

PolicyWatch #1379 : Special Forum Report

Israel and Hizballah: 2006 and 2008

Featuring Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff
June 10, 2008

On June 4, 2008, Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff addressed a Policy Form at The Washington Institute. Mr. Harel, a military correspondent for Haaretz, and Mr. Issacharoff, the newspaper's Arab affairs correspondent, discussed the balance of power between Israel and Hizballah since the summer 2006 war. The two Tel-Aviv-based journalists also debuted their book 34 days: Israel, Hezbollah, and the War in Lebanon, which has just been translated into English.

AMOS HAREL

Almost two years have passed since Israel's war against Hizballah in 2006, and the balance of power is far from positive from an Israeli point of view. One of the major remaining questions is that of deterrence. Although the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) performed disappointingly during the war, the army's image and its deterrent capability is not as bad as some might perceive. This conclusion is supported by two events that have taken place since the war: the September 2007 Israeli air force attack on the alleged Syrian nuclear reactor; and the February 2008 bombing in Damascus that killed Hizballah terrorist, Imad Mughniyeh. Neither event drew a reaction from Syria, raising the question of why Bashar al-Asad did not respond. One can only assume that the reason was the performance of the Israeli air force during the war. The air force was very effective and precise, supported by good intelligence, and able to destroy Hizballah's long-range rockets in the early days of the war.

Although the war was not a total mistake, it could have ended after the first three or four days instead of continuing for over a month. If Israel had followed up with a ground invasion after the initial air strikes, perhaps there would have been a better outcome. As it turned out, when the ground forces were sent in at the end of the war, they did not perform well, leading to the current examination of the IDF.

It was clear that the IDF had insufficient training to fight a conventional war. Over the years, it had become superior in fighting terrorism in the West Bank and Gaza, but when it came to conventional war, the military lacked the tools and training to succeed. One general was even quoted as calling the IDF an army of "mediocrity." Funding had been focused on counterterrorism operations and not conventional warfare. As a result, entire units that had not practiced for years were deployed at the start of the war. There was also a surge of denial: since the army had been so successful in fighting terrorism, it could not accept its apparent lack of preparedness for conventional war. The IDF also suffered from a lack of experience from the top down, from the prime minister to the soldiers. This led to deep feelings of remorse and failure in the army, but not necessarily in the government.

Looking at Hizballah and Israel two years later, there are differences on both sides. For Hizballah, it no longer has outposts along the Israeli border and has been forced to relocate much of its personnel and equipment further north. However, it has acquired longer-range rockets than it had before the war, and has a much larger presence in Beirut. For Israel, it has begun to train and prepare its soldiers and reservists with much more intensity and vigor. If there is another war, Israel does not want the "who won" question; it wants a decisive victory, and it is preparing for that outcome.

On August 14, 2006, Israelis started to rebuild and return to their homes. It was the end of a thirty-four-day war, and for many, it was a time to start over. Hizballah, on the other hand, was celebrating. It was clear from the reporting and celebration in Lebanon that Hizballah felt like it had won. Despite its cheer, Hizballah, from a military perspective, was badly damaged by the war. It lost many weapons and bunkers, and finally understood that Israel had incredibly accurate intelligence pinpointing its medium- and long-range missiles. There was also the large economic and social impact on the Shiite population, forcing Hizballah to invest billions of dollars in infrastructure and housing. The organization also had to compensate many Shiites who were badly hurt by the war.

However, Hizballah is now said to be stronger than ever. It has more short- and long-range missiles than ever before, and in many ways, has a better army. Economically speaking -- thanks to the Iranians -- Hizballah has been able to invest heavily in its communities. It managed to reconstruct not only the houses that were lost, but also its image in the eyes of the people.

Hizballah's public image is something that needs to be looked at more closely. After the war, there was lengthy discussion of who won. In Lebanon, although the people felt that Hizballah had won the war, the conflict also prompted much discussion over the disarmament issue. Today, there is little open criticism of Hizballah since the Doha agreement. However, because of the recent fighting in Lebanon -- when Hizballah took up arms against other Lebanese -- the group lost much off its public credibility.

Unfortunately for Lebanon, there has not been a leader capable of challenging Hizballah. The Doha agreement basically gave Lebanon to Hizballah because no one wanted to stand up to it. Since that agreement, there is an understanding that Hizballah has gained the upper hand: it has enough cabinet seats to veto government decisions, there is no talk anymore about disarmament, and it has more outward and legal power than ever before.

Criticism of Hizballah from the pragmatic Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE) is now fading away. With their acceptance of the Doha agreement, they are basically stating that Hizballah can take over Lebanon. They did so because there was simply no other option. Challenging Hizballah further or pushing the March 14 camp to fight Hizballah are even worse outcomes because they would lead to a violent takeover of Lebanon.

With all the recent discussion about a possible Israeli-Syrian peace deal, people are wondering how that would factor into the Hizballah equation. Even if there were an Israeli-Syrian peace agreement, the Hizballah-Iranian connection is much stronger than the Hizballah-Syrian connection, and the organization would continue to not only promote terror, but also get weapons and funding directly from Iran.

All these factors call into question the identity of Hizballah. Is it Lebanese Shiite or Iranian Shiite? Since the Doha agreement, many seem to believe Hizballah is more Iranian than Lebanese. Because of this, many non-Shiites may leave Lebanon, making the sect's presence in Lebanon even stronger. Shiites and Hizballah will be the major powers in Lebanon over the next decade, making Lebanon a different place from what everyone has known in the past.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Gerri Pozez.

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