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Lebanon 2006-2016: Deterrence is an Elusive Concept

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In the years following the 2006 war, Hezbollah has increased the quantity and quality of its missiles and rockets by tenfold. We must think, therefore, about the next operation in Lebanon. The destruction will be enormous, and IDF ground forces will have to act decisively and quickly to counteract fire and inflict great losses on Hezbollah. If the IDF practices well ahead of the campaign (as opposed to in the days before 2006); if the political parties are clear in their intentions; and if their orders are related to the reality on the battlefield, the IDF should achieve a great deal. As always, the next question will be how to translate those military achievements into political achievements – and to do so more effectively than in 2006.

Never, it seems, has there been such dissonance between the media perception of a military operation and the reality a decade later as there is surrounding the 2006 Second Lebanon War.

The public was left with a bitter aftertaste once the campaign ended, and media pundits tried to outdo each other with criticisms of the military's performance, the outcome of the war, and government policies, all while marveling at the sophistication shown by Hezbollah and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

This notorious campaign, however, has given Israel unprecedented calm on the northern border. Over the last 10 years, residents of the area have enjoyed peace and quiet. So what caused such a big gap between perceptions of the campaign and the results on the ground?

The first, and perhaps most important, reason stems from the media, which evaluated the campaign's success according to its own expectations rather than according to the campaign's effect on the enemy. These two worldviews were miles apart, especially when you consider Nasrallah's own admission that "had we known this would be the result of the abduction [of Israeli soldiers Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev], we wouldn't have done it."

As it turns out, the Israel Defense Forces inflicted massive damage on Hezbollah. Nasrallah found himself in a highly precarious situation in which his men were a hair's breadth from their breaking point. Many in Israel have failed to understand that it was not, in fact, Hezbollah's sophisticated tactics that spared them, but Israel's hesitancy and the disappointing performance of several IDF senior commanders on the ground.

The criticism of the military was justified, but as Nasrallah learned the hard way, the IDF has the upper hand in any clash between itself and Hezbollah. Nasrallah understood he was on the verge of a crushing defeat, one he could not spin into a "divine victory". The crippling blows Hezbollah suffered, particularly at the hands of the Israeli Air Force, also explain why the Shiite terrorist group has been focusing considerable effort on building up its air defenses.

The second reason for the misperception is that Israeli pundits failed to account for Iranian interests. Iran formed Hezbollah as its regional proxy, a long strategic arm to be used to generate deterrence and retaliate for major events. And there the group was, wasting its resources on a minor move like the abduction of two Israeli soldiers, for which it was made to pay dearly. Already anxious about its strategic asset, Iran responded to Hezbollah's gambit by deciding it needed to supervise the group far more strictly, as it had to be kept from making such costly mistakes. So, following the 2006 campaign, Iran imposed restrictions on Hezbollah's aggression.

Since 2012, another restriction has been curtailing Hezbollah's activity, one no one could have foreseen in 2006. Four years ago, Hezbollah became an active participant in the Syrian civil war, fighting alongside President Bashar Assad's army. It is now embroiled in a life-or-death battle in Syria, making the launch of another battle against Israel in southern Lebanon very challenging. Still, while Hezbollah may be cautious in its dealings with Israel, it has been gaining valuable experience on the Syrian battlefield that will come into play in the next confrontation.

For Hezbollah, the preservation of Assad's regime in Syria is a must if it is to maintain its iron grip on Lebanon, successfully deal with internal and external Sunni pressure, including by Islamic State, and continue its armament efforts.

Assad's Syria is Hezbollah's strategic home front and part of its link to Iran. This is why Hezbollah has prioritized Syria over Israel, and as long as the civil war in Syria continues to rage, that order of priorities will remain.

The past decade of calm on the northern border may not have been solely the result of the 2006 war, but it is doubtful that any cease-fire would have held up as long as it has without it.

The nature of the military campaign itself has been misunderstood by many. The public failed to internalize that when dealing with non-state entities such as Hezbollah, which pose a considerable threat to the Israeli home front but not to the country's existence, Israel launches "campaigns," rather than wars that achieve a decisive result. Many expected something along the lines of the unequivocal victory of the 1967 Six-Day War and wanted to see Hezbollah raise a white flag, which of course did not happen.

One must remember that the impressive victory of 1967 was immediately followed by the War of Attrition, and six years after that the devastating Yom Kippur War. The lesson is clear: Israel must win its wars, but cannot expect victory to result in its enemies' disappearance or even to guarantee longer intervals between conflicts, let alone peace. Victory on the battlefield is a necessary condition, but it is not enough. Deterrence is an elusive concept, one difficult to predict and apply, even in the context of successful military campaigns.

As Israel must continue to fight organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas, it is best if certain things, underscored by the 2006 campaign, are made clear. Non-state organizations can be defeated militarily, but while it is possible to destroy their operational abilities, one should not aspire to annihilate them through extreme measures (although doing so is possible under certain circumstances). The real question is not whether they should be vanquished, but rather how beneficial vanquishing them would be, compared to the price of achieving victory and maintaining the new situation.

Israel, for example, could seize the Gaza Strip and turn Hamas into an organization unable to fire rockets or dig terror tunnels. This was the case before the 1993 Oslo Accords, and it could be that way again. The questions are: would eradicating Hamas' terrorist nests be worth the potential death toll among Israeli soldiers, and does Israel want to again assume responsibility for Gaza's 1.8 million residents, knowing they will continue to carry out terrorist attacks against IDF soldiers in Gaza?

As for Hezbollah, while a campaign to eradicate its military capabilities would be very difficult, Lebanon has a sovereign government, and it would

be possible to destroy the Shiite group's infrastructure and withdraw without assuming responsibility for the lives of millions of Lebanese. Hezbollah currently possesses an unprecedented number of missiles and rockets, so we have to remember that any conflict would see it fire tens of thousands of rockets at Israel, hundreds of which would hit population centers and infrastructure. The Israeli home front would face considerable destruction miles from the Lebanese border.

Fighting Hezbollah in the future will be considerably more difficult than it was in 2006 and will exact a heavy price, in both financial terms and in terms of civilian and military fatalities. We have to internalize these facts so the difficult reality of war does not blindsides Israel.

As a considerable part of Hezbollah's arsenal is hidden in civilian areas -- in homes and public buildings -- the devastation in Lebanon would be far worse than it was in 2006. Moreover, since every one of the rockets hidden in residential areas carries dozens of pounds of explosives, barring a mass evacuation, the civilian death toll in Lebanon would be horrifying.

The inevitable destruction in Lebanon would exact a heavy diplomatic price from Israel, as the hypocritical international community would have a field day with statements and UN resolutions seeking to restrict Israel's moves. But it is an undeniable truth that officials from both the UN and the Red Cross have intelligence showing that projectiles are being stored in civilian homes in Lebanon. This raises a simple question: what will Israel be allowed to do to prevent those projectiles from being fired at its cities?

These official representatives of the international community have yet to come up with an answer. They too would be liable for any potential devastation in Lebanon, as they have done nothing to prevent private homes from becoming weapons caches, in clear violation of international law.

In retrospect, and with the wisdom of hindsight, one can say the 2006 Lebanon campaign was mishandled by the political leadership, which failed to clearly outline the desired objectives it wanted the military to achieve. In this respect, the criticism of the government was justified.

The military also underperformed. The troops on the ground demonstrated determination and courage, but for the most part, their missions were vague and their objectives even vaguer. Soldiers were deployed and redeployed constantly, the fighting was interrupted without rhyme or reason, and senior commanding officers did not follow a clear strategy and failed to mark significant achievements.

Meanwhile, the IAF, facing no real opposition from Hezbollah, was able to meet the majority of its objectives. The blows it dealt Hezbollah painted a painfully clear picture for Nasrallah, who understood what the future would bring unless he agreed to the cease-fire that has now been in place for a decade.

The post-campaign reality is complex. On the one hand, since 2006, Nasrallah, in his rare public speeches, has been watching his words, and Hezbollah has been watching its steps. The Shiite group is seemingly willing to absorb the loss of valued commanders and assets in strikes attributed by foreign media reports to Israel -- as long as these alleged strikes take place in Syria and Israel refrains from admitting any involvement.

On the other hand, Israel has been unable to curtail Hezbollah's astounding buildup. The group's arsenal is significantly larger and more sophisticated than it was in 2006, and now includes precision missiles capable of striking anywhere in Israel. It also possesses a large number of anti-aircraft, anti-ship, and anti-tank missiles.

Israel drew valuable conclusions from the war and now has an impressive, albeit partial, response that can counter Hezbollah's rockets. Soon, the David's Sling medium- to long-range missile defense system will join the Iron Dome short-range rocket defense system, and the two will be able to counter the threat posed by Hezbollah's arsenal more effectively.

In 2006, Israeli intelligence and the IAF were able to strike several substantial projectile launching sites and neutralize nearly all heavy launchers once they were used. In a future conflict this may prove more difficult, as Hezbollah launchers are now more widely deployed. Still, the more launching sites the IDF is able to detect and destroy, the harder it will be for Hezbollah to strike deep in Israeli territory.

To neutralize the threat, especially to northern Israel, the military would have to overrun southern Lebanon immediately. As that may prove an inevitable contingency, the IDF would be wise to formulate the proper battle and training plans.

While the 2006 Lebanon campaign achieved a welcome, prolonged calm on the northern border, one cannot ignore the weaknesses it uncovered or its serious outcome in terms of Hezbollah's buildup. In any future confrontation with the Shiite group, Israel will face a stronger and far more experienced organization, and would require "something else" in terms of strategy and tactics.

If the IDF trains for this fight properly -- as opposed to the period prior to the 2006 conflict -- and if the political echelon outlines its goals and instructions clearly, the IDF should be able to mark significant achievements. As always, the question will remain how Israel can translate those military gains into diplomatic gains. That task will have to be done better than it was in 2006.

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