

# Defining the Enemy in an Asymmetrical Confrontation: The Case of the Second Lebanon War

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## Introduction

The phenomenon known as “asymmetrical confrontation” or “low intensity confrontation” presents the international community, especially democratic states, with new dilemmas unknown in the era of classical wars, when regular armed forces fought one another. Such regular wars had their own sets of rules: it was usually clear when the war started, who started it, and how it ended. Also, for the most part the decision in such wars was clear, and was often formulated in official documents. The situation differs radically in conflicts with irregular forces.

Particular dilemmas arise when a terrorist organization operates from within the territory of a sovereign state against another state. In such a case, the state under attack by the terrorist organization faces the very fundamental question of who is the enemy, i.e., against whom it should direct its punitive and retaliatory actions. It is customary to assume that in terms of international law, a sovereign state bears responsibility for any activity carried out from its territory against another state, and is therefore the address for retaliatory and deterring actions on the part of the state under attack.

In practice, the situation is usually much more complex. In many cases, the terrorist organization operates inside a sovereign state like a state-within-a-state. In practice it controls some areas of the sovereign state and does not allow the legal government to impose its sovereignty in this area. In fact, it is considered to be an enemy of the host sovereign state just as it is the enemy of the state it attacks. This presents the state

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under attack with a dilemma: is it appropriate and does it further its interests to attack a sovereign state, which in practice may be viewed as a kind of ally of the state under attack, in that both are in conflict with the same enemy?

The State of Israel has been forced to confront this dilemma for many years, as terrorist organizations have operated against it from sovereign states. Israel's dilemmas were particularly acute because the sovereign states from within whose territories the terrorist organizations chose to operate usually took moderate political positions regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict and were considered pro-West states. In this sense, Israel faced a difficult constraint: Israel viewed maintaining the stability of the moderate regimes as in its own national interests. Moreover, Western nations were naturally opposed to Israel attacking their ally, and Israel had to take their positions into consideration very seriously. Over the years, Israel was asked to focus its efforts against terror on protective measures. When retaliation was required, Israel was asked to act against the terrorist organizations or the extremist nations supporting them. In any case, it was urged to avoid harming the ally to the extent possible. In this context, the subject was usually Lebanon or Jordan.

In addition to defining the enemy in the conflict with terrorist organizations, Israel's set of considerations included issues of operational and moral nature: terrorist organizations tend to operate from within civilian populations not directly involved in the fighting. This created a wide spectrum of dilemmas for Israel when it was trying to decide on its manner of fighting, including: was there an absolute ability to destroy terrorist cells hiding within civilian populations or dispersed in small groups through large areas? What was the cost that Israel was willing to pay for a frontal confrontation with such cells? To what extent could Israel put civilian populations in "the terrorist state" at risk in order to exert pressure on terrorist organizations?<sup>1</sup>

This article attempts to examine the dilemmas that arose in Israel in the process of defining the enemy in the Second Lebanon War. It focuses on two central issues: the discussions on defining the enemy on the eve of the war; and why this issue was not settled before the war broke out.

### **The Discussions on Defining the Enemy**

The abduction that prompted the war in Lebanon started around 9 A.M. on July 12, 2006. In the incident, three soldiers were killed, two were

injured, and another two, Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser, were abducted by Hizbollah. Five soldiers were killed in an attempt to rescue the abducted victims.

The serious import of this incident must be examined in light of similar events, albeit less extreme in terms of their results, that took place on the Lebanese border in the preceding months. All were accompanied by militant declarations by Hizbollah leaders who extolled the daring of Hizbollah fighters braving “the strongest army in the Middle East.” The policy of restraint adopted by Israel following the withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 severely eroded Israel’s deterrent image vis-à-vis Hizbollah. Under these circumstances, it was clear that the July 12, 2006 incident – particularly its outcome – demanded an Israeli response. The lack of an appropriate response in these circumstances would have implied a critical blow to Israel’s deterrent capability.

The prime minister called a cabinet meeting for 8:30 P.M., nearly twelve hours after the incident, to determine the nature of Israel’s response and its goals. Until the beginning of the cabinet meeting, frenzied consultations at various echelons and in various settings were held about the goal of the response, its nature, and its scope. In these discussions two virtually opposite approaches emerged in terms of defining the enemy that would be the focus of the Israeli response: Lebanon and Hizbollah. However, not a single proposal sought to focus exclusively on one defined target. Both addressed the need to attack both Lebanon and Hizbollah. The argument revolved around the question of how much and when to attack each of the targets.<sup>2</sup>

One approach called for placing full responsibility for the incident on Lebanon and its government. Lebanon, so it was said, was a sovereign nation with recognized institutions of governance. It had the ability to enforce its authority throughout the nation should it really want to do so. Thus, the proposal suggested that Israel’s response to the incident focus on a crushing attack on Lebanese infrastructure targets, especially electric and fuel installations and Beirut’s airport. In the security discussion preceding the cabinet meeting, Chief of Staff Dan Halutz unequivocally stated his opinion on the matter: “We have to look at this incident as a turning point in the Israeli-Lebanese dialogue. We have to place the entire onus on the government of Lebanon, but we will not spare attacking Hizbollah wherever we can....It is inconceivable that we

not attack Hizbollah targets.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the position of the military echelon was not accepted. “From day one,” said Halutz, “it seemed to me that we have to view Lebanon as a single entity and as the address for our operational moves. My position on this was rejected.”<sup>4</sup>

The proposal by the military leadership to attack Lebanese infrastructure targets was meant “to push Hizbollah beyond the threshold it had crossed by means of an operation that was beyond its expectations; an operation that would clarify that the price we will extract from the other side [for an attack] is higher than its potential profit.” Nevertheless, despite the intimidating formulation, the proposal brought by the military to attack the infrastructures was measured and limited. It was not meant to paralyze Lebanese civilian life (though it would have been possible to do so), rather intended to cause it enough damage to make normal life difficult for Lebanon’s citizens and thus motivate them, so it was hoped, to put pressure on their government to take steps to curb Hizbollah activities and anti-Israel operations. According to the Winograd Commission report, Major General Gadi Eizenkot, who at the time was the head of IDF operations, proposed “attacking two power stations and damaging about 20-30 percent of Lebanon’s electricity consumption, Hizbollah’s security center in Beirut, the power station at al-Manar, Beirut airport, and Fajar missile launchers.”<sup>5</sup>

The second, contrasting approach was ultimately adopted by the prime minister and the defense minister. According to the Winograd Commission report, it was also supported by the heads of Israel’s General Security Services and the National Security Council at that time. This approach sought to focus the response on Hizbollah. When the chief of staff proposed immediately attacking Beirut’s airport, Defense Minister Amir Peretz expressed his reservations regarding attacking Lebanese infrastructure targets. “If it’s possible to eliminate the Fajar positions,” he said, “it makes more sense to do that than to attack the airport.”<sup>6</sup>

Prime Minister Olmert, who demanded that the response be focused on Hizbollah, raised serious objections to the proposal to attack Lebanese infrastructures. He made it clear that the international community understood Israel’s need to come up with a harsh response to the attack, but demanded that such a response be directed at the organization that initiated the provocative act rather than against Lebanon. His comments clearly reflected the concern that should Israel direct its response at

Lebanon, Israel would lose the world's sympathy for its response. In addition, he claimed that it is not self-evident that attacking civilian targets in Lebanon would in the end weaken Hizbollah. "Therefore," he concluded, "it is necessary to focus on Hizbollah targets." It is not clear to what extent he communicated to the cabinet ministers the pressures exerted on him by the American administration and the British government to avoid attacking Lebanese infrastructure targets and to what extent these pressures affected the shaping of his positions that night.<sup>7</sup> As would be expected, the position of the prime minister and the defense minister was adopted, and the response focused on Hizbollah rather than on Lebanon itself.

### **Defining the Enemy: Lebanon vs. Hizbollah**

Defining sovereign Lebanon as the enemy and focusing on Lebanese infrastructure targets as the chief of staff proposed was not a risk-free undertaking. It is almost certain that such a move would have aroused international criticism of unknown extent, scope, and intensity, including from the United States. On the day of the abduction, the American administration categorically demanded that Israel avoid attacking infrastructure targets, a move liable to endanger the stability of Fouad Siniora's government. The administration would likely have looked askance at an outright Israeli refusal to heed its request, and it is hard to assess what the practical ramifications of American disapproval might have been.

Indeed, any attack on Lebanese infrastructure targets had implications for the stability of the Lebanese regime headed by Siniora, a moderate, pro-Western regime that saw Hizbollah as a bitter rival, if not enemy. The accepted assumption was that this regime was a natural ally for Israel, and therefore Israel must not take steps that might weaken it or undermine its stability. However, attacking infrastructures does not necessarily entail great loss of life. The damage is reversible and of a primarily economic nature. Thus while attacking infrastructures might have led to severe rioting in Lebanon, it is nevertheless difficult to assess the practical effect such an operation might have had on the regime's stability. This rationale could have been used to temper the criticism coming from Western nations.

Defining Lebanon as the enemy would likely have allowed Israel to exit from the campaign within a relatively short period. Within this time framework, it would have achieved meaningful strategic gains, first and foremost the enhancement of Israel's image of deterrence. Attacking the infrastructures would have demonstrated Israel's determination to maintain the security of its people, even at the cost of disagreements with the United States and other Western countries. "The core of my recommendation," said Halutz, "consisted of a high intensity response, much beyond the scope expected by the enemy. This philosophy was founded on the belief that if we desire to live as an independent state in the Middle East, we must be able to generate deterrence, to act decisively, and at times even to act outrageously."<sup>8</sup>

Focusing the attack on Lebanese infrastructure targets would have demonstrated that Israel was maintaining its credibility and acting on the declarations made by its leaders that Israel would hold Lebanon responsible for any Hizbollah act against it and demand a steep price from Lebanon. Israel's deterrence with regard to Hizbollah had eroded over the years, mainly because Israel did not act on its threats to react decisively against provocations after the withdrawal in May 2000. "Our responses," said Halutz, "were weak, contradicting our declarations before the withdrawal when we committed ourselves to making Lebanon burn should Hizbollah act against us.... We adopted a policy of restraint, moderation, and symbolic response; this simply encouraged the other side to push us farther and farther towards the edge."<sup>9</sup>

In the prevailing circumstances, Israel should have made it clear to the American administration that its ability to achieve decision over Hizbollah in a direct confrontation was limited, if at all existent. Thus if the West was interested in seeing Israel win the confrontation, it had to allow Israel extensive room for maneuvering, including attacking Lebanese targets. It is possible that Israel's allies in the West, especially the United States, would have shown understanding for Israel's claims.

Indeed, unlike the prevalent assessments on the eve of the war that the United States would try to stop Israel, the administration showed a great deal of understanding for Israel's need to act with force and determination in order to curb Hizbollah's ability to act. According to Major General Moshe Kaplinsky,

We were all waiting for the administration in Washington to stop us. This approach was totally mistaken. We failed in analyzing their needs, their insights, and the understandings they were formulating at that time with regard to Hizbollah. In my opinion, the Americans understood, just like we did, the importance of this battle not just for Israel alone but for the entire world of similar outlook and therefore they allowed us full freedom of action.<sup>10</sup>

The problem was that this assessment regarding Israel's highly limited ability to win a war that mainly targeted Hizbollah was never stated out loud to the American administration for the simple reason that it was only understood after the war. Moreover, before the war the assessment that Israel was capable of achieving a decision in a battle against Hizbollah, and that such a decision was attainable primarily on the basis of massive airpower, was prevalent in Israel.

Against this background, one must conclude that before any future confrontation in Lebanon, Israel must make it clear to the international community that its target for response *must* be Lebanon rather than Hizbollah. Major General (ret.) Giora Eiland made reference to what Israel must do before such a scenario actually plays out:

The right thing to do ...is to explain to the world...that the next time Israel is forced to wage a battle against Hizbollah, the State of Lebanon will no longer enjoy any immunity.... The war will not be between Israel and Hizbollah but between Israel and Lebanon. Only a political statement of this sort...will ensure that the war [and] its outcome [are] radically different from the Second Lebanon War.<sup>11</sup>

At the end of the war, it was claimed – with a great deal of justification – that defining Hizbollah as the enemy led the IDF into a war in which its chances of emerging with the upper hand were very slim, if not nil. With Hizbollah as the enemy, the IDF was hard pressed to find an effective expression for the almost absolute superiority it enjoyed in the overwhelming majority of parameters relevant to a decision in a confrontation. The IDF had decisive superiority in terms of sheer numbers of personnel, quality and quantity of weapons, technological capabilities, firepower, intelligence gathering, quality of command and fighters, and more. Yet the IDF waged a war on Hizbollah's home turf where the organization was able to demonstrate its relative advantages



over the IDF, while the Israeli home front was under massive attack by missiles that the IDF had no way of dealing with.

### **A Decision on Defining the Enemy: Questions without Answers**

The process of defining the enemy on the eve of the Second Lebanon War is still a source of conjecture. The abduction was anticipated many months before it happened. In his testimony before the Winograd Commission, the prime minister clarified that upon taking office as acting prime minister on January 4, 2006, Lebanon was at the top of his priorities. He told the commission, "I am constantly concerned with one issue: northern Israel. I feel that from there 'disaster shall break loose.' This awful event [the abduction] seemed to us a certainty. We spoke of it with a certainty above all certainties." Similar testimonies were elicited also from the military leadership, including Major General Udi Adam, head of the Northern Command.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, on the basis of a statement made by the prime minister in a security discussion some months before the war, one may infer that the prime minister, and almost certainly other leading officials in the security services as well, viewed an abduction not only as a sign of a crisis but as an option that could have presented Israel with a justified opportunity to change the rules of the game set between Israel and Hizbollah in recent years. In a security discussion that occurred on May 10, 2006, Olmert said: "Were we able to get to a situation at the end of which the Lebanese army would be deployed in the south, Hizbollah would fall back and be stripped of its weapons....If there is such a thing whose result would be the removal of the threat of Hizbollah – this interests us deeply."<sup>13</sup>

The Winograd Commission determined that "we have not found any support or other references to this important comment." However, Halutz, in his testimony before the commission, also expressed a similar thought process. Halutz reviewed the violent events prior to the abduction and the attempted abductions. After an event in which Hizbollah fighters fired at and injured a soldier and a civilian in Manara (a kibbutz near the Lebanese border), Halutz proposed that if a similar event occurred in the future "we should change our policy of action on the northern border and take advantage of it in order to destroy Hizbollah's infrastructures along the border."<sup>14</sup> This thought process was presumably acceptable to cabinet ministers and senior personnel in the security services as well.



The emerging picture indicates that in 2006 some individuals in positions of senior leadership in Israel came to the conclusion that a drastic change in the balance of power and in the rules of the game between Israel and Hizbollah was needed. At the same time, it was inconvenient for Israel to initiate a unilateral move that would upset the status quo. Israel in fact needed a provocation by Hizbollah to give it justification for escalating the action into a war-like confrontation in order to transform the intolerable reality created on the northern border since its withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000.

Against this background, one may better understand the need that the prime minister – and almost certainly other ministers – had to define the enemy in Lebanon early on. On March 5, 2006, two months after taking office as acting prime minister, Olmert called for a discussion at a senior security forum about the policy of response in Lebanon in the event of an abduction. At the discussion, Olmert made fairly explicit statements about the need for determining ahead of time the enemy in Lebanon against whom the IDF would retaliate. This is how the dialogue between the prime minister and the chief of staff is documented in the Winograd report:

Olmert: “We have to be ready with pre-planned responses formulated to match the type of provocation involved.”

The Prime Minister expressed hope that “someone is preparing such plans.”

The Chief of Staff added that “the plans are there.”

Olmert said that “we would like to hear what they are at the earliest opportunity.”

The Chief of Staff added: “They exist and are authorized by everyone.”

The Prime Minister said: “I wouldn’t want to wait, God forbid, for an event to take place before starting to consider [the goal and nature of the response].”<sup>15</sup>

Especially given such decisive words, it is astounding that in the end, the prime minister’s demands were left without any response. It is almost certain that the chief of staff’s statement that the plans were “authorized by everyone” referred to Sharon’s government. Olmert, according to the Winograd Commission, never got the prepared response plans from the IDF, which almost certainly were in the IDF’s hands. “We did not find any evidence that these plans were in fact presented to the prime minister

or to the political-security cabinet in a comprehensive and organized fashion, and therefore also that they were authorized by them.”<sup>16</sup>

It would seem then that the prime minister had his say, but there was no follow-up mechanism in the prime minister’s office that ensured that his request was put into practice. It is impossible to determine the reason for this unequivocally. In his testimony before the commission, the prime minister tried to downplay the importance of establishing the goals and nature of the response at the outset, because many components having to do with the formulation of Israel’s response were unknown.

There are many conditions lacking certainty, and it is impossible to create an exact platform to match all our capabilities, all our conditions, all our needs, all our priorities, have it be ready on July 12, and have a prime minister who will come to a very simple conclusion [of fulfilling it]. You have to operate under conditions of uncertainty.

We do not know if Olmert was aware that at least on the surface, these statements contradict his demand of the chief of staff to receive precise details regarding the IDF’s response plans.<sup>17</sup>

It would seem that the military had a clear picture of the goal and nature of the response that would be executed in the event of an abduction by Hizbollah. In his testimony before the commission, Chief of Staff Halutz presented the military’s plan for a response to an abduction. The plan included massive aerial strikes in Lebanon, almost certainly against infrastructure targets and Hizbollah targets, over the course of a few days. Only at a later stage was a limited ground maneuver supposed to be carried out along the border for the purpose of destroying the fortifications constructed by Hizbollah there. At the same time, from the exchange between the commission members and Halutz, it is clear that the plan was not brought to the attention of the political echelon, and therefore was not authorized. Below is the dialogue at the commission over the issue as documented in the Winograd report:

Judge Winograd says to Halutz: “You are presenting us with a picture in which you had a fairly organized, previously arranged plan that included massive strikes by the air force, also against infrastructure installations in Lebanon, after which a limited ground action would take place along the border. I have not found that you came to the Prime Minister, to the political echelon, and said: ‘Look, this is the plan.’

Nothing like that was ever said.” Dan Halutz confirms that this is so.<sup>18</sup>

We do not have an unequivocal explanation for why the military echelon never bothered to receive authorization from the political echelon ahead of time for the goals of its response in the event of an abduction. From Halutz’s testimony before the commission it seems that he could have understood that the prime minister would have tended to adopt a disproportional response and would have authorized extensive attack activity in the case of an abduction by Hizbollah. According to him, after incidents that took place between the IDF and Hizbollah, he received instructions from the prime minister to expand the target bank for attack in the event of another unusual event along the border. In hindsight, it is clear that the chief of staff’s reliance on unilateral understandings was of no relevance to the events of July 12, 2006. Even if the prime minister had agreed to expand the target bank, this does not necessarily mean that he would have adopted the chief of staff’s position to focus the response on the infrastructures of Lebanon.

### Conclusion

On July 12, 2006, the State of Israel faced a most serious threat to its vital interests posed by Hizbollah. An immediate decision was required regarding the response Israel would make. Israel’s leadership lacked clear vision and was beset by internal differences of opinion over the most important strategic issue created by the circumstances: which was Israel’s primary enemy in Lebanon – Hizbollah or the state of Lebanon? Israel’s decision makers struggled for a long time – too long – with the question before making a decision, albeit not a clear one.

An examination of the events of the Second Lebanon War and the process of defining the enemy are of concrete significance for the State of Israel now too. The definition of an enemy in confrontations liable to take on the nature of war is a decision of a distinctly strategic nature, and must be made before any fighting breaks out. The decision over the nature and extent of the response bears a rather tactical character and may be made in real time.

Therefore, it is appropriate that we ask if we have learned the lessons that are inherent in the definition of the enemy. Should Hizbollah carry out a similar provocation again, does the military echelon have a

clear definition of the enemy, one that is also acceptable to the political echelons and approved by them? This is highly doubtful.

On November 24, 2009 Defense Minister Ehud Barak stated that in case of another confrontation in the north, the state of Lebanon will be the target of Israel's response. Yet even if this statement is an expression of the Israeli government's formal position – which is not clear – it is not certain that this position will indeed be implemented in real time.

### Notes

- 1 For an extensive discussion of this issue, see. Sherry Makover, "'Yes, we are the most moral army in the world,' An Interview with Prof. Asa Kasher," *Haaretz*, September 25, 2009.
- 2 *The Commission for Examining the Events of the Battle in Lebanon, 2006, the Winograd Commission, the Second Lebanon War, Partial Report*, April 2007, pp. 110-11, 107.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Dan Halutz, "The Failures and Achievements of the War," *Armed Forces and Strategy* 1, no. 2 (2009): 34.
- 5 *Winograd*, pp. 116-17. See also Halutz, p. 52.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 109 and 112.
- 7 Ibid., pp. 118-19.
- 8 Halutz, p. 53.
- 9 Ibid., p. 52.
- 10 Moshe Kaplinsky, "The IDF in the Years Before the War," *Armed Forces and Strategy* 1, no. 2 (2009): 29.
- 11 Giora Eiland, "The Second Lebanon War: Lessons of Strategy," *Armed Forces and Strategy* 1, no. 2 (2009): 22.
- 12 Testimony of the prime minister before the Winograd Commission.
- 13 *Winograd*, p. 94.
- 14 Ibid. See also the testimony of Dan Halutz before the commission.
- 15 *Winograd*, p. 93.
- 16 Ibid., p. 94.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Testimony of Dan Halutz before the Winograd Commission.