

Israel's Second Lebanon War Reconsidered

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Operation Change of Direction, the code name given to Israel's war against Hizbollah in Lebanon in 2006 by the Operations Directorate of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), was the most inconclusive performance by far in the IDF's many trials by fire since 1948, in that it represented the first time that a major regional confrontation ended without a clear cut victory on Israel's part. The campaign's uneven course and outcome did not emanate from any particular single point failure but rather, in the words of two informed commentators, from "an overall accumulation of circumstances."¹ More specifically, it did not reflect any failure of Israel's well endowed air arm to perform to the fullest extent of its considerable but not unlimited capabilities, as many were quick to complain.² Rather, it resulted from a more overarching deficiency in strategy choice, whose most flawed elements were inconsistency between avowed goals and the available means and will to pursue them, and the Israeli government's initial placement of friendly casualty avoidance above mission accomplishment in its ranking of campaign priorities.³

What mostly accounted for the frustration felt throughout Israel as the conflict unfolded was the fact that at no time during the 34 days of combat were IDF forces able to stem the relentless daily barrage of short range Katyusha rockets that Hizbollah fired into civilian population centers in northern Israel until a mutually agreed ceasefire put an end to that deadly harassment. Beyond that, the war's achievements fell short of what Prime

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Minister Ehud Olmert had promised the Israeli people at the campaign's outset, namely, an unconditional return of the two IDF soldiers that Hizbollah abducted on July 12, 2006, which triggered the counteroffensive in the first place, and a decisive elimination of Hizbollah's military presence in southern Lebanon.⁴ Not only did the IDF's lackluster performance adversely affect the longstanding image of Israel's invincibility in the eyes of the Arab world and the West; it reflected manifold failures in objective setting and expectations management at the highest levels of the Israeli government, both uniformed and civilian.⁵

It would be wrong, however, to suggest from this generally accepted overall view of Israel's Second Lebanon War, as one American did a year after the fighting ended, that playing up its accomplishments, of which there were many, "is a little like saying that the operation was successful but the patient died."⁶ On a more positive note, the IDF Chief of Staff who oversaw the planning and conduct of the campaign, Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, who rose the ranks through the Israel Air Force (IAF), remarked presciently during his subsequent testimony to the Winograd Commission that assessed the IDF's performance that "whatever was or was not achieved [during the campaign] must be judged in the perspective of time."⁷ Prime Minister Olmert likewise suggested in his testimony to the commission that "the results of the [war] will look better with time."⁸ Consistent with these more upbeat early official judgments, the campaign experience has gradually come to be seen differently in Israel today than it was when the smoke of battle was cleared in August 2006. As early as 2008, a new debate began gathering momentum among Israelis over "whether or not we actually lost the war."⁹

Why the War was not a Total Loss for Israel

It was easy enough for Hizbollah commander and leader Hassan Nasrallah to claim in the campaign's early aftermath that he had "prevailed" simply by virtue of having survived. Yet the fact is that as a result of the IDF's counteroffensive, the Hizbollah organization suffered significant setbacks and paid a high price for its provocation on July 12, 2006 that was the *casus belli* for the campaign. The IDF killed nearly 700 of its most seasoned combatants and wounded more than a thousand.¹⁰ In addition, a considerable portion of Hizbollah's military infrastructure in Lebanon

was either laid waste or badly damaged as a result of the IDF's relentless aerial and artillery bombardment.¹¹

To note only the most important of the IDF's other achievements in this respect, the majority of Hizbollah's long range Zelzal and medium range Fajr rockets were destroyed during the campaign's first night by a well planned and practiced preemptive attack by the IAF, a largely unheralded first in the annals of air warfare. Nasrallah's command and control nexus in the Dahiye section of Beirut was also all but completely destroyed by precision IAF strikes.¹² Furthermore, Hizbollah's multiple barrel rocket launchers were repeatedly attacked and destroyed by the IAF within just minutes after their launch crews had fired their first round into northern Israel. The IAF's unprecedented rate of success in these time-sensitive targeting attacks could well have an inhibiting influence on any future indiscriminate use of such launchers by Hizbollah, and could drive its combatants to resort instead even more to single barrel launchers that can fire only one rocket at a time before being moved out of harm's way and reloaded.¹³

In addition, despite Nasrallah's continuing claim to have won a "divine victory" in the Second Lebanon War, Hizbollah's threat potential was severely diminished by the IDF's unexpectedly massive counteroffensive. As IAF Major General (ret.) Isaac Ben-Israel rightly noted in this regard, Operation Change of Direction "overturned the notion that Israel is not ready to fight with anyone who holds a sword over the heads of its civilians." In addition, he pointed out, "the destruction of a section of an Arab capital city, even a section that was directly associated with Hizbollah's main headquarters in Lebanon, set a precedent that should make Israel's enemies think twice the next time."¹⁴

The campaign also made for an instructive experience for the IDF in that it unmasked the true nature of Hizbollah as an enemy, its strengths and weaknesses, how it fights, and the lethality of its Iran-supplied rockets and anti-tank weapons. Moreover, in undertaking its response with such sustained intensity, Israel showed its determination to deal with Hizbollah using grossly disproportionate measures should a future challenge be deemed to require such *force majeure*. Israeli military historian Martin Van Creveld pointed out in this regard that "if anybody had predicted, a few days before the war, that in response to the capture of two of its soldiers, Israel would launch an air campaign over all of Lebanon, mobilize three of

its divisions and send them across the border, and keep up the pressure for over a month while taking thousands of rockets and suffering more than a hundred casualties in dead alone, he would have been considered stark raving mad." In all, added Van Creveld, in light of that response and the implied promise of more like it should Israel again be similarly provoked, "Nasrallah has good reason to think twice before engaging in another adventure of the same kind."¹⁵

In sum, the IDF's 34-day counteroffensive against Hizbollah was not quite the unqualified setback for Israel that many initially thought. Consider, in this regard, the post-campaign reality that Operation Change of Direction occasioned for both Hizbollah and Israel. From the very first weeks of his selection as Hizbollah's commander in 1992, Nasrallah had regularly, and with impunity, lobbed short range rockets into northern Israel until the start of the Second Lebanon War. Yet not a single rocket was fired from Lebanon into Israel during the years since the campaign ended until three rockets were launched during the IDF's subsequent 23-day operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and January 2009. Even though Hizbollah by that time had accumulated more short range rockets (as many as 40,000) in its since-reconstituted weapons inventory than ever before, its leaders were quick to disavow any responsibility for those launches.¹⁶ Since then, the Lebanese border region has remained quiescent, indicating that Israel's deterrent against Hizbollah has held firm.

Nasrallah's Changed Risk Calculus

This new and so far persistent reality on Israel's northern border suggests that Nasrallah's post-campaign motivations and conduct were most definitely affected by the significant blow that the IDF dealt to his organization. He almost surely has been successfully intimidated by the lesson taught him by the IDF from any further gratuitous firings of rockets into northern Israel, a lesson that was doubtless reinforced by Israel's equally punishing subsequent campaign against Hamas two years later. Moreover, as a result of his awareness that he remains targeted by the IDF, Nasrallah and his main deputies have been forced to command from their bunkers and, with but few exceptions, have not appeared in public since the Second Lebanon War ended.

In this regard, commenting on a highly publicized “victory parade” that Nasrallah staged in Beirut in mid September 2006 about a month after the fighting in Lebanon ended, a senior source close to Prime Minister Olmert said: “Nasrallah doesn’t look good. He looks exactly like someone who has been spending his time in a bunker, far from the sun, since July 12.”¹⁷ This source further noted that on the eve of Nasrallah’s much-ballyhooed event, the Israeli security establishment debated whether to seize the opportunity to go after him even at the potential cost of causing hundreds of casualties among the surrounding Lebanese civilians. In the end, the government chose not to proceed with an assassination operation after senior leaders concluded that such an attack, at the likely price of many fatalities among innocent Lebanese, would have done Israel more harm than good. However, added the Israeli source, “The man will spend many more years in the bunker. He’s a dead man.”¹⁸ Before the 2006 war, it was Nasrallah’s practice to participate in more than a dozen highly publicized events each month. For one whose impact as a charismatic leader has long depended so heavily on frequent public exposure, his having since been forced to command from hiding has made for a major blow to his former effectiveness.

Furthermore, Israel inherited a significantly improved situation in southern Lebanon as a result of the campaign experience. On August 11, 2006, with the final countdown to an escalated IDF ground offensive rapidly nearing, the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 1701, which called for a halt to the fighting and authorized the deployment of 15,000 foreign troops to the war zone to help the Lebanese army take control of southern Lebanon. The resolution, which was approved soon thereafter by the Israeli and Lebanese governments, further allowed the UN to take “all necessary action” to ensure that areas in which its forces would be patrolling were “not utilized for hostile activities of any kind.”¹⁹ It also called for the disarmament of Hizbollah’s forces in southern Lebanon and the establishment of an enlarged United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). To help further enforce a semblance of order in the conflicted region, the Lebanese army began deploying in southern Lebanon on August 17, 2006.

To be sure, both the Lebanese government and UNIFIL subsequently retreated from their initial avowed commitment to disarm Hizbollah, and the presence of Lebanese army troops in southern Lebanon has

done nothing to curtail Hizbollah's continued fighting potential opposite northern Israel. Offsetting those all but predictable disappointments, however, has been the abiding fact that Nasrallah was plainly chastened by the IDF's unexpected response to his abduction of the two Israeli soldiers in July 2006 and has bent every effort to keep the border area calm so as to prevent a replay of the IDF's disproportionate counteroffensive. As a senior IDF commander observed within just a week after the campaign ended, "This is the huge change [that] this operation created."²⁰ Another commentator similarly noted a year later that "the last few months have been the quietest period on the northern border since Operation Peace for Galilee in June 1982." He further noted that "focusing the public debate [solely] on the failure in the Second Lebanon War and ignoring its achievements entirely may [adversely] influence the IDF's ability to learn from experience and draw the proper conclusions."²¹

Indeed, in reflecting on the various elements of guarded good news for Israel as a result of the campaign's outcome, a retired Israeli intelligence officer concluded that although the Second Lebanon War failed to diminish Hizbollah's long term threat potential or produce a significant change in the nature of Israel's standoff against the terrorist organization, it yielded four distinct positive achievements. First, it provided timely insights into Hizbollah's most advanced combat capabilities. Second, it helped reduce anxieties regarding what actions Iranian proxies like Hizbollah might take against Western interests. Third, it gave Israel an early look at what it will need to do to retool its capabilities for its next confrontation with Hizbollah. And last, it gave Israel's politicians an incentive to rethink the wisdom of their policy of giving up land for peace, as they did in Gaza and in parts of the West Bank in 2005.²²

Looking back over the campaign experience, one can further ask whether Nasrallah, in planning his abduction gambit, fundamentally misread Israel's fortitude by so grossly underestimating the likely intensity of the IDF's response. Even as the Israeli counteroffensive was still under way, the deputy chief of Hizbollah's political arm, Mahmoud Komati, told Western reporters that he had been surprised by the force of the Israeli reaction and that Hizbollah's leaders had anticipated only "the usual, limited" reprisal by the IDF, such as commando raids or limited air attacks.²³ For his part, shortly after the ceasefire went into effect, Nasrallah himself frankly admitted that he would never have ordered the capture of

the IDF soldiers had he known beforehand what would follow by way of an IDF response: "You ask me if I had known on July 11...that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not."²⁴ Toward the end of the campaign's second week, as the IDF's response was just moving into high gear, the American columnist Thomas Friedman, against the grain of the still-fashionable belief in many quarters that Nasrallah was the most "brilliant" and "strategic" Arab player, offered perhaps a more accurate assessment that "when the smoke clears, Nasrallah will be remembered as the most foolhardy Arab leader since Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser miscalculated his way into the Six Day War."²⁵

That latter assessment can claim considerable strength from the premature frittering away of much of Iran's long term investment in Hizbollah that Nasrallah's headstrong provocation in 2006 occasioned. Indeed, Iran's provision of rockets of all types to Hizbollah could arguably be compared in overarching intent to the Soviet Union's forward deployment of medium range ballistic missiles to the Western hemisphere that culminated in the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, with the IDF having finally implemented measures analogous to those of the United States in dealing with the challenge militarily. As one informed Israeli observer noted in this regard, Iran built up Hizbollah's well stocked inventory of rockets with the idea that the latter would constitute, in effect, a "forward aircraft carrier" stationed close to Israel's border. In his judgment, this capability "was supposed to remain concealed until the moment of truth – a military conflict between Israel or the United States and Iran over Iran's nuclear weapons program. Their premature discovery, in light of the terrible blow they could have struck [against Israel], caused a strategic loss for Hizbollah and for its Iranian suppliers that cannot be denied."²⁶

As if to bear that judgment out, the Iranian National Security Council, according to one report, received an internal document not long after the fighting ended indicating deep irritation over Hizbollah's "waste of Iran's most important military investment in Lebanon merely for the sake of a conflict with Israel over two kidnapped soldiers."²⁷ Such a reaction by Iran's ruling mullahs would not be surprising, considering that IDF operations during the 34-day war essentially wiped out much of the \$4-6 billion that the Iranian treasury had sunk into building up Hizbollah's military strength, thereby necessitating a costly emergency Iranian outlay to reconstitute Hizbollah's military infrastructure and weapons stocks.

A New Strategic Chessboard for Israel

In all events, Hizbollah's role as a forward combat arm of Iran was starkly dramatized by the campaign experience, thus bringing into ever sharper focus the IDF's already considerable appreciation of the seriousness of the Iranian threat and giving its leaders an enhanced understanding of the threat that they also faced from Hamas. In addition, Hizbollah's image as a would-be guardian of Lebanese interests was badly tarnished by the costly consequences of Nasrallah's provocation for Lebanon's economy and civilian infrastructure. The terrorist leader now has a new understanding of the Israeli mindset and of the actual extent of what he can and cannot get away with in the future. Thanks to the scale and extent of its response, Israel demonstrated to Hizbollah that it is prepared to pay a high price in effectively retaliating against future tests of its resolve. The experience also spotlighted serious readiness problems in the IDF's ground forces and significant deficiencies in both air-ground integration and the provision of close air support to engaged ground troops by the IAF. Both problems have since been rectified, as was well attested by the IDF's more effective subsequent combat performance against Hamas in December 2008 and January 2009.²⁸

Moreover, at the strategic level, Israel's experience during the Second Lebanon War drove home the emergent reality that a non-state adversary of Hizbollah's relatively sophisticated armament and orientation was far more than just a nuisance factor in the nation's security planning. On the contrary, with its revealed ability to hold large numbers of Israeli civilians at risk with its rocket inventory, the radical Islamist movement had in fact become what one Israeli analyst aptly described as "a strategic threat of the first order."²⁹ As two Australian scholars later commented, the proliferation of such cheap but effective terror weapons throughout the region had the almost instant effect of undermining "the historical importance of air power as the main instrument of Israel's deterrence policy."³⁰

In a related vein, American defense analyst Andrew Krepinevich well characterized the Second Lebanon War as "the proverbial canary in the coal mine" in the way in which it spotlighted how "a new, more deadly form of irregular conflict ...under high-technology conditions" had underscored the increasingly pronounced difficulty of defending major military installations, economic infrastructure, and densely populated rear areas against hybrid opponents like Hizbollah and Hamas armed with what he

called RAMM (rocket, artillery, mortar, and missile) capabilities.³¹ Clearly concluding from its fresh memories of Lebanon that standoff-only attacks could not offer an adequate answer to this new challenge, the IDF got it right the next time around, in Gaza, by applying its emergent realization that the only way of dealing with such RAMM threats decisively was by “taking control of enemy launching areas....Thus, [in Gaza], Israel once again [came] to rely on a large maneuvering force, and the principle of waging battle on enemy territory [returned].”³² Yet another reason why the IDF performed better in Operation Cast Lead in Gaza than it did during the Second Lebanon War was that this time its leadership and the Olmert government were willing, if need be, to sustain troop losses, which in the end proved to be far less than anticipated.

In all of the above respects, said one Israeli commentator, “it is almost as if Israel should thank Hizbollah for the wake-up call.”³³ A big part of that wake-up call was a dawning realization that in fighting Hizbollah, the IDF was actually engaging a forward combat arm of Iran. Said one Israeli: “A huge, dark, perpetual forest of Katyushas is blooming in front of us. It is the State of Israel’s tremendous good fortune that it is happening now and not later.” This commentator added: “Nasrallah has lost the ability to deter us. He said that what goes for Beirut goes for Tel Aviv, and before he even finished talking we leveled another ten buildings in Beirut. He understands we are no longer afraid of him – no longer frozen.... He’s the one who’s [now] in an existential battle.”³⁴

In light of the major setback that the IDF counteroffensive during the Second Lebanon War dealt both to Hizbollah as a terrorist organization and to Iran’s strategic interests, to say nothing of the uninterrupted calm that has prevailed along Israel’s northern border ever since the ceasefire went into effect in August 2006, one can safely say in hindsight about Operation Change of Direction what the American essayist Mark Twain once supposedly said about Wagnerian opera – it’s not as bad as it sounds. Viewed in hindsight, the three main strategic goals that General Haloutz declared for the IDF – stopping terrorist attacks by Hizbollah into Israel from sovereign Lebanese soil, making the Lebanese government responsible for policing its southern region, and inflicting significant damage on Hizbollah’s military infrastructure – were all achieved in the end.³⁵ The only significant remaining downside, as IAF Brigadier General Itai Brun frankly admitted in a reflection on the campaign experience, is

that “we [the IDF and the Olmert government] failed to protect Israel’s civilian population and did not succeed in shortening the war.”³⁶

To be sure, thanks to Iran’s and Syria’s continuing financial largesse and technical support, Hizbollah and Hamas are now assessed as having accumulated a combined inventory of as many as 70,000 short-range rockets.³⁷ Moreover, according to information reportedly acquired by Israeli intelligence and subsequently leaked to the press by Israel’s President, Shimon Peres, Syria also has provided Hizbollah with a shipment of Scud-B missiles that possess the range and payload capability to hit any city in Israel with a 2,000-pound warhead.³⁸ If that report is correct, the transfer of Scuds to Nasrallah would make his organization the first non-state entity to possess such highly destructive (if unguided and inaccurate) surface-to-surface weapons.

On the negative side, however, Hizbollah has experienced a surfeit of highly publicized setbacks. For example, on July 14, 2009, an explosion destroyed a major ammunition dump maintained by the terrorist organization in the southern Lebanese village of Hirbet Salim. The following October, another secret munitions bunker maintained by Hizbollah in southern Lebanon blew up under obscure circumstances. Both events caused Hizbollah perceptible discomfiture by revealing the organization to be in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that prohibits the stockpiling of weapons south of the Litani River. To make matters worse for the organization’s public image, Hizbollah combatants, aided and abetted by Lebanese army troops, prevented foreign inspectors from examining the site of the latter incident, thereby exposing the Lebanese army’s lack of neutrality and its provision of active aid and support to Hizbollah.³⁹

On top of that, more than a year before, on February 12, 2008, Hizbollah’s military commander and Nasrallah’s single most valued deputy, Imad Mughniyeh, was killed in Damascus by a mysterious car bomb explosion. At the terrorist mastermind’s funeral in Beirut the following day, Nasrallah blamed Israel for having assassinated his right hand man and swore that Hizbollah’s retribution would not be long in coming.⁴⁰ To this day, however, Nasrallah has not exacted his promised revenge for this devastating blow that was dealt to his organization’s fighting edge.⁴¹ (Among numerous other acts of notoriety, Mughniyeh was strongly suspected of having planned and overseen the July 12, 2006 border provocation that set off the Second Lebanon War.⁴²)

In addition, Hizbollah has been a lightning rod for gradually mounting Lebanese popular discontentment since the end of the IDF counteroffensive in 2006 as the main instigator of Israel's retaliatory bombardment that generated such widespread damage to Lebanon's civilian infrastructure and economy. For that reason, Nasrallah fully appreciates that he cannot afford to be viewed by the Lebanese rank and file as the cause of yet another painful Israeli retaliation against Lebanon. Also for that reason, only at the greatest risk to Hizbollah's own interests as an infectious presence within its Lebanese host can he commit any future act of aggression against Israel sufficiently grave as to precipitate an even more massive response of that sort by the IDF.

Looking Forward from Israel's Second Gaza Conflict

Israel's intelligence monitoring of Hizbollah is said to be greatly improved over what it was before the Second Lebanon War, and the IDF Northern Command has voiced confidence that the indecisive outcome of Operation Change of Direction in 2006 will not be repeated in case of another showdown with Hizbollah. Said one of its senior officers in October 2009: "By all means let Hizbollah try. The welcome party that we are preparing for them [this time] is one that they will remember for a very long time."⁴³ In addition, Israel's current leadership has left no room for doubt that because Hizbollah has inserted itself even further into the formal structure of the Lebanese government, any future act of aggression by the terrorist organization would be deemed an act undertaken by that government, thereby rendering Lebanon's infrastructure and economy legitimate targets for IDF retaliation.

Furthermore, with Hizbollah's hard line sponsors in Tehran now facing mounting troubles of their own given the slowly simmering discontentment on the home front, Nasrallah can no longer, at least for now, count on the automatic support of Iran in case of another Israeli assault on his most valued assets in Lebanon. "In short," in the words of a well-informed Israeli defense reporter, "despite the fact that Hizbollah today is substantially stronger in purely military terms than it was [in 2006], its political stature and autonomy have been significantly reduced. It is clear that Nasrallah is cautious, and he will weigh his options very carefully before embarking on any course of action that might lead to all-out war with Israel."⁴⁴

In addition, in large measure due to the manifold incentive generated by Israel's having suffered two successive rocket wars in a span of less than three years, compounded by the continuing possibility of worse challenges yet to come from Hizbollah and Hamas, Israel's research and development establishment made major strides after 2006 toward fielding a serviceable active defense against the Grads, Katyushas, Qassams, and other short range rockets that plagued the IDF and the Israeli civilian population during the Second Lebanon War and in the months that preceded Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. In addition to its Arrow 2 and Arrow 3 area-defense anti-missile systems against long range ballistic threats and to its David's Sling interceptor aimed at destroying medium range rockets and slower flying cruise missiles, the IDF in 2010 began deploying its Iron Dome point defense system against short range rockets of the sort fielded in large numbers by Hizbollah and Hamas.

Until late 2012, the IDF's mobile Iron Dome interceptors were mainly positioned around Israeli towns and facilities closest to the Gaza Strip, as that Hamas-occupied bastion was the sole source of periodic rocket fire into populated areas of Israel after Operation Cast Lead ended in January 2009. Eventually, however, a total of 13 Iron Dome batteries will be fielded at strategically significant locations throughout Israel. The aim is to negate, ultimately decisively, the attack tactic currently most favored by Hizbollah and Hamas, i.e., firing short range, high trajectory unguided rockets into Israel's population centers for their terrorizing effect. Partly financed by the United States and incorporating advanced American radar and other technology, the Iron Dome system has not proven effective against mortars. Moreover, some have voiced concern that militant groups like Hizbollah and Hamas could attempt to overwhelm the system by unleashing heavy barrages of cheap short range rockets, thereby forcing the IDF to spend as much as \$50,000 a shot to negate them. However, as an IDF spokesman commented in this regard, "there is a bigger issue here than how much it costs. [The Iron Dome system] is going to give us some answers."⁴⁵

Earlier in 2012, such answers seemed to be coming increasingly into hand, in light of Iron Dome's successful interception in tests of a number of rockets that mimicked the scores of thousands of Qassams and Katyushas in the Hizbollah and Hamas arsenals. In those tests, the system used radar that acquires the incoming rocket and guides a kinetic interceptor to engage and negate it. The radar further succeeded in detecting rockets that were

headed toward predicted impact points known to be in uninhabited areas, thereby allowing the interceptor rocket to be withheld so as not to waste it against a nonthreatening target.⁴⁶ In March 2012, the targeted killing of a senior member of the Palestinian Popular Resistance Committees by an IAF air strike prompted a renewed barrage of Qassams out of Gaza, with some 250 launched into southern Israel as of the end of that month. By then the operational Iron Dome system intercepted nearly 90 percent of rockets that threatened to land in a vital area.⁴⁷

This encouraging early showing of Iron Dome in its first combat test was reconfirmed on a larger and more definitive scale eight months later during the IDF's eight-day air offensive against Hamas, Operation Pillar of Defense, conducted in November 2012. That offensive was unleashed in response to a steadily escalating resumption of rocket fire by Hamas into southern Israel in previous months that was prompted by the encouragement its leaders perceived as empowering developments occasioned by the so-called "Arab Spring" in Egypt and elsewhere in the Islamist world.⁴⁸ In a masterful opening retaliatory strike enabled by precise real-time actionable intelligence, the IAF succeeded in killing Hamas's military commander, Ahmed al-Jabari, by means of an accurate air attack while he was riding in a moving vehicle. Over the course of the operation's eight days, the IAF also systematically obliterated all known and geolocated Hamas rocket storage sites, command and control facilities, and other vital military equities throughout the Gaza Strip.

This time, in marked contrast to its earlier experiences in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2008 and 2009, the Israeli government took special care to ensure that overarching political goals and diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving them would be the main determinants of IDF combat actions. Treating its latest counteroffensive against Hamas as more an armed negotiation than a full-fledged war, the administration of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with the crucial assistance of Egypt's democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi, consciously strove throughout for a negotiated ceasefire that might provide a more durable halt to Hamas's rocket fire into Israel in return for a gradual easing of Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip aimed at hindering the influx of covert weapons shipments to Hamas by Iran and Syria through the Sinai Peninsula. The ceasefire was pursued by the Israeli government from the very start in conscious awareness that in order to achieve its desired political goals, the price it

would have to pay would be the avoidance of a major decisive combat operation against Hamas on the ground. In this regard, as the ceasefire negotiations neared their endgame, Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak rightly noted: "Hamas will not disappear, but the memory of this experience will remain with it for a very long time, and this is what will restore deterrence."⁴⁹

This latest flare-up of hostilities between Israel and Hamas and the successful IDF response highlighted two additional windfall benefits that ultimately accrued to Israel from Operation Change of Direction in 2006. First, Hizbollah watched the unfolding of Israel's eight-day pummeling of Hamas throughout the November fighting with keen interest as the Iron Dome system largely spared the country's civilians from substantial harm by Hamas rocket fire until the ceasefire was implemented.⁵⁰ However, it studiously avoided any attempt to open a second front on Israel's northern border by joining Hamas in contributing to the rocket fire. That restraint suggested that Israel's deterrent against Hizbollah not only remained intact but may have been even further enhanced by Iron Dome's impressive performance.

True enough, shortly after the fighting between Israel and Hamas ended, Nasrallah warned ostentatiously that his combatants would unleash "thousands" of their own rockets against Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in the event of any future war between Israel and Hizbollah. Yet in a resounding affirmation that actions speak louder than words, Hizbollah took care not to undertake any actual physical provocation against Israel that might risk inviting another massive retaliation by the IDF against its assets throughout Lebanon. Moreover, as before in the years since the Second Lebanon War, Nasrallah issued his bombastic but otherwise hollow threat not in public, but through the safety of a video link from an undisclosed location.⁵¹

Second, in a notable departure from six decades of previous Israeli military practice, the revealed shortcomings in the IDF's performance in Lebanon in 2006 gave rise, perhaps for the first time, to a serious "lessons-learned" undertaking on the part of Israel's military leaders. That determined effort had a clear positive impact on the course and outcome of the IDF's first Gaza war two years later. It may also have revealed its full consummation in the IDF's second round of successful combat against Hamas in November 2012. Two years before, an informed and thoughtful Israeli scholar suggested that Israel's military culture had yet to assimilate

“formalized systems for learning lessons from its campaigns” and that any successes the IDF may have achieved at drawing useful conclusions from its past combat experiences tended to be mainly of a narrow technical and tactical nature.⁵²

Yet in the early aftermath of its flawed Lebanon campaign in 2006, the IDF under General Haloutz’s personal direction carried out a determined and brutally honest effort involving all three branches over a course of six months to understand and assess what went wrong in the conduct of Operation Change of Direction. In short order, that effort led to significant improvements in air-ground integration and joint campaign planning that in turn eventually resulted in the substantially more effective Israeli performance in Operations Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense.⁵³ Each of the above-noted developments was a direct linear outgrowth of the IDF’s performance against Hizbollah in 2006, further underscoring the extent to which, viewed with the benefit of six years’ hindsight, Israel’s security situation gained in the long run from the experience of the Second Lebanon War.

In a summary statement to the Winograd Commission that well captured the case for this more encouraging outlook across the board, General Haloutz declared as early as January 2007: “When I judge the results [of the campaign] in light of the goals [of the campaign], and when I look at the military outcome where an improved military situation has been created, where Hizbollah has been weakened, and where the Lebanese establishment has understood that it must implement its responsibility over Lebanon...I think that...the starting point today is substantially superior to what it was before the outbreak of the fighting. I cannot tell how long this will last, but what I can say is that even today, this is the longest period of time ever in which such a reality has existed along the border.... From the military point of view, [Hizbollah] has been dealt a blow like it had never felt before.”⁵⁴ Thus far, that early optimistic appraisal has been amply borne out by Hizbollah’s subsequent cautious behavior throughout the ensuing years.

Notes

- 1 Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, *34 Days: Israel, Hezbollah, and the War in Lebanon* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. ix.
- 2 For more on this point, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, “An Airpower Failure? Hardly!,” *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, October 10, 2011, p. 70.

- 3 On the second of these two counts, in testimony before the Knesset after the initial week of fighting, the IDF chief reported that Hizbollah was seeking to draw Israel into a prolonged war of attrition and that while the IDF had plans in hand for a ground counteroffensive, it was not yet ready to implement them because of the near-certainty of high friendly troop casualties that any such move would generate. See Abraham Rabinovich, "Hezbollah Trained for Six Years, Dug Deep Bunkers," *Washington Times*, July 21, 2006.
- 4 These two extravagant goals, both unattainable by any military means that Israel's rank and file would likely have countenanced, were announced by Olmert six days into the campaign in a speech to the Knesset that showed no sign of any serious prior strategy deliberation. See Harel and Issacharoff, *34 Days*, pp. 107-8. Notably, they were *not* among the more modest campaign goals that the IDF General Headquarters had formally assigned to Israel's fighting forces at the start of Operation Change of Direction.
- 5 A fuller development of this argument is presented in Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Air Operations in Israel's War against Hezbollah: Learning from Lebanon and Getting It Right in Gaza* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG835.html>.
- 6 William M. Arkin, *Divining Victory: Airpower in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 2007), p. 147.
- 7 "Testimony by Lieutenant General Dan Haloutz, IDF Chief of Staff, to the Winograd Commission Investigating the Second Lebanon War," unpublished English translation from the Hebrew, Jerusalem, Israel, January 28, 2007. The commission was named for its appointed chairman, Judge Eliyahu Winograd, a retired president of the Tel Aviv District Court.
- 8 *Ibid.* Israel's first Lebanon War, which began in 1982 and ended fully with Israel's withdrawal in 2000, resulted in nearly 600 IDF troops killed over the course of its 18-year duration. It has since been widely regarded as Israel's Vietnam.
- 9 Interview with Brigadier General Itai Brun, IAF, Director, Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies, Camp Glilot, Herzliya, Israel, March 26, 2008.
- 10 Dan Haloutz, *At Eye Level* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2010), from an unpublished English translation.
- 11 For a fuller development of this line of argument, see Eyal Zisser, "Nasrallah's Defeat in the 2006 War: Assessing Hezbollah's Influence," *Middle East Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (2009): 27-35.
- 12 For more on these two operations, see Lambeth, *Air Operations in Israel's War against Hezbollah*, pp. 29-36. In a rare public speech from an undisclosed location through a video link on July 18, 2012 in celebration of the sixth anniversary of his proclaimed "divine victory" over Israel, Nasrallah made a special point to address the IAF's preemptive attack against Hizbollah's hidden medium range rockets and denied that the air offensive was mission-effective. He claimed that his organization "knew that Israel knew where the

- platforms were located” and accordingly managed in due time to “change the location of these platforms without allowing the Israelis to find out” – as if saying so made it so. Quoted at “Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah,” *Now Lebanon*, <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=420450>.
- 13 Amir Kulick, “The Next War with Hizbollah,” *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 3 (2007): 41-50.
 - 14 Isaac Ben-Israel, *The First Israel-Hizbollah Missile War* (Tel Aviv: Program for Security Studies, College of Policy and Government, Tel Aviv University, May 2007), p. 19 of an unpublished translation into English.
 - 15 Martin Van Creveld, “Israel’s Lebanese War: A Preliminary Assessment,” *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, October 2006, p. 43.
 - 16 For amplification, see Ronen Manelis, “Between Lebanon and Gaza: Hizbollah in Operation Cast Lead,” *Military and Strategic Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2009): 43-50.
 - 17 Ben Caspit and Jackie Hugi, “Speech of the Panicked Mice,” *Maariv*, September 25, 2006.
 - 18 Ibid.
 - 19 Colum Lynch and Robin Wright, “Peace Resolution for Lebanon Unanimously Approved at UN,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 2006.
 - 20 Steven Erlanger, “Israel Committed to Block Arms and Kill Nasrallah,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2006.
 - 21 Gabriel Siboni, “From Gaza to Lebanon and Back,” *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 1 (2007): 66-69.
 - 22 Cited in Guermentes E. Lailari, “The Information Operations War between Israel and Hizballah during the Summer of 2006,” in James J. F. Forest, ed., *Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2009), p. 322.
 - 23 Greg Myre and Helene Cooper, “Israel to Occupy Area of Lebanon as Security Zone,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2006.
 - 24 “Hezbollah Chief Revisits Raid,” *Washington Post*, August 28, 2006.
 - 25 Thomas L. Friedman, “Not So Smart,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2006.
 - 26 Ben-Israel, *The First Israel-Hezbollah Missile War*.
 - 27 Cited in Jim Storr, “Reflections on the War in Lebanon,” *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, April 2007, p. 71.
 - 28 For more on this point, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, “Forging Jointness under Fire: Air-Ground Integration in Israel’s 2006 War against Hezbollah,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2012): 48-53.
 - 29 Ron Tira, “Shifting Tectonic Plates: Basic Assumptions on the Peace Process Revisited,” *Strategic Assessment* 12, no. 1 (2009): 91-107, especially pp. 100, 102.
 - 30 Sanu Kainikara and Russell Parkin, *Pathways to Victory: Observations from the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah Conflict* (Canberra: Royal Australian Air Force, Air Power Development Centre, October 2007), p. 17.

- 31 Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., "The Pentagon's Wasting Assets: The Eroding Foundations of American Power," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009, p. 24.
- 32 Tira, "Shifting Tectonic Plates," p. 102.
- 33 Roni Bart, "The Second Lebanon War: The Plus Column," *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 3 (2006): 16-17.
- 34 Ben Caspit, "First, Let's Win," *Maariv*, August 11, 2006.
- 35 For more on this, see Gabriel Siboni, "From the Second Intifada through the Second Lebanon War to Operation Cast Lead: Puzzle Pieces of a Single Campaign," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2009): 25-33, especially pp. 28-29.
- 36 Itai Brun, "The Second Lebanon War as a 'Wake-Up Call': A Strategic Perspective and Major Lessons Learned," Camp Glilot, Herziliya, Israel: Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies, undated briefing charts.
- 37 Michael Oren, "Time Is Short for Iran Diplomacy," *Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 2012.
- 38 Bret Stephens, "Plotting the Next Mideast War," *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2010.
- 39 Ronen Bergman, "Israel's Secret War on Hezbollah," *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2009.
- 40 Al-Manar television (Beirut), February 13, 2009.
- 41 Some have suggested that the attack by a confirmed Hizbollah suicide bomber that killed five Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria on July 18, 2012 may have been intended as retribution for Mughiyeh's assassination. A more plausible explanation for that particular incident, however, is that the attack was a directed retaliation for the assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists, for which Iran, Hizbollah's main sponsor and manipulator, has blamed Israeli agents. See Nicholas Kulish and Eric Schmitt, "Hezbollah is Blamed for Attack on Israeli Tourists in Bulgaria," *New York Times*, July 19, 2012.
- 42 Bergman, "Israel's Secret War on Hezbollah."
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Howard Schneider, "Israel Finds Strength in its Missile Defenses," *Washington Post*, September 19, 2009.
- 46 Yaakov Katz, "Iron Dome Successfully Intercepts Kassam, Katyusha Barrages," *Jerusalem Post*, July 15, 2010.
- 47 Sheera Frenkel, "Israel Sees New Advantage in Iron Dome Anti-Missile System," *McClatchey*, March 26, 2012.
- 48 On this count, after the relative quiescence for a time that followed the successful conclusion of Operation Cast Lead in January 2009, there were 365 rocket and mortar attacks from Gaza into southern Israel in 2010, 680 in 2011, and 800 through most of 2012, with 171 in October alone. (Peter Beinart, "Israel's Fatal Game," *Newsweek*, November 26, 2012.) Of the IAF's eventual response to these provocations, IDF Colonel (ret.) Gabi Siboni said:

- "Deterrence has to be maintained. It was only a question of time until this moment arrived." See Isabel Kershner and Fares Akram, "Ferocious Israeli Assault Kills a Leader of Hamas," *New York Times*, November 15, 2012.
- 49 Nidal al-Mughrabi and Jeffrey Heller, "Israel, Gaza Ceasefire Agreed to, Hamas Official Says, Israel Denies," *Reuters*, November 20, 2012.
- 50 Throughout the operation's eight days, Hamas fired a total of 1,506 rockets into Israel from the Gaza Strip. Of those that were determined to have been headed toward populated areas, Iron Dome intercepted and stopped 421, with only 58 landing in urban settings, making for an overall success rate of nearly 90 percent and only 5 Israeli fatalities occasioned by the rocket fire. See "IDF Newsletter: IDF Ends Operation Pillar of Defense," from newsletter@idfblog.com, November 21, 2012.
- 51 Bassem Mroue, "Hezbollah Chief Says Rockets Would Hit Tel Aviv in War," *Washington Post*, November 26, 2012.
- 52 Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors in the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the U.S., and Israel* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 124.
- 53 For an assessment of how this focused effort paid off in the IDF's planning and conduct of Operation Cast Lead, see Benjamin S. Lambeth, "Israel's War in Gaza: A Paradigm of Effective Military Learning and Adaptation," *International Security* 37, no. 2 (2012): 81-118.
- 54 "Testimony by Lieutenant General Dan Haloutz, IDF Chief of Staff, to the Winograd Commission Investigating the Second Lebanon War."