

# Israeli Government Policy and the War's Objectives

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## The War's Opening

The 2006 war in Lebanon caught Israel's government by surprise. This is a new government, not only technically, since by law a new government is formed after a general election. Rather, this is a new administration in the most fundamental sense, and the triumvirate leading the government in the areas of foreign affairs and defense are new to their positions. The prime minister, a civilian lacking military background, has indeed served in several governments and even served as deputy prime minister for the past three years, but thus far has not taken part in directing defense activities. The minister of defense is a politician with absolutely no experience in either defense or foreign affairs, and who has never served as a minister or even as a member of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. The minister of foreign affairs is also relatively new to her position, and has not been previously involved in diplomacy in any significant way.

Some believe that Hizbollah's intent in abducting the soldiers, which occurred shortly after the

Hamas operation at Kerem Shalom, was to challenge the new government and to test the mettle of its leaders, in the best Soviet tradition whereby Moscow would test each new American president. True or not, there is no doubt that Hizbollah's action on the morning of July 12, little over a fortnight after the abduction of the soldier at Kerem Shalom, has posed a serious challenge for the new government and its leading triumvirate.

To the surprise of many, including apparently Hassan Nasrallah, the government's actions were swift and decisive. On the morning of the abduction the prime minister convened a special government meeting for that evening, which indicates that even in those early hours he was determined to embark on a widespread military action against Hizbollah. Indeed, that

very same evening the government unanimously approved the proposal made by the prime minister and the minister of defense to launch a frontal assault on Hizbollah throughout Lebanon. The significance of this decision lies in that the government was well aware of the implications therein, namely, on the one hand, severe damage to civilian infrastructures throughout Lebanon and the consequent international repercussions, and on the other hand, exposing the entire northern part of the country, to Haifa and beyond, to an ongoing onslaught of thousands of Katyusha rockets and missiles, with the related domestic implications. In this sense one might say that merely by making the decision and implementing it over an extended period of time, one of the objectives of this war has been achieved: renewing

Israel's power of deterrence.

## Objectives of the War

The objectives of the war are not easy to define. The politicians, as is their wont, have defined three general objectives for the war: shattering Hizbollah, restoring Israel's





deterrence, and changing the reality in Lebanon. These objectives are phrased in a very general and unfocused manner, and with the exception of reinstating Israel's deterrence – which has already been achieved to a large degree – it is unclear whether the two remaining objectives are attainable. There are, however, several specific objectives whose achievement, or lack thereof, will determine the success of this operation. These objectives are:

- Return of the two abducted soldiers without linkage to the release of Palestinian prisoners
- Reduction if not neutralization of Hizbollah's military power, by destroying the majority of its weapons, especially its rockets, and eliminating as large a number as possible of its fighters, primarily its senior leadership
- Weakening of Hizbollah's status in Lebanon and in the Arab world, by undermining its military force, symbols, and image
- Removal of Hizbollah from Israel's border, deployment of the Lebanese army in the south, and exercise of Lebanon's sovereignty and

its elected government's rule over southern Lebanon

- Establishment of a mechanism to disarm Hizbollah of its heavy rocket weaponry and prevent further

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weaponry supply from Iran and Syria to Hizbollah.

Some of these objectives, such as damaging Hizbollah's military power, weakening its status, and distancing it from Israel's border, are attainable, in whole or in part, by military means. The remaining objectives are attainable, in whole or in part, only by a diplomatic accord with international backing. It seems that the Israeli government is well aware of this, and is acting towards this goal. The prime minister, the minister of defense, and the minister of foreign affairs have made it clear that Israel will pursue

the military and diplomatic channels concurrently. Diplomatic activity switched into high gear with the visit to the region by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Presumably any diplomatic accord will be grounded in a new resolution of the UN Security Council that essentially reaffirms resolution 1559 and creates a multinational force to deploy in southern Lebanon and assist in deployment of the Lebanese army all the way to the Israeli border.

At this stage the end result of the military campaign is difficult to anticipate. There is no doubt that Hizbollah has been hit hard and hence

weakened, but it is too soon to speak of a decisive military victory. The final picture depends on many factors, some of which remain undefined. Unexpected developments are possible as well, which may significantly influence the perception of the final outcome. These include, on the one hand, a surprise by Hizbollah or, on the other hand, Israeli success in eliminating Nasrallah or other senior Hizbollah leaders. Nevertheless, in the total balance sheet for this campaign, significant weight should be assigned to Israeli national resilience. The Israeli home front has endured weeks of attacks unprecedented in

scope and depth since the Independence War. Still, polls weeks into the war showed that 90 percent of the public supported the war, 85 percent viewed the IDF's performance as positive, and 70 percent regarded the performance by the prime minister and the minister of defense as good or very good. As is customary in a democracy, the opposition too has supported the government and provided it with full backing. These expressions are a significant contribution to Israel's power of deterrence.

As for the diplomatic accord, the chances of realizing it are also difficult to anticipate. Any diplomatic agreement must be grounded in a Security Council resolution, and hence must be agreed upon by its five permanent members, accepted by moderate Arab countries, and consented to by the Lebanese government and of course by Israel. In this equation the Lebanese government is the weakest link and its final position is difficult to anticipate, even more so since there are two governments in

effect, that of Prime Minister Siniora and that of President Lahoud.

### **Strategic Decisions by the Government**

In conclusion, two strategic decisions made by the government at the outset of the operation should be reviewed. The first was not to involve Syria, and to limit military action against Hizbollah to Lebanese territory only. The second was to focus on aerial assaults and to avoid, as much as possible, ground troop operations in southern Lebanon.

Both decisions are controversial, and some question their wisdom. As for the first decision, vehemently upheld by the government, some believe that the only way to deal a deadly blow to Hizbollah is by removing Syria's sponsorship of the organization, and that this cannot be achieved without a military strike against Syria. In the opposite corner, those backing the government's decision claim that Hizbollah's isolation

and the mere fact that no entity in the Arab or Muslim world has come to its rescue are important contributions to its weakening.

As for the second decision, the government itself did not embrace it for very long. Even by the end of the first week of fighting it became clear that the air force alone could not significantly curtail the rocket attacks on Israel's home front, and that deploying ground troops to southern Lebanon was inevitable. Quite a few critical voices were raised against the government for not instructing the IDF, even at the outset of the operation, to overtake Hizbollah strongholds next to the border and to physically destroy the rocket launching infrastructure in these strongholds and villages.

The IDF thus expanded the scope of its ground forces action in southern Lebanon, with multiple signs, including an extensive call up of reserves, that the war will see more widespread ground troop action in southern Lebanon.

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