

From Gaza to Lebanon and Back

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In the summer of 2006, the IDF was impelled to respond to two significant challenges with major military operations. The kidnapping of Gilad Shalit led to a wide scale operation in the Gaza Strip. The kidnapping of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev two and a half weeks later on the northern border led to the IDF embarking on what is now known as the Second Lebanon War. Nearly one year after the two events it is worthwhile examining the processes underway in the IDF and the public and civilian systems that bear on all aspects of IDF performance.

The Second Lebanon War is commonly perceived by the public as a war in which the IDF failed to achieve the strategic goals set for it. According to the generally held view, Israel's position after the war was inferior to its position at the onset of the war. The outpourings of words splashed across the newspapers contend that the war in Lebanon was disastrous for Israel and defy any other interpretation (let alone a more balanced one) of Israel's overall strategic situation. At the same time, the IDF's performance in the Gaza Strip has been relegated to the margins of public debate, which in turn allows continued evasion of the subject of the IDF's ability to achieve the strategic objectives that were defined before it embarked on the operation in the south.

The supreme job of any military is to achieve the grand strategic objectives¹ as defined by the political leadership, even if in many cases the military is an important partner in defining these objectives. Once defined, these objectives become the goals of the political leadership. The IDF's military operations in the north and the south were

conducted subject to the definition of the military strategic purpose adapted for each sector. The aim of this essay is to survey to what extent the IDF's strategic objectives were achieved in each campaign, and to examine if and how much the IDF's success in these confrontations was internalized by the Israeli public. Essential here is a professional military analysis relating to the strategic objectives defined by the military compared with the actual achievements.

Prior to the military operation in the Gaza Strip the chief of staff defined the military strategic purpose for the IDF, from which the forces' tasks and operational methods were derived. The strategic purpose defined at the time² addressed two main components: (a) the need to generate conditions for the return of Gilad Shalit in a manner that will deter the terror organizations from carrying out similar kidnappings in the future; (b) the creation of a different military reality in the northern and western Negev by stopping high trajectory fire. Creating conditions for the return of the kidnapped soldier is an objective that cannot be measured, and therefore it is dif-

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difficult to judge whether it has actually been achieved. On the other hand, generating a new security reality in the northern and western Negev is a strategic purpose that can be examined and assessed. About one year after the IDF embarked on the campaign in the south, the firing of Qassam rockets continues with varying intensity, Hamas continues to build up its operational strength, and arms smuggling continues on an unprecedented scale, almost without interference. Thus, not only has the security reality in the south not improved; it has actually deteriorated, while at the same time the Palestinians' operational strength and potential in the Gaza Strip has significantly increased. The IDF failed to achieve the principal strategic objectives set for it in this campaign.

The military strategic objectives defined for the IDF when it embarked on the Second Lebanon War comprised a number of elements,³ some measurable and others whose success, if at all achieved, was essentially difficult to gauge.⁴ Consider the following elements: stopping terror activities against Israel that emanate from the sovereign territory of Lebanon; implementing Lebanon's responsibility and its control of the south of the country; and inflicting substantial damage on Hizbollah and exerting pressure for the return of the hostages. Examination of the IDF's performance in this war should be carried out on two levels: the first level relates to performance vis-à-vis the degree to which the strategic objectives that the IDF set out to achieve in the war were in fact achieved; the second level relates to the IDF's operational performance in the war. These are two separate levels of examination.

Balanced examination of the strategic achievements requires breaking down the strategic purpose into secondary compo-

nents and examining to what extent each component was achieved, as follows:

- *Stopping terror activities against Israel from Lebanon's sovereign territory* – in practice, the last few months have been the quietest period on the northern border since Operation Peace for the Galilee in June 1982. Terror from Lebanese territory, which included kidnap attempts, high trajectory fire, and a direct threat to the lives of the civilians along the border have lessened considerably.

- *Implementing Lebanon's responsibility and its control in the south of the country* – the security situation in southern Lebanon has changed radically; the deployment and activity of the South Lebanon Army and the activities of UN forces have pushed Hizbollah northward, and the organization's freedom of activity in the south has decreased significantly.

- *Inflicting substantial damage on Hizbollah* – the extent of damage inflicted on the organization should be assessed by a set of indices, for example, the price that Hizbollah is willing to pay in order to restore the previous situation as a prism for examining the degree of damage the organization sustained. This is in context of the organization's standing in Beirut, specifically, the current status of "rejection" compared with its previous standing as king of the south. The organization sustained an unprecedented blow after it suffered about 1,500 casualties, including about 500 deaths. A considerable number of





GOC Southern
Command Maj. Gen.
Yoav Galant with Prime
Minister Olmert

villages were abandoned or destroyed, its long range rocket facility was almost totally destroyed, and its logistical rear in Baalbek was hit. All these indicate a very heavy toll on the organization.

- *Exerting pressure to return the hostages* – assessment of the achievement of this objective is nearly impossible (see note 4) so that it is impossible to examine the degree of its realization clearly.

In order to achieve the strategic purpose the IDF endeavored to inflict damage on four Hizbollah centers: the Nasser area in south Lebanon, the security area in Beirut, the long range rockets array, and the logistical rear in Baalbek. Three of these efforts contributed successfully to helping the IDF achieve the defined strategic goals. The IDF's integrated effort in the Nasser area of south Lebanon was only partly successful, and the IDF failed to reduce the rocket fire on the country's home front and to end the war sooner.⁵

Following the war in Lebanon a government commission of inquiry was appointed and dozens of briefing teams were established to examine the IDF's performance in the war. In contrast, the IDF and the Israeli

public desisted from probing the IDF's performance in Gaza and its inability to achieve even part of the strategic goals that were set for it. This fact raises questions about the various norms for evaluating the IDF in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. Did Hizbollah's large scale rocket fire, compared with the firing from the Gaza Strip, impact on the public's view of the military's performance and its position on the war? Was the severity of the damage inflicted on the home front the index that determined the public's view of the war? Diverting public debate to the failures and the negative aspects of the war, while almost completely ignoring its achievements, has generated a distorted perspective. One analogy is a soccer team that wins 4-3 yet leaves its ardent fans offended and angry over the goals the team conceded, who then storm out "to burn down the club," forgetting entirely about the victory.

The decision to embark on a military operation in the Gaza Strip after the kidnapping was justified and essential, but the IDF did not manage to achieve any of the strategic objectives that it set for itself. On the other hand, those who claim that the war in Lebanon was unnecessary should be asked what were Israel's strategic alternatives in July 2006. The confrontation with Hizbollah was lying in wait at Israel's door, and its premature outbreak led to its evolving in a situation of strategic unreadiness on the Iran-Syria-Hizbollah axis. One can only wonder how this confrontation might have developed had Iran had a nuclear capacity. The public exposure of the strategic axis is an important political achievement that has contributed greatly to Israel's national security.

Focusing the public debate on the failure in the Second Lebanon War and ignoring its achievements entirely may influence the

IDF's ability to learn from experience and draw the proper conclusions. Furthermore, directing the spotlight to the war in Lebanon, using strategic language that ignores the complexities of war on terror, and not conducting a critical analysis of the performance of the security systems in the Gaza Strip, does not contribute to the desired improvement and reinforces the lack of strategic success in the south.

Notes

1. In the interests of creating a common language, the following is a summary of strategic philosophy. **Grand strategy** is a tool used by the government to set long term national security goals (even if in general the government does not make use of this tool). Often, the government makes do with issuing the IDF what are called war objectives or political directives. The military has a **military strategy** that defines the long term goals that it wishes to achieve from the fighting. In IDF terminology (which is currently under review), these goals are called the **strategic purpose**. This military strategy is one factor among the country's national security goals that the government has to define in its grand strategy. In practice, the

military defines its strategic purpose based on the government's political directive (when there is one). Overall, the content of the directives is influenced by the interchange between the military and the government relating to the constraints on or recommendations of the military with regard to its ability to implement the directives.

2. Shlomo Brom, "Operation 'Summer Rains' – Aims, Methods, and Possible Outcomes," *Tel Aviv Notes* no. 175, July 5, 2006.
3. Ze'ev Sciff, "Let's Be Realistic," *Haaretz*, October 21, 2006.
4. One clear example is that part of the strategic purpose relating to enhancing Israeli deterrence in the field. This is a strategic aim whose total or partial achievement is difficult to estimate. Another example of such an objective is the creation of conditions for returning the hostages that, in different versions, appeared as a strategic purpose both for the campaign in Gaza and the war in Lebanon. In general, the military leadership should set strategic objectives that are quantifiable and achievable, and that can be examined in a balanced manner.
5. Reducing the Katyusha fire was defined as an objective only later in the combat; limiting the war's duration is part of Israel's security concept and does not need to be designated specifically as a war objective.