



## **Strategic Follies: Israel's Mistakes in the Second Lebanese War**

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*Executive Summary: Israel's political and military leadership was ill-prepared for the war against the Hizballah in the summer of 2006. A series of strategic mistakes on the part of Israeli leaders denied Israel a military victory and squandered an important opportunity to destroy the majority of Hizballah's military presence in Southern Lebanon, settle scores and enhance Israel's deterrence. Hopefully, Israeli leadership will be better strategically prepared so as to attain a clearly-defined victory in the next round.*

Israel's political and military leadership was ill-prepared for the war against the Hizballah in the summer of 2006. Israeli leaders displayed strategic blindness on several accounts, denying the IDF victory in an important war.

Firstly, Israeli political and military leaders erred in believing that Israeli pressure on the weak Lebanese government could generate a political process whereby Hizballah would be weakened and the Lebanese army would achieve a monopoly over the use of force in Lebanon.

From the earliest stages of the war, Israeli leaders insisted that they could force Lebanon to become a regular state and act accordingly, and that Israel's army would crush Hizballah's Lebanese state-within-a-state. Quite incredibly, senior Israeli officials actually believed that something could be done to overcome the historical social and religious rifts that pull Lebanese society apart. In 1982, Israel unsuccessfully attempted to restore Christian hegemony in Lebanon. By 2006, Israel should have realized that it cannot "fix" Lebanon (nor the hopeless situation of the Palestinians).

Even the incomparably stronger US has proven incapable of political engineering in the Middle East. Its meager achievements in Iraq and Afghanistan testify to the inhabitants' resistance to changing old habits.

Israel should have adopted a more modest goal in its use of force, focusing on neutralizing the rivals' capability to harm Israel. Use of force can be most effective when directed at disrupting military capabilities; not in creating a new political environment.

Similarly misguided was the idea, suggested by Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, of replacing the ineffective UNIFIL with another international force, albeit one "more robust" and better equipped. The hope that such an international contingent could assure the demilitarization of Southern Lebanon and the enforcement of an arms embargo against the Hizballah in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1701 – is totally unfounded.

It is clear already that even the European troops participating in the "new" UNIFIL have no intention of using their weapons to implement the resolution. Indeed, UN secretary general Kofi Annan has advocated "flexibility" in the deployment of UNIFIL along the Syria-Lebanon border, meaning that UNIFIL will not bother the Hizballah.

This dangerously naive new faith in the UN - a morally bankrupt and totally ineffective institution - was also reflected in Jerusalem's involvement in the drafting of the UN resolution. It was actually the first time in the history of the wars waged by Israel that Jerusalem had waited for the UN to call for a ceasefire in order to end a war. The presence of an international force - the result of misguided diplomacy - will interfere primarily with Israel's freedom of action against the Hizballah, especially as the Hizballah rebuilds its military capabilities.

Worse still is the fact that this unforgivable Israeli diplomatic naïveté may yet lead to the introduction of an international force in the West Bank, something that would be extremely detrimental to Israel's interests.

Israel's public efforts to calm Syria during the war were ill-advised as well. Israel's leaders repeatedly stated that Israel had no intention of expanding its military activities to target Syria. Instead of putting pressure on Damascus to stop the shipments of arms to Hizballah - weapons that have caused great pain in Israel and have allowed the organization to resist the central Lebanese government - Israeli leaders went out of their way to communicate to Syria that Damascus can continue bleeding Israel by proxy with no fear of paying a price for its aggressive behavior.

Fear of escalation clouded the strategic judgment of Ehud Olmert's government. Olmert forgot that in the past, escalation has been an effective tool in coercing Israel's rivals into accepting its conditions.

Israel's leadership also failed to understand the strategic significance of the cumulative effect of numerous Katyusha strikes. (The leadership's nonchalant attitude toward the Qassam rockets fired by Hamas from Gaza reflects a similar underestimation.) Most short-range Katyushas indeed fell in empty fields and caused little damage. But when thousands of such rockets were launched, hundreds hitting urban areas, the whole of northern Israel, including its main port and many strategic installations, was paralyzed and in danger of destruction. Israel's failure to allocate

sufficient funds for development of an adequate defense against this type of threat is a strategic mistake.

Another strategic folly was over-reliance on air power. It is of course very tempting to use Israel's unmatched air force. The IAF offers spectacular destruction with almost no Israeli casualties. However, while the air force was extremely efficient in destroying Hizballah's long-range missiles and their launchers, it was incapable of dealing effectively with the short-range Katyushas. Only ground forces could have performed the job.

The pilots at the helm of the IDF seem to have been unable to grasp this fact. Their hesitation and the reluctance of the political leadership to employ infantry battalions allowed Hizballah to continuously barrage Israeli cities with Katyushas for an entire month, granting Hizballah the claim to victory at the end of the war.

The reluctance to commit ground troops to battle also betrays a terrible gap between the leadership and the people in Israel. Israel's political and military leaders mistakenly believe that Israel's society is tired of the protracted conflict and is unwilling to pay the price of continuous war. Olmert said as much in the past, reflecting a sense of weariness at the leadership level. Decision makers in the Oslo process were also motivated by such sentiments and by a similar misperception of Israeli society. Thus, casualty aversion became a main feature of Israel's military *modus operandi*.

While the need to avoid reckless loss of human life is self-evident, Israeli society has in fact shown great resilience in war. It stood strong in the face of the terror campaign designed to break Israeli society launched by the Palestinians in September 2000. Similarly, during the recent war in Lebanon, tremendous determination and willingness was exhibited by the home front to carry the brunt of the battle.

Given the clear threat posed by Hizballah, there was enthusiastic backing for offensive operations, even if military casualties were inevitable. A huge majority of Israelis lent full support to the war. They wanted an unequivocal victory and were ready to pay a high price for achieving it.

A series of strategic follies resulted in an unsuccessful war for Israel. Most of Hizballah's military presence in Southern Lebanon indeed could have been destroyed. Unfortunately, Israel's political and military leadership had no clear concept of what victory over Hizballah entailed. It wasted an important opportunity to settle scores and enhance Israel's deterrence.

Israel cannot afford such failures. Hopefully, Israeli leadership will be better prepared with appropriate military and diplomatic strategies for attaining a clearly-defined victory in the next round.

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