

Israel's Home Front: A Key Factor in the Confrontation with Hizbollah

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Several weeks into the second Lebanon War, it is increasingly apparent that the civilian home front is once again a central element in the military confrontation. With thousands of rockets launched at northern towns, at the rate of over one hundred a day, Hizbollah's strategy in the current confrontation has emerged as an integrated war of attrition. It is based primarily on strong defense both deep inside Lebanon and in its south, coupled with a continuous attack on the north of Israel. Its aim is to hit the very fabric of civilian life in Israel, mostly through the use of scare tactics and the disruption of the daily routine. Hizbollah's leadership is thus materializing the concept it cultivated in recent years, based on the assumption that the home front is the weakest, most vulnerable link in Israel. Hence, undermining it might tip the balance, despite Israel's superior military power.

In the weeks of fighting Hizbollah has succeeded in manifesting its war doctrine, reaping the fruits of lengthy, meticulous preparation of its long-range weapons arsenal and realizing its ability to keep firing almost continuously even under difficult conditions created by Israel's total air superiority. The large number of rockets fired at Israel's towns reflects the essence of the current engagement: this is a military confrontation where the home front plays a key role. One cannot ignore the symmetry between Israeli and Lebanese civilians caught in continuous attacks of long-range weaponry. And in both cases, the civilian population is perceived as targets that are supposed to translate their grievances into politi-

cal pressure on their respective leaderships in order to change the political agendas.

The situation emerging on Israel's home front is fairly complex. On the one hand, normal life for much of Israel's populace in the north is all but gone. There are numerous casualties as well as extensive damage to property, and the evident economic damage, primarily in the north, has started to have an impact on the national scene as a whole. According to various reports, the number of Israelis who have left their homes ranges between one third to one half the population for some northern towns, and for other towns, mostly along the border, almost everyone has been evacuated. In many cases those who remained

at home belong to the weaker sectors – elderly people and others whose socio-economic status does not enable them to seek long-term lodging in the center of Israel. Under such circumstances there is a clear and problematic dividing line between the northern periphery, threatened and stricken, and the center, which continues its everyday routine.

Nevertheless, the general impression is that the Israeli public, including in the north, has so far exhibited a fair amount of strength, resilience, consensus, and clear political support for the government and the war's objectives. A poll conducted by the IDF's Home Front Command, published in the IDF magazine *Bamahane* on July 19, showed that 80 percent

of residents of the north thought the IDF should continue military operations in Lebanon. A poll conducted by the Dahaf Institute, directed by Dr. Mina Tzemach, and published in the *Yediot Ahronot* daily on July 18 reported that 86 percent felt the IDF's operation is justified, 87 percent were satisfied with the IDF's performance in the war, and 78 percent were satisfied with the prime minister's performance. In the Home Front Command poll 74 percent of the northern residents polled indicated they preferred remaining at home, and 65 percent defined their personal fortitude as "very high." A poll conducted by Rafi Smith and published in the daily financial newspaper *Globes* on July 19 reported that 85 percent of those polled, all from the north, believed that the public was exhibiting a high degree of resilience. After about two weeks into the war a clear erosion in the degree of solidarity was evident, even if it remained fairly substantial. Into the third week there were indications of stability in the rate of support of the government and the IDF, which suggests that the public was still showing clear signs of resilience facing the continuous attack of the Hizbollah rockets into civilian populated centers.

It is too early to draw systematic conclusions on the fortitude exhibited by the public, and especially its long term resilience. Obviously there is a concerted effort by the municipal and national leaderships to portray public opinion in a positive way. At this stage most of the media – and the

electronic media in particular – presents a similar picture of solid endurance, staunch support of the government and especially the IDF, and overall mutual concern.

Several reasons might be suggested for the public's resilience in the present confrontation:

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■ The most important factor is the collective belief this is a just struggle against a ruthless enemy. This is based on the fact that Israel withdrew unilaterally and completely from Lebanon in 2000 and that Hizbollah started this round with a deliberate provocation. Hizbollah is commonly



portrayed and perceived as the clear representative of the evil triangle of Islamism, fundamentalism, and terrorism. A poll dated July 24, conducted on the *start* web site, reflected the public's firm attitude: 73 percent supported wide-ranging ground troop operations in southern Lebanon; 13

percent supported restricted ground troop operations, and 14 percent supported restricting Israeli military action to the air. According to a poll of 500 adults published in the *Maariv* daily on August 5, 80 percent of respondents supported the military's conduct and 74 percent agreed that Prime Minister Olmert and his government were doing their job.

■ IDF combat on a defined front against a specific enemy encourages patriotic sentiments and promotes the public's natural tendency to join in what is currently termed "embracing the soldiers." This well-known trait of the Israeli public is enhanced by the government's determined position, which manifests itself by the activation of significant military force.

■ As long as the number of casualties is not unbearably high, the Israeli public can keep up its sense of solidarity. Once there are more casul-

ties, and particularly among soldiers, the picture starts to be more complicated, opening the way for more doubts and criticism.

■ The feeling is that this time, leaving homes under attack in northern towns is understandable and legitimate. Unlike in past cases, those leaving are not regarded as “deserters,” but rather as people pursuing a rational choice. In a poll conducted on the *msn* web site with over 1,600 respondents, 90.5 percent said that

It could be argued that the sentiment of national resilience is subjective to a large extent and may even be misleading, if not manipulative. It may change relatively quickly as the circumstances change, yielding to distress, disappointment, and dissatisfaction, which would be followed by criticism and opposition. This is where the military campaign meets the domestic front. Visible successes in the military campaign, particularly if casualties do not mount signifi-

ground for long-term tranquility on the northern border. Mere words of support and enthusiasm for the fortitude of the home front will not suffice for very long. The government can and should focus its efforts on confronting the hardships of northern towns on a system-wide basis. To a large extent, this requires two parallel national efforts: a military one, led by the IDF, and a civilian one, led by state agencies that will be in charge of running the domestic campaign to empower the home front.

This effort should call for several key elements: an immediate improvement of the civil defense system, including in the Arab sector; reinforcement of the socio-psychological support system in the towns under attack; rapid implementation of economic programs for those damaged on various levels, including statutory arrangements for retributions for those who suffered severe financial losses, as well as strengthening the municipal systems that directly serve the individuals. Past cases have proven that there is a direct link between systemic support for the individual and public resilience. This link appears to be vital for success in the current confrontation as well. National resilience may be an abstract term, but nonetheless it must be strengthened with clear and tangible investments.

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the decision of those who left their homes in the north under Hizbollah fire was understandable. This attitude was echoed by Knesset Member Prof. Shlomo Breznitz, an expert on stress situations, in saying (*Haaretz*, July 20) that “one should be very careful in saying that people should not be evacuated...If someone lives in an area that is being threatened and can, with little effort, move somewhere further away, this is one of the most rational behaviors. There should be no social sanction attached to it...On the contrary, this should be encouraged.”

cantly, will impact on the domestic resilience. A lack of such success may effect an opposite impact.

The Israeli leadership is well aware of this conundrum. Hence the need for clear and visible successes on the battlefield. But the clock is already ticking in the domestic arena where one hears some expressions of doubts as well as public criticism and arguments, primarily in the printed media.

The Israeli government can do more to strengthen its civilian home front. Obviously the basis for this has to be military achievements to set the