The Second Lebanon War as a Watershed

Gabriel Siboni and Amir Kulick

Wars are difficult and traumatic, and as such, their impact goes well beyond their immediate time frame and the people directly involved. In this sense, the Second Lebanon War is not unusual. In hindsight, and in light of the thoughtful analyses presented at this conference, it seems that the most prominent phenomenon about the Second Lebanon War is the fact that it was a watershed – a pivotal moment in which different processes ceased, accelerated, or significantly changed direction. This is true at the personal level regarding the people who took part in the war on the Israeli and Lebanese sides; at the organizational level regarding both the IDF and Hizbollah; at the state level regarding both Israel and Lebanon; and on the regional level regarding Iran and the various Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria.

At the personal level, there is no doubt that the war and its outcomes severely damaged the professional and political prestige of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Minister of Defense Amir Peretz. Those two, alongside Chief of Staff Dan Haloutz, suffered mainly because of the gap between public expectations and declared promises on the one hand, and the actual outcomes of the war on the other. During the first days of the war, politicians, retired senior officers, and media figures presented a long list of public goals for the IDF that created an expectation among the Israeli public for a quick, devastating victory. On the fifth day of the war, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert appeared before the Knesset and declared: "There are moments in the life of a nation when it must stare straight into the face of reality and say, 'No more!' This is such a moment of national

Dr. Col (ret.) Gabriel Siboni, senior research associate at INSS and head of the INSS program on Military and Strategic Affairs; Amir Kulick, research associate at INSS

truth and I say, 'No more!' Israel will not be held hostage. We will prevail." Binyamin Netanyahu, then the head of the opposition, lent his support, and from the Knesset podium on the same day called on the IDF to "fight them, get them, smash them. We're with you!" He added: "You don't start up with us. You don't shoot missiles at us. Israel will win."[1] In the first days of the war, the media broadcast messages in the same spirit; three days into the campaign, on Friday, July 14, the daily *Yediot Ahronot* published the headline "The Target: Nasrallah" while the daily *Maariv* called to the IDF, "Crush Hizbollah." The goals of the war, as defined for the IDF by the politicians in closed sessions, made no difference; in practice, for the Israeli public, the goals of the war were simple: to destroy Hizbollah or at least wrest from it an unconditional surrender. As the days passed, it became clear that the gap between these expectations and the outcome in practice was immeasurable. The public was bitterly disappointed, and the price for that disappointment was paid by Minster of Defense Amir Peretz, Chief of Staff Dan Haloutz, and finally, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. The latter resigned three years later because of the criminal investigations into his affairs, but there is no doubt that the war and its results severely damaged his prestige and the public's willingness to support him and his political party. In this sense, the war was indeed a painful watershed for these individuals.

At the same time, as is apparent from Professor Eyal Zisser's analysis, the war was also a personal watershed for Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's leader. In the years since Israel's withdrawal from the security zone (May 2000), Nasrallah and his organization were seen as the only entities in the Arab world that had confronted Israel and emerged victorious. Thus their prestige was at an all-time high. Within the Shiite community, Nasrallah became the undisputed leading politician. In Lebanon's political system, Nasrallah was viewed as a national leader, and the "weapon of resistance" – Hizbollah's independent military apparatus – was deemed an asset helping to protect the Lebanese state from the Zionist aggressor. Among the masses in the Arab world, Nasrallah's personal popularity soared to new heights and to a large extent he became a pan-Arab leader. Accordingly, he earned the respect and appreciation of many on the inter-Arab arena. The war in Lebanon and its outcomes changed this state of affairs.

After the war, Nasrallah sought to present himself and his organization as the great victors of the campaign. Several weeks after the ceasefire went into effect the organization held victory celebrations in Beirut, and Nasrallah made his "divine victory" speech. In it, he extolled Hizbollah's achievements in the confrontation with Israel. Nonetheless, as early as the first interview with the media, Nasrallah was forced to express regret and explain: "We did not estimate even a single percent of the extent of this war that was brought on by the abduction...Had we known that the abduction would lead to such a result, we would not have carried it out."[2] In addition to the apology and admission of error, Nasrallah's low key, diffident appearance was itself a marked change from the previous appearances of the arrogant, self-confident leader. Likewise, from this point onwards, Nasrallah's personal popularity on the Lebanese internal arena and on the Arab street appeared to go into a steep decline.

The events on the Lebanese political stage emphasized this trend even further. Even during the battles, Hizbollah and its leader were subject to unprecedentedly harsh criticism. Saad Hariri, leader of the March 14 Alliance and head of the Future Movement (Tayyar al-Mustaqbal), called for "a reckoning with Hizbollah." After the war, the calls for disarming Hizbollah grew louder. Accusations about the organization being a "state within a state" that was harnessing foreign interests – Iranian and Syrian – became common slogans of many Lebanese politicians and media officials. Nasrallah's demand to establish a national unity government was denied, and the extensive popular protests held by the organization came to naught.

Tensions in the Lebanese political system climaxed in May 2008 when Fouad Siniora's government sought to dismantle the independent communications system laid down by Hizbollah in Beirut and fire a Beirut airport security officer associated with the organization. In response, Nasrallah sent forth his fighters, who promptly took control of west Beirut. The battles between government supporters and Hizbollah lasted several days. At the end of the crisis, the Doha agreement was signed, which ensured Hizbollah and its ally, the Maronite politician Michel Aoun, major political gains. However, this victory proved to be a double-edged sword for Nasrallah and his supporters. As early as September 2006, Antoine Nadraous asked, "Will [Nasrallah's] weapons be turned on the internal arena?"[3] In May 2008, that question was answered.

As a result of the Doha events, public criticism of Nasrallah and his organization mounted again, and the "weapons of resistance" became a public burden.

The results of the public criticism of Hizbollah were evident in the June 2009 Lebanese parliamentary elections. While Nasrallah's party, the March 8 Alliance, swept most of the Shiite representatives, Hizbollah and Aoun failed to establish a significant base of support among the other ethnic groups. Thus from being a pan-Arab Lebanese star, Nasrallah – at least for now – has become just another average politician wallowing in the mud of Lebanese politics. Hizbollah as an organization has for many ceased being a rising Arab-nationalist power and become a sectarian element in the service of Iran and Syria. In this sense, one may define the Second Lebanon War as a watershed also for large segments of the Lebanese public, a junction where many shed the illusion that it is possible to maintain an independent military force in Lebanon that is not subject to the government's apparatus without considering the inherent risks to the nation's stability. Thus one may assume that for many on the Lebanese street Hizbollah has ceased being a sacred cow and a myth of nationalism and heroism, and has instead turned into a concrete risk threatening the unity of Lebanon.

The events of the summer of 2006 were a watershed also for the organizations that participated in them – Hizbollah's military wing and the IDF. For Hizbollah, the war was an operational success. Hizbollah's military wing was constructed with the capability to fire at Israel's home front throughout the fighting with the deployment of many launchers throughout Lebanon, supported by a ground force that could curb any Israeli attempt to end the fire by means of a ground maneuver. Hizbollah has likely learned many lessons from the war, but in principle it seems that the operational approach that formed the basis for the force buildup before the war was validated. This conclusion is supported when one looks at the organization's processes of force buildup since the summer of 2006. At the center of the organization's increased strength, special emphasis is placed on increasing the number of rockets, extending their range, and improving their accuracy. Israeli sources have estimated that the organization now has missiles that cover most of Israel's territory and that the number of rockets at its disposal has grown from 20,000 before the war to 40,000 in the summer of 2009.[4] Thus, one may conclude that

at least militarily the Second Lebanon War buttressed the *muqawama* (resistance) model brought to us courtesy of Hizbollah and Iran.

For the IDF, there is no doubt that the Second Lebanon War was a watershed in many ways. The most obvious, as is evident also from the analyses by former chief of staff Dan Haloutz and his deputy Moshe Kaplinsky, is understanding the nature of the threat and the need to formulate an appropriate response. The growth of Hizbollah did not come as a surprise to the army. In the years following the withdrawal from Lebanon, the Israeli media published much data about the organization's armament with rockets and missiles.[5] Furthermore, as proven by the destruction of the long range missiles by the Israeli air force on the first two days of the war, the IDF had intimate knowledge of Hizbollah's military complex. Even so, even though the information was known, it seems that their significance was not internalized, or if it was internalized, it was not acted upon. From 2000 until 2006, Israel was deeply concerned with the war of terrorism in Judea and Samaria. As noted by former deputy chief of staff Kaplinsky, new operational models were developed in order to respond to that threat and a whole new operational culture developed in order to provide an appropriate response to the unique conditions that prevailed in the territories. The Lebanese arena and the threat that Hizbollah was steadily constructing were, from the army's point of view, not its top priority.

In this sense, the war in Lebanon was a major juncture for the IDF in understanding the nature of the threat, its force, its implications, and the operational response necessary to deal with it. It became clear to the army and to the security forces in general that the Israeli home front is an integral part of the battle and commands special attention. The army thereby came to the understanding that it is necessary to formulate a special response and a better tailored operational approach to the rocket threat, consisting of a balanced mix of ground maneuver and firepower, and that it was necessary to maintain the IDF's traditional capabilities.

After the American invasion of Iraq, the public − and apparently also the army − felt that the conventional threat against Israel had been reduced and that from now on it was necessary to deal primarily with a future nuclear threat and the various terrorist threats. Thus the defense budget was cut, training was reduced, and the basic battle-fitness of both the regular army and the reserves for fighting a conventional war

was compromised. There is no doubt that the events of the summer of 2006 proved that developing capabilities for combating terrorism cannot come at the expense of maintaining the traditional fighting abilities of IDF units. In this sense, the war was a wake-up call for the State of Israel in general and for the IDF in particular.

The Second Lebanon War also had regional ramifications, especially in redefining the rival camps in the Middle East. Tensions between different elements in the inter-Arab and regional scenes are common, and the existence of rival camps is a time-honored tradition. So, for example, in the 1960s the Arab world was divided between the Nasserites, those who supported Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the royalists, headed by Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Nonetheless, it seems that in the intervening years the Arab world did not witness so clear and extreme a division as that which emerged in the summer of 2006 between the moderate camp, headed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, and the axis of evil – Iran, Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas.

Since President Bush defined the axis of evil in his famous 2002 speech, the Arab world has been divided clearly between those who support the United States and those who oppose it. The war in Lebanon brought this distinction to the surface for all to see. For the first time, Arabs were clearly and openly lining up against an Arab element fighting a war against Israel. Thus, senior Saudi clerics, including Sheikh al-Hawali and Sheikh Ben Jabrin, issued religious decrees saying it was forbidden to support Hizbollah. In one of these opinions, Hizbollah (which literally means "the Party of God") was even called "the Party of Satan." The Saudi government condemned the abduction of the Israeli soldiers and called Hizbollah's actions "impromptu adventures."[6] In mid 2009, the dispute between the two camps reached its peak with Hizbollah's attempt to establish terrorist cells on Egyptian soil and with Saudi Arabia's active involvement in the Lebanese elections and attempt to help the Sunnis and their allies (the March 14 Alliance) against Hizbollah and its allies (the March 8 Alliance).

In addition to the inter-Arab dispute, the war in Lebanon demonstrated that the Middle East produced an historically unusual complex of forces in which Israel found itself lined up in one camp together with the major Sunni Arab nations – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan – against a rival regional camp, primarily Shiite, headed by Iran and its allies – Syria,

Hizbollah, and Hamas; "We are all in the same boat," as King Abdullah of Jordan put it when he addressed the Israeli public. Our failure to stop the Shiites and the global jihadists, explained the king, was your failure too, and vice versa.[7]

In conclusion, one may say that the events of the summer of 2006 left a deep imprint on all participants: leaders, fighters, organizations, nations, and the regional system as a whole. In this sense, there is no doubt that the Second Lebanon War was a watershed, and its ramifications will continue to reverberate for years to come.

Notes

1 The quotations are taken from the Knesset's website, "Weekly Summary of Knesset Plenum Events: The Fighting in the North, July 17, 2006," http://www.knesset.gov.il/AllSite/mark02/h0205558.htm#TQL. See also *Haaretz*, July 18, 2006.

2 NTV, August 27, 2006.

3 *Al-Mustaqbal*, September 14, 2006.

4 "Senior Member of Northern Command: The Calm Liable to Blow up at Any Time," Ynet, August 4, 2009, at http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3757275,00.html.

5 See, e.g., Amos Harel "Iran Planning Rockets to Reach the Greater Tel Aviv Area from Lebanon," *Haaretz*, November 26, 2003; Reuven Pedatzur, "IDF's Horror Show," *Haaretz*, August 1, 2004; Aluf Benn and Amos Harel, "Head of Military Intelligence: Hizbollah Capable of Launching Rockets to the Sharon – Perhaps Even to Tel Aviv," *Haaretz*, July 27, 2004; Ze'ev Schiff, "Iran Ships Lebanon Rockets Capable of Reaching Beer Sheva," *Haaretz*, May 29, 2006.

6 "Senior Saudi Sheikh: Hizbollah – the Party of Satan," *Ynet*, August 5, 2006, at http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3286606,00.htm.

7 "Listen to the King," *Haaretz*, February 25, 2007.