Hizbollah vs. the IDF:
The Operational Dimension

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The IDF's Combat Approach vs. Hizbollah

If one were to generalize, one might say that since the War of Independence the IDF has been perceived by Arabs as a maneuvering army, that is, whose military operational doctrine centers on firepower and rapid maneuvers of large forces. And indeed, until the 1990s the major campaigns and operations waged by the IDF (except for the 1969-70 War of Attrition) were based on large scale maneuvers of ground forces. From the 1956 Sinai Campaign to the first Lebanon War in 1982, IDF infantry and armored forces operated deep in enemy territory at the early stages of fighting. The air campaign was perceived at first as mere assistance, and later as a parallel effort aimed at achieving air superiority, destroying enemy anti-aircraft installations and surface-to-surface missiles, and finally assisting ground forces. This perception has been evolving since the 1990s. The air campaign waged by the US in Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War and the campaign waged by NATO member states in Kosovo presented a different model of fighting, which centers on an air campaign. It seems that from this point, the weight the IDF assigned to air and artillery firepower began to shift. The low number of casualties in this brand of fighting, the hi-tech style of war, and the ability to rely on Israel's technological advantage all promoted this combat approach.

This style of fighting, whose core is the "fire-intense effort," was waged successfully against Hizbollah in 1993 during Operation Accountability. Hizbollah was highly surprised by this mode of warfare. The Shiite fighters had prepared for a ground campaign and for face to face fighting with the Zionist enemy. Instead, they encountered a very different campaign, one waged mostly in the space outside of their reach – from the air, from the border, and from within IDF strongholds in the security zone in Lebanon. From this campaign Hizbollah reached the requisite conclusions and came to the next confrontation much better prepared. Thus, during Operation Grapes of Wrath in April 1996, the organization relied primarily on Katyusha rockets that it launched towards northern settlements close to the border.

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Nonetheless, the IDF persisted in its line of thinking that centered on intense firepower, and thus most of the IDF fighting in the 1996 operation relied on the air force and artillery. Ground operations were few, limited mostly to special forces operations in launch site areas. These forces were sent into battle only after the IDF had essentially failed to reduce the volume of rocket fire into Israel's territory. In any event, as far as Hizbollah was concerned and regardless of the political outcome of the confrontation, the clashes of 1996 ended with relative success at the operational level. There were many lessons to be learned in the area of logistics (weapons shortages) and in aspects of command and control, but as a rule the organization was successful in launching Katyusha rockets into Israel up until the ceasefire.

Hizbollah's Operational Preparation for Lebanon War II

From the end of the 1996 campaign and up to 2006, Hizbollah prepared for the next confrontation. Aided closely by Iran, it based its preparations on several assumptions derived from previous rounds of fighting, as well as from military and political developments of recent years. At the center was the organization's assumption that Israeli society is weak and cannot stomach a large number of casualties. In Hizbollah's eyes, this weakness induced the IDF withdrawal from the Lebanon security zone, and Hassan Nasrallah flaunted this ostensible frailty in his victory speech of May 26, 2000 in the border town of Bint Jbail, soon after the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon, where he claimed that Israeli society is as weak as a spider web.

On the operational level it seemed that Hizbollah decision-makers grasped that IDF fighting in the future would also be based on massive use of the air force and artillery. This realization was reinforced by minor intermediate rounds of the conflict in Lebanon as well as by IDF operations in the early years of the intifada, namely, the reluctance to deploy massive ground forces (at least until Operation Defensive Shield in April 2002) and reliance on the air force and limited use of special forces.

Based on these assumptions (the weakness of Israeli society and the IDF's reliance on a firepower campaign), Hizbollah proceeded with its force buildup. The recent round of fighting demonstrated that the organization's primary operational objective was to wage a war of attrition against Israel's home front. Thus at the center of the organization's combat approach was the need to strike within Israel's borders, as deeply as possible and throughout the fighting, even in the face of massive bombing or ground operations by special forces. On this basis, Hizbollah put in place three or four major fighting formations:

- A short range artillery array relying primarily on Katyusha rockets. This array was to bear the burden of striking within Israel's borders.

- A mid-range artillery formation, set up south of the Litani River. This formation launched most of the rockets that hit deep into Israel (the Haifa area and southward). It included 220 mm Syrian rockets and extended range Katyusha rockets.

- Two additional long range rocket formations (up to 250 km) set up in the area between the Litani and Beirut (seen, for instance, when the air force attacked the Zelzal launcher in Beirut). These two formations were intended as strategic weapons of deterrence to allow Hizbollah to deal blows of varying intensity to Israel's soft underbelly – the area between Haifa and Tel Aviv.

Alongside these three or four rocket formations was a ground array created south of the Litani based on underground tunnels and bunkers, explosives-ridden areas, and anti-

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tank units. This array was intended to confront ground forces to a limited extent, to stall ground incursions, and to inflict as many casualties as possible, which would wear out IDF forces, slow down their progress, and allow continued rocket fire into Israel. This operational infrastructure was apparently intended to form a basis for continued fighting by the organization, should the IDF reoccupy parts of southern Lebanon (the less

likely but more dangerous scenario in Hizbollah's view).

On the tactical level, in order to face the IDF's expected fighting mode, the organization chose three principal tactics:

1. Saturating the area with (short range) rockets, and therefore over recent years Hizbollah stockpiled thousands of Katyusha launchers and rockets. The goal was to ensure a situation whereby Israel's destruction of multiple launchers, even dozens of them, would not inhibit Hizbollah's ability to sustain firepower. Thus, the launchers were spread out both in villages and in open areas, and indeed, the organization managed to maintain this formation and continue generating massive fire into Israel (an average of over 100 Katyusha rockets every day) throughout the war.

2. Mobility. Based on different reports, it seems that most of the mid-range rockets fired into the Haifa, Afula, and Beit Shean areas were fired from mobile launchers (launchers installed on vehicles). Apparently these launchers were intended to allow Hizbollah fighters to launch the rockets and hide before air or artillery fire was directed at the launch site. To a large degree, this method failed. According to Israeli air force reports, almost any mid-range launcher that fired into Israel was destroyed.

3. Advance preparation of a ground and logistics infrastructure for waging a prolonged campaign. This infrastructure included many weapons repositories south of the Litani River as well as an extensive ground infrastructure of bunkers and shelters. These were intended to help fighters survive in the face of aerial and artillery attacks and allow them to maintain operations for extended periods.

The organization has created a hybrid command and control model. The cornerstone of its operational layout is a strict hierarchical organizational structure, with Nasrallah and the Jihad council (Hizbollah's "general staff") at the top of the pyramid. Below them are well formed units and formations. This structure enabled the organization to control – throughout the fighting – the amount of fire ("the height of the flames"), the firing units, and the strike range inside Israel. The organization chose to activate its mid-range fire array (south of the Litani) only after several days of fighting, while the long range rocket formation was not activated at all. Similarly, Hizbollah was able to hold its fire during the 48-hour truce during the fighting and renew the rocket attacks shortly afterwards. In the same vein, once the ceasefire came into effect, this command structure ensured that the fighting halted in all areas.

It is likely that with a looser organizational model, Hizbollah would not have succeeded in controlling the massive fire formations it created. Moreover, the organization's investment in a modern command and control infrastructure (such as

the advanced control rooms discovered during IDF action in Bint Jbail) is evidence of its ambition to conduct the fighting in an orderly, well-timed

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manner. At the same time, alongside the hierarchical structure it seems that the ground fighting forces were given considerable free reign. There are two main reasons for that: one reason is the secondary role assigned to this formation – slowing down the ground campaign and inflicting casualties. The second reason is the estimation of the Hizbollah leadership, namely, that during an IDF large scale ground operation Hizbollah would not be able to control a large number of tactical events (whose importance for the overall campaign is in any case insignificant).

The IDF withdrawal from Lebanon facilitated Hizbollah's military buildup. The low operational activity along the Israel-Lebanon border over the years allowed Hizbollah to allocate most of its operational resources to preparing its units for the next campaign with no interference. Without the IDF present south of the Litani, Hizbollah was able, unhindered, to build a wide-ranging infrastructure a short distance from the international border. Moreover, its presence on the border line likely en-

abled it to gather high-quality target intelligence regarding targets deep inside Israeli populated areas using advanced observation devices such as those discovered by the IDF in different villages in southern Lebanon. In addition, Hizbollah also operated

that has evolved in previous years, especially in the recourse to Effects Based Operations, but with firepower remaining its dominant component. Within the framework of this approach, the methodology for confronting Hizbollah's rocket array has

deployed south of the Litani.

Ground forces were deployed after several days of air strikes, and only to a limited extent, on the front lines and in a narrow area (e.g., Maroun a-Ras). This situation left IDF soldiers facing an entrenched and well-prepared ground formation; furthermore, the IDF concentration in a narrow sector allowed Hizbollah to reinforce its troops in the area and send in fighters from adjacent sectors. This mode of operation not only caused many IDF casualties, but also allowed Hizbollah to continue firing its daily quota of rockets into Israel. Possibly the massive ground force operations of the last days of fighting may have surprised Hizbollah, but it seems to have been too late to damage its operational infrastructure significantly. Furthermore, the ceasefire apparently left a major part of the organization's capabilities intact (mainly in the region beyond the narrow strip where the IDF was concentrated for most of the ground combat). Thus in the absence of a sound combat approach, the IDF's combat achievements on the operational level were fairly limited.

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agents within Israel, such as the two brothers from the village of Rajar who were arrested in late 2003 for collaborating with Hizbollah. Other examples are Ahmed al-Heib, arrested in November 2004, and Lt. Col. Omar al-Heib, arrested in February 2002, both suspected of providing information to Hizbollah.

In addition, the short range rocket array deployed on the international border enabled the organization to extend the range of Katyusha rockets to many urban areas in Israel that were out of Hizbollah's reach before the IDF withdrawal, for example, Safed and Tiberias and even Haifa, which was targeted by mid-range Syrian rockets of 220 and 302 mm caliber, as well as by Katyusha rockets whose new range extended to 27-35 kilometers.

IDF vs. Hizbollah in the Recent Campaign

The IDF thus entered the recent confrontation with a combat approach

not changed, nor has it been upgraded since Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996, relying mainly on pre-launch preemption and destruction of the launcher afterwards. It is safe to assume that certain technological innovations have been introduced and were of some benefit during the July-August war. Nevertheless, IDF operations vs. Hizbollah continued to be based on air and artillery firepower, and while IDF fire may have disrupted Hizbollah operations, it did not significantly undermine or impair the operational logic that dictated Hizbollah activity – waging a prolonged rocket campaign against Israel's home front. Thus the numerous bombardments in Beirut and in the Beka'a seem to have hurt the organization, but they did not substantively change the battle plan it planned to pursue. And indeed, throughout the fighting the IDF could not reduce the volume of rocket launches by even a narrow margin, although it was successful in targeting the mid-range rocket array

Nevertheless, at the strategic level and regarding the domestic Lebanese arena, several achievements may be credited to the Israeli architects of the campaign, first and foremost uprooting Hizbollah's basic strategic assumption that Israel's home front is incapable of sustaining prolonged damage or a large number of casualties (military and civilian). In addition, the organization's deterrence ca-

pability, based in recent years on the threat of rocket fire, was damaged. The recent campaign also exposed and jeopardized one of the pillars of Iran's security concept – Hizbollah's long range fire capability, and this at a time when Iran may need the organization's deterrence capabilities. Furthermore, the destruction and ruin in traditional Shiite strongholds in southern Lebanon do not contribute to Hizbollah's stature. Domestic criticism of Hizbollah and its leader by various figures outside and even within the Shiite community are additional results of the recent war.

Hizbollah's Preparations for the Next Campaign: Initial Conclusions

It may be possible to sketch in general terms Hizbollah's expected preparations in the coming years for the next round of fighting. It seems that these preparations will be centered around artillery and rocket arrays, with most of the organization's fighting concentrated into attacks on Israel's home front, though at longer range and more intensively than before. In view of the considerable operational success of the short range rocket array, this formation is likely to be reinforced. The IDF's systematic elimination of mid-range rocket launchers in the region south of the Litani and the (somewhat more limited) damage to the long range rocket array north of

the river may push Hizbollah to build a massive infrastructure for arrays north of the Litani, possibly even in Beka'a and north of Beirut. The objective will be to saturate the area with rockets (based on the same logic that has guided Hizbollah in setting up the short range rocket array) in order to compel the air force to operate in multiple areas and thereby increase the array's survivability.

It is likely that from Hizbollah's perspective the mid-range rocket array did not achieve the optimal

From the command and control aspect, the massive bombardment of the Dahiya quarter of Beirut where, according to IDF reports, Hizbollah command posts were centered, may prompt Hizbollah to disperse its offices and operational command posts across different areas of Beirut and outside Beirut (for example, in Christian quarters that from an international standpoint may be more difficult to attack).

It is too early to assess the full potential for operational change that the

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result. The psychological effect of rocket attacks in Haifa and further south did not materially alter Israel's conduct. From here the organization may draw two operational conclusions: one, to abandon the long range rocket array and focus on the short range rockets; the other, more likely conclusion is that Hizbollah leaders may decide that in order to obtain the desired effect in the future, they should significantly expand and fortify the mid- and long range rocket arrays. The goal of the next campaign would be to launch intensive volleys towards Tel Aviv and its surroundings, which Hizbollah perceives as the nerve center of the Zionist entity.

organization may undergo, since such change depends to a large extent on several factors that are as yet not sufficiently clear. These include the ability/willingness of the multi-national force to prevent Hizbollah from restoring its operational infrastructure in the south; the ability to prevent continued arms transfers from Syria and Iran to Hizbollah; and the internal dynamics that will unfold in Lebanon in the near future. Nonetheless, one question dominates all others, namely will Israel be able to act, both internally and internationally, to disrupt Hizbollah's rearmament, in order to ensure a different outcome for the next campaign whenever it will occur.