

# The Second Lebanon War: The Limits of Strategic Thinking

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## Background

Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000 without coordinating the conditions for evacuating the security zone in South Lebanon with the Lebanese government. However, it did coordinate its withdrawal with the United Nations: representatives of the UN secretary general drew the so-called Blue Line as the demarcation line between Israel and Lebanon (the agreement of both nations would have been necessary to establish a permanent border). On this basis, the UN approved the declaration that Israel was withdrawing from all of Lebanon, except for the northern part of the village of Ghajar.

Hezbollah exploited the IDF's hasty exit and the subsequent vacuum in southern Lebanon to take several significant steps. It cultivated a narrative of victory, "proven" by the fact that Israel had failed to confront the organization's acts of resistance successfully and was vanquished. It seized control of the areas evacuated by Israel, entrenching the organization and making the organization into the de facto ruler, while continuing acts of provocation against Israel. Hezbollah strengthened its influence on the Lebanese political system, including participation in elections and the government. On the military level, the organization built its military strength with Syrian and Iranian support, and inter alia was outfitted with mid range (up to 250 km) surface-to-surface missiles and surface-to-surface rockets, advanced and portable anti-tank and anti-air missile systems, UAVs for intelligence gathering and attacks, and surface-to-sea missiles. It constructed underground

infrastructures for launches, concealment, and intelligence and command and control systems. Hezbollah reorganized its strategic model, basing efforts on the firepower capabilities of a regular army combined with a modus operandi of guerrilla warfare, and reorganized the command and control structure. Finally, it provided direct and indirect help to Palestinian terrorist organizations in planning, financing, and arming terrorist attacks.

In tandem with infrastructure work of force buildup and political positioning in Lebanon, Hezbollah continued with terrorist acts, culminating with the abduction of three Israeli soldiers in the Mount Dov sector in October 2000 (early in the second Palestinian intifada) and later, with several (failed) attempts at abductions of soldiers from the border area in 2005-2006.

In September 2004, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1559, which determined that all Syrian forces were required to withdraw from Lebanon and Lebanese militias would be disarmed. It also called for expanding the Lebanese government's responsibility and control of the southern part of the country. After the resolution was adopted, two formative events occurred in the Lebanese arena: the murder of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri (February 2005), and the Cedar Revolution (April 2005), which ended Syria's military presence in Lebanon.

This was the background to the events of July 12, 2006, when Hezbollah launched a surprise attack on an IDF patrol along the Lebanese border inside Israeli territory, abducted two soldiers, murdered three, and injured three others. The abduction, less than three weeks after IDF soldier Gilad Shalit was abducted along Israel's border with the Gaza Strip, was assisted by surface-to-surface missile fire toward northern Israel. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah assumed Israel's reaction would be mild, given that the IDF's attention was focused on the Gaza Strip, that there had been no significant Israeli response to the 2000 abductions or the attempted abductions in 2005-2006. This assumption was likewise grounded in Hezbollah's – as well as Nasrallah's own – self-confidence in an ability to predict Israeli reactions to any event.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Strategic Objective**

During the second intifada and the urgent need to fight Palestinian terrorism, Israel chose not to be dragged into a situation in which it would have to be engaged in two arenas – the Palestinian and the northern – and estimated it would be able to contain events vis-à-vis Hezbollah. At the same time,

Israel watched with rising concern as the organization built up its military strength and raised its level of self-confidence. Hezbollah controlled southern Lebanon and provoked the IDF almost daily, while interfering with the routine of civilian life near the border and intensifying its attempts to abduct soldiers, both as a bargaining chip and as a way of humiliating Israel.<sup>2</sup> After the IDF managed to overcome Palestinian terrorism with Operation Defensive Shield and Israel understood that it was necessary to put an end to Hezbollah's ongoing provocations, it turned its attention to the northern front. With the July 2006 abduction on the Israeli-Lebanese border soon after the abduction of Gilad Shalit on the Israeli-Gaza Strip border, Israel felt it could remain passive no longer. The government, in consultation with the military leadership, decided that it was time for a determined reaction.

The military response to the abduction was almost automatic. There was no strategic situation assessment beforehand, nor were there discussions or decisions on what Israel wanted to achieve.<sup>3</sup> At the government meeting on the day of the abduction, the decision was made to go to war without defining the action as "war," and without making a necessary clarification about the war's aims or the risks involved in attaining them or an evaluation of the consequences of forceful military response.

Had the government proceeded correctly, it would have analyzed two main options based on its definition of the strategic problem. The first option stemmed from defining the strategic problem as the erosion of deterrence, evident in Hezbollah's willingness to strike at Israel again. Based on this analysis, it would be necessary to restore deterrence. To attain such an objective, what was needed was a powerful retaliatory strike at Lebanon for several days built on assault capabilities and firepower, especially of the air force, in order to exact a heavy toll of Hezbollah and inflict damage on Lebanon itself as the responsible actor for what was happening in and from its territory and therefore forced to pay for the protection it was giving a terrorist organization. An Israeli response of this order would not have been enough to bring the captives back home and reverse the threat Hezbollah posed, but it would have stood a chance of restoring Israel's deterrence by forcing the other side to pay a price and causing it to desist from further attacks.

The second option stemmed from defining the strategic problem as Hezbollah itself, a powerful military organization with increasing strength and a dominant player in the northern arena, capable of harming Israeli

civilians any time it so desired. The force Hezbollah amassed had gradually changed the balance of power with Israel as well as the organization's political considerations, and resulted in the loss of Israel's deterrence. Therefore, what was needed was a strategic objective that would fundamentally change the situation and the balance of power. The way to do so would be to substantially undermine Hezbollah's capabilities, especially those that could damage Israel with high trajectory weapons, and push the organization's forces away from the Israeli border. The realization of this strategic objective would have meant the use of a great deal of power and ground maneuvers deep in Lebanese territory, at least to the Litani line (south of which Hezbollah had many assets), with an ORBAT of three to four divisions. Such a ground offensive would have lasted at least six weeks, and by its nature, would have meant a high price and major risks, including the loss of life and the possibility of long term entanglement on Lebanese soil. These facts would have had to be assessed and weighted before making a decision.

But the government discussion did not include an in-depth analysis of the various options and their ramifications. It merely ended with a decision to instruct the IDF to start aerial strikes as a response to the abduction. The assumption was that at some later point, decisions would be taken in response to developments. In another cabinet discussion, the IDF presented the government with a proposal for a strategic objective and end state designed to change the state of affairs in a fundamental fashion. The end state described the desired reality at the end of the confrontation: Hezbollah removed from the Israeli-Lebanese border; significant damage to the organization's capabilities (especially its mid and long range surface-to-surface missile and rockets systems); damage to Hezbollah's standing in Lebanon and its image in the Arab world; restored Israeli deterrence against the organization and other regional players; improved conditions for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559 with regard to the deployment of the Lebanese army in southern Lebanon, the disarming of the militias, and the enforcement of the responsibility of the sovereign Lebanese government; increased international involvement in Lebanon and the implementation of Security Council resolutions; and the creation of the conditions needed to bring the abducted soldiers home and prevent future abductions.

The rationale behind setting such far-reaching goals was the drive to bring about a change in the strategic situation that had developed on the Israeli-Lebanese border in the six years since Israel withdrew from the security

zone. The proposal was approved in the cabinet, but the key component in its realization – ground maneuvers deep into southern Lebanese territory – was postponed in the government meeting. The main reason was the concern among the political and military echelons that Israel would suffer numerous casualties, which according to estimates could have been 300-500 soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Thus, a gap was formed between the strategic objective and the military outline designed to attain that objective.

The strategic concept that in practice was applied in the Second Lebanon War focused on: damaging Hezbollah's capabilities, primarily destroying its mid and long range launch systems, made possible thanks to precise strike capabilities based on high quality intelligence; causing severe damage to components of Hezbollah's other military capabilities (other launch capabilities, targeted assassinations of senior personnel, command centers, previously identified logistical centers and warehouses, infrastructures and fortifications near the border, and civilian infrastructures serving the organization's war systems); strengthening Israel's deterrence by determined, powerful aerial attacks; damaging Hezbollah's image as "Lebanon's defender" and stressing its being the cause of massive damage to the country; carrying out special operations in the rear of Hezbollah's strategic alignments; intercepting and foiling arms shipments from Iran and Syria and through Syria to Hezbollah; establishing a naval siege and no-fly zone to prevent aid from reaching Hezbollah; and stressing the responsibility of the Lebanese government for what was happening in the country.

The strategic objective and strategic concept were formulated during the fighting. They were not accompanied by an ordered situation assessment on definition of the problem and objective, or judgment on the best way to use force to achieve that objective. Even after some far-reaching goals were defined, the high command and the government did not officially declare a shift to the state of war. On the contrary, the government imposed limits on the IDF's use of force; in particular, it banned direct, intentional damage to Lebanese state infrastructures (because of Prime Minister Olmert's commitment to President Bush, designed to allow the United States a sphere of political action in order to reach a political settlement).

In tandem with the military efforts, a mechanism was put into place to allow humanitarian relief to the Lebanese population not involved in the fighting. Political moves vis-à-vis the Lebanese government were made with US mediation, aimed at enforcing the government's state responsibility

and sovereignty in the south to the Israeli border; and with the international community, aimed at imposing an embargo of arms shipments not designated for Lebanon's official army.

The war developed in three stages that could be delineated only retroactively, as they occurred without prior planning and in response to developments, and in light of the fact that throughout the period of fighting, Hezbollah managed continuously to launch surface-to-surface rockets at Israel (a total of 400 mid range rockets and 3,500 short range rockets<sup>5</sup>).

- a. In the first stage, lasting eight days, the IDF concentrated on neutralizing Hezbollah's strategic capabilities by attacking its long range surface-to-surface rockets and missiles, destroying the organization's command and control center in the Dahiya neighborhood of Beirut, and preventing shipments of arms and other support from Syria and Iran.
- b. In the second stage, which lasted approximately three weeks, the focus was on deepening the operational achievements and pushing Hezbollah from the border with Israel, while continuing to hunt down the organization's various rocket systems.
- c. In the third stage, the IDF maintained and ramped up its pressure on Hezbollah. A ground offensive into southern Lebanon, up to the Litani River line, was launched with the aim of destroying the organization's infrastructures in the region, pushing its operational units far from the border, suppressing the short range surface-to-surface rocket fire, and creating the conditions for promoting Israeli interests during the Security Council's decision making, according to the parameters proposed by the United States. The political echelon ordered a ground maneuver deep into Lebanon about 24 hours before the anticipated Security Council decision, apparently based on an understanding that the decision, which would end the fighting, would ensure that the IDF was not dragged into a prolonged ground offensive in Lebanon.

The description of the three stages indicates that the second stage was prolonged and failed to increase the pressure on Hezbollah, thereby also failing to create the appropriate exit conditions. In fact, Israel encountered problems in formulating an exit strategy and a mechanism to end the campaign, while waiting for the Security Council decision as the political clock was ticking exhaustingly slowly. Indeed, this pattern recurred in the conflicts with Hamas, when Israel tried to shorten the duration of the campaign but at the same time found it difficult to pick the right time and method to do

so, while at the same time striving to maximize the military achievement for political ends.

It was essential to undertake an extended situation assessment, from the beginning of the confrontation with Hezbollah, to indicate the optimal time to end the fighting when the approach to the use of force had realized its potential and most of the political objectives were met. The realization of aerial attacks and the standoff fire effort was one week into the fighting once Hezbollah's strategic launch systems were severely damaged and the organization's nerve center in Dahiya destroyed. In addition, in this period of time, Hezbollah's leadership was still in something of a state of shock because of the power of the Israeli response, the loss of the organization's strategic capabilities, and the legitimacy that Israel's campaign was granted in the international arena and even in the Arab world. Nasrallah said outright that he would be willing to end the fighting after a week, especially because his primary success – the abduction of the soldiers – came even before the fighting started. For these reasons, the IDF's Strategic Branch in the Planning Directorate recommended an end to the fighting after the first week. But the recommendation was rejected both by the senior military echelon and by the political echelon.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Gaps between the Strategic Objectives and the Execution**

Because it is hard to judge the achievement of a war while it is underway, in many cases – especially in deterrence operations – there is a sense that it is worth continuing the fighting in order to enhance the military achievements and leverage them into political gain. This was true of the Second Lebanon War, in which Hezbollah's evolving situation, the balance of achievements, and the break-even point of the trends were incorrectly weighted. Israel's lingering presence allowed Hezbollah to overcome its initial shock, adapt to the IDF's framework of action, and amass successes by continuing to launch surface-to-surface rockets and demonstrating the IDF's inability to paralyze the organization's launch systems. Thus it unfolded that Hezbollah continued to inflict casualties deep in Israel as well as on the front.

A confrontation between the State of Israel and a sub-state entity such as Hezbollah reflects a fundamental asymmetry: a terrorist organization, free of state responsibility, hides within the civilian population and uses it as human shields and even cannon-fodder for propaganda purposes – and then directs its activity to attack Israeli civilians. Another dimension of the



asymmetry is the war's objectives: for Hezbollah, the fact that it did not surrender to Israel was seen as a victory, while for Israel an end state in which it had not decisively bested a terrorist organization was seen as a defeat. This was accentuated by the fact that Israel has an open, critical system that exposed the holes in the decision making process; the harm done to civilians, soldiers, and the civilian front; the flaws in the IDF's readiness; and the late and clumsy deployment of the ground offensive. In the absence of a clear victory for Israel, the fuzzy picture of the war's outcomes that Hezbollah presented to the Lebanese public allowed the organization and its leader to declare "a divine victory," whereas the Israeli side was shrouded in internal criticism, debriefing committees, and commissions of inquiry on the subject of the failure. Only as years passed did Hezbollah gradually admit to the mistakes it had made and the price it paid (the project to reconstruct the ruins concluded only seven years later), and in practice has avoided resuming proactive attacks on Israel from the Lebanese border (in part because of the circumstances that developed in Syria).

What were Israel's failures in its prosecution of the war? First, there was no understanding that the quick Israeli response in heavily damaging Hezbollah's strategic capabilities would lead to a war, and no state of war was ever declared. Avoiding the designation of a military operation as "war" also stemmed from psychological blocks and political barriers, because a declaration of war creates high expectations. For this reason, many political and military systems, including the civilian front, did not shift into emergency mode. The decision to call up the reserves came late, and once it came, progressed in halfhearted fashion (slowly, slowly). Moreover, the forces called up were not appropriately prepared during the stage before the ground offensive, despite the fact that it started only about a month after the war broke out. Likewise, there was little willingness to take risks in the use of force, as required in a state of war.

Second, the IDF, which for several years had concentrated on the ongoing conflict in the Palestinian arena, had reduced readiness in the northern sector and had not prepared for a high intensity confrontation with Hezbollah. It assumed – erroneously – that the operational experience it had accrued in fighting Palestinian terrorism had trained it sufficiently to face Hezbollah. The damage to IDF readiness was made evident in the state of the emergency warehouses of the reserve divisions and in the command and control capabilities of the division command centers, which had lost their combat fitness.



Third, the IDF did not have an appropriate response to the continued short range rocket launches and to Hezbollah's underground infrastructures where the launchers were concealed and protected, so that even the unique achievement of paralyzing Hezbollah's strategic launch systems and destroying 90 percent of the mid range rocket launchers was cancelled out because of the inability to suppress the short range rocket launchers.

Fourth, on the eve of the war, the General Staff approved an updated IDF concept and mode of operations, but the army still had many reservations and therefore it was not assimilated within the forces on the ground. Consequently, there was confusion at the General Staff level and among the field commanders regarding the doctrine about the deployment of forces.

### **What the IDF Should Have Learned from the Second Lebanon War**

An asymmetrical confrontation is not manifested only in the deployment of force but also in a war's objectives. In the Second Lebanon War, the sub-state enemy defined survival as victory – the very fact that it was not defeated by the IDF (manifested primarily in its ability to continue launching surface-to-surface rockets at Israel's rear). By contrast, the advance of Israel's political goals required Israel to present clear facts on the ground that the enemy would not be able to manipulate to its own advantage. The way to attain this goal was to cause it extreme damage, sometimes by means of a ground offensive deep into enemy territory, and significantly reduce its ability to damage Israel's civilian and strategic rear.

The IDF must be ready to engage in a wide range of different confrontations. The response to one type of conflict is not necessarily appropriate in another. The capabilities and skills acquired in the limited, ongoing conflict in the Palestinian arena did not provide the fitness and readiness needed for a military confrontation with an enemy such as Hezbollah, which was equipped with advanced military systems and extensive long range launch capabilities capable of reaching every part of Israel. This required the application of greater force against the organization.

It is important to undertake a comprehensive situation assessment before, at the start of, and during a confrontation to examine the strategic problem that lies beyond any particular security incident, to formulate the political directives and the strategic objective, to formulate the strategic concept needed to realize that objective, to examine several military-political options

on the basis of the political goals, and to undertake an in-depth analysis of the implications and ramifications of the option selected before it is put into action.

Another layer is the political campaign, in which it is impossible to attain meaningful results without clear successes on the battlefield. For a political campaign to succeed, five fundamental components are needed:

- a. International legitimacy, i.e., guaranteeing that Israel is not blamed for starting the war.
- b. Clear success on the battlefield, i.e., a victory that translates into Israel's ability to force its ceasefire conditions on the enemy.
- c. Full exhaustion of the regional and international potential to promote Israel's political goals.
- d. Full coordination with the United States about the war's goals and the ways to attain them, which also requires consideration of US interests.
- e. Careful attention to avoid war crimes while reducing collateral damage and, to the extent possible, prevention of harm to non-combatants on the enemy's side.

A positive point that should be adopted from the Second Lebanon War is the integration of military, political, legal, and humanitarian efforts, coordinated and synchronized by the chief of staff of the Prime Minister's Bureau. The interdisciplinary approach is critical given contemporary conflicts. Much more needs to be done to develop and refine it.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite Israel's problematic decisions and flaws in preparedness and use of force in the Second Lebanon War, the realization of the gaps in force between Israel and Hezbollah left the Lebanese organization badly bruised and forced it to change its modus operandi and strategic conduct vis-à-vis Israel. In the years after the war, Hezbollah was drawn into the Syrian civil war, leaving Israel's northern border calm for the decade that followed.

The most important lesson is not to embark on a military campaign to fix the outcomes and image of the previous one. It is necessary to examine every military campaign in light of its own particular and changing strategic context, and to steer the use of force according to the strategic goals set by the Israeli government. One must not allow the sour sense of regret of non-realization of the potential for rendering a more severe blow to Hezbollah in the Second Lebanon War to affect the strategic objective of the next military

campaign against the organization. In the current strategic situation, it is highly probable that such a campaign is unnecessary.

## Notes

- 1 Gideon Alon, Assaf Oni, Aluf Benn, and Yoav Stern, "Nasrallah: We Wouldn't have Abducted the Two Soldiers had we Known it Would Lead to War," *Haaretz*, August 26, 2006, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1131753>.
- 2 Evidence for Hezbollah's mood may be found in the so-called spider web speech Nasrallah gave on May 26, 2000, "Sayyed Speech in Full on 26 May 2000 – Resistance and Liberation Day," *al-Maaref Islamic Net*, May 21, 2013, <http://english.almaaref.org/essaydetails.php?eid=3886&cid=286>.
- 3 For more on this topic, see Giora Eiland, "The Second Lebanon War: Lessons on the Strategic Level," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2009): 9-24, <http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/MASA%20-%201.2.pdf>.
- 4 Isaac Ben-Israel, "The First Missile War," position paper, Harold Hartog School of Government and Policy, Tel Aviv University, May 2007, pp. 12-25.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ofer Shelah and Yoav Limor, *Captives in Lebanon* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot-Hemed Books, 2007), pp. 17-23.
- 7 Udi Dekel and Omer Einav, "Revising the National Security Concept: The Need for a Strategy of Multidisciplinary Impact," *INSS Insight*, No. 733, August 16, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/No.%20733%20-%20Udi%20and%20Omer%20for%20web772343072.pdf>.