

## Israel's Pyrrhic Victory in Lebanon

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In 1983 I was called up to reserve duty in Lebanon. My daughter asked me what we were doing there and how was the occupation of Lebanon making Israel more secure. I could not come up with a convincing answer, one that would make sense to a then seven-year old, so I decided to study the processes by which seemingly reasoned policy choices of states give rise to unintended and counterproductive consequences. The resulting book, *Paradoxes of War: On the Art of National Self-Entrapment*, analyzed the paradoxical aspects of the initiation, management, and outcomes of wars in the twentieth century starting with the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 and ending with the 1982 Lebanon War and Falkland War.

In contrast to the 1982 Lebanon War whose key aspects were highly paradoxical, the current Israeli-Lebanese war is not. Born out of political folly and recklessness, it evolved into the epitome of military incompetence, and will die a slow and painful death. All parties to this war have grossly miscalculated, but Israel's political and military blunders were the most severe. In the interest of a candid and comprehensive introspection of Israel's decisions and actions in this war, here are some of the key issues that require close scrutiny.

**The decision to go to war.** In May 1967, the Egyptians amassed their troops in the Sinai Peninsula, closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, sent reconnaissance flights over the Dimona nuclear reactor, and the entire Arab world mobilized for a war aimed at the annihilation of Israel. Even under these dire circumstances, it took the Israeli government three weeks before it decided to launch a pre-emptive war. During these weeks the Israeli government withstood tremendous pressure from the IDF generals and sought to exhaust all diplomatic avenues to defuse this crisis. In July 2006, it took the Israeli government a few hours to decide on war, less time than it takes an average person to purchase an appliance. The Olmert Cabinet failed to consider diplomatic options, and did not adequately analyze the political and military implications of the war. The Israelis were well aware of Hezbollah's capabilities, and yet the cabinet disregarded the impact of its decision to attack civilian targets in Lebanon on Hezbollah's ability to hit Israeli population centers. It failed to consider the implications of a failure of its military strategy for the credibility of Israel's deterrence, especially the possibility that an unsuccessful military campaign may erode its deterrence more than a diplomatic strategy of crisis management.

**What should Israel have done?** Clearly, Israel had to respond resolutely to the Hezbollah attack and the abduction of Israeli soldiers. That said, however, its military response was hasty and ill-advised. Israel should have taken advantage of the crisis to use coercive diplomacy—a combination of diplomatic pressure and demonstrative military actions—to bring about an effective implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1559 calling for the disarming of all militias in Lebanon including Hezbollah. Specifically, Israel should

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have issued an ultimatum to the Lebanese government and to the international community demanding a prompt implementation of resolution 1559 by Lebanon or by an international force, and an unconditional release of the abducted soldiers.

There is a fair chance that this ultimatum would have been effective. The Lebanese government, moderate Arab states, and the major powers would have realized the gravity of the Hezbollah provocation and the risks associated with noncompliance. The reaction of the Lebanese public and the international community to the Hariri assassination last year suggests that public and international pressure could prove effective in Lebanon. Hezbollah was and continues to be a primarily Lebanese movement; it cannot operate without public support. It had to accept the withdrawal of its Syrian allies, and would have been forced to accept the pressure to disarm.

If Lebanon did not comply with this ultimatum, or if the international community could not mobilize and insert an international force that would help Lebanon disarm Hezbollah, Israel would have been justified to use force in order to remove the risk to its northern border. Then, a war would have been morally and internationally justified. More important, Israel would have time to prepare for a war more than it did in July. There is a lot of talk in Israel about the need to re-establish deterrence as a principal cause of the Israeli war. Yet effective application of a deterrent threat must provide the opponent a chance to rationally assess the costs and benefits of a given course of action. Israel failed to provide Lebanon and Hezbollah an opportunity to do so. Hence, the indiscriminate and massive use of force is unlikely to re-establish Israel's deterrence posture; it is more likely to further erode it, especially given the military fiasco this war turned out to be so far.

**Israel's military strategy.** In my book, *Defending the Holy Land* I studied all of Israel's wars since 1948. I have also examined its low-intensity conflict strategy over time. In comparative perspective, this war is clearly the worst military performance in Israel's history. The military fiasco has several aspects.

First, the air campaign has failed miserably. The attacks on Lebanese civilian centers and infrastructure targets had little effect on the Lebanese government's will and ability to comply with Israel's demands, or on Hezbollah's capacity and will to hit Israeli targets. All it did was to wreck havoc on Lebanon and to boost the public support of Hezbollah. The notion that an air campaign could decide a war with minimum casualties to the side employing it is based on fundamental historical ignorance. While in some cases (such as Kosovo) an air campaign decided a war without ground operations, in most historical cases—starting with World War II and ending with the Afghanistan and Iraq wars—air attacks on population centers and infrastructure had marginal effects on the outcome. In some cases, the air campaign increased the motivation of the enemy and strengthened its resolve. Israel should not be surprised if its air attacks in July and August 2006 would give rise to the next generation of terrorists who would be far more reckless than the Hezbollah.

Second, after a month of fighting and ground operations, Hezbollah continues to fire rockets as if the IDF did not exist. Israel's ground campaign did not diminish Hezbollah's capacity to launch rockets. The expansion of the ground operations to the Litani River has come—from a strictly military point of view—too late and its military effects would be marginal. Any military outcome that would result in less than total dismemberment of the

Hezbollah—including the capturing or killing of most of its leaders—would be interpreted as a major military victory and a morale boosting landmark for extremists all over the Middle East. It appears we are heading towards this outcome. More generally, in this war the IDF displayed defective planning, lack of imagination and little tactical and operational creativity, it featured cumbersome and slow movement of forces, vulnerability to ambushes and ineffective management of anti-guerrilla warfare.

**What should Israel have done?** Let me re-emphasize that this is an unnecessary war. Having said that, once Israel decided to destroy the Hezbollah militarily, conducting a luxury war guided by the wish to minimize Israeli military casualties was the worst possible military strategy. Israel should have launched large scale operations including amphibious landings in Tyre and Sidon and air transport of ground forces to the Litani River to block the retreat of Hezbollah. It should have launched a direct attack on Hezbollah forces in south Lebanon all across the front. The IDF should have used Special Forces in Beirut and the Beqqa Valley to destroy command and control centers and training camps and to block weapon shipments. Air power should have been used strictly in support of ground operations and not as the centerpiece of the military campaign.

This strategy would have resulted in many more military casualties, but it would have been far more “surgical” and certainly more effective from a military point of view than the actual Israeli campaign. It would have quite probably reduced appreciably the damage of Hezbollah attacks on northern Israel because it would have forced the Hezbollah units to concentrate on fighting or fleeing rather than on firing rockets. It would have been more humane and would have had less of a diplomatic fallout. And it would have eroded the Lebanese support for Hezbollah.

**Israel's Homefront Command.** The disarray in the homefront command and the confusion and lack of coordination in the government's dealing with the damage to Israel's northern population is reminiscent of the U.S. government's outrageously negligent response to hurricane Katrina. The homefront command was totally unprepared to deal with Hezbollah attacks. It issued confusing instructions, failed to evacuate the population from danger areas, and completely ignored the Israeli-Arab population of northern Israel. The government has yet to come up with a plan to provide damage relief to northern Israel, arrangements for schools, and adequate provisions for Israeli refugees. The impulsive decision to go to war resulted in the total disarray of the homefront administration.

**What should have been done?** Since Israel had been aware of the rocket launching capacity of Hezbollah, the homefront command should have issued clear instructions to the civilian population and should have been prepared with plans to deal with widespread emergency in northern Israel. The difficulties of dealing with a prolonged siege of northern Israel are also due to the creeping and ineffective offensive campaign of the IDF in Lebanon, and could have been significantly shortened by a bolder offensive strategy.

**Israeli intelligence services.** The IDF intelligence and the Mossad had six years (since the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon) to collect information about the location of the Hezbollah rocket launchers, rocket depots, and the command and control centers of their enemy. The hundreds of rockets Hezbollah launched on a daily basis for four consecutive weeks indicate a colossal intelligence failure. It is not clear whether the intelligence

community warned the political leaders of the consequences of acting without detailed knowledge of the location of Hezbollah's rocket launchers and depots. Nor do we know whether the intelligence community provided the government with an accurate assessment of the military, political, and homefront costs of a war. If such a warning had been issued but the politicians ignored it, the political leaders should be held accountable. If, on the other hand, political leaders did not have adequate warning of the extent of damage that the Hezbollah is capable of inflicting on Israel, this requires a major reform—or even a revolution—in Israel's intelligence community.

**What should have been done?** In the absence of accurate information about the location of Hezbollah's rocket launchers and depots, the intelligence community should have warned the government of the consequences of a premature attack on Lebanon that include multiple rocket attacks on northern Israel's population centers. It should have made it clear that in the absence of a massive and quick ground campaign it would be impossible to stop these attacks for a long time. It should have emphasized that any military strategy that does not result in a quick and total destruction of the Hezbollah would further erode Israel's deterrence because it would expose the weaknesses and incompetence of the IDF. This kind of assessment should have deterred the Israeli politicians from using premature force without exploring diplomatic solution and it should have altered the IDF's strategy. If this had indeed been the intelligence assessment presented to the Cabinet, then the civilian policy makers must be held accountable; if not, then the intelligence community requires a major and quick overhaul of its collection and analysis capacity.

**Israel's Foreign Ministry and the Diplomatic Corps.** Tragically, this war accentuated the traditional role of Israel's foreign ministry: explaining military policy rather than shaping foreign policy. Israel's foreign ministry does not have the tools, the staff, and the prestige for planning and advocating foreign policy that rests primarily on diplomacy. As it is now, the foreign ministry is incapable of offering meaningful diplomatic options or to analyze the international implications of military options. In this case, the foreign ministry got lucky in that the Bush Administration supported Israeli policies at the UN and handled for it most of the international negotiations. Even so, the foreign ministry failed in offering a real diplomatic alternative to the military policy. Its attempts to explain the massive use of force against civilians appeared feeble at best and hypocritical for the most part.

**What could be done?** The Foreign Ministry should have indicated to the government that it was in Israel's interest to maintain a stable and democratic Lebanon. An attempt to bomb Lebanon into the Stone Age is self-defeating. It should have tried to convince the government that the crisis offers an opportunity to resolve the Hezbollah problem through diplomacy backed up by force, not by force backed up by diplomacy. During the war the foreign ministry should have sought to find a quick resolution of the conflict through negotiation, not let the Americans do our diplomatic job, because nobody guarantees that the United States would be on our side the next time around. More generally, a thorough re-organization of the foreign ministry with an emphasis on a capacity to provide staff work and analysis to the minister and the cabinet on diplomatic aspects of crisis management is essential if Israel wants to have a proactive foreign policy rather than a foreign policy that provides diplomatic support to its military (mis)adventures.

**Drawing the lessons from this catastrophe**

As the UN resolution offers a glimmer of hope to end to this war, all sides are going to declare victory. Israeli politicians and IDF generals will probably claim that their policies and actions are vindicated by the outcome. Even a diplomatic solution that stabilizes Israeli-Lebanese relations should not overshadow the fact that the same outcome could probably have been accomplished without bloodshed. At the very least the same agreement could have been reached with fewer civilian casualties and far less damage to the infrastructure and economies of Lebanon and Israel. This outcome was not the result of political vision and creativity and of military competence. The exorbitant cost to both sides should serve as an opportunity to revamp Israel's security and foreign policy of the kind of structures, ideas, and people who gave rise to this unnecessary and costly war.

The opportunity should not be bypassed because the combined costs of folly, denial, and self-deception have become too high to bear. The deficiencies that I had identified in *Defending the Holy Land* were accentuated during this war. The defective political decision making processes in which the security establishment dominates foreign policy and diplomacy, the strategic ills of the IDF and the intelligence community, and the lack of civilian oversight of the military have lasted too long and caused too much damage to let them perpetuate themselves. The political and military institutions are not going to reform themselves from within. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the academic community, the media, and the general public to demand and offer changes.

It is not enough to replace the politicians and generals who were responsible for this war of folly; a deeper structural reform is urgently needed. This reform should consist of several related elements. First, the Knesset needs to establish a robust and efficient system of political oversight of government operations in general, and of the security community in particular. It must develop a professional staff next to the Committee on Foreign and Security Affairs that can guide such oversight operations. Second, the prime minister's office must upgrade the National Security Council (NSC) and grant it more planning and crisis management authority. Third, the NSC should assume principal responsibility for intelligence analysis and assessments that are currently under the responsibility of the Military Intelligence Branch of the IDF, as well as the net assessment function currently not fulfilled by any of the intelligence services. Fourth, the Foreign Ministry should develop its own policy planning staff and a crisis management center focusing on diplomatic aspects of policy making, so its staff can offer feasible policy alternatives both during crisis situations and on a more current basis. Fifth, the government must establish policy evaluation center that can examine whether government policies have accomplished the goals they were intended to, possible side effects, and conduct efficient cost-benefit analysis of government operations. Current organizations such as the State Comptroller have neither the training, the capabilities, nor the access to decision makers to conduct policy evaluation.

A plan and commitment to conduct such reforms should be a litmus test of candidates and parties competing for political office in Israel. These should serve as the basis for endorsement by public groups, by opinion leaders, and by internal party organs. The extent to which such reforms are implemented should be the basis for evaluating the performance of politicians in the future. It is high time Israel started learning from its mistakes, not to repeat them but to improve itself.