

“Did We Win or Lose?”: Media Discourse in Israel about the Second Lebanon War, 2006-2016

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The Second Lebanon War is anchored in Israel’s collective memory as a military failure. The media played a significant role in this war, and there were those who claimed that the media had a large part in painting the war as a failure. Over time, political-security discourse has come to understand that the ten years of quiet on the northern border indicate more favorable outcomes of the war than the impressions formed in August 2006. Accordingly, it is important to assess the role of the media in shaping the discourse on the war over the past decade.

Each war has its own story that is woven before, during, and after the war. As the years pass, the stories, heroes, ethos, and myths change. Most studies of collective memory focus on the question of how societies build their past from the vantage point of the present, and how a group’s past is shaped by its current interests and politics.¹ Addressing the questions regarding memories of war in Israel is likely to be significant, as the memory of past wars often shapes future wars.

The development of mass media revolutionized the manner in which we perceive memory. The right to tell the story of the past, which was once reserved for politicians, soldiers, academics, and elites, has entered the public domain, and mass media has been an important arena in shaping collective memory. The media assumes a central role in defining images and shaping the way the public pictures events, and serves as an arena for the interpretation

of events and the creation of worldviews.² So too, the media has a special role in shaping the memory of wars.³ However, research literature primarily addresses media coverage of the wars during the fighting (particularly if the wars are relatively short), and not the memory shaped over time.

This article addresses the shaping of perceptions of the war: it will attempt to assess the contributions of media discourse surrounding the Second Lebanon War since the end of the war in 2006 until 2016, including the elements that influenced this discourse, its characteristics, and its implications. It will differentiate between the media's two approaches to the question of the war's success or failure – the substantive aspect and the operational aspect. The substantive view seeks to define the purpose and political goals declared by the government and determine whether they were achieved by the end of the war; the operational view addresses the IDF's management of the war and execution of its missions.

Given the long period of time under review in this essay, media coverage was assessed on a daily level during July and August each year, and during additional security events on the northern border.⁴ The article focuses particularly on the period after the publication of the Winograd report in January 2008. It includes analysis of qualitative content of all the media items that addressed the topic, both on the news-information level and on the publicist level, in the primary Israeli media outlets during the period under review: *Yediot Ahronot*, *Ynet*, *Israel Hayom*,⁵ and *Channel 2*.

Background: The Second Lebanon War and the Israeli Media

Research literature has thoroughly addressed the manner of media coverage of the Second Lebanon War.⁶ The media filled its primary role during the war, with each side attempting to use the media to influence its opponent's perception.⁷ During the war, the two poles of public political discourse criticized the media. The more common approach maintained that the media undermined the security of the state, along with the morale of the public and the soldiers, to the point of endangering the lives of the soldiers. There were those who claimed that the media was responsible for incorrect perceptions of the outcomes of the war and the general pessimism in Israeli society following the war.⁸ A second and less widespread approach pointed to the lack of criticism against the establishment by the media, and its presentation of the glass as "half full." Discussions on this matter led the Israel Press

Council to establish a committee to discuss setting special ethical rules for the media during times of war.

At the heart of the matter, the contradiction between the two approaches can be reconciled in the study's findings, which demonstrate that both are grounded in fact: when the war broke out, the media united around the country's leadership and supported the war. Barring a few exceptions, Israel's main media outlets covered the war in an uncritical manner that seemed almost mobilized for the cause. They created an environment of complete support and justification for the war, and suppressed any question marks. However, as the war continued and the number of casualties rose, as the rocket and missile attacks on communities in northern Israel continued, and as the reservists' criticism surfaced steadily after the war, media criticism also increased. It began to focus on the message that "the war was just and correct, but the decision makers did not manage it well, and therefore we lost." In other words, the criticism was about the conduct of the war and not about its justification or very occurrence; this was a nearly full consensus among the media.⁹ Even during the ground operation at the end of the war, voices of commentators who opposed the operation were almost unheard, as opposed to the long list of journalists who supported it, as if they "pushed" the country to battle.¹⁰

Another focus of criticism was the coverage of the home front. As of the third week of fighting, the image and representation of the strong home front dissolved. Instead, a critical media discourse began that reflected the crisis of the home front.¹¹ The apparent conclusion is that even when criticism was raised on this issue, it was criticism of the home front's lack of readiness and on the failures of home front conduct, rather than on the essence of the war and whether or not it justified the price paid by the home front.¹² From this perspective, Israeli media coverage of the Second Lebanon War coincides with the representative pattern of media coverage of military and security matters in the first decade of the 21st century in Western democracies in general, and in Israel in particular. The discourse became more complex, and included coverage that was supportive of the military and government, even as it was critical in many ways.¹³

The negative criticism in the media about the conduct of the war continued during the period immediately following the war, which saw an abundance of academic committees and conferences about the war (the Winograd Commission, which published an interim and a final report; the

State Comptroller of Israel, who published a report about the war; IDF inquiries; and media committees of the Israel Press Council). All of these led to the war filling a central role in the media during the year after it ended. Israel was portrayed as having lost the war, or at least as having missed opportunities for victory and as having achieved nothing. The coverage primarily addressed operational aspects of the war's conduct, inadequate preparation by the IDF, and criticism of specific decision makers in both political and military positions.¹⁴

As the years passed, the Second Lebanon War gradually disappeared from the media agenda, and coverage was pushed to the margins of the news. The war was barely present in the media agenda, even in the context of related events, such as the return of the bodies of the kidnapped soldiers (Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev) in 2008, and during the isolated incidents along the northern border over the years. Even coverage on the anniversaries of the war decreased as the years passed, and tended to drift away from analysis of the war's outcomes in favor of individual stories of bereaved families.

Perceptions of the War's Outcomes in the Test of Time

From time to time over the years, certain attitudes appeared in the discourse and shaped the collective memory of the Second Lebanon War. The media continued its criticism of the IDF's professionalism during the war, particularly of its commanders, in part by quoting Hezbollah leaders, especially Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. Thus, for example, Nasrallah was quoted in 2007-2008: "Israel's military intelligence failed in the war,"¹⁵ and "Israel did not achieve any of its goals in the war."¹⁶ This message was also conveyed by quoting senior defense establishment figures, who felt there were flaws in the IDF's performance during the war. For example, Maj. Gen. Moshe Kaplinsky was quoted in 2009 as saying, "The Lebanon mistake – commanders stayed at their plasmas [computer screens]."¹⁷ At various times, the headlines of articles also gave expression to this line of thinking: "Video demonstrates the failures,"¹⁸ and "Towards the complete rehabilitation [of the IDF] from the severe low point revealed in the Second Lebanon War."¹⁹ At a later stage, less unequivocal quotations could be found, such as the Deputy Chief of Staff's quote in 2013: "Eisenkot: maybe we didn't meet expectations, but it is now clear that Hezbollah lost the war...there might have been failures,

but we were victorious...that is clear now." In other words, in retrospect, the failures in the army's operation turned into success in the long term.²⁰

As the years went by, the media did not discuss the essence of the war or whether it was justified. An unusual article was published in 2009, in which then-GOC Northern Command Gadi Eisenkot emphasized: "The goal was just, and ended an intolerable reality in the North."²¹ This article was the exception that proves the rule, as alongside it few articles were published that referred to the war as unjustified.²² The discourse surrounding the long term results of the war heralded the quiet that developed on the northern border over time as a measure of the war's success. That is, the quiet in the north proved that the war was justified, and perhaps is the best proof that the war was no great failure, as it was framed immediately when it ended. To this end, IDF sources were quoted in 2012 as saying that "the next campaign will be harder...every day of quiet that we have succeeded in attaining is a great achievement,"²³ as well as, "the IDF is wrapping up the most stable six years that we have had in this sector since the beginning of the 70s. This is reflected in the tourism and quiet that the residents of the north have been enjoying."²⁴ An article analyzing the situation explained that "Military Intelligence estimates that the next war won't break out this summer, and perhaps will be postponed for a longer period of time. This is primarily because the Second Lebanon War, despite all its debacles, succeeded in achieving stable deterrence, which has been holding for four years. This deterrence might only be postponing the next war, but this too is no small achievement from our perspective."²⁵ Another article stated that this was "a strange war, since it was mismanaged and exposed serious flaws in the IDF's preparedness and readiness, but the strategic result of the Second Lebanon War can be considered a partial success...As a result of this deterrence, Hezbollah has not taken action against us for five years, and the border with Lebanon is quiet most of the year."²⁶

Some analysts compared Operation Protective Edge (2014) to the Second Lebanon War, while emphasizing the following argument: "The Second Lebanon War taught us all that the results of war are measured over time, and it is not possible to conclude immediately whether it was a success or failure. Only over time can we learn whether quiet was achieved and the war succeeded, or not."²⁷ A common indicator that the media used to support this approach was the fact that Nasrallah is in hiding, as evidence of Hezbollah's defeat: "Nasrallah, it's fair to say, ended the war weak, really weak. Since

the end of the war, the Secretary General of Hezbollah has been living in underground tunnels in Beirut, and hasn't seen the light of day for fear of Israel assassinating him.²⁸

Notably, public opinion polls over the years have shown a similar picture of the public's analysis of the war compared to the media's analysis. During the war and immediately after it, the public criticized the handling of the war, and this criticism was directed at decision makers. Mixed feelings were expressed about the outcomes of the war, both immediately after it ended and a few years later. For example, in 2007 some 50 percent of those surveyed claimed that neither of the sides had won the war; 23 percent believed that Israel had won, and 26 percent maintained that Hezbollah had won. In contrast, on a fundamental level, both during the war and immediately after it, and as the years went by, the majority of the public (60-67 percent) supported the decision to go to war and thought that it was justified under the circumstances.²⁹

From the Second to the Third Lebanon War

Beginning in 2009, the media discourse went from discussing the Second Lebanon War to using it as a theoretical basis for the emergence of the "Third Lebanon War." The nature of media coverage became deterministic, conveying the message that it is only a "matter of time" until the next war breaks out. The third Lebanon war is presented as a *fait accompli*, and the focus is on the nature of the expected confrontation. For example, it was noted in 2011-2012 that "the third Lebanon war will look different,"³⁰ and that "their [Hezbollah's] intelligence gathering on IDF forces is part of their preparations for the third Lebanon war."³¹ The dominant pattern was a war of words, centered on the balance of power and mutual deterrence between the two players in the next war: IDF vs. Hezbollah. Coverage dealt with the question of "who is stronger," and emphasized Hezbollah's strength and capabilities, while the IDF's strength and capabilities were more marginal. The media gave center stage to Hezbollah's leaders, especially to Nasrallah. The many quotes from his speeches grabbed the main headlines and stood at the center of in-depth articles that aimed to analyze them, especially surrounding anniversaries of the war. The mood between the lines highlighted Hezbollah as a strong and formidable enemy that must be taken seriously. Belligerent quotes perceived as threatening Israel demonstrate a typical pattern of coverage. For example, from 2008-2010: "If Israel attacks – it

will be more thoroughly defeated...if the result of the July war was defeat for Israel, it will suffer an even greater defeat the next time it attacks,"³² or, "The enemy's home front will suffer concentrated barrages of missiles...the organization learned the lessons and understandings about the new Israeli mentality."³³

An important element in the discourse was the highlighting of Israeli fear, and terms such as "warning," "worry," "panic," "concern," and "fear" were used often. For example, the following appeared in the media: "An alarming reminder – three years since the Second Lebanon War...concerns in Israel: the threat is greater than ever,"³⁴ as well as "Concerns: after the deal, Hezbollah will return to its old ways."³⁵ Another article bore the title "Deceptive calm in the north: 'it can all end in an instant,'"³⁶ and a different one stated, "The next Lebanon war will be different. Six years since the beginning of the Second Lebanon War, the IDF looks north with worry: Hezbollah is gathering intelligence on the fence."³⁷

Media discourse on the IDF's preparedness proceeded differently than the discourse surrounding Hezbollah. The IDF's activity was presented as defensive, and usually did not reach the main headlines, except in response to declarations or figures showing Hezbollah's strength. The media presented the IDF's process of learning lessons and improving its capabilities, and in most cases noted that the army is much better trained and equipped than it was on the eve of the Second Lebanon War: "Hezbollah has become much stronger, but it will find that it is up against a much better trained and equipped army than it met in the Second Lebanon War."³⁸ The IDF's intelligence information regarding Hezbollah's deployment and capabilities was also presented by the media: "Four years later, the IDF presents: this is how Hezbollah is deployed."³⁹ Little by little, the feeling of security was built up, as can be clearly seen in the words of a senior officer who was quoted in 2011 as saying, "We can take them, even without leaving a doubt like we did in 2006."⁴⁰

A complementary aspect to this type of thinking can be seen in the handling of psychological warfare, by indirectly sending messages to Hezbollah surrounding the anniversary of the war, such as messages regarding new Israeli technological capabilities. For example, coverage of a training exercise by the soldiers of Shahaf – the IDF Combat Intelligence unit – in which they simulated closely tracking the activities of Hezbollah, received the headline: "Hezbollah acts: the Israeli Shahaf unit watches." The article

quoted the unit commander in 2009, who said of Hezbollah's fighters that "they're not resting on their laurels...but we are preparing a target list, and when the time comes, we'll know how to strike."⁴¹ Another article from 2012, with the headline "Nasrallah, the ground intelligence monitors will keep an eye on you," reported that the IDF would soon put into operation a detection system based on integrating the existing systems.⁴² Reminders of Israel's technological strength are sometimes made indirectly, for example surrounding the anniversary of the war: "The Iron Dome system succeeds in intercepting targets...something to be proud of,"⁴³ as well as "The Arrow simulates intercepting a Shahab-3 missile under real conditions,"⁴⁴ or "The Trophy protection system for tanks: trials completed successfully,"⁴⁵ and "After years of activity: the Tamuz anti-tank missile is revealed."⁴⁶

Finally, it is important to note that Hezbollah's threats are quoted more extensively than quotes from the Israeli side, and there are only a few quotes of Israel making threats. One appeared in 2008, in an article that began with a report on the defense establishment, in which many warned of Hezbollah's increased strength. Only further on, after a description of the threat, does the article mention that "there are also those in the IDF who emphasize Israel's increased strength...top Armored Corps officer: Hezbollah won't be able to stop us...Hezbollah is in for a surprise with our level of preparedness, our ability to take them on."⁴⁷

Conclusion

In considering memory, the importance of the immediate effect is well known, and in the case of war – how the war is remembered immediately after it ends. Sometimes, this memory solidifies and leaves an indelible imprint. The immediate effect of the Second Lebanon War in media discourse was seemingly that of military failure in the handling of the war and the conduct of the IDF. And indeed, in the period following the end of the war, the predominant narrative was that Israel ended the war without any military achievement. It appears that the passage of time has softened some of these aspects, and today the picture seems less severe.

Naturally, as the years go by, there has been a significant decline in the media's discussion of the Second Lebanon War and its implications. In many senses, the very lack of discussion of the war has enhanced the feeling of quiet in the north. When the war nonetheless appeared on the media's agenda, the discourse focused on issues of the use of force and less on the

strategic outcomes of the war. Significant political matters connected to the outcomes of the Second Lebanon War were rarely discussed in the media, and when they were, they were marginalized (for example, the political aspects of Security Council Resolution 1701: distancing Hezbollah outposts from the border, expanded deployment of UNIFIL, marking the Blue Line with Lebanon, international legitimacy for Israel's attacking weapons transfers to Hezbollah, and more).

As the years passed, the dominant media discourse maintained that in retrospect, the war was slightly more successful than appeared during and immediately after it. The findings indicate that the discourse on the Second Lebanon War, or perhaps on every war, is the discourse of an ongoing and changing process. It seems that the passage of time may enable a more substantive and professional discourse with a wider scope, as has been proven in the past.

The memory of past wars in the media occurs via the present, and at the same time the media interprets the future based on memory of the past. Media discourse on the Second Lebanon War ranges between the war that was and the war that will be. To a large extent, memory shapes the face of future wars, and the Second Lebanon War shapes the face of the Third Lebanon War, whenever that may be.

The dominant discourse that arises from the research on the next Lebanon war is thought provoking. On the one hand, it can be argued that the media acts responsibly when it discusses the army's readiness for the next war, and in mentally preparing the public for it. On the other hand, it is possible that in the media's deterministic presentation of the next war as a *fait accompli*, it shapes reality, like a self-fulfilling prophecy. This also applies to downplaying the IDF's strength, which may have practical implications, if we take into account that Hezbollah, or other enemies of Israel, keep track of the discourse and are aware of its trends.

In conclusion, the criticism of the Second Lebanon War that has appeared in the media over the years focuses on the effectiveness of the military's performance in that war. The media has not examined to what extent the military campaign achieved the goals and aims determined by the military and the government, and there is almost no substantive criticism of the military's assumptions, the principles of the military doctrine, or the validity of conceptions of military victory in the current era of conflicts.

Notes

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- 2 Motti Neiger, Oren Meyers, and Eyal Zandberg, "Songs to Remember: Popular Culture, Collective Memory and the Radio Broadcasts on Israel's Memorial Day for the Holocaust and the Heroism," *Megamot* 46, no. 1-2 (2002): 254-80.
- 3 Oren Meyers, "Still Photographs, Dynamic Memories: An Analysis of the Visual Presentation of Israel's History in Commemorative Newspaper Supplements," *Communication Review* 5, no. 3 (2002): 177-205.
- 4 For example, surrounding the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh; the assassination of Samir Kuntar; the assassination in Quneitra of Imad Mughniyeh's son Jihad in 2015; the incident in which two IDF soldiers were killed and 7 injured by Hezbollah terrorists who fired an anti-tank missile at a non-armored vehicle on Har Dov in January 2015, and more.
- 5 *Israel Hayom* began publication in 2007.
- 6 For example, a special edition published by *the Seventh Eye* dedicated to the media and the war (edition 64, September 2006); in addition, a series of publications of the Rothschild-Caesarea School of Communications, Tel Aviv University (5 volumes), and many academic articles published in Israeli and international journals.
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- 8 According to one survey, 49 percent of the public claimed that the media undermines the morale of the soldiers, and 47 percent believed that the media undermines the morale of the home front. See Gabriel Weimann, "The Israeli Public's Criticism of the Media During the Lebanon War of 2006," *Series on Media in Wartime*, Rothschild-Caesarea School of Communications (Tel Aviv University, 2007), p. 33.
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- 13 Yehiel Limor and Hillel Nossek, "The Military and the Media in the Twenty-First Century: Towards a New Model of Relations," *Israel Affairs* 12, no. 3 (2006): 484-510.
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- 27 Amnon Abramovich, Channel 2, July 15, 2014.
- 28 Karnit Goldwasser, "This is What's Left for Nasrallah," *Yediot Ahronot*, July 18, 2013.
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