the axis of evil, a policy that comes at the expense of improving the welfare of the Iranian people.

Much has been said about the moderate states. In brief, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other states are disgusted by Hizbollah and are doing everything possible to promote a different kind of Lebanon. They reject Hizbollah and its patron Iran, which poses a nuclear threat to the entire region. Consider Egypt's action and response against Hizbollah cells exposed recently within its borders and the resulting harsh messages exchanged between the sides. The Egyptian operation and the war of words that developed afterwards between Egypt and Iran because of it are proof of the organization's standing within the moderate Arab community. Professor Zisser supported this with data from a public opinion survey about the low rate of support for Hizbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, throughout the Arab world.

Another ramification of the war was the change in our own conceptual and behavioral worlds. Among ourselves the recognition grew that the defense budget can no longer be an automatic target for reduction and slashing. Furthermore, we have internalized the method of action beyond what the enemy expected. The Dahiya model as a model of action has become accepted. In addition, the fact that the civilian front is an inseparable part of the target and the cost of any future confrontation is also understood. Expressions that were roundly castigated during the war in Lebanon are now seen as truisms. Terms such as "there is no fell

swoop” in this type of warfare; “the resoluteness of the home front as a component of our comprehensive capabilities”; “rockets and missiles fired until the last day of fighting”; “time and patience are required”; and other quotations from statements made during the war that generated waves of criticism are today seen as all but self-evident. In addition, the media undertook some soul searching after the Second Lebanon War, and the IDF as well learned lessons and corrected the erroneous communications policy it used during the war. All of this was achieved by the IDF’s soldiers and commanders who, through their fighting and bravery, generated a change.

I will not wager the amount of time the current situation with the features I have described will last, but I am absolutely convinced that any decision on the part of our enemies to test our patience will be taken with a great deal of fear and trembling.

As for the challenges of the future, our ability to foresee the next confrontation is questionable. Nonetheless, it is important to consider one piece of information as a solid working assumption. Israel’s civilian front will continue to be the enemy’s preferred target in war. Therefore, the army must receive the appropriate resources to prepare and equip itself and be battle-ready within a very short period, in order to attain the tactical, operational, and strategic goals presented to it in the shortest time possible. From this aspect, it is important to strengthen and consolidate the stamina of Israeli society before future confrontations.

The component of defense against missiles and rockets – active defense in the form of interception systems, and passive defense in the form of fortification – is an inseparable part of the total reservoir of capabilities we have to build.

That said, it is necessary to stress that deterrence is not a means to prevent the enemy’s fortification. I am sure that there are many who remember that rearming after a war is a natural activity on the part of the other side. Such growth in strength can be dealt with either through political moves or through military operations.

Responding beyond the enemy’s expectations must be the basis for any future action. In the case of Lebanon, the Lebanese state is the address regarding any hostile act taken against Israel from its territory. The fact that Hizbollah is building up its forces and is deploying in the heart of Shiite towns and villages gives us operational, legal, and moral

legitimacy to stage extensive attacks there should it be necessary as a response to terrorist activity emanating from Lebanon, in the way we operated in the Dahiya neighborhood of Beirut in 2006. This requires us to undertake an entire range of prior actions that would reduce the risk of harm to innocent civilians.

In light of the war and its outcomes, we owe ourselves a thorough clarification of the concepts “victory” and “decision,” certainly when we talk about the type of warfare we are currently facing. Using these terms without clarifying what they stand for runs a great risk of creating an expectations gap and an erroneous assessment of achievements.

Finally, it should be noted that the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead became wars of the past the moment they ended, whose familiar form we will never encounter again. The lessons learned and the conclusions drawn must serve as a tool for progress. Preparing for the future entails the constant need to change and to thwart stagnation. If we can do that, we will cope successfully with scenarios that today are still part of the unknown.

## Notes

- 1 Haloutz is referring to a statement made by Minister of Defense Ehud Barak, who at the official ceremony marking three years since the Second Lebanon War, declared: “Their [the soldiers’] courage made up for the mistakes of upper echelons more than once.” *Haaretz*, July 8, 2009.
- 2 Haloutz’s reference is to impassioned newspaper headlines in the first days of the war, including “The Target: Nasrallah,” *Yediot Ahronot*, and “Crush Hizbollah,” *Maariv*, both on Friday, July 14, 2006.
- 3 The attack on the Syrian reactor in September 2007, and the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, the head of Hizbollah’s military wing, in February 2008.