



The Israeli-*Hezbollah* Rocket War: A Preliminary Assessment

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The Incident

On 12 July 2006, *Hezbollah* set out to abduct Israeli soldiers patrolling the Israel-Lebanon border. *Hezbollah* began a diversionary heavy mortar and *Katyusha* rocket attack on Israeli military posts and border villages. During the attack, a ground detachment of *Hezbollah* guerrillas crossed into Israeli territory and attacked two Israeli Humvees patrolling the border, close to the village of Zar'it. *Hezbollah* managed to capture two Israeli soldiers and to kill three others. During the IDF's initial incursion into Lebanon to rescue the two kidnapped soldiers, five other soldiers were killed.

Hezbollah's main aim, when it recently provoked Israel, was to demonstrate to the world what its leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, believes to be the Israeli Achilles heel, notably Israeli society itself. Nasrallah wanted to prove that Israeli society is a brittle post-military society that cannot endure wars anymore and that under pressure it can succumb to Arab aggression. Despite Israel's many operational errors and weaknesses, which it will try to obviate before the next round of hostilities flares up again, Israel demonstrated that its moral fortitude and motivation to fight against a perceived existential threat through war has not deteriorated.

Israeli-Hezbollah Tit-for-Tat Escalation

Israel retaliated following the botched rescue operation with massive air, naval and artillery bombardments on known *Hezbollah* strongholds throughout southern Lebanon and southern Beirut. This response in turn escalated *Hezbollah* rocket attacks against Israel and until the UN-brokered resolution came into effect on 14 August 2006, both Israel and *Hezbollah* slugged each other through massive firepower exchanges, whilst various different ground and special forces incursions into Lebanon by the IDF were carried out with the objective of trying to stop *Hezbollah* rocket attacks. A few days before the ceasefire came into effect the Israeli security cabinet approved a new ground offensive deep into southern Lebanon. This offensive was carried out by four reinforced divisions of 11 brigades (around 12,000 combat soldiers) under the general command of Maj.-Gen. Benny Gantz, Head of the IDF Ground Forces Branch. The aim of the offensive was for the IDF to reach the Litani River whilst flushing out *Hezbollah* fighters and rocket units from southern Lebanon. And yet the IDF was ultimately unable to reduce the number of *Hezbollah* rocket attacks against Israeli civilian targets.

Indeed, between 13 July and 13 August, the Israel Police reported 4,228 *Hezbollah* rocket attacks into Israel. During the first couple of weeks, *Hezbollah* fired into Israel around 100 rockets per day. By early August, *Hezbollah* doubled its fire rate to around 200 rockets per day. Although *Hezbollah*'s command, control and communications (3C) network was showing signs of distress due to Israel's ground invasion, during the last few hours before the ceasefire came into effect on the last day of the conflict, 250 rockets were launched against Israel. *Hezbollah* rocket attacks, which often contained anti-personnel projectiles (i.e., ball-bearings) used to inflict maximum civilian damage, caused 53 deaths, 250 severe casualties and 2,000 light casualties.¹

The rationale behind Israel's strong, if not disproportionate use of force against *Hezbollah* and Lebanese targets, following *Hezbollah*'s initial abduction and rocket attack was based on Israel's need to re-establish its deterrent posture. Prime Minister Olmert explained Israel's decision in the *Knesset* (Israeli parliament) by stating that Israel's reaction to *Hezbollah*'s attacks 'emphasised to the world that Israel will not permit threats on its sovereignty, will not turn a blind eye to attacks on its citizens, and will react strongly to any terror attacks either in the north or south, either from the West of the Mediterranean, from anywhere'.² And yet many in the international community perceived Israel's reaction as disproportionate. The extensive damage, caused particularly by the Israeli Air Forces' air bombardments, led to the destruction of more than 15,000 homes, 900 commercial structures, 400 miles of roads, 80 bridges and Lebanon's international airport.³ According to the Associated Press, the Lebanese suffered 845 deaths of which 743 were civilians, 34 Lebanese soldiers and 68 *Hezbollah* fighters (the IDF states that 500+ *Hezbollah* fighters were actually killed). Total casualties were estimated at 4,051.⁴

Furthermore, the use of ground forces by the IDF was also deemed ineffective at arresting *Hezbollah* rocket attacks. When ground forces were finally sent into Lebanon, they were not properly used, and thus, unable to hamper considerably *Hezbollah*'s rocket salvos into Israel. Rather than sending in small, mobile squads for rapid incursions on *Hezbollah* positions, foxholes and villages, bulky units progressed slowly under the cover of artillery, armoured and air covering fire. The IDF's slow progression enabled *Hezbollah* fighters to disperse quickly and regroup for ambushes, normally once IDF contingents had passed by. The slow IDF advance was due to three main weaknesses.

First, the indecisiveness and lack of direction from the upper political and military echelons led to the IDF's late and eventually slow deployment of ground

¹ Statistics taken from: Uzi Rubin, 'Hizballah's Rocket Campaign Against Northern Israel: A Preliminary Report', *Jerusalem Issue Brief*, *Institute for Contemporary Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 10, <http://www.jcpa.org/brief/brief006-10.htm>, 31 August 2006.

² Ilan Marciano, 'PM: We'll continue to hunt Hizbullah down', *Yediot Ahronot*, 14 August 2006.

³ Associated Press, 'Mideast War, by the Numbers', *Guardian Unlimited*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/worldlatest/story/0,-6022211,00.html>, 18 August 2006.

⁴ *Ibid.*

forces in southern Lebanon. The IDF's initial air, artillery and naval bombardment campaign was mostly the result of the IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Dan Halutz's organisational bias for stand-off firepower mostly provided by the air force. The Israeli Air Force, in fact, carried out more than 15,000 sorties targeting over 7,000 targets in Lebanon. The Israeli Navy conducted over 2,500 bombardments off the Lebanese coast, whilst imposing a blockade of the Lebanese coast.⁵ Just like the US military, currently involved in its counter-insurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, Israeli senior commanders have come to depend too much on firepower and hi-tech weapons systems for fighting terrorists. Regrettably, these systems have proven to be relatively ineffective against guerrilla and terrorist insurgencies.

Second, during the six years of ongoing counter-terror operations against the Palestinian terror and insurgency campaign, known as the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, the IDF concentrated on refining small-unit tactics for conducting search and arrest operations and targeted killings. Moreover, the IDF spent considerable time and resources in enforcing curfews and closures throughout the Occupied/Disputed Territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Such operations improved the IDF's constabulary and special operations capabilities, but they severely impeded the IDF's training for non-urban guerrilla warfare and for preparing IDF units for large-scale joint-force operations. For example, several infantry brigades that had carried out constabulary duties for long periods in the Gaza Strip were unable to coordinate artillery batteries and air cover during their advances against *Hezbollah* units in southern Lebanon. Such coordination obviously was not needed when policing the cramped streets of Gaza City or Khan Yunis. Tank units that had grown accustomed in providing static firepower to infantry units operating in the Territories did not coordinate their movement with other units, move and shoot. In fact, many tanks remained stationary. This provided *Hezbollah* fighters armed with state-of-the-art anti-tank missiles easy targets. Despite the fact that the new *Merkava MK-4* tank is considered one of the safest as well as deadliest tanks in the world, the IDF armoured corps suffered significant setbacks during its operations in southern Lebanon. 'Twenty-two tanks sustained hits that penetrated their steel armour' leading to the death of 30 soldiers and officers and more than 100 casualties.⁶

Logistical problems also affected in part the operational tempo of certain missions and in particular the preparedness of reservist units. A lot of the combat equipment stockpiled in emergency stores for major combat operations was already being used for units operating in the Occupied/Disputed Territories. Some forward deployed units lacked basic essentials such as food and water. Reservist units lacked or had obsolete equipment, whilst some units experienced real trouble in evacuating the wounded.

⁵ The 33-day naval blockade permitted in any case over 200 vessels through in order to conduct evacuation and humanitarian aid missions. See: '7,000 Targets in Lebanon', *IDF Spokesperson's Unit*, <http://www1.idf.il/DOVER/site/mainpage.asp?sl=EN&id=7&docid=56765.EN>, 15 August 2006.

⁶ Hanan Greenberg, 'Why did Armoured Corps fail in Lebanon?', *Yediot Ahronot*, 30 August 2006. The IDF, overall, lost 118 soldiers during the conflict.

Third, a dearth of tactical intelligence on *Hezbollah's* tactical methods and precise positions within South Lebanon meant that most units operated very cautiously in order to avoid own casualties. Moreover, the resistance carried out by the highly professional and well-equipped guerrilla fighters proved a major challenge to IDF units. The IDF had to deal with an intricately camouflaged and reinforced foxhole and tunnel system through which *Hezbollah* fighters carried out deadly ambush attacks. *Hezbollah* preparations for war were attested by the fact that it had carved up South Lebanon into over 170 combat quadrants managed from *circa* 50 scattered command bunkers. This bunker network, situated in what many call the 'Triangle of Death' given its dense vegetation and deep crevices that allow for deadly ambushes, incorporated war rooms equipped with the best hi-tech instruments such as computers, (C3) electronics and night-vision equipment. Many IDF units struggled operating amongst this bunker network as they had not received appropriate training for combat against camouflaged bunkers.

Furthermore, many of the casualties that IDF units suffered were due to the lack of knowledge on and preparation against *Hezbollah's* anti-tank missile techniques. Several units complained that they lacked the appropriate training relevant to the combat conditions in south Lebanon. The IDF, in fact, has over the last twenty years struggled to maintain a thorough training regime given the extensive use of ground forces units in the Territories. Division-level manoeuvres have not really taken place and brigade-level manoeuvres have been rare. Most training within the IDF has been carried out at battalion level, but company-level training has become the norm since the outbreak of the *Al-Aqsa Intifada* in September 2000. This lack of relevant training led the outgoing IDF Chief Infantry and Paratroopers Officer, Brig.-Gen. Yossi Hyman to admit recently that, 'we [IDF forces] were guilty of the sin of arrogance.... I failed to prepare the infantry better for war'.⁷

Many of the infantry units fought, in fact, by using methods they had learnt and adopted whilst serving in the Occupied/Disputed Territories, but which were not pertinent to the combat experienced in Lebanon. For example, when dealing with the enormous number of anti-tank missiles being fired by *Hezbollah*, many soldiers instinctively took cover in the closest house. Whereas such methods worked against small weapons or machine gun fire in the Territories, in Lebanon many soldiers were killed by *Hezbollah* anti-tank rockets that easily breached walls behind which IDF soldiers had taken cover.

The enemy the IDF was pursuing is not, in fact, a regular military that moves large divisions around. It is a small terrorist-guerrilla militia of 3,000+ highly equipped, trained and motivated jihadist guerrillas. And yet, the IDF was able to learn and adapt quickly enough to inflict enough damage on *Hezbollah* strongholds and casualties so that *Hezbollah* had to change appreciably its tactics during the conflict. Following initial close-quarter combat skirmishes with the IDF, *Hezbollah* fighters were ordered to pull out from most urban areas and conduct guerrilla-style operations

⁷ Amos Harel, 'Outgoing infantry chief says military "guilty of arrogance"', *Ha'aretz*, 21 August 2006.
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from the dense woods, forests and crevices within the surrounding mountainous areas. Despite the IDF's last-minute large ground invasion, massive retaliatory strikes and *Hezbollah's* counter-strikes, both Israel and *Hezbollah* eventually accepted a temporary diplomatic resolution to the crisis.

Who won?!

Although both parties to the conflict have subsequently stated that they have won, I think it would be wiser to claim that everyone lost as one cannot really claim victory when most of the damage and casualties suffered were civilian. At the tactical level, one can argue that *Hezbollah* lost and, in fact, made a colossal error. Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah wanted to enhance his prestige in Lebanon and the Middle East by abducting and killing a few more Israeli soldiers on the Israel-Lebanon border. The rationale behind this scheme was based on the fact that, since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, *Hezbollah's* role as an insurgent militia against Israeli occupation had lost relevancy. On 16 June 2000, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in fact, reported to the Security Council that Israel had re-deployed its military from Lebanon in conformity with the line identified by the United Nations and in accordance with UN resolution 425 (1978) and had met the requirements listed in his report of 22 May 2000.⁸ *Hezbollah* had no *legitimate* reason to continue attacking Israeli civilian and military targets within Israel.

Even though Nasrallah has enhanced his prestige in the Middle East due to *Hezbollah's* ability to stand up to the IDF and continue its rocket barrages into Israel, it did pay a heavy price in terms of *Hezbollah* casualties suffered, long-range rocket launchers destroyed and the chaos its operation brought about in Lebanon following Israel's heavy retaliation. The abductions and attacks *Hezbollah* had gotten away with following Israel's withdrawal this time around resulted in a massive Israeli reprisal operation.⁹ Both the timing and result of its decision to provoke Israel were a tactical error that led even Nasrallah to admit on various media outlets that, 'we did not think that the capture would lead to a war at this time and of this magnitude. You ask me, if I had known on July 11 . . . that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not'.¹⁰

At the operational level one has seen throughout this article that the IDF was ill-equipped and ill-prepared to conduct a large-scale ground invasion of south Lebanon given the lack of tactical intelligence available since the IDF's departure from Lebanon in May 2000, logistical, equipment and training deficiencies, and inadequate joint coordination of the air, artillery, armour and infantry branches during ground incursions into Lebanon. Moreover, the initial over-reliance on firepower not

⁸ See: 'Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation Security Council resolutions 425 (1978) and 426 (1978)', S/2000/590, *UN Security Council*, 16 June 2006.

⁹ *Hezbollah* had previously kidnapped and killed three IDF Engineering Corps soldiers in October 2000, had abducted an Israeli businessman, Elhanan Tannenbaum and had carried out periodic attacks against IDF posts and villages along the Israel-Lebanon border.

¹⁰ 'Leader admits kidnap error', *Herald Sun*, 29 August 2006.

only was not able to degrade significantly *Hezbollah's* rocket arsenal, but was not able to avoid the significant death of civilians and destruction of civilian infrastructure. The IDF could not avoid collateral damage even when conducting ground operations given the extensive fire cover that it required when moving throughout southern Lebanon. Notwithstanding *Hezbollah's* renowned and callous use of civilian areas as 'human shields' (particularly when launching rockets), Israel's bombardment of Lebanon did weaken its moral stance vis-à-vis *Hezbollah's* rocket campaign and alienate initial international sympathy.

Despite the Israeli government's claim that it had achieved its objectives in Lebanon, 'the majority of Israelis (52 percent) believe the IDF was unsuccessful in its Lebanon offensive'.¹¹ Moreover, a war to re-establish Israel's lost deterrent stance vis-à-vis its enemies is, in fact, somewhat of a failure if there is a general apprehension that there will be another round of hostilities with *Hezbollah* and/or other players in the Middle East.

At the strategic level, I think that the United Nations has undoubtedly been the loser in this conflict. The fact that the UN backtracked on its previous decisions regarding the legal status of the Shaba Farms and basically has allowed a terrorist-guerrilla organisation to maintain in effect its rocket arsenal without really providing a concrete mechanism for the disarmament of *Hezbollah* according to UN Security Resolution 1559 (2004) has weakened the UN's already feeble credibility.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which was unanimously approved on 11 August 2006, authorises 15,000 UN peacekeepers to help Lebanese take control of South Lebanon as Israeli forces withdraw. Although Resolution 1701 has brought about a temporary ceasefire, it has left out several key provisions, which if not addressed in a future resolution by the international community, will lead to a new round of hostilities that could be even deadlier than last month's conflict. Resolution 1701, in fact, did not create a mechanism to enforce the embargo on arms supplies from Syria and Iran, no provision was made for the enforcement of UN Security Resolution 1559, which since 2004 has called 'for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias'.¹² More importantly, the fact that the reinforced UNIFIL contingent cannot enforce the ceasefire under a Chapter 7 mandate does not bode well as *Hezbollah* will continue to strut around southern Lebanon under the knowledge that the Lebanese Army does not have the will or means to disarm it and that UNIFIL will continue to observe and do very little else given its emasculated mandate. With its remaining arsenal intact (*circa* 8,000 rockets) and with clandestine replenishments probably already on their way from Syria and Iran, *Hezbollah* will be tempted to use again its missiles against Israeli civilian targets as a pretext for engulfing the region in more turmoil and redrawing internationally-recognised borders through the use of its terror tactics. Unless the international community seriously

¹¹ Ilan Marciano, '52 percent of Israelis: IDF failed', *Yediot Ahronot*, 14 August 2006.

¹² See: UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004), S/RES/1559, 2 September 2004.



attempts to disarm *Hezbollah* at some point in the near future, it will have to witness a second round of death and destruction at the hand of *Hezbollah*, Israel and possibly also at the hand of some other regional player.

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