

# MERIA

## LEBANON 2006: UNFINISHED WAR

Jonathan Spyer\*

*The Lebanon war of 2006 failed to resolve any of the issues over which it was fought. Ultimately, the war may be understood as a single campaign within a broader Middle Eastern conflict--between pro-Western and democratic states on the one hand, and an alliance of Islamist and Arab nationalist forces on the other. The latter alignment has as one of its strategic goals the eventual demise of the State of Israel. While such a goal may appear delusional, the inconclusive results of the 2006 war did much to confirm the representatives of the latter camp in their belief that they have discovered a method capable of eventually producing a strategic defeat for Israel.*

### INTRODUCTION

The 2006 war between Israel and the Lebanese Hizballah organization, known in Israel as the “Second Lebanon War,” and in Lebanon as “the July War,” formed part of a larger strategic confrontation taking place in the Middle East. This confrontation places the United States and its allies in opposition to Iran and its allies and client organizations. Israel is part of the former camp, while Hizballah is part of the latter. The 2006 war was complicated by the fact that the Lebanese government, which acted as an unwilling host to Hizballah, is also an important U.S. regional ally.

The war has been the center of a number of interlinked, heated controversies almost from the moment of the implementation of the UN-sponsored ceasefire, which brought it to an end on August 14, 2006. The controversies have been both between partisans of the sides in the war--often in basic disputes over the facts of the case, numbers of casualties on each side, etc.--and on a more conceptual level, concerning the correct interpretation and characterization of the war.

Some analysts have seen the war as the harbinger of a new type of “post-modern” conflict--with important implications for the future effective use of force<sup>1</sup> others have

sought to view the war and its results through the lens of more conventional strategic assessments.<sup>2</sup> Still others view the 2006 war as unique in the Middle Eastern context, in that it saw a conventional state army-- the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF)--engaged against Hizballah--a force which was neither a conventional army in the full sense, nor a guerrilla force in the sense in which that term has usually been understood (i.e. as an irregular agency engaged in low-intensity operations).<sup>3</sup> This article will briefly look at the events of the war itself over which the argument is taking place and will close with an attempt to draw some conclusions regarding the strategic significance and lessons of the war.

### THE COURSE OF THE WAR

The Second Lebanon War began on July 12, 2006, with the shelling by Hizballah of the Israeli border villages of Zarit and Shlomi. The shelling was intended to act as a diversion for the commencement of a cross-border raid. The objective of the raid was the abduction of IDF soldiers for use as bargaining chips to secure the release of Lebanese citizens convicted of terrorist acts and incarcerated in Israel. A contingent of Hizballah fighters attacked two armored Humvees manned by IDF reservists from a combat engineering unit. Three IDF soldiers were killed, two more

injured, and two abducted by the Hizballah men and taken back across the border to Lebanon. Five additional soldiers were killed, and a Merkava tank destroyed, as the IDF attempted to rescue the soldiers.<sup>4</sup>

The IDF carried out air and artillery strikes on targets in southern Lebanon in the course of the day. Israel's cabinet convened on July 12, 2006, in order to decide on Israel's response to the abductions. On the same day, the cabinet authorized the bombing of targets in south Lebanon. This included both attacks on Hizballah's long and medium-range missile capabilities, and strikes on infrastructural targets in southern Lebanon and beyond it. Over the next few days and weeks, Israeli aircraft struck at Hizballah missile capabilities, at Nasrallah's headquarters in southern Beirut, and also bombed the Rafiq Hariri International Airport and roads leading out of Lebanon.<sup>5</sup>

Hizballah leaders were undoubtedly surprised by the extent and ferocity of the Israeli response. However, once its dimensions became clear, the movement was able to mobilize according to prior existing plans and to await the Israeli ground assault. In the following days, the movement reinforced the border villages, moving in elements of its regular force. At an early stage, however, the Israeli political leadership chose to rule out a major ground assault to the Litani River. Instead, an intensive air campaign commenced.

Limited ground operations began only on July 17, 2006, with the entry of IDF troops into Marun al-Ras.<sup>6</sup> The task of the defenders was made much easier by the Israeli decision to concentrate its attacks in a very narrow area. This enabled Hizballah to reinforce the area under attack with forces from adjacent sectors. This pattern was repeated in the coming days in other towns such as Bint Jubayl and Ayt al-Sha'b.<sup>7</sup> The Hizballah units were also able to benefit from an extensive storage, tunnel, and bunker system put in place prior to the war. Due to Israel's decision to concentrate on confronting Hizballah in the

villages and towns close to the border, the IDF was unable to utilize fully its advantages in terms of armor, artillery, and air power.

The result was a series of bloody encounters between Israeli infantry on the one hand and Hizballah fighters on the other. Hizballah's ability in tactical maneuvering under fire was noted, as was the creative effect with which the movement used antitank weapons in the infantry combat.<sup>8</sup> While Israel managed, after concerted efforts, to gain ground in these areas, the subsequent withdrawal of IDF forces meant that the village-based Hizballah units were able to reemerge. Israel's apparent lack of awareness of the system of bunkers and tunnels built by Hizballah represented a serious intelligence failure on Israel's part, which further benefited Hizballah's efforts.

The Israeli decision to concentrate in the first part of the war on an air campaign, accompanied by what were in effect large-scale raids into populated areas of southern Lebanon, also enabled Hizballah to maintain a constant stream of short-range rockets onto populated areas of northern Israel. No clear response to the threat represented by short-range rockets deployed south of the Litani River existed--other than a large-scale ground incursion. Since the political leadership did not order such an incursion, the result was that Hizballah was able to maintain a steady stream of Katyusha rockets throughout the war, through to the ceasefire. Hizballah would fire just under 4,000 rockets in the course of the fighting, with over 200 rockets a day fired in the final days of the war.<sup>9</sup> Hizballah was not able to adjust or coordinate its rocket fire in a sophisticated fashion, and hence the rockets were employed in essence as a terror weapon, designed to produce panic and disorientation among Israel's civilian population in the north. This appears to have been precisely the intention of Hizballah, which places stress on what it considers to be the weakness of Israeli society and its susceptibility to casualties. The idea, in line with the classic aim of both strategic bombing and terrorism, was to use

civilian casualties and the resulting public unrest as a tool to pressure the government of the enemy country.

However, the IDF also enjoyed notable successes in the early stages of the war. The Israeli Air Force was able to commence swiftly its air campaign and succeeded in destroying a substantial part of Hizballah's medium and long-range weapons capability during the first two days of the war. Israeli defense sources claim to have destroyed around 80 percent of this capability.<sup>10</sup>

Hizballah forces within the populated areas consisted mainly of part-time "village guards" mobilized for the war. Hizballah forces were also aided by fighters representing its rival for the loyalty of Lebanese Shi'a--Amal. In addition, smaller factions such as the Lebanese Communist Party, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party also took part.<sup>11</sup> Hizballah ground forces were organized into teams of seven to ten men, and these groupings appear to have operated with a large degree of autonomy, making full use of their knowledge of the local area, as well as of the system of bunkers and tunnels available to them.

These forces were augmented by the presence of members of Hizballah's full-time "elite" forces, which number in total around 1,000 men. The full-time forces appear to have been engaged largely in antitank operations in the open countryside and in rocket firing. On the few occasions in which Hizballah forces attempted to take the initiative and launch attacks on IDF troops, their efforts were unsuccessful. For example, on July 28, 2006, an attack by an elite Hizballah unit on Israeli airborne forces in Bint Jubayl resulted in a costly setback for Hizballah, in which it lost 20 men.<sup>12</sup> The overall performance of the "village guards," however, has been praised by military analysts.<sup>13</sup>

A much-noted element of the ground combat was Hizballah's successful

employment of antitank missiles. The organization used these not only against Israeli armor, but also employed them in a creative way in the infantry combat in built-up areas. The missiles themselves were Russian systems, purchased by Hizballah from Syria with Iranian funds.<sup>14</sup> Hizballah used AT-3 Sagger missiles to collapse buildings in which IDF forces were sheltered, as well as against tanks. Meanwhile, the AT-14 E Kornet missile, one of the most advanced Russian anti-armor systems, took a considerable toll on Israeli armor in the confused, sporadic ground war that raged close to the border. Hizballah also employed the RPG 29, the AT-4 Spigot, the AT-5 Spandrel, and the AT-13 METIS-M systems. In all, around 40 tanks were damaged in the course of the war, resulting in the deaths of 30 tank crewmen--25 percent of the IDF's entire combat losses in the war.<sup>15</sup> Of the 40 tanks damaged, however, the great majority were not totally destroyed and were withdrawn and repaired.<sup>16</sup>

Together with the air campaign and the war on the ground close to the border, the Israeli navy imposed a blockade on the Lebanese coast, which Hizballah proved unable to dislodge--despite its early success in hitting an Israeli ship, the Hanit, with a C-802 missile, badly damaging it.<sup>17</sup>

These, then, were the contours of the war for the greater part of its duration: limited ground operations by the IDF in an area adjoining the border, air operations up to Beirut, as well as a naval blockade; and on Hizballah's side, defense of areas under ground attack and a successful effort to maintain a constant barrage of short-range rockets on northern Israel.

This situation changed somewhat in the final days of the war, as the IDF began larger-scale and more ambitious ground operations. This phase saw the IDF push for the Litani River, achieving some tactical objectives, though with considerable loss of life.<sup>18</sup> The targeting of IDF armored forces in the Wadi Saluqi area, with resultant heavy IDF losses,

received much publicity.<sup>19</sup> A ceasefire came into effect at 8:00 a.m. on August 14, 2006, following the passing of UN Resolution 1701. The end of the fighting found some IDF forces deployed at the Litani River, but with Israel far from control of the entire area between the river and the Israeli-Lebanese border. Symbolic of this was Hizballah's continued ability to fire short-range missiles into Israel, which the group demonstrated by continuing the barrage until the very minute that the ceasefire went into effect.<sup>20</sup>

### ASSESSING THE WAR

The conduct of the Second Lebanon War, and in particular the perceived failure of Israel to achieve its stated objectives, such as the freeing of the two kidnapped soldiers and the disarming of Hizballah, led to a mood of deep disquiet in Israel in the months that followed the war.

The aims of the war from Israel's point of view had been defined in the cabinet on July 19, 2006. They included:

1. Freeing the kidnapped soldiers and bringing them back to Israel, with no conditions.
2. The cessation of the firing of missiles and rockets against the citizens of Israel and against Israeli targets.
3. Complete implementation of Resolution 1559, including the disarming of all the militias as well as the imposition of its sovereignty by the Lebanese government throughout its territory, and also the deployment of the Lebanese army along the border with Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Following the ceasefire, it was clear that of these objectives, only the second half of the third had been achieved. This led to the widespread and clearly justified sense later summed up in the final report of the Winograd Committee, of the war as a "great and grave missed opportunity."<sup>22</sup>

There was a general sense of surprise at the losses encountered by the ground forces, at the failure to end the short-range rocket attacks, and at what was widely seen as the failure of the political echelon to set a coherent, achievable set of political goals which could clearly be achieved by the reaching of a defined, coherent set of military objectives. Rather, the impression was one of general confusion among both the military and political leaderships. Demonstrations by demobilized reserve soldiers commenced in the weeks following the ceasefire, and a committee of enquiry into the conduct of the political and military echelon was appointed, chaired by Judge Eliyahu Winograd.

Many international observers felt that the mood of pessimism that very noticeably descended on Israel in the weeks following the war was exaggerated.<sup>23</sup> Resolution 1701, which ended the fighting, changed the situation in southern Lebanon to Israel's advantage, in that it ended the de facto Hizballah domination of the southern border area which had pertained since the unilateral Israeli withdrawal in May 2000. According to the resolution, control of the south and of the border would be taken over by a beefed up UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) force and by the Lebanese army's deployment in the south for the first time since 2000.<sup>24</sup> The loss of the control of the border and of freedom of operation south of the Litani was a significant setback for Hizballah. Clearly, however, much would depend on the extent to which the international community would prove determined in ensuring the implementation of the resolution. It was also evident that these achievements notwithstanding, Israel had failed to achieve the greater number of its goals as the Israeli government itself had defined them, and the performance of the army--in particular the ground forces--was cause for deep concern and disquiet regardless of the clear damage inflicted on Hizballah in the course of the war and by its outcome.

Hizballah, for its part, declared that the war represented a “divine victory” for the movement.<sup>25</sup> The movement initially claimed to have suffered minimal losses. As the underdog, it was able to point to the generally acknowledged impressive performance of its fighters in the defense of southern Lebanese towns and the failure of Israel to destroy the organization’s infrastructure of command or to kill any of the senior leaders of the movement. A statement made by Hizballah leader Hasan Nasrallah in an interview with a Lebanese TV channel shortly after the war, however, indicated a more complex response to the war within Hizballah. Nasrallah said that had the movement known of the likely IDF response to the kidnapping operation, it would have never have carried out the kidnappings. This statement became the subject of much interpretation and speculation.<sup>26</sup>

Since, clearly, neither side had won a “knock-out” victory in the war, the way was open for differing interpretation and rival claims. The very different nature of the analyses emerging from individuals identified with the rival camps, however, became apparent in the months following the war. To some extent, these differences derived from the varying nature of the protagonists. Israel is a democratic society, with a free media and an independent research community. Hizballah is a closed movement committed to a totalitarian ideology and possessing the ability to control the flow of information regarding its situation and regarding important facts concerning its performance in the war. The result was that different analyses sometimes rested on contrasting factual claims emerging from the sides.

An example of this was in the dispute over the number of Hizballah casualties in the war. From the outset, as noted above, Hizballah claimed to have suffered very few losses. The propaganda value of such a claim is obvious. Hizballah was concerned to promote the idea that it had won a “divine victory.” Israel lost 119 servicemen killed in the course of the

war.<sup>27</sup> Israel estimated that between 500 to - 600 Hizballah fighters had been killed.<sup>28</sup> Such a ratio--five Hizballah fighters killed for every IDF fatality--would tend to raise questions regarding Hizballah claims of “victory.”

The movement therefore initially admitted only to have lost around 150 fighters.<sup>29</sup> Alistair Crooke and Mark Perry assert that the “most telling” evidence of Israel’s failure in the war was in the “nearly equal” numbers of killed and wounded. Crooke and Perry note that counting the funerals of Shi’a fighters killed in the war would be the most reliable method of ascertaining numbers, and using this method, they conclude that 184 Hizballah fighters died. (It is not clear where their figure of 184 funerals comes from, and they accept the possibility that further funerals may increase the total).<sup>30</sup> However, it has transpired that Hizballah deliberately staggered the burial of fighters killed in order to create the impression of fewer casualties.<sup>31</sup> Hizballah fighters were interred without ceremony for later reburial. Lebanese and UN officials now concur with the initial Israeli suggestion that around 500 Hizballah fighters were killed. The organization itself now admits to losing 250 men.<sup>32</sup>

The cost to Hizballah notwithstanding, Israeli analyses of the war cast an unstinting focus on Israeli operational failures and errors. Observation of Israeli analyses of the failures and achievements of the war, however, show the emergence of a number of schools of thought, critical of the IDF performance, but differing in their explanations of it, and thus in their proposed remedies.

All Israeli and international accounts of the war concur that the Israeli performance contained serious problems at every level: the political planning and setting of objectives for the war, the military strategy adopted for the war, the performance of some of the senior commanders, and the preparedness of elements of the fighting troops.

Some analysts have focused on the hard military aspects of Israeli failure: above all, the excessive capabilities attributed to air power--as a result of a mistaken reading of what was achieved by NATO in Kosovo in 1999. This failure may be attributed largely to the top military echelon, which appears to have given the impression to the politicians that a decision could be achieved through weakening Hizballah from the air.<sup>33</sup>

This failure was then compounded by the serious problems encountered by the IDF in its performance in ground combat, in which a lack of preparation, particularly among reserve forces, was visible.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, because of the mistaken belief that air power could deliver victory, Israel failed to follow through with the massive commitment of ground forces, which alone would have enabled it to conquer the area of land up to the Litani River and then to hold this land for sufficient time to clear it of short-range rocket launching teams and Hizballah fighters.<sup>35</sup> The completion of such an operation would have taken several weeks and would have required a larger commitment of forces by Israel. As noted above, Israel's ground operations for the greater part of the war consisted of sporadic operations in an area up to ten kilometers from the border. The IDF in fact began a more extensive ground operation only in the period immediately preceding the ceasefire. This more extensive ground operation made some headway, but with considerable losses, and with questionable political purpose, and was called off 24 hours before the ceasefire on August 14, 2006.

This critique, which could be called the "military critique," thus lays down some serious but manageable criticisms of the IDF - criticisms which point to an erroneous strategy, hesitant execution, and considerable tactical errors. These errors reflect back to an erroneous conception that took hold in the IDF in the years preceding the war of the likely nature of future conflict. There was a general sense that the likelihood of Israel's needing to

commit large numbers of conventional infantry and armored forces in a future conflict was very low. Rather, future conflicts would be dominated by air power and would involve relatively small numbers of highly trained specialists on the ground.<sup>36</sup> This, combined with the demands made by the intifada after September 2000 for large numbers of men for what were essentially constabulary duties in the West Bank, meant that the training regimen for reserve units in particular, but also for regular infantry and armored units, was deficient. Resources were not put into this, because it was assumed that they would not be needed.

The result was that when in 2006 the IDF was faced with a very different kind of war from the one anticipated, it was ill-prepared--on every level. Among the more extreme examples: Some reserve armored units were called into combat having taken part in only one full-scale training exercise in the preceding five years. Such a force might well have incurred heavy losses against Hizballah if called upon to take part in a large scale conquest of southern Lebanon to the Litani--given the impressive showing of Hizballah's village fighters.

There is little doubt, however, that such a conquest could eventually have been achieved--even with the under-trained, problematic IDF that went to war in 2006. The fact is that such an assault was not ordered at a point when there was still time for it to be achieved.<sup>37</sup>

Hence, according to the "military critique," the IDF needed to reorder its priorities, abandon the idea that wars could be won "on the cheap" through air power and special forces alone, and begin to pour resources back into winning wars in the way that it had won them in the past--through high-speed, maneuver warfare, and commitment to achieving objectives despite losses.<sup>38</sup> To accomplish this, the troops needed to be trained for the mission, and society needed to be made aware that sacrifices, including

considerable loss of life for front line troops, were an integral element of large-scale ground operations.<sup>39</sup>

This latter point of concern over societal ability to withstand losses is crucial, but hard to quantify. Certainly, statements by senior Israeli officers and politicians appeared to indicate that a sense of an Israeli society unwilling to bear losses did exist and may have influenced decisionmaking. (The fact that this view of course perfectly parallels Hizballah's view of Israeli society should be noted.) Such a view relates to a much larger discussion in Israeli society, which will be addressed in the conclusion.

Since it is clear that, difficulties notwithstanding, the IDF would have been capable of carrying out a conquest and consolidation of southern Lebanon if it had been ordered to do so, the failure is not in the final instance a military one. The fact is that ultimate responsibility must lie with the political echelon for the failure to calibrate coherently military operations with political objectives--which would surely have meant a major ground operation, in terms of the stated goals of the war. The final Winograd Report located a failure to "understand and fully internalize the fact that the fighting in Lebanon was a real war" as opposed to a routine security operation of the type that Israel had become used to. Winograd held both the military and political echelons responsible for this failure, which the report identified as a central element in the "unsatisfactory results" of the use of military force in the war.<sup>40</sup>

### **SINCE THE CEASEFIRE**

With the implementation of the ceasefire and the passing of Resolution 1701, it was noted that in assessing the final results of the war, much would depend on the implementation of 1701. Israeli leaders made statements after the war that expressed clearly what they considered to be essential elements of the implementation. Thus, Foreign Minister

Tzipi Livni noted that she expected the increased UN military force to be deployed according to the resolution in order to "control the passages on the Lebanese-Syrian border, to aid the Lebanese army in deploying properly, and to fully implement UNSCR 1559, particularly in disarming the Hezbollah."<sup>41</sup> Prime Minister Ehud Olmert concurred with this view. The deployment of the Lebanese army to the south together with the increased UNIFIL forces did represent an achievement--reducing the total freedom of activity in the south that Hizballah had possessed prior to the war. The movement would henceforth need to take the international presence into account. Yet the key issue would be whether the new arrangements would serve to reduce Hizballah's capabilities permanently or whether the movement would--through intimidation of the UNIFIL and Lebanese army forces and adaptation--succeed in rebuilding its strength.

A year after the war, it was clear that the new arrangements put in place by Resolution 1701 had failed to prevent Hizballah from largely replenishing its strength and replacing the losses incurred in the 2006 war, although the movement's freedom of activity was curtailed in the area between the Litani and the southern border.

UNIFIL and the Lebanese army made little effort to prevent the smuggling of arms and equipment across Lebanon's eastern border with Syria.<sup>42</sup> Hizballah has thus been able to rebuild its medium- and long-range missile teams north of the Litani, replacing the Iranian Zelzal and the Fajr systems destroyed during the war. The Zelzal has a range of 250 kilometers, enabling it to reach Tel Aviv.<sup>43</sup> Israel also considers that Hizballah has tripled the number of C-802 land to sea missiles in its possession, and has created an anti-aircraft unit.<sup>44</sup> Israel has provided the UN with evidence for these claims and has raised the issue of arms smuggling across the Syrian-Lebanese border. A team sent by the UN Security Council has largely confirmed the Israeli allegations.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, the

presence of Lebanese and UN forces along the southern border undoubtedly significantly curtails the freedom of operation of Hizballah, and may be considered a positive achievement of the war from an Israeli point of view.

Hizballah's rebuilding of its capabilities does not mean that the next round of fighting is necessarily imminent. Hizballah's capabilities were clearly badly damaged in the war, and the movement faces a long process of reconstruction. Hizballah has also since the war been embroiled in internal political battles in Lebanon, which have served to cost it much of the kudos it gained as a result of the 2006 conflict. In November 2006, Hizballah sent its supporters onto the streets of Beirut, in an effort to secure for itself a veto power over government decisions. Hizballah actions led to the real threat of serious sectarian violence in early 2007 and were part of the larger political standoff in Lebanon, which sees Hizballah and the forces of Christian General Michel Aoun aligned with Syria against the pro-Western forces of the March 14 movement, which forms the current Lebanese government. The internal tension continued throughout 2007.

Hizballah clearly wishes to justify its continued bearing of arms and to make use of the status deriving from its self-declared status as challenger to Israel. In November 2007, the movement held a three day military exercise in southern Lebanon, observed by Israel and unmolested by UNIFIL, in spite of Resolution 1701's stipulation prohibiting the organization from operating south of the Litani River.<sup>46</sup> The role of Hizballah's Iranian patrons in choosing the moment when the movement may wish to reignite hostilities should also be taken into account. Given the damage and losses incurred by the movement as a result of the kidnapping operation in July 2006, it is likely that Iran will be impressing upon its clients the need for caution and patience, as it finances and facilitates the rebuilding and equipping of Hizballah. It is noticeable that despite Hizballah claims of massive investment in reconstruction in the areas hit by the war, the evidence of the damage caused is

still very visible in the towns and villages of southern Lebanon. In Marun al-Ras, for example, the scene of some of the heaviest fighting, a section of the town remained in rubble and uninhabited a year and a half after the war.<sup>47</sup> Iran is likely to be keen to rebuild and to keep its Hizballah client intact for use in line with Iranian broader policy objectives at some future date.

The war of 2006 failed to resolve any of the issues over which it was fought. Israel did not succeed in recovering its prisoners, completely removing the military threat of an Iranian-backed militia from its borders, or in disarming Hizballah. It may have succeeded in setting the price for future Hizballah incursions at a rate higher than the organization or its sponsors will wish to pay, but this is by no means certain. Hizballah also achieved little of tangible value. The Lebanese prisoners for whom it claimed to have carried out the July kidnappings remain incarcerated in Israel. The group lost control of the border with Israel, and was forced to adapt to the restricting presence of Lebanese and international forces in the south. The group also suffered heavy losses in terms of personnel and equipment.

In a military sense, the war revealed serious deficiencies in the IDF as well as in the political and military decisionmaking process in Israel. The failure to understand and internalize fully the different requirements of war when compared to the low-intensity operations in which the IDF has been engaged in recent years, the setting of unrealistic goals, the failure to decide on a clear policy, the pursuit of goals in an unsuitable and unrealistic way (e.g through excessive use of air power and illogical and half-hearted use of ground forces), and the lack of readiness of some units because of a misapplication of resources for training were all apparent. Both the interim and final Reports of the Winograd Committee confirmed the criticism in all these areas. The reports were also harshly critical of the hasty Israeli decision to go to war, the failure to make a clear decision at an early

stage between a limited operation reliant on standoff fire and a full-scale ground incursion, and the evident lack of knowledge and failure to consult on the part of Israel's political leadership.<sup>48</sup>

The heavy cull in Israeli commanders following the 2006 war (from the division commander of the area, where the kidnappings took place, via the OC Northern Command and the chief of staff and up to the defense minister) indicated the Israeli concern at the poor performance and the desire to rectify such errors urgently. The appointment of Major-General Gabi Ashkenazi as chief of staff and the replacement at the helm of Amir Peretz's Ministry of Defense by Ehud Barak offered a pointer to Israel's response to the new situation. Dan Halutz, the first Israeli chief of staff to come from the air force, had been expected to preside over an increasing focus on the ballistic missile challenge and the issue of Iranian nuclear ambitions, in the context of generally quiet borders for Israel. Ashkenazi, Israel's first chief of staff to have begun his career in the Golani Infantry Brigade,<sup>49</sup> clearly represented a desire to focus, in addition to the above issues, on preparing the army for large-scale potential ground campaigning. Barak's replacement of Peretz, meanwhile, signaled recognition that Israel was entering a period of new uncertainty and potential conflict, such that it was essential that somebody experienced be at the head of Israel's defense establishment.

### **STRATEGIC INDICATORS FROM THE SECOND LEBANON WAR**

While lacking in air power, armor, and artillery, Hizballah forces engaged in high intensity combat in southern Lebanon in 2006. Due to Israel's decision not to launch a large-scale ground assault and conquest of southern Lebanon, the impression was created that somehow Hizballah had succeeded in "stopping" the IDF--that is, in engaging in a frontal clash with Israeli forces which prevented the IDF from advancing further into Lebanon. Hizballah's ability to fire short-

range rockets into Israel up to the ceasefire enhanced this impression. However, it was a misleading one. The IDF's hesitant approach toward the ground combat played to Hizballah's strengths. The small, pinpointed scale of attacks enabled the organization to concentrate its forces in limited areas. Yet a small organization of a few thousand fighters would not have been able to resist a full-scale ground assault of the four divisions with which Israel fought the war. Such an assault, however, was never ordered.

The model adopted by Hizballah has been promoted in the propaganda of the movement and its backers as representing a new approach to armed conflict with Israel that maximizes the benefits enjoyed by the Arab side while neutralizing the advantages enjoyed by Israel. In the propaganda of Syria, Hizballah, and Hamas, this new model of *muqawama* (resistance) is constantly returned to. It derives from an ideological view according to which Israel is particularly unable and unwilling to absorb casualties and make sacrifices. Hence, the relentless willingness to sacrifice of the *muqawama* forces, combined with their indiscriminatory terror attacks on civilian targets, can force Israel to concede, despite its greater conventional military capability.<sup>50</sup>

From this point of view, the fact that Israel, if it pours its full strength into the fight, cannot be prevented from reaching its objectives is not the crucial issue. The point is that Israel will not be able to initiate full-scale operations of this kind, because it will be unwilling or unable to absorb the casualties inherent in such a decision. The *muqawama*'s ability, meanwhile, to maintain a steady stream of Israeli civilian casualties will in time force Israel to concede to the will of its enemies, once it realizes that its initial attempts to assert its will have not succeeded. The failure of Israel to achieve its self-defined goals in the war of 2006 is held up as a vindication of this strategy and enables Hizballah and its supporters to consider themselves victorious--in spite of the far greater losses they suffered when compared to Israel, their inability to

prevent damage to Lebanon's infrastructure, and their inability to have prevented Israel from attaining its objectives had it clearly defined them and committed itself to their achievement.

This military-political strategy of muqawama is related to a broader ideological conception of Israel as a weak, artificial society beset by contradictions and lacking inner reserves. This view of Israel is not new and has formed a constant in Arab nationalist views of the country, and before this in Arab views of the Jewish national movement. Ultimately, it rests on a very widespread and deeply felt ideological belief in the Arab world and among the Iranian ruling elite that Israel is a temporary phenomenon, artificially implanted in the region by Western colonialism.

Thus, the Muqawama strategy rests on an article of faith--namely, that Israel's perceived "weakness" will ultimately serve to cancel out its advantages in the fields of technology, societal organization, conventional military strength, and so on. The events of the Second Lebanon War have been arranged to fit with this view in the interpretations of Hizballah and the larger regional camp to which it belongs.

From Israel's point of view, the significant problems in the functioning of both the political echelon and the military in the war of 2006 derived from deep structural and ideological factors, which were nevertheless rectifiable. The military had grown rusty from constabulary duties in the territories, and had adopted a faulty conception of the war it was likely to be called to fight. As a result, certain units were under-prepared for the task ahead. In the war, it overestimated the ability of air power to force a decision--particularly within the anomalous political parameters, which limited its application (i.e. that Israel was at war with an organization controlling territory within a state, but not with the state itself. Lebanon itself could therefore not be defined as a hostile entity.) It underestimated the

ability of Hizballah fighters in tactical maneuvers and in the application of weapons systems, in particular antitank missiles.

The political echelon displayed an excessive reluctance to commit to a large scale ground operation in line with existing plans. It also did not clearly commit to the avoidance of ground operations and a strategy based purely on standoff fire. Rather, the political echelon seems to have failed to internalize immediately that Israel was at war. The result was a slow, incremental increase in ground operations, which achieved little. Furthermore, the political echelon underestimated the strategic importance of leaving Hizballah's short-range rocket capacity intact. At certain points, it defined ill thought out, unrealistic goals for the war, (such as the recovery of the kidnapped soldiers, or the permanent disarming of Hizballah), which it did not then seriously pursue. Since the ceasefire, Israel has observed the ongoing rebuilding of Hizballah's strength north of the Litani, which makes an eventual next round of fighting likely.

Israel will thus need in the time available to overhaul its military--training and preparing it adequately for the relevant challenges ahead. It will need to ensure that it has a national leadership that understands the capabilities of the military and that knows how to integrate this knowledge into a clear, stable national strategy with clearly defined goals and parameters, and to which it then adheres. It will need to prepare its public for the awareness that the country is engaged with an enemy pursuing a clearly thought out "long war" strategy, which may take years and may require further sacrifices--such as, for example, the inevitable cost in the lives of soldiers that would accompany a large-scale ground operation into southern Lebanon of the type which could deal a real military blow to Hizballah.

The indicators are that as far as Israeli society is concerned, the basis exists for this. No decline in the numbers of Israelis

volunteering for combat units was noticeable in the period following the 2006 war. The civilian public remained supportive of the war throughout, although they began to question the strategy being pursued to win it. The lesson of Israeli public resilience in the period of the Palestinian attacks on civilians in urban areas in 2001-2003 indicates that the Israeli public--the views of its enemies notwithstanding--is able to absorb blows and continue to function, if it is convinced that no alternative to conflict exists.

These factors, however, are necessary but not sufficient elements in the process of reform that needs to take place in the Israeli national security structure. Crucial to all this is a factor pointed to by the Winograd Committee and other critiques of Israel's performance in the war--namely, the urgent need for a properly integrated structure in Israel for the formulation of a long-term national security strategy. The failure to create a body capable of overlooking this process and providing a coherent framework within which decisionmakers can and must operate is undoubtedly one of the central sources for the vagueness of conceptual thinking that underlies the failure of the war, from Israel's point of view.

Ultimately, the 2006 war must be understood as a single campaign within a broader Middle Eastern conflict, between pro-Western and democratic states on the one hand, and an alliance of Islamist and Arab nationalist forces on the other. The latter alignment has as one of its strategic goals the eventual demise of the State of Israel. While such a goal may appear delusional, given the true balance of forces involved, the inconclusive results of the 2006 war did much to confirm the representatives of the latter camp in their belief that they have discovered a method capable of eventually producing a strategic defeat for Israel. It is therefore expected that a further round of conflict is only a matter of time. Israel, meanwhile, must endeavor to develop a strategy capable of striking a blow in a future engagement

sufficient to make any subsequent ambiguity untenable.

*\*Dr. Jonathan Spyer is a senior research fellow at the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, Herzliya, Israel.*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ofer Shelah, "Anti War," *Strategic Assessments*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (November 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Efraim Inbar, "How Israel Bungled the Second Lebanon War," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Summer 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Helmer, "Not Quite Counter-Insurgency: A Cautionary Tale for US Forces Based on Israel's Operation Change of Direction," *Armor Magazine*, January 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Myre and Steven Erlanger, "Clashes Spread to Lebanon as Hezbollah Raids Israel," *New York Times*, July 12, 2006, reprinted in *International Herald Tribune*, September 12, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Nir Hasson, Jack Khoury, Amos Harel, Aluf Benn, and Gideon Alon, "Israel Targets Hezbollah Stronghold in Beirut Suburb," *Haaretz*, July 14, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Exum, "Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment," *Policy Focus*, No. 63, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, (December 2006). See also Amir Kulick, "Hizbollah vs. the IDF: The Operational Dimension," *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (November 2006). See also Ofer Shelah and Yoav Limor, *Shvu'im Be'Levanon [Prisoners in Lebanon]* (Hebrew), Tel Aviv: *Yediot Ahronot*, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Kulick, "Hizbollah vs. the IDF."

<sup>8</sup> Conal Urquhart, "Computerised Weaponry and High Morale," *The Guardian*, August 11, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Yaakov Katz, "Katyusha Defence at Least 4 Years Away," *Jerusalem Post*, October 11, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Steven Erlanger, "Israel Committed to Block Arms and Kill Nasrallah," *New York Times*, August 20, 2006. See also Noam Ophir, "Look Not to the Skies: The IAF vs. Surface to Surface Rocket Launchers,"

*Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (November 2006).

<sup>11</sup> See Herbert Docena, "Amid the Bombs, Unity is Forged," *Asia Times*, August 17, 2006. Syrian Social Nationalist Party members engaged IDF forces in the town of Marj Ayun in the final stages of the war, where several SSNP members died. A monument to them has been erected in the town.

<sup>12</sup> Hanan Greenberg, "20 Terrorists Killed in Bint Jbeil," *Ynetnews*, July 29, 2006, <http://ynetnews.com>.

<sup>13</sup> Exum, "Hizballah at War."

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Helmer, "Not Quite Counter-Insurgency."

<sup>16</sup> Yaakov Katz, "Tank Hits Not as Bad as It Seemed," *Jerusalem Post*, August 15, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Barak Ravid, "Israel to UN: Hezbollah Has Tripled its Land-to-Sea Missile Arsenal," *Haaretz*, October 31, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Adrian Blomfield, "Israel Humbled by Arms from Iran," *Daily Telegraph*, August 16, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Yaakov Katz, "Wadi Saluki Battle: Microcosm of War's Mistakes," *Jerusalem Post*, August 29, 2006. See also Nava Tsuriel and Eitan Glickman, "The Canyon of Death," *Yediot Ahronot*, August 18, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> As witnessed by the author, August 14, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Final Report of the Winograd Committee, p. 219.

<sup>22</sup> Winograd Final Report, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, John Keegan, "Why Israel Will Go to War Again--Soon," *Daily Telegraph*, November 3, 2006. The author, a distinguished British military historian, attributes post-war assessments that considered the war a Hizballah victory to be largely a reflection of bias against Israel in the international media.

<sup>24</sup> See full text of Resolution 1701, <http://www.un.org>.

<sup>25</sup> "Hezbollah Leader Claims 'Divine Victory'" Associated Press, September 21, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Herb Keinon, "Nasrallah: I Would Not Have Kidnapped Troops Had I Known the Outcome," *Jerusalem Post*, August 28, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> "Israel-Hizbullah Conflict: Victims of Rocket Attacks and IDF Casualties," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.il>.

<sup>28</sup> "Lebanon Sees More than 1,000 Deaths," Associated Press, December 28, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> "Israel Condemned over Lebanon War," *Al Jazeera*, September 6, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> See Alistair Crooke and Mark Perry, "How Hezbollah Defeated Israel, Part II: Winning the Ground War," *Asia Times*, October 13, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Patrick Bishop, "Peacekeeping Force Won't Disarm Hizbollah," *Daily Telegraph*, August 22, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> "Army Chief Says Israel May Have to Confront Hezbollah Attempts to Re-arm," Associated Press, February 21, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> The Final Winograd Report, in its depiction of the cabinet discussions preceding the decision to launch Operation Change of Direction 11 (the final, controversial ground operation of the war), notes that arguments arose between the military and political echelons, with the leaders of each seeming to blame the other as to why the ground operation was being ordered so late. Thus, Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, when told by Defense Minister Amir Peretz that the army had not presented a plan for an extensive ground operation, responded that "There was a clear statement that the political echelon does not want a ground operation." (Winograd, p. 181, translation by author.) Prime Minister Olmert then intervened in the dispute, saying that "The whole way through, the military echelon said: We do not recommend a ground operation." (*Ibid.*)

<sup>34</sup> See Inbar, "How Israel Bungled the Second Lebanon War." See also the Final Winograd Report: "During the war, and after it, it became clear that the IDF, especially the ground forces, was not ready, from many points of view, for the war that developed." Final Winograd Report, p. 33. Translation by author.

<sup>35</sup> The Interim Report of the Winograd Committee criticizes the Chief of Staff on this matter in the following terms: "The COS did

not alert the political echelon to the serious shortcomings in the preparedness and the fitness of the armed forces for an extensive ground operation, if that became necessary. In addition, he did not clarify that the military assessments and analyses of the arena was that there was a high probability that a military strike against Hezbollah would make such a move necessary.”

<sup>36</sup> Ron Tira, “Breaking the Amoeba’s Bones,” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (November 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Yehuda Wegman, ““Anti-War””: Has the IDF Really Lost its Ability to Win Wars?,” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (November 2006).

<sup>38</sup> Tira, “Breaking the Amoeba’s Bones.”

<sup>39</sup> Inbar considers that a dislocation exists between the Israeli leadership and the public regarding the issue of willingness to absorb losses. He contends that recent experience shows that the public possesses a higher degree of willingness in this regard than elements of the political and military elite believe to be the case. See also Amnon Meranda, “Knesset War Report: IDF Failed to Eliminate Hizbullah Rocket Threat,” *Ynetnews*, December 31, 2007, <http://ynetnews.com>.

<sup>40</sup> Final Winograd Report, p. 408.

<sup>41</sup> Inbar, “How Israel Bungled the Second Lebanon War.”

<sup>42</sup> “Ban in Lebanon: Arms Smuggling from Syria Could Threaten Ceasefire,” Associated Press, March 31, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Barak Ravid, “Israel to UN: Hezbollah Has Tripled its Land to Sea Missile Arsenal,” *Haaretz*, October 31, 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Edith M. Lederer, “Security Along Lebanon-Syria Border Too Lax to Stop Arms Smuggling, UN-Appointed Team Says,” Associated Press, June 26, 2007.

<sup>46</sup> “Hezbollah Holds ‘Military Exercise’,” *al-Jazeera*, November 5, 2007.

<sup>47</sup> As witnessed by the author, January 1, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> “The Main Findings of the Winograd Partial Report on the Second Lebanon War”, *Haaretz*, May 1, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> “Who is Gabi Ashkenazi?” *Ynetnews*, January 22, 2007, <http://ynetnews.com>.

<sup>50</sup> For an examination and exposition of the key elements of this idea, see Ehud Ya’ari, “The Muqawama Doctrine,” *Jerusalem Report*, November 13, 2006.