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The "Quagmire" Then and Now

Lessons for Combat in the Gaza Strip and for Decision Making from the IDF's Presence in Lebanon Until its Withdrawal to the Awali in October 1983

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Currently, amid the growing debate over the fighting in the Gaza Strip within the context of the Swords of Iron war—what the worthy and attainable goals are and how to achieve them, as well as whether to escalate the campaign in Lebanon, including possibly occupying territory in southern Lebanon—it is worth returning to the IDF's presence in Lebanon, particularly from September 1982 to one year later when the IDF unilaterally withdrew south of the Awali River. By comparing the decision-making processes, the public atmosphere, and the consequences for the IDF during that time, it becomes apparent that there are many similarities with the current situation, and the mistakes of the past should serve as a warning sign for decision makers at all levels.

On August 31, 1982, about three months after the outbreak of the First Lebanon war, Yasser Arafat and thousands of PLO members (Yitzhak Shamir, then foreign minister, estimated their number to be 11,000)[1] left Beirut for Tunis and Syria. Thus, the declared mission of Operation Peace for Galilee was successfully achieved—of removing the rocket threat from northern Israel. But the IDF, as we know, did not redeploy south of the international border between Israel and Lebanon until 18 years later, after hundreds had been killed and three withdrawals had been declared. In September 1983, the IDF withdrew south of the Awali River; in 1985 to the "security zone," where IDF and SLA forces fought Hezbollah; and in May 2000 to the international border. The number of IDF officers and soldiers killed during these 18 years has never been officially published, but according to verified estimates,[2] it reached 675 soldiers, which, together with the approximately 540 killed from June to September 1982, placed the cost of the campaign in Lebanon in its full sense at 1,217 casualties. About 250 of the soldiers were killed between September 1982 and the time of the withdrawal to the security zone in 1985.[3] The security price for Hezbollah's growth and its becoming the enemy that poses the greatest threat to Israel on its borders, as well as the

political, social, and internal military costs of remaining in Lebanon Israel continues to pay until this day.

The circumstances of the outbreak of the First Lebanon War are fundamentally different from those of Swords of Iron, as the First Lebanon War did not begin with a massive attack whose results were traumatic such as on October 7, 2023. After a year-long ceasefire starting in the summer of 1981, the war broke out following the attempted assassination of Israel's ambassador to the United Kingdom, Shlomo Argov, on June 3, 1982. But then, as now, its declared purpose was to remove the real and direct military threat to an entire region that the Katyushas posed to northern Israel in the early 1980s. There is great similarity in terms of the discussion of how to continue after the intensive military campaign in the first few months of the Lebanon war, to ensure that its military achievements are not diminished, and the threat does not return. Here too there is a fundamental difference: In the current war, if Hamas returns to power in Gaza, the threat to Israel's territory will return; in 1982, after it was agreed that Arafat and his men would depart from Beirut, it was clear that they would not return, and Lebanese organizations no longer posed a threat toward northern Israel.

The hope that a political agreement with Lebanon would ensure quiet, if there was any such hope, faded after the murder of Bachir Gemayel on September 14, 1982, and despite the agreement that Israel had signed with his brother and successor as president, Amine Gemayel, on May 17, 1983. Even though there were no attacks on Israeli territory in the months after the war nor any Lebanese organizations that advocated for war with Israel, the political and military leadership continued to believe that remaining in Lebanon—including in locations dozens of kilometers away from the Israeli border—was a guarantee for protecting the Galilee.

This conception did not change even as it gradually became clear in the months after September 1982 that the IDF's presence in populated areas in Lebanon, its being dragged into the plethora of local conflicts in the divided country, and the constant friction with the civilian population created hostility toward both the IDF and Israel. The same Lebanese who threw rice to welcome the IDF convoys that entered Lebanon in June 1982 started to use explosive charges against the Israeli forces as time went on.

"Withdrawal Is Weakness"

A prominent reason given for remaining in Lebanon was the concern about Israel's image if it withdrew. This concern was repeatedly mentioned in Shimon Golan's study *From Beirut to the Security Zone*, which is based entirely on protocols and minutes of discussions in the army's leadership and in the Ministry of Defense at

that time. For example, an October 1982 document by the Research Department of the Military Intelligence Directorate claims that,

Such a withdrawal would give Israel, in the eyes of the Arabs and in the eyes of the United States, the image of an army in retreat, after it already unilaterally withdrew from Beirut. It would be interpreted as admitting the failure of the policy that strived to achieve basic objectives in Lebanon and as a demonstration of weakness and inability to withstand pressure. Following the withdrawal, the impression could emerge that Israel will not stop at that line and that the exertion of further pressure could force it into additional withdrawals.[4]

This motif, according to which each step back demonstrates weakness that could lead to aggression, even if it does have military logic in it and even when the forces remaining in the captured territory do not achieve a visible objective, recurs more than once in Israel's wars, and is of course also relevant to the discussion regarding the Gaza Strip at the present time.

"Until the Captured and Missing People Return"

In addition to withdrawal being perceived as a sign of weakness, the statement from the current campaign in Gaza is painfully familiar: conditioning the withdrawal on the return of captives, missing people, hostages, and bodies of fallen soldiers, which Defense Minister Moshe Arens also stated in April 1983.[5] Of course, we cannot compare the situation in 1982 to the unprecedented situation of hundreds of civilians taken hostage by Hamas, but then, as now, there is a concern that the issues of captured and missing Israelis are being used as a justification to continue the military operations, even when their utility is doubtful and sometimes even negative in terms of both the achievements of the war and the captives, missing people, and hostages themselves.

"The Military Pressure Will Lead to Achievements"

Another recurring claim is that staying at the forward lines that the army has reached in combat is a kind of "military pressure" that should be maintained until a political achievement is reached—even if it is not on the horizon. On April 21, 1983, while the pace of the attacks—explosive charges and mines, gunfire, attacks on outposts and checkpoints—against IDF soldiers in Lebanon had been increasing all the time,[6] and the number of soldiers killed had approached ten per month, the incoming chief of staff, Moshe Levi, concluded a discussion on a unilateral withdrawal to the Awali by saying, "essentially, this is a political problem—the IDF's remaining at its current lines aims to serve the political negotiations and provides Israel with political advantages."[7]

"If We Are to Withdraw, Then Not Now and Not All the Way"

When the discussions on unilateral withdrawal began, the military figures—whose weight in the discussion, then as now, was decisive, in the absence of independent planning and administration bodies in the Ministry of Defense or another civilian body—pushed for only a partial withdrawal, even though it was difficult to state what the advantages of the new line were. A partial withdrawal did not amount to "leaving Lebanon," so it could not help Israel acquire international legitimacy for its operations or lessen the opposition within Lebanon to the IDF's continued presence on the ground. Nor did the new line "protect the Galilee." At that time, there was no threat to the Galilee, and. in any case, the forces at the Awali line did not have the ability to prevent any such initiative in the territory that Israel supposedly controlled. Indeed, those were the years when Hezbollah began to organize as the resistance force in southern Lebanon and carried out a major attack, known as the Second Tyre Disaster in November 1983, which resulted in the death of 56 IDF soldiers, Border Police, and Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) personnel.

This argument of "protecting the Galilee" was made repeatedly, even though it was clear that the new line would also not serve as a real barrier, and hostile initiatives could still operate both north and south of it and even pass through it. The area was described as a "security zone" under Israeli auspices, which included the operation of local forces and separation from Lebanon, but again without a real military purpose. In April 1983, the head of the Planning Directorate, Major General Ehud Barak, published a document stating that if there were no agreement with Lebanon within a month, "there will be a need to build the region south of the Awali, including Sidon, but not the bulge toward Mount Barukh, as a security area disconnected from the government in Beirut and maintaining itself, with Israel's backing, with military forces and judicial institutions and tax collection, with all of the crossings from it to northern Lebanon monitored and restricted."[8] This area was a very wide strip (the Awali River flows west from the Chouf Mountains and flows into the sea north of Sidon, about 60 kilometers north of Rosh HaNikra), and included the cities of Sidon and Tyre and a Shiite population that gradually became hostile to Israel, but these factors, which were known in advance, were not brought up as real considerations vis-à-vis the inertia of the opposition to full withdrawal. Ultimately, after hundreds of attacks on IDF soldiers and many dozens killed, the withdrawal to the Awali River line was completed on September 4, 1983.

The Public Debate and the Protest Movements

The First Lebanon War was controversial even before it broke out, as many knew about the IDF's preparations for the war, which had begun more than a year before June 1982. The debate over it was intertwined with the difficult election campaign that took place in 1981, and politicians from the opposition, like former chief of staff Mordechai Gur, warned that it would be an unnecessary war with questionable achievements.

An article published by *Yedioth Ahronoth*'s military correspondent, Amiram Nir, on the second day of the war attests to the prior debate. Its headline, "Quiet, We're Shooting," indicates that Nir sought quiet from the heated debate prior to entering Lebanon because with the die having been cast, the debate could make it difficult for the soldiers to carry out their mission properly and safely return from it.[9] Over time, as it became clear that the war greatly deviated from its declared objective—of pushing back the terrorists beyond the range of the Katyushas (40 kilometers)—the debate intensified and became a real protest movement.

Although the intensity of this debate does not compare with the serious rift in Israeli society prior to October 7, there are similarities between the two situations: both gave expression to clear social fault lines, political sectarianism, and identity politics, which also largely determined the positions of the camps on seemingly "practical" matters, such as the problem of northern Israel's security or relations between the branches of government. The 1981 election campaign was no less harsh and venomous than the election campaigns that preceded the establishment of the current government; nor was there much less mutual delegitimization of factions in society.

In 1982, not long after the war broke out, the debate surrounding the course of the war was rekindled. Before September 1982, Mordechai Gur warned that Israel was tied, entangled, and involved in East and West Beirut, with tactical considerations dictating the national tone more than overall national strategic considerations, and added that "only history will judge if it was necessary, possible, and right to take over Beirut in the momentum of the initial attack – because the government decided otherwise and since then we have been in a war of attrition that is wallowing in military, political, and moral mud."[10] Prime Minister Menachem Begin responded in an article of his own, in which he stated that this was a necessary war for the lives of Israel's citizens and for the members of the Jewish people.[11]

The public debate further intensified after the PLO's departure from Beirut and the Sabra and Shatila massacre (September 16–18, 1982), events that

strengthened the sense that the war was a foolish war (as in the Hebrew title of the book later written about it by Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Yaari), and its real purpose—a new order in Lebanon—was hidden from the public. At the very least, according to the opponents, the war had achieved what it could and was only continuing due to political reasons and mental inertia. The climax of the intensifying protest movement was the enormous demonstration that took place after the Sabra and Shatila massacre ("the 400,000-person demonstration") in September 1982, the beginning of the refusal to serve (the Yesh Gvul movement), and the demand to bring those responsible to justice, which led to the establishment of the Kahan Commission and the removal of Ariel Sharon from his position as minister of defense.

The Increasing Prominence of the Issue of Casualties in the Discourse on the War

As the notion strengthened that the IDF had nothing to do in the territories that it captured in Lebanon in June 1982, the protests started focusing on the claim that the casualties in Lebanon—about 18 killed per month on average and many more injured—were the victims of a failed policy. Despite the significant number of casualties (about 540 from June 1982), until September 1982, there were very few expressions of anger at the number of soldiers killed in the fighting. Defense Minister Sharon even asked radio and television stations to downplay reports on the war's fallen soldiers.[12]

The issue of casualties made the headlines not only due to the claims against the political leadership but also because of a growing discourse about the failures of the IDF itself. For example, a Pentagon report published in the *Washington Times*, gained prominence, as it claimed that about 20% of the IDF's losses in the war were caused by Israeli shelling and bombing.[13]

The sense of a war in which the aims were controversial, its continuation unclear, and the IDF's performance was deficient made the issue of casualties central to the public discourse. In the following months, the casualty count, including signs that were permanently placed at intersections and next to the home of Prime Minister Begin counting the number of fallen soldiers since the beginning of the campaign, became one of the most prominent symbols of the frustration and anger at what would later be called "the Lebanese mud." According to many sources, the casualty count greatly weighed on Prime Minister Begin's decision to resign in October 1983, almost at the same time as the withdrawal to the Awali line.

Just like after the Yom Kippur War, the reserve soldiers who returned home in the months after the war—many of whom were called up for additional periods of service in Lebanon—had a lot of weight in the protests against remaining in Lebanon. The Peace Now movement, many of whose founders were officers and soldiers in combat units in the reserves, was prominent in the protests. The incident on February 10, 1983, in which Yona Avrushmi threw a grenade at a protest march of the movement killing Emil Grunzweig became a symbol of the bloody struggle and the rift in Israeli public opinion surrounding the war.

Israel–US Relations

There are clear differences between the situation in June 1982 and October 2023. The Reagan administration explicitly opposed an Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and during the year prior to the war's outbreak, President Reagan, members of his administration, and Prime Minister Begin held many conversations about this. In contrast, on October 7, 2023, the United States stood with Israel with all its might, both in justifying the war and its purpose of removing the military threat to Israel and overthrowing the Hamas government in Gaza as well as in preventing the spread of the war to other arenas.

However, in other aspects, there are similarities between then and now. The Reagan administration saw the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as an action contrary to its interests—certainly as it went on and became a permanent presence—and his staff also cast doubt on the effectiveness and success of the operation.[14] Against this backdrop, President Reagan rebuked Prime Minister Begin at their meeting in Washington, for reasons that sound very familiar from statements by President Biden and senior officials in his administration in the past few months (replacing the Soviet Union with Iran): "Your actions in Lebanon have seriously harmed our relations with Arab countries whose cooperation we are in great need of, in order to face external threats and radical Islam that is supported by the Soviet Union. As a result, the strength of radical groups in the region is growing." He added an implicit threat that "if Israel operates contrary to the interests of the United States, Israel's interests will also be harmed."[15]

The basic relationship between the Reagan administration and the Begin government was immeasurably better than between the Biden administration and Prime Minister Netanyahu and his current government. Currently, the president and senior administration officials have spoken harshly about those whom they see as extreme elements in the government and have even spoken about Netanyahu himself as an impediment to achieving the war's proper aims in the eyes of the Americans.[16] Thus, there is room for concern that as the war

continues and as Israel is perceived as striving to occupy Gaza contrary to the explicit American position, far more serious harm could be caused to Israel–US relations than during the First Lebanon War.

The Impact on the IDF

Despite the public debate surrounding operations in Lebanon before the war, there was high public legitimacy for action in June 1982, and the mobilization of the reserves, constituting the majority of the forces entering Lebanon, was complete. Most of the reserve soldiers were mobilized until after the PLO's departure from Beirut, and within months of being released, many were called up again for additional periods of approximately one month to maintain control over the large territory captured in Lebanon. Many units even went through two more rounds of mobilization, in addition to about three months of service following the outbreak of the war, until the withdrawal to the Awali in October 1983.

The strain on the reserves was a recurring topic in discussions among the senior military ranks at that time. However, other factors affecting the IDF were not discussed, or at least not in the discussions whose details have been published since then. Disagreements about the aims of the war and hiding them from the public, the war's prolongation, and the condition of the army during the period after September 1982—without a real military objective, facing a hostile civilian population, and suffering many attacks—were kept mostly within the ranks of the army itself. Nevertheless, these factors had consequences for the various formations in the IDF, ultimately leading to a real crisis in the years following 1982. Even phenomena that were clearly present, such as the crisis in the army's permanent service in the mid-1980s, were attributed to other factors in internal military studies, as we will see below.

Thus it is difficult to find strong evidence that supports the belief held by the commanders in regular and reserve service at that time, according to which the presence in Lebanon, the sense of military stagnation, the lack of an objective, and the numerous casualties, as well as the debate in the home front, significantly and negatively affected soldiers' motivation to volunteer to serve as officers, continue in permanent service, or mobilize for reserve service in Lebanon for a second or third time, after the first period of reserve duty service during the war itself.

Disagreements between Senior Officers and the Political Leadership and Within the IDF Itself

During the siege of Beirut, before the PLO's departure, there were several incidents that indicated discomfort among senior commanders regarding the

goals of the war and its management, as well as the conduct of Defense Minister Sharon. The most famous affair was related to Colonel Eli Geva, the commander of an armored brigade who had distinguished himself in the containment battles of the Yom Kippur War. Geva asked to be relieved of his position as brigade commander as he did not believe that it was necessary to enter West Beirut, although he said he would be willing to serve as a fighter.[17] He claimed that the government did not know when to stop the fighting, and although he initially believed it was a just war, he suspected there were other motives for the IDF's sacrifices, particularly the presumption of determining who would rule in Lebanon.[18] The Geva affair, with Geva being removed from service, along with the petition signed by a thousand reservists against serving in Lebanon, and the resignation of the IDF Command and Staff College Commander Amram Mitzna from service as a declaration of non-confidence in the minister of defense, were significant factors in the intensifying protests against the war.

The stagnation led to mutual recriminations between the political leadership and the army. Sharon felt that the IDF had not achieved the goals promised to him, while unidentified officers said to the foreign media that Israel's decision making was based on political considerations (specifically, Sharon was accused of pressuring the political leadership to act in western Lebanon when no one else wanted this, resulting in a weeks-long waiting period that caused unnecessary losses) and created confusion within the units.[19] In addition, the anticipation of an investigation into the war, which did occur with the establishment of the Kahan Commission (officially the Commission of Inquiry into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut) sparked tension between Sharon and senior commanders, who feared that Sharon would abandon them the day after the Commission of Inquiry.[20]

The Reflection of the Political Disagreement and the Decline in Reserve Mobilization and the "Gray" Refusal to Serve

As the IDF's presence in Lebanon continued, and reserve combat units that had served for several months in the first part of the campaign were called up for additional periods of service throughout 1983, internal opposition to service in Lebanon grew within these units. This opposition was mostly expressed through a "gray" refusal to serve, which is difficult to quantify but remembered by reservist commanders from that time. These units were staffed at a higher rate than the standard units, allowing commanders to release those who did not want to be called up and still fulfill their missions.

One affair that was widely publicized, although erroneous and even politically motivated, was the affair of the "brigade that was not called up"—the northern brigade of the paratroopers in the reserves (today's Brigade 226). When the IDF command tried to call up the brigade for additional reserve service during the preparations for the invasion of West Beirut, the brigade commander, Yair Ogen, said to the chief of staff that "I think that the brigade will take it hard if they are called up. They were just released, and the mission is problematic."[21] Even though the brigade was ultimately mobilized, Ariel Sharon used this statement as evidence to claim that the brigade was not mobilized due to opposition from its soldiers to the war. He presented it as an example of the politicization of military service by opponents of the war. While this was a false claim, it demonstrates how reserve service was part of the debate over the continuation of the war in Lebanon, and the extent to which it was used by all sides to criticize each other.

The strain on the reservists was evident in decision-making discussions within the IDF and the political leadership. For example, in a document from May 1983, the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate stated that "in the background of the decisions we need to consider the continuing burden that the current deployment in Lebanon imposes on Israeli society and on the IDF in the areas of casualties, the duration of release from reserves, the ongoing harm to training them, the IDF budget, and the possible erosion of the motivation of soldiers in regular service and in the reserves."[22] In July 1983, Moshe Arens, the minister of defense at the time of the withdrawal to the Awali, even requested alternative solutions to the service of reservists, to alleviate the great strain imposed on them.[23]

Even though the IDF never admitted to the existence of "gray" refusal to serve or concerns about refusal to serve in Lebanon, we can learn about the discourse surrounding these issues from a holiday interview that Chief of Staff Levi gave to *Yedioth Ahronoth*. The first question that he was asked related to shortening the duration of reserve service (his answer was "I wouldn't talk about shortening") and on the phenomenon of refusal to serve ("even a single war refuser worries me").[24]

As mentioned, there are no figures on the extent of "gray refusal to serve" during the years 1983–1985, but there is no doubt that it existed in significant numbers. This had a clear impact on decisions: the declared goal of the withdrawal to the Awali was to reduce the territory under the IDF's control, to decrease the order of battle stationed in it, mainly the reservists, as well as the number of casualties among the forces.[25] Arens later attributed the decision on the withdrawal to the influence of the reservists.[26] From 1985 onward, a small number of reservists served in the security zone in Lebanon; some claim that this was one reason for the continued presence there, as the number of members of the "Lebanon

community"—combat soldiers in regular service and their family members—was not large.

In any case, it is clear that during that period, various aspects of the phenomenon of reserve service in the IDF became apparent, clearly indicating that it was the "people's army" in every sense. The reserves allow the IDF to be a relatively small army in normal times and large in emergencies; however, as civilian soldiers, they require the system to take into consideration economic, social, and political considerations that it would prefer to ignore. We can assume that these factors influenced not only the decisions regarding Lebanon but also the trend, along with the financial agreement between the defense establishment and the Ministry of Finance in 1985, to greatly reduce the number of reserve days actually used and to rely more on the regular army.

The Impact of the Disputes on Volunteering for Service as Officers and Continuing in Permanent Service

The IDF does not recognize the presence in Lebanon after October 1982 as one of the factors in the major crisis in permanent service in the mid-1980s. A comprehensive study by Brig. Gen. (res.) Dr. Meir Finkel on this issue, which relies entirely on military sources—surveys by the Behavioral Sciences Department in the Personnel Directorate, documents reflecting the senior command's involvement in the issue and from the Personnel Directorate headquarters—stated unequivocally that

It is important to note that contrary to the prevailing conception in the IDF today, that a central factor in the crisis of 1985-1986 was the IDF's functioning in Operation Peace for Galilee in 1982, there is no direct connection between the events. As stated, the survey that was conducted after the war showed that soldiers in permanent service were proud of the IDF's functioning and of their activity during the war. There was a broad public debate over the necessity of the war and later over the need to remain in Lebanon, but the claims were against the political leadership, not against the IDF over its functioning in the fighting. The crisis started two years after the war with the big cut in the defense budget (a budget cut that was related to increased defense expenses due to the war and the presence in Lebanon).[27]

Finkel's study is serious and in-depth, but it should be noted that the survey to which he refers was conducted in November 1982, immediately after the first stage of the war, and it relates to the units' fighting at that stage. The IDF did not study (or at least such research was not mentioned by Finkel or in other open sources) the impact of the "quagmire period" from October 1982 onward, during

which the army mainly faced setbacks and did not enjoy a real sense of achievement. He also mentions the war as a factor influencing the decision to sign up for permanent service,[28] but it is last among the list of factors that the military system studied, possibly due to the sensitivity of the subject.

In one way or another, there certainly was a crisis. In 1986, Uri Sagi, commander of the Field Corps' Command, wrote: "Volunteering for junior officer positions (captain, major) for continuing in permanent service is in crisis and in a worrying decline." Among other things, it was noted that only 36% of major-rank positions were filled by officers within the rank, and the gap was being addressed by assigning officers at the rank of captain and even lieutenant.[29]

The willingness to extend service dropped from 60% in 1984 to 38% in 1986, and the support of spouses for continuing in permanent service dropped from 70% in the years 1979–1980 to 40% in the years 1983–1986. A report from the Behavioral Sciences Department on the issue noted four factors that negatively affected officers' desire to continue serving: ambiguity regarding their future, due to unfulfilled agreements about their continued service; strain and burnout; damage to image and prestige—following Operation Peace for Galilee—rotation and achievement; and the pressure to succeed quickly, which led commanders to avoid activities with results that would only be seen after completing their duties.[30]

Interestingly, the report does not mention salary levels or temptations in the civilian market, which were also affected by extreme measures in the Ministry of Finance's stabilization plan to address the major economic crisis of the early-to-mid-1980s. All the factors mentioned in the report relate to the IDF's organizational culture and image, directly tied to the erosion of this image during the "quagmire years" in Lebanon. This raises doubt on the assertion that the crisis in permanent service was solely economic, and that the presence in Lebanon, which was dangerous, purposeless, and inglorious, had no impact on the motivation to continue to serve.

Another familiar issue to those involved is the IDF leadership's denial of a crisis. Finkel references a statement from the memoirs of Major General Matan Vilnai, who became the head of the Personnel Directorate, that when a booklet titled "Permanent Service—Crisis" was distributed to a small number of General Staff major generals as ordered by Vilnai, Chief of Staff Moshe Levi ordered it to be shelved (which Vilnai refused). Finkel also mentions a photograph of the booklet cover and a note in Levi's handwriting asking the head of the Personnel Directorate, "What is this?"[31] In an interview on Army Radio, Levi acknowledged that there was indeed some aversion to attending the officers' course but claimed

that it was unrelated to burnout during the war. He explained that "an examination conducted by the IDF showed that this process started a long time before the war in Lebanon, and is actually not a result of it."[32]

Then and Now / Between Lebanon and the Gaza Strip

There is, of course, no complete analogy between different historical situations. However, examining the "quagmire period" in Lebanon after the PLO's withdrawal from Beirut, especially the year between this event and the IDF forces' withdrawal south of the Awali, reveals several similarities with the situation of the ongoing fighting in the Gaza Strip that Israel has been engaged in since October 7, 2023, its impact so far, and its future consequences. Understanding these similarities and the impact of previous decisions or the lack thereof can be immensely beneficial as Israel grapples with weighty decisions. This examination aims to avoid the negative phenomena that occurred then, adversely affecting the IDF as well as Israel's political, military, and social situation, which are evident in the present time.

Even the significant difference between then and now—the complete consensus surrounding the need and obligation to initiate the Swords of Iron war—is somewhat obscured due to the intensifying debate in recent months regarding the objectives and conduct of the fighting, in addition to the rift in Israeli society surrounding various political-civil issues prior to the war. The mutual resentment between parts of society and the tendency to conceptualize the reality and judge the actions of the government and the defense establishment according to their social-political identity were present then just as they exist today. As time goes on, the political-identity debate and the debate about the war, its objectives, and its handling become intertwined and make it very difficult to create consensus for the courses of action that are needed. Over time, the protests against the government's policy also intensify (then regarding remaining in Lebanon, now regarding the delay in coming to a deal to release the hostages, and what are seen as political considerations in the management of the war) along with what the protests see as "fundamental sins" for which the political and personal price must be paid (in 1982, embarking on a controversial war and hiding its true objectives from the public, today the debacles of October 7).

Reasons given by the political-military establishment to reject necessary measures, chiefly withdrawal from the lines that the IDF reached in the first stage of the fighting in Lebanon, are to the point of being identical to those that the current establishment is using toward the apparent dead end in the Gaza Strip.

The conception that withdrawal from these lines is necessary even if it does not contribute to achieving the military mission has always accompanied Israel's decisions (see also the decision to continue holding the Suez Canal line from 1967, despite the lack of tactical logic in being stationed on the barrier itself, in contrast to controlling it).

The argument that a unilateral withdrawal would be perceived as a weakness, the untenable claim that the line reached in some way protects the border that is at a distance from it, ignoring the implications of holding onto the territory for the deployment of forces, the burnout of forces in regular and reserve units, and the issue of casualties taking center stage because there is an increasing sense that they are in vain—all of these were heard and were evident then and are also evident now, regarding both the Gaza Strip and a possible campaign in Lebanon, which would include ground maneuvers to conquer territory and the creation of a "security zone" again (see for example Knesset Member Avigdor Lieberman's statement that "Israel must remain between the Litani and the border for 50 years").[33]

In the ranks of the army itself, negative phenomena that were prominent in 1982–1983 regarding Lebanon are evident now again and could become even more prominent in the near future. Field commanders have openly opposed decisions or non-decisions by the senior command and the senior ranks' refusal to take responsibility for its failures;[34] a crisis of confidence between the military command and the political leadership, and a well-founded claim of politicization of decision making;[35] "gray" refusal to serve in the reserve forces, signs of crisis in recruitment for permanent service, and declining public confidence in the army's ability to achieve its objectives. An INSS survey from May 2024 indicated a significant drop in the public's confidence, with only 61% believing that the IDF will achieve its objectives, compared to over 90% when the war began.[36] Additionally, according to figures from the Personnel Directorate at the end of May 2024, only 42% of officers in permanent service would be interested in continuing their service, compared to 49% before the war.[37]

The continuation of the military operation and the decision to remain in Gaza, contrary to the opinion of the American administration, are worsening the tensions between Washington and Jerusalem—a development that is much more serious than in 1982 and afterwards. Israel needs the United States to prevent the war from expanding, which has already become a regional campaign—although in the arenas that are not Gaza its scope is still relatively limited—into an all-out war against the Iranian "axis of resistance," and to withstand such a war if it occurs. Continuing the fighting out of inertia, political considerations, and avoiding making

decisions about the "day after" could cause serious damage to Israel's security in this critical aspect as well.

And most importantly, the stakes today are much higher than they were in the early 1980s. Israel faces a tangible danger of becoming a "pariah state" whose positions and righteousness are rejected by international institutions and public opinion in the West. This has consequences for the justification of Israel's existence, its commercial and cultural relations, and other fundamental aspects of national security. The absence of a political framework and the inertia of the military operation could lead to an expansion of the campaign in Gaza into a regional war with an even wider scope, without American support for possible Israeli actions (such as a proactive high-intensity campaign in Lebanon) and with a very heavy price for the IDF and the home front.

The issue of the hostages, a painful and significant event that undermines the basic sense of the state's responsibility for its citizens and has no parallel in any previous war, including the First Lebanon War, further darkens the picture. And within Israel itself, the polarization is expanding, accompanied by a sense of the futility of the situation, the loss of a sense of physical security even within Israel's borders, and fears about Israel's future existence.

This state of affairs requires deep reflection and decision making driven by national responsibility and acknowledgment of the severity of the situation. Learning from past mistakes, including the similarities between the current situation and that on the Lebanese front at the end of 1982 and afterwards, is a necessary condition for such thinking.

Notes

[1] Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir's speech at Knesset meeting, May 11, 1983, [in Hebrew] https://knesset.gov.il/tql/knesset_new/knesset10/HTML_27_03_2012_05-50-30-PM/19830511@19830511001@001.html

[2] See, for example, the Facebook group "Stories from Lebanon—What Happened at the Outposts."

[3] IDF, the History Department, "The Campaign in the Security Zone," 2021

[4] Military Intelligence Directorate, Research Department, base and monitoring division, "Monitoring Paper—Unilateral Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon, Why Not," October 31, 1982, quoted in Shimon Golan, *From Beirut to the Security Zone*, Modan Publishing House, Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 2019, pp. 17–18.

[5] Golan, *From Beirut to the Security Zone*, p. 29.

[6] In the first three weeks of June alone, there were 61 attempted attacks, meaning about three per day on average. Golan, *From Beirut to the Security Zone*, p. 50.

[7] Golan, *From Beirut to the Security Zone*, p. 33.

[8] Golan, *From Beirut to the Security Zone*, p. 34.
[9] Amiram Nir, "Quiet, We're Shooting," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, June 6, 1982.
[10] Motta Gur, "Beirut—Yesterday and Today," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 9, 1982.
[11] Erol Güney, "The Big Unknowns—Arafat's Way and Our Relations with the U.S.," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 20, 1982.
[12] Aharon Bachar, "This Is How the Intelligentsia Fled Begin's Camp," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, December 30, 1983.
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[14] Zaki Shalom, "The American–Israeli Dialogue at the Start of the First Lebanon War," INSS, *Strategic Assessment*, April 2020, https://www.inss.org.il/strategic_assessment/the-american-israeli-dialogue-at-the-start-of-the-first-lebanon-war/
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[18] Eitan Haber, "If the Defense Minister and Chief of Staff Are Having Trouble Mobilizing a Certain Reserve Brigade—This Is a Terrible Thing that We Must Not Allow to Happen," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, September 26, 1982.
[19] Wolf Blitzer, "In the Lebanon War the IDF Operated Like a Failed, Undisciplined Mob and Caused Itself Heavy Losses," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 28, 1984.
[20] Eitan Haber, "Erosion of Confidence Between Sharon and the Army's Commanders," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, October 1, 1982
[21] Yaakov Erez, "The Story of the Brigade that Wasn't Called Up," *Maariv*, October 22, 1982.
[22] Golan, *From Beirut to the Security Zone*, p. 35.
[23] Golan, *From Beirut to the Security Zone*, p. 59.
[24] Eitan Haber, "Chief of Staff: The Demand for the Syrians to Leave Strengthens Their Desire to Stay," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, September 7, 1983.
[25] Yair Amikam, "The Arens Line," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, September 16, 1983.
[26] Ofer Shelah, *The Platter and the Silver*, Zmora Bitan Dvir, 2003, p. 12.
[27] Brig. Gen. (res.) Dr. Meir Finkel, *The Major Crisis in Permanent Service in the 1980s*, Dado Center, July 2023, p. 70.
[28] Finkel, *The Major Crisis in Permanent Service in the 1980s*, p. 11.
[29] Finkel, *The Major Crisis in Permanent Service in the 1980s*, p. 47.
[30] Finkel, *The Major Crisis in Permanent Service in the 1980s*, p. 42.
[31] Finkel, *The Major Crisis in Permanent Service in the 1980s*, p. 125.
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