

# The Limitations on Fighting a Terrorilla Army: Lebanon and Gaza as Test Cases

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In the past two and a half years, Israel has waged two military campaigns – against Hizbollah in Lebanon and against Hamas in Gaza – and in both, the campaigns were labeled in the public discourse in Israel and abroad as wars against terrorist organizations. The use of this term to describe the enemies Israel fought and the characteristics of these battles is not only imprecise and misleading but also shrouds the character of the enemy and the nature of the confrontation in a haze, minimizes their complexity, and creates unrealistic expectations in the mind of the public about the feasibility of overcoming them with a clear and unambiguous victory.

In the battles against Hizbollah and Hamas, Israel fought with enemies that can be described as military terrorilla outfits, i.e., sub-national organizations that at their inception based their “military” status on their use of terrorism,<sup>1</sup> that is, on sporadic, violent operations against civilian targets. After these, they added small scale guerilla activity and hit-and-run actions to their methods arsenal, and later on built well ordered and institutionalized military forces with squadrons, brigades, and even divisions (though at this stage they are smaller than in conventional armies), and employed fighting tactics combining all these components.

The purpose of this article is to clarify why a democratic state such as Israel, operating with constraints and restraints that are the direct result of its form of government and of broad political and international considerations, finds it so difficult to prevail fully and clearly in the confrontation against military terrorilla organizations such as Hizbollah and Hamas, which are multi-system outfits backed by social, economic,

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political, and religious institutions and that operate in the very heart of densely populated civilian areas in failed states or entities.<sup>2</sup>

The battle Israel waged against Hizbollah in the summer of 2006 broke out after Hizbollah attacked a number of Israeli settlements with massive missile fire as cover for the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers who were on Israeli territory, patrolling the Israeli side of the border with Lebanon. Consequently, Israel, using its air force, embarked on an extensive operation attacking strategic targets of the organization in the depth of Lebanese territory. Hizbollah responded with massive missile fire aimed at Israel, and this led to a military confrontation that lasted thirty-three days.

During the fighting, Hizbollah operated its institutionalized military system that it had built over many years with the direct assistance of Iran (and over the last few years, with significant Syrian contribution). Iran trained Hizbollah fighters, and armed and equipped them at a level suitable to a regular army of an actual nation.<sup>3</sup> In the Second Lebanon War, Hizbollah's military organization assumed the fighting methods of guerillas, undertook hit-and-run actions, fired at IDF soldiers from afar, and fired massive rocket fire at Israeli towns and cities from within residential areas and even from within the homes of Lebanese citizens. This was according to the explicit logic of terrorism,<sup>4</sup> which seeks to cause indiscriminate harm to as many civilians as possible in populated urban centers.

Hizbollah had free rein in firing at Israel because the country from which it operates is weak; its sovereignty lacks effective power of enforcement and has no influence whatsoever on the operation of the organization's military means or on its decision making processes. Israel avoided punishing Lebanon, from whose territory the attack was carried out, and did not greatly harm its infrastructures as a means of pressure on Hizbollah to stop the fire, though had it wanted to do so it certainly had the capability. Israel acted thus also because of the requests of its allies that have clear interests in Lebanon, primarily the United States and France, who urged Israel to avoid harming the Siniora government. In Israel too, this was considered a moderate Arab government, a member of the pragmatic camp and a possible partner for a future political move between the two countries. Harming a Lebanon led – at least officially – by a pro-Western sovereign government might have undermined its

stability, and perhaps even toppled it, dragged Lebanon into a civil war, and thus strengthened Hizbollah and the radical camp it represents.

As part of its operational strategy, Hizbollah took advantage of the harm that was nevertheless caused to Lebanon and the population, especially the Shiites, by Israel's reaction to the fire launched from or near their residential areas. Hizbollah used pictures of the destruction, broadcast all over the world during the war, in order to undermine the legitimacy of Israel's actions and in order to besmirch it as an immoral and aggressive country. It especially focused on isolated events with mass civilian casualties like the Kafr Qana incident (July 30, 2006) that killed 28 civilians who, unbeknownst to the IDF, were hiding in the basement of an abandoned building from which fire was regularly aimed at Israeli soldiers. The longer the fighting lasted, the more Hizbollah managed to suppress among public opinion the circumstances that led to the outbreak of the war by constantly harping on these images.

Israel's hesitant conduct and its leaders' avoidance of making a clear decision to embark on extensive and comprehensive ground maneuvers in order to penetrate into the depth of Lebanon, surround Hizbollah forces, and deal them severe blows using Israel's ground forces, helped Hizbollah construct the illusion of victory in the war. As the days of the war passed without Israel confronting Hizbollah's primary military force and its rocket launching units, Israel allowed Hizbollah fighters to continue firing them towards Israeli territory and establish what its spokesmen later on would call "the divine victory."<sup>5</sup>

Hizbollah is a movement that has been operating in Lebanon already for 27 years, and during those years it developed an extensive and well-established organizational, social, and economic system, which is represented in the Lebanese parliament and government and is supported by many Shiites, the largest of the ethnic groups in Lebanon. Therefore, the possibility of toppling it and wiping out its military forces via a military move seems patently unreasonable. Given the constraints of time and the restraints under which Israel was operating, it was at most possible to exacerbate the damage done to the organization's infrastructure and its commanders so that it would be much harder for it to present the façade of victory that took hold among the organization's supporters and many others who expected a more significant Israeli achievement. Clearly, the intensive support by the patron states Iran and

Syria – with money, equipment, and weapons – helped the organization rebuild its military force, which was rendered a blow within a short period of time, and this fact too clearly indicates the difficulty in bringing about the total annihilation of a military terrorilla organization of Hizbollah's kind given the circumstances under which it and its enemies operate.

Operation Cast Lead against Hamas in Gaza (as well as against other organizations using terrorism against southern Israel) got under way after a period of several weeks when Hamas escalated its rocket fire. This was no different from the seven years preceding the operation during which rockets of various kinds and mortar bombs were fired at the towns and kibbutzim of southern Israel. Israel prepared for the operation thoroughly and over a significant period of time, and chose its timing without being pressured to act by a mass-casualty event as was the case in Lebanon in 2006. Therefore it succeeded in conducting an intelligent and focused campaign against the military terrorilla organization constructed by Hamas with the ever-present assistance of Iran. Despite the many differences between the two campaigns and the two organizations,<sup>6</sup> there was nonetheless a common denominator. Hamas operated on the basis of the same rationale as Hizbollah, i.e., the use of its military units, many of whose personnel were trained in Iran, and acted in organized patterns – to the extent that the IDF allowed them – of command and control of organic units, even if these were smaller than Hizbollah's. They fought the soldiers of the IDF to the best of their ability, and tried in particular to act using classic guerilla methods against military forces that outnumber their own, attacking sporadically in hit-and-run attacks,<sup>7</sup> in order to try to "sting" IDF personnel by harming them with suicide bombers, sniper fire, and light weapons and mortar bomb fire, as well as kidnapping soldiers, knowing full well both the morale and practical damage such kidnappings represent for Israel. The rationale behind firing at Israeli towns and cities was also terrorism, i.e., causing a lot of indiscriminate damage to the extent of their ability to Israeli civilians and towns, resulting in deaths, property damage, and damage to Israeli civilian routines and morale.

Despite Hamas attempts during all twenty-two days of the operation to harm IDF soldiers and Israeli civilians and their infrastructures, its successes were relatively few, primarily thanks to the IDF's careful preparations for this type of warfare. This was seen for example by

the IDF use of its aerial advantage and the intensity of the firepower directed at the sources of Hamas fire on IDF soldiers in the battlefield and on Israeli civilians, and proper preparation of the civilian home front. Despite Israel's relative success in limiting the damage caused by Hamas, it avoided a massive incursion into the heart of Gaza City to render even stronger blows against the Hamas infrastructure and its leadership. Moreover, Israel did not manage completely to stop the missile fire against its towns but only to reduce it. Accordingly, Israel left Hamas' military terrorilla the possibility of creating an illusion of victory over Israel, one that was eagerly consumed by the movement's ardent supporters. Even in Israel, some parts of the public experienced a sense of a "miss" because of the feeling that the IDF could have achieved a more impressive military decision and achieved a halt to the Qassam and Grad fire at Israel altogether. This fire, even though it dwindled as time went by, did not stop completely even after the end of the operation, and it would seem that only an agreement between Israel and Hamas – with Egyptian mediation – is likely to end it, even if only for a given amount of time allotted by the renewed *tahadiya*.

In conclusion, as long as the State of Israel (like other democratic nations facing enemies of this type) conducts itself on the basis of the constraints of conventional wartime law and morality and the laws, norms, and values that define it and it considers norms accepted in the West, it will likely find it difficult to achieve a clear cut and unequivocal decision against military terrorilla organizations such as Hizbollah and Hamas. This is especially true when these multi-system movements are so deeply embedded in the civilian-urban fabric of the communities from which they operate and their support is based on a broad infrastructure. They have the help of patron states that take care to prepare them and equip them for military campaigns before they begin and finance their rebuilding after the end of the fighting, thus preventing the achievement of a total victory over them.

Because the type of warfare against them greatly resembles fighting normal conventional campaigns, which the terrorilla organizations simply copied into the heart of the civilian arena without any restraints or limitations (except at times in a range of their harm to enemy civilians), a democratic state cannot employ – over an extended period of time and in various situations that come up in the course of fighting – a surgical,

focused strategy, which is usually to be preferred when fighting against terrorist organizations and small guerilla armies. Their lack of restraint and their willingness to take advantage of harm to civilians on both sides, as against the self-imposed limitations set by democratic nations fighting them, help them emerge at the end of these military confrontations with declarations of victory, even when it is clear that militarily they were much more badly hurt relative to the damage they managed to inflict.

Therefore, beyond developing effective strategies and methods and adapting them to the manner of the fighting and the nature of military terrorilla, Israel faces a political and public relations challenge of the highest order. Before the outbreak of hostilities, Israel must prepare for a public relations campaign aimed at heads of state and public opinion around the world, and present the complexity of the new type of warfare it is facing, what needs to be done against such enemies, and the toll that this is liable to take on the countries hosting military terrorilla organizations. Constructing a strategy of proper public relations will allow Israel to gain widespread support, or at least greater tolerance, among both domestic and international public opinion for the harm caused to civilians in the states where military terrorilla has made itself at home. Such a complex type of warfare is definitely liable to appear at the doorsteps of other Western democracies, e.g., those involved in multinational forces stationed in regions of conflict in the world, such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Exposing the fighting strategy of military terrorilla and the rationale at its core, as well as clarifying the military might of these organizations – on a scale usually characterizing sovereign nations – may allow for a more effective confrontation with them, despite the constraints imposed on the use of force by democratic countries when operating in a civilian environment.

Despite the extensive criticism leveled internationally against Israel's actions in the last two campaigns, one may say that as a policy, Israel chose to operate its forces with maximum care under these circumstances of fighting against civilians, and certainly did not sweepingly compromise the rules of restraint expected of a democratic nation in this type of warfare.

Whoever thinks that it is possible to wage war on military terrorilla that finds refuge in obvious civilian environments in failed states, using

only surgical strategy without harming civilians, is deluding himself. One the other hand, whoever expects a democratic state to achieve an unequivocal, total, and clear decision against military terrorilla organizations only through the use of great force against their military component is liable to be very frustrated when it becomes clear that the support of their patrons and civilian systems helps them rebuild so that they will again be equipped for terrorism and guerilla and perhaps even completely reconstruct their military strength. This situation helps create an image of victory for terrorilla, because for them and their supporters the lack of a decision means victory.

### Notes

- 1 It is not the intention of this article to go into a deep analysis of the problematics inherent in finding a single definition of terrorism accepted around the world, because there are more than one hundred such definitions (or nuances thereof). In this context, see Research Symposium: "Terrorism on Trial" at Case Western Reserve University School of Law, sponsored by the Frederick K. Cox International Law Center on October 8, 2004.
- 2 While there is wide acceptance among those who differ about the correct definition that systematic attack designed a priori against innocent civilians is an essential component in defining an action as a terrorist attack, there are those who prefer to focus on the action's justifications rather than on the action itself. There is also a difference between the policies and the manner of conduct of these two movements. Today, Hizbollah is part of the Lebanese establishment and is represented in parliament and the government, but it does not control the country. On the other hand, the state is incapable of controlling its conduct vis-à-vis its military security policy. Hamas operates within a Palestinian entity that is not a sovereign state. Since winning the Palestinian parliamentary elections in January 2006, Hamas heads the Palestinian government, but since its forceful takeover of Gaza in June 2007, its government rules only this area, and the Palestinian Authority has established an alternative government in the West Bank.
- 3 Isaac Ben-Israel, *The First Missile War: Israel-Hizbollah 2006*, Tel Aviv University, May 2007.
- 4 Giora Romm, "A Test of Rival Strategies: Two Ships Passing in the Night," in Shlomo Brom and Elran, Meir, eds. *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives* (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007), p. 51.
- 5 "'Today,' said [Nasrallah] at the beginning of his speech, 'we are celebrating an historic, strategic and divine victory,'" <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/766312.html>.

- 6 See Amir Kulick, "'Lebanon Lite': Lessons from the Operation in Gaza and the Next Round against Hizbollah," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2009): 51-66.
- 7 Interview with Paratroopers Division Commander Col. Herzi Halevy, *Yediot Ahronot*, January 23, 2009.