The Road to the Second Lebanon War, 2000-2006: Strategic Changes in Lebanon, the Middle East, and the International Theater

Reuven Erlich

Background

On the night of May 23, 2000, the IDF withdrew from the security zone in southern Lebanon. The move received international legitimacy under UN Security Council Resolution 425, which was adopted in 1978 following Operation Litani and called for an IDF withdrawal from Lebanon. IDF forces deployed south of the international border along the Blue Line that was delineated by a team of UN cartographers. Thus came to an end an 18-year presence and intensive IDF activity in Lebanon. A new situation emerged along the Israeli-Lebanese border that enabled residents of northern Israel to return to normal life.

The ensuing six years preceding the Second Lebanon War featured dramatic changes in the internal Lebanese theater. Syria's standing in Lebanon declined following the death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000 and the rise to power of his inexperienced son Bashar. The death of Assad Sr. undermined the Syrian order imposed on Lebanon following the 1989 Taif Agreement, which ended the Lebanese civil war. The Christian opposition to the Syrian order was invigorated, and was joined by members of the Druze community, led by Walid Jumblatt, and Sunni Muslims, led by Rafiq al-Hariri. Against this alliance were Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah, which regarded themselves as the axis of resistance to the West and Israel, and sought to impose their ideas and agenda on Lebanon.

The IDF withdrawal to the international border and the international legitimacy it received undermined the internal Lebanese justification for Hezbollah's existence as an organization with a military infrastructure, and ran contrary to the image it sought to create for itself as the "defender of Lebanon." The main argument used by Hezbollah to justify its operations against Israel on Mt. Dov after the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon was the liberation of Shab'a Farms. Another argument used by the organization in favor of kidnapping IDF soldiers was its demand for the release of Lebanese prisoners held in Israel (and a third argument, of marginal importance, was the demand for the return of seven Shiite villages in Israeli territory to Lebanese sovereignty). These arguments did not constitute a viable substitute for the legitimacy enjoyed by the organization when Israel was present on Lebanese soil. Rather, they aroused criticism among the anti-Syrian alliance, namely, that Hezbollah was the only organization allowed to retain its military infrastructure in the country since the Taif Agreement, in contrast to the other militias, which were forced to disarm.

Significant changes in the regional and international theaters also had the effect of weakening Syria's position in Lebanon. The September 11, 2001 terror attacks led to the United States invasion of Iraq and President Bush's classification of Syria as part of the "axis of evil." Consequently, and given the growing unrest in Lebanon, international pressure for the disarming of Hezbollah and the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon increased. This was reflected in the diplomatic initiative by the United States and France aimed at the removal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, which was part of a plan to disrupt the Syrian order that had tightened its grip following the IDF withdrawal. The American-French initiative culminated in UN Security Council Resolution 1559 of September 2, 2004, which called for the withdrawal of all non-Lebanese forces from Lebanon and the disarming of all the militias in the country. The international pressure, combined with the protest that erupted in Lebanon following the murder of Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in February 2005 (responsibility was ascribed to Syria), forced Bashar al-Assad to withdraw the Syrian army from Lebanon in April 2005. Five years after the IDF left the country, the Syrian military presence there also came to an end – the very presence that made possible the growth and consolidation of Hezbollah. A new era in Lebanon began.

Israeli Policy in Lebanon, 2000-2006

For 18 years (1982-2000), Lebanon was a primary issue in Israeli policy. The political and military echelons in Israel were heavily occupied by the challenges posed by the Lebanese theater, led by the efforts to achieve a political agreement with Lebanon and the fighting against Hezbollah. During the First Lebanon War, massive IDF forces were present in the country, in support of the political and military campaign waged by the Israeli government. This policy failed, and came to an end in 1985 with the withdrawal of the IDF from most of Lebanon without any agreement and with the establishment of the security zone. During the IDF redeployment in the security zone, limited IDF forces took an active part in the fighting, with support from the South Lebanon Army (SLA). Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, where the IDF engaged in routine security missions, were a secondary theater of action.

During the six years preceding the Second Lebanon War, a fundamental change occurred in Israeli priorities. The focus of the political leadership and the IDF shifted to the Palestinian terrorist campaign (the second intifada) that broke out in October 2000, less than five months after the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon. In tandem, the IDF conducted regular security activity along the Israeli-Lebanese border with a defensive approach, taking great care not to open a second front that would require allocation of resources and a diversion of attention. The campaign against the second intifada required putting most regular IDF forces into Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, and sometimes also calling up reservists. It reached a peak in Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, and concluded with Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip (2005).

Ariel Sharon was Prime Minister in the five years leading up to the Second Lebanon War (2001-2006). During his term as Minister of Defense in the second Begin cabinet, Sharon was the principal mover behind Operation Peace for the Galilee, which became the First Lebanon War. Nevertheless, during his term as Prime Minister, he showed extremely limited interest in the Lebanese theater. He was far more cautious and restrained than he was two decades prior, and invested most of his efforts in the second intifada, which he regarded as a war for all intents and purposes.[1] The Israeli response to Hezbollah's sporadic military activity was accordingly restrained, despite the international legitimacy gained by Israel with its full withdrawal from

Lebanon and the legitimacy in Israeli popular opinion for much stronger responses.

Israel's restraint was already evident when Hezbollah kidnapped and killed three IDF soldiers on a routine patrol on Mt. Dov on October 7, 2000. Israel's moderate response to the kidnapping with an attack against tactical Hezbollah targets in the area of the event damaged Israeli deterrence credibility. Hezbollah was thereby encouraged to initiate shooting incidents in the Mt. Dov theater from time to time, which killed or wounded a number of IDF soldiers.[2] Israel also had no significant response to the penetration into the western Galilee by a squad of Palestinian terrorists under Hezbollah auspices in 2002, and Israel refrained from any substantive response to the indirect aid given by Hezbollah to the Palestinian terrorist organizations during the second intifada.

Hezbollah took advantage of Israel's focus on the second intifada to build an extensive military infrastructure in Lebanon with aid from Syria and Iran, and without any significant interference from Israel.[3] This infrastructure, which included a large scale rocket system, was used successfully against Israel in the Second Lebanon War.

Israel's policy toward Lebanon since the IDF withdrawal was referred to by the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee as a "containment strategy." It was well described in a report by the Committee following the Second Lebanon War. The chapter dealing with IDF deployment on the northern front on the eve of the war stated:

> The containment strategy formulated and applied on the northern front following the withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 was designed to shape a pattern of deterrent relations that would prevent escalation on the northern front, in the realization that a local event (such as the kidnapping of a soldier) could quickly develop into a conflict with strategic consequences that does not necessarily serve Israel's interests. As part of the containment policy, the Ministry of Defense was instructed to act in a way that would not cause a conflagration in the theater. Wherever Hezbollah acted openly against Israel in one way or another, and an Israeli response was required, limited action was taken (usually including counter fire) that did not bring about general escalation…This policy had a logical basis, among other

> reasons due to the wish to avoid opening another front when the IDF was mostly busy fighting terrorism and had not trained properly, and the wish to avoid a major military confrontation under conditions that were politically and economically inferior for Israel. In practice, however, this policy also dealt the army a severe blow on the tactical level. The order of battle on the northern border was thinned out, and the army's patrols did not penetrate as far. Operational activity along the line and beyond it was very limited, the deployment of technological equipment in the border area was not completed, and intelligence gathering was weakened. The operational routine on the border corresponded to the guiding political and strategic ambience, which remained in effect until the kidnapping: containment and keeping the front quiet.[4]

The Policy of Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah

In the six years preceding the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah became more important for Iran and its ally, Syria. Hezbollah, which from Iran's perspective had proved its worth as a reliable organization with military capabilities during its years of warfare against the IDF, was perceived as serving Iran's regional interests, and as its "long arm" against Israel. The strengthening of this "arm" was especially important, given the progress in Iran's nuclear program and the development of its missile deployment, which increased the tension between Tehran and Jerusalem.

Hezbollah also became more important for Syria as a preferred proxy organization precisely because the Syrian order in Lebanon declined. In the era following the withdrawal of the Syrian forces from Lebanon, the Bashar al-Assad regime regarded Hezbollah as an important tool for safeguarding Syria's interests there, in place of the traditional tools it had used in the years of its involvement in Lebanon, which were made possible by the local presence of the Syrian intelligence mechanisms and the Syrian army.

During the period following the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah faced a difficult dilemma. The withdrawal made the organization appear triumphant, and increased its prestige and status as the "defender of Lebanon." At the same time, however, the international legitimacy attained by the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon detracted from the internal Lebanese legitimacy

for Hezbollah's continued military action against Israel and its existence as an armed organization. Iran and Hezbollah therefore chose a new multi-faceted policy: regular military activity with a lower profile, but without an absolute halt; a strong emphasis on political activity in the internal Lebanese theater, but without neglecting military activity; and indirect aid to Palestinian terrorist cells in order to fan the flames of the second intifada, while refraining from intensive military activity along the Lebanese border. This policy prevented the situation from deteriorating, and gave Hezbollah a breathing space for strengthening its military and political power in Lebanon.

The new policy required adaptations and changes in Hezbollah's policy on terrorist attacks. Intensive military operations gave way to sporadic attacks, mainly on Mt. Dov. Hezbollah also carried out kidnappings of soldiers, or tried to, from time to time. Israel's restrained response to the kidnapping of soldiers on Mt. Dov in 2000 was followed by an unsuccessful kidnapping attempt in Ghajar in November 2005. The next kidnapping on July 12, 2006 took place when Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was in office, and drew a radically different Israeli response that took Hezbollah by surprise.

In the political sphere, during the period between the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon and the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah increased the number of its representatives in the Lebanese parliament and deepened its political influence in Lebanon. It joined the Shiite Amal organization in 2005, and the two organizations held coalition negotiations with Prime Minister-elect Fouad Siniora, a Sunni Muslim. The government formed in July 2005 contained five Shiite ministers, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Hezbollah co-founder Muhammad Fneish was appointed Minister of Energy in a measure designed to signal the organization's desire to bolster its involvement in Lebanese politics.[5]

Construction of Hezbollah's Military Infrastructure

The IDF withdrawal from Lebanon and the substantial drop in the volume of military activity enabled Hezbollah, for the first time since it was founded in 1982, to be eased of the burden of constant fighting and focus most of its efforts on building its military force in the areas under its control. Hezbollah filled a security and governmental vacuum created in the area, especially when the Lebanese army and central government, which were to have entered southern Lebanon and established Lebanese sovereignty there, refrained from doing so for fear of an armed conflict with Hezbollah, and due to pressure

from its sponsors. Hezbollah was thus able to build centers of power in southern Lebanon and other Shiite areas, where it in effect replaced the sovereign Lebanese government and built a military infrastructure.

Hezbollah's improved military infrastructure was built with Iranian and Syrian assistance. Aid consisted of a massive supply of weapons (including large quantities of advanced rockets and anti-tank missiles), financial aid, and political backing, which enabled Hezbollah to deal successfully with its opponents in the internal Lebanese theater. The improved infrastructure built during this period turned Hezbollah from a terrorist and guerilla organization into an organization with quasi-state military capabilities, which in certain aspects (its missile deployment, for example) exceeded the military capabilities of regular armies. This infrastructure included three levels: offensive, defensive, and logistical.

Until the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, the offensive array was based on a large store of rockets, estimated at over 20,000, of various ranges, including long range rockets capable of reaching Haifa and even further south. Most of the rockets were concentrated in Hezbollah's operational core in southern Lebanon, and most were stored in special warehouses dispersed in towns and villages in the area. This offensive set-up was designed to give Hezbollah the ability to conduct a prolonged campaign against Israel and to cause extensive damage to the civilian population, as indeed occurred in the Second Lebanon War.

Hezbollah's defensive set-up was based on the military infrastructure built by the organization in the area south of the Litani River and in Nabatieh. These areas have a Shiite majority, and Hezbollah strengthened Shiite control there after the IDF withdrew from Lebanon. The defensive set-up was designed to enable the organization to conduct guerilla warfare effectively in a scenario in which the IDF enters Lebanon, using advanced anti-tank missiles, engineering forces, and high quality infantry. The defensive set-up was based on Hezbollah's extensive deployment in Shiite towns and villages south of the Litani River, and on implacable warfare waged from within population centers. As a supplement to the military set-up among population centers, Hezbollah also built strongholds in open territory ("nature reserves"), but these played a secondary role in the organization's defensive concept.

The logistics set-up included many storehouses dispersed throughout Lebanon, especially in the south, for weapons designed to enable Hezbollah to conduct protracted warfare against Israel. In effect, Hezbollah built a state

within a state for itself, while using Lebanese state infrastructure, headed by transportation and communications, for its struggle against Israel.

Hezbollah's Aid to the Palestinian Terrorist Organizations

In the years of the second intifada leading up to the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah gave assistance to the terrorist organizations operating in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip. This aid was part of a comprehensive Iranian policy designed to augment the quantity and quality of terrorist operations against Israeli civilians, and to improve their operational capabilities. This aid included direction, financing, smuggling weapons, training, and technological know-how. While doing this, Iran and Hezbollah tried to disguise the source of the aid and avoid being dragged into a direct confrontation with Israel.

During 2001-2006, the number of Palestinian terrorist cells grew every year, mostly in Judea and Samaria, with a few in the Gaza Strip, and received aid and guidance from Hezbollah. The most prominent cells belonged to the Fatah al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Generally during the second intifada Hezbollah provided indirect assistance to the Palestinian terrorist organizations, but in at least one case there was direct Hezbollah involvement in a terrorist attack on Israeli territory. On March 12, 2002, at the height of the intifada, Hezbollah enabled two Palestinian terrorists to penetrate into the western Galilee. The two terrorists fired light weapons at Israeli vehicles traveling in the vicinity of Kibbutz Matzuva, killing five civilians and one soldier. In order to conceal its involvement, Hezbollah used Palestinian terrorists, and refrained from explicitly taking responsibility for the attack. As part of its policy of restraint on the Lebanese border, Israel refrained from a significant response in this case as well.

Hezbollah was also involved in the Iranian attempt to smuggle a large quantity of arms for Yasir Arafat on the *Karine A*, which the Israeli navy intercepted in the Red Sea in the early morning hours of January 3, 2002. From the Iranian perspective, the advanced weapons sent on the ship were designed as a force multiplier for the terrorist organizations, which would enable them to step up the second intifada that was underway. Interrogation of the *Karine A* crew revealed that Hezbollah operatives had been involved in buying the ship and training the crew.

The volume of Hezbollah's aid to cells in Judea and Samaria fell substantially at the end of the second intifada, and the focus of its aid and that of Iran to the Palestinian terrorist organizations shifted to the Gaza Strip.

This was particularly true of the period following the Israel withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the seizure of power by Hamas, which turned the area into a locus of terrorism against Israel. Hamas and the other terrorist organizations, which built their military infrastructure in the Gaza Strip during the period following the Israeli withdrawal, regarded Hezbollah as a model for emulation. It is quite possible that for its part, Hezbollah saw Hamas's success in kidnapping IDF soldier Gilad Shalit on the Gaza Strip border in June 2006 as a reason for increasing its determination to renew the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers.

Epilogue

In 2006, the year of the Second Lebanon War, significant political changes took place in Israel, along with changes in foreign policy challenges. On January 4, 2006, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a severe stroke and was replaced by his deputy, Ehud Olmert. Following an election campaign in March 2006, Olmert was sworn in as Prime Minister of Israel. The challenges facing the new Prime Minister changed substantially: the second intifada ended, and Israel's focus of attention shifted to the Gaza Strip, where Hamas had consolidated its rule. The Lebanese theater, on the other hand, was still considered a secondary theater of activity by the political and military echelons.

On July 12, 2006, at 9:00 AM, a Hezbollah force attacked two IDF patrol vehicles traveling from Zar'it to Shtula in the course of a routine mission. The attack killed three soldiers, three were wounded, and two others, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, were kidnapped by Hezbollah. That same night, the Israeli cabinet, following a two-hour meeting, unanimously decided to embark on what became the Second Lebanon War. In its report on the events of the war, published in January 2008, the Winograd Commission wrote, "The government did not want war, did not intend to start one, and did not know that it was starting one. Only on March 25, 2007 did the government decide to call the military campaign in the summer of 2006 a 'war.' Nevertheless, that was the meaning of the decision of July 12."[6]

Indeed, Israel did not intend to start a war in the Lebanese theater, nor did Hezbollah plan one. Essentially, the Second Lebanon War was a result of the ongoing erosion in Israel's deterrence, which motivated Hezbollah to carry out a provocative kidnapping operation, under the erroneous assumption that it would not necessarily lead to escalation. Hezbollah did not take into

account that it faced a new Prime Minister, whose behavioral patterns were still unfamiliar to the organization, and in a period following the end of the second intifada, when Israel had greater military and political freedom of action in the Lebanese theater. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah even admitted after the war that had he correctly evaluated Israel's response, the organization would not have carried out the kidnapping of the soldiers.

The Second Lebanon War lasted 34 days, and its results were far reaching. Even though the way it was conducted drew strong criticism from the Israeli public and the Winograd Commission Report, it brought about a prolonged and unprecedented lull on the Israeli-Lebanese border, a lull that still continues one decade later. The war also restored, albeit only partially, the Israeli deterrence that had eroded in 2000-2006. On the other hand, this did not prevent the rebuilding of Hezbollah's military infrastructure: the organization's military capabilities by 2016 were much greater than those it had in 2006.

From a historical perspective, it can be seen that the Second Lebanon War was a kind of supplementary action to the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. This supplementary measure, however, had weak points, which may also contain the seeds of the next conflict.

Notes

1 David Landau, *Arik: The Life of Ariel Sharon* (Tel Aviv: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir, 2005), pp. 292-97. Landau writes that off-the-record statements were made by the Olmert government, formed two months before the Second Lebanon War, about the Lebanon trauma allegedly suffered by Sharon (Ibid., pp. 408-9). I believe that the need to deal with the second intifada, not the "Lebanese trauma," accounted for the restraint in Israeli policy toward Lebanon during Ariel Sharon's term as Prime Minister. At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that personally, Sharon, who had been burned in the Lebanese theater, drew the necessary conclusions about the limitations on the use of force in Lebanon.

2 More than 30 shooting incidents were recorded in the Mt. Dov sector between October 2000 and the summer of 2006, in which a number of IDF soldiers were killed with no significant Israel response. See Tomer Naveh, "The Deterrent Relationship Between Israel and Hezbollah between 1982 and 2006," Master's thesis at Tel Aviv University, October 2007. The study is posted on the website of the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center in the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center.

3 Imad Mughniyeh, military deputy of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, was a key figure in building the upgraded military infrastructure during the period before the Second Lebanon War, and in operating it during the war. Mughniyeh was killed in

2008, two years after the Second Lebanon War, when his car exploded in Damascus. The foreign media attributed the killing to Israel.

4 Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Report on Conclusions Drawn from the Second Lebanon War, December 2007, p. 65.

5 Yitzhak Nakash, *On the Road to Power: Shi'ites in the Modern Arab World* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2008), pp. 154-55.

6 Winograd Commission, Final Report: Volume 1 (January 2008), p. 33.