The IDF in the Years before the Second Lebanon War

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It is very difficult to analyze and understand the Second Lebanon War without understanding how the IDF entered it. By this I am not referring to the moment the decision was made to attack on July 12, 2006, rather to the processes that occurred in the years leading up to the war. In this context, it is necessary to try to understand the fields where the military was focusing its endeavors, the topics with which the army was dealing, and the outlook of the IDF's leadership at that time. It is necessary to focus on two central, interrelated points. The first concerns the ongoing war on terrorism in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, and the question of how this warfare affected the IDF. The second point is the limited resources the army had to cope with in those years.

Though in the rush of events this is sometimes forgotten, it behooves us to remember that the IDF came to the war in Lebanon after unprecedented successes in the warfare against Palestinian terrorism in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip. The wave of terrorism that started sweeping over Israel in September 2000, highlighted by suicide terrorism, caused senior army personnel, senior security services personnel, government members, and probably also the public at large to wonder if the traditional statement that terrorism is not an existential threat to the State of Israel still held true.

The answer to this question became clear very quickly. As the result of the increasing terrorism, the notion that should we fail to deal with the mounting wave of suicide bombers it might well constitute a threat to Israel's very existence slowly permeated our consciousness. In those years, the army did what was necessary to uproot the phenomenon. In

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this context, the leadership of the army, myself included, made the right decisions regarding priorities. Among other decisions, the bulk of the regular forces were diverted to continuous fighting against terrorism. It was also decided to divert resources in favor of this type of warfare at the expense of long term growth in power, and at the expense of neglecting the war reserve stores. So, for example, we moved equipment out of these depots in order to distribute it to forces operating daily in the alleys of Nablus, Jenin, and the Gaza Strip. According to these decisions, the most problematic sectors in terms of terrorism received higher priority when it came to allocation of resources than other sectors, including the Northern Command. As a result of the challenges faced by the army at this time, the Northern Command was, for the first time in many years, asked to adopt the modus operandi of a secondary front.

In 2002, 42 terrorist attacks were carried out against the civilian front in the State of Israel, and 260 civilians and soldiers lost their lives. By contrast, four years later, in 2006, there were only two terrorist attacks on the home front, with 17 civilians killed. This achievement was unprecedented in Israel and elsewhere in the world, but this achievement came with a steep price tag.

In response to the evolving challenges, the army changed its method of operation against Palestinian terrorism. In late 2002, when I was appointed commander of the Northern Command, we understood that it was critical to change fundamentally our manner of fighting in this region. Operation Defensive Shield (April 2002) allowed us to generate the necessary change in our mode of fighting terrorism. We particularly emphasized the issue of intelligence and the ability of the smallest fighting framework to take in and synchronize information from all intelligence sources. Further, we stressed the importance of operations and surgical actions over large scale undertakings involving masses of large forces. This way, every fighting battalion, down to the simplest one, performed special operations at one level or another.

We also supported deliberations over the value of the mission. We insisted on carrying out missions only when all the conditions were ripe for them to be carried out. We insisted on checking if missions were still justifiable given the risks to our forces. In several instances we even decided to cancel missions as the result of such considerations. For example, given the reality of the time in Judea and Samaria, in most cases

it did not matter if we waited a day or two to arrest a certain terrorist. The army was focused on creating suitable conditions in which to carry out the arrest in a smooth and orderly fashion. We deliberately developed this culture, stressing, for example, that when the weather did not allow for an appropriate intelligence envelope the mission was to be postponed until the following day. All of this, of course, was the case as long as we did not have a ticking bomb scenario, a suicide terrorist on the way to carrying out an attack inside Israel.

As part of this operational culture, we also insisted that our brigade commanders remain in the rear. Perhaps this is where we created what later became known in the public as "the plasma commanders." In my opinion, all of us did an enormous disservice to the brigade and battalion commanders in the war against terrorism, because they were never "plasma commanders," but this is where we created the phenomenon: given the operational environment in Judea and Samaria at that time, it was indeed the proper procedure to place the commanders in the rear. Those who differ with me are welcome to revisit the public and military debate that arose regarding the commander's placement in the war against terrorism in the wake of the death of the Hebron Brigade commander, Colonel Dror Weinberg. On Friday night November 15, 2002, Colonel Weinberg arrived at the path between Kiryat Arba and the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron in an attempt to find a cell that had carried out a shooting attack in the area. In that action, Weinberg was killed by terrorist fire.

It could be said with a great deal of justification that the IDF has always been fighting terrorism. For twenty years in Lebanon, we fought terrorism with characteristics particular to that sector. We have always tried to adapt ourselves to the enemy's different patterns in order to deal successfully with any specific threat, and still this did not decrease the army's capability of fulfilling missions and meeting challenges in other sectors. Nevertheless, what bridged the gaps created in the units' fitness and in the fitness of the fighters and commanders and help prepare them for missions in other sectors was the training. Unlike the past, in the period of fighting suicide terrorism the army in practice halted training.

In order to demonstrate this point, I will mention that in my service as commander of the Golani Brigade there was a debate in the IDF whether, given budgetary constraints, to expand the cycle of three

months training followed by three months operational employment to four months training and four months operational employment. As the representative of the brigade commanders, I was sent to speak before various forums, including the chief of staff and the minister of defense at the time. I explained to them that four months of continuous operational employment would not allow us to keep up our units and maintain their level of training or their fitness to deal with other threats, and that we would also find it hard to maintain operational tension. There is no doubt in my mind that I was naive and innocent. The units that served in my command in the Central Command during the war on suicide terrorism sometimes served as many as twelve months of continuous operational employment; sometimes they served ten months of continuous operational employment, followed by a month or five weeks of something like training, which we called "a refresher" because it really was no more than that. All of this needs to be mentioned in order to place matters in the proper proportion and perspective.

In fact, we were also unable to bridge the gap that opened up in terms of unit training because of limited resources. In 2003, the IDF formulated a multi-year program called "Kela." This program involved many drastic budget cuts. So, for example, we suspended a large part of our tank reserves and grounded dozens of airplanes. In addition, we shut down some units altogether, and started dismissing some 6,000 standing army personnel. A month and a half after the government authorized Kela's budget at a certain sum, it imposed another half a billion NIS budget cut on the army. Therefore, the IDF had to slash many more millions of dollars beyond what it had defined as the line in the sand. We are talking about considerable sums of money.

Nonetheless, money was not the major problem in this context. The problem was the way in which the budget was cut. The sudden imposition of the cuts on the army created a situation in which the budgetary room for maneuvering on the part of the IDF's leadership was greatly constricted because long term programs were already underway. The army personnel who were fired still would still collect many more months of salaries. Therefore, the resources that we were still consuming and most available for cutting were days of reserve duty, training, and inventory maintenance. These were the three areas in which it was still possible to make budget cuts in the IDF at that time.

And thus, we cut the training budget: from 1 billion NIS in 2001, we invested only 0.5 billion NIS in 2006. Similarly, the reserves training budget went from about 0.5 billion NIS in 2001, to about 150 million NIS in 2006. In 2003, there was no training at all of the reservists, i.e., the reserves training budget for that year was zero.

The combination of these two elements − the war against terrorism and the repeated cuts in the defense budget and their effect on the IDF's training program − meant that the army came to Lebanon unprepared to fulfill its mission. Company commanders had not had concentrated training. Officers who since their enlistment had dealt with fighting terrorism in the territories suddenly found themselves in Lebanon for the first time, leading full size companies without having had organized training with their companies. Battalion commanders who had never led a tank battalion were sent to Lebanon, and there were reserve units that for six years had not trained under fire. All of these factors have already been discussed at length, but I think it is appropriate to mention them in order to understand the comprehensive picture of that war and understand the IDF performance.

Another phenomenon touches on the debate that developed in the army regarding a new operational approach. In my opinion, formulating a new operational approach in the army when the nature of the threat was changing was the right thing to do. An army must be an organization that learns, makes progress, improves, and revitalizes itself. In practice, several years before the summer of 2006, we dealt with the development of a new operational approach. Some of its ramifications and principles touched on strengthening firepower at the expense of maneuver in what we called "joint decision." That was the direction the army was taking at the time; that was its intention. At the same time, a new language with unique terminology developed in order to describe this new approach. Unfortunately, this field was not developed professionally or well enough. The language stayed within a small cadre in the army and did not succeed, because of our internal failures, to reach the rank and file or to become the language common to all the echelons.

The large general staff exercise held in 2004 dealt with a scenario similar to the Second Lebanon War. Already then there was a lot of writing on the wall, and the sharp-eyed among us saw it then. As early as that exercise, many weak points of the new operational approach became

apparent, such as the unsuccessful attempts to shape or wrest a decision from the other side only by application of firepower. It also became clear that the period of fighting was too long, and that there was insufficient attention paid to the number of casualties on the home front. In addition, the first signs of misunderstandings between the echelons due to unclear language emerged. Yet in hindsight it seems that in the years preceding the war it was difficult to expose the shortcomings of the new approach and the language describing it, both because of the lack of orderly training at the corps level and at the command level. This is how the IDF showed up for the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006.

Still, none of the above is an excuse or a justification for the way in which we proceeded. I think – I know in my bones – that even under such circumstances we were obligated to do better and conclude the campaign in a more decisive and much better manner. If this is the case, we need to ask where we went wrong. In my understanding, the mistake lay primarily in the way we used the tools at our disposal. The scope of this article is insufficient to describe all the issues relating to this point. Therefore, I will focus on five essential points, especially as we seek to prepare for the next round in Lebanon or prepare ourselves for challenges the State of Israel and the IDF will have to face in the future.

The first point in which we erred or failed as commanders was our inability to change the approach or the general mindset prevalent in the government, the public, and mostly within the army itself. We failed to clarify – perhaps we did not completely understand it ourselves – that the confrontation with Hizbollah was not a direct continuation of the ongoing operations we had carried out for the last six years in Judea and Samaria but was, rather, a war. One of the commanders, not a particularly senior one, a major, who fought both in the Second Lebanon War and in Operation Cast Lead, was recently asked his opinion of the difference between the two campaigns. He thought for a while, and finally answered: "In Lebanon, they kept telling us 'you're part of an operation." but when we left, they said, 'This was a war.' In Operation Cast Lead, they told us 'war, war, war," but when we left, they said, 'this was an operation.'" In my opinion, this is the best formulation for demonstrating the mindset of that war.

The entire spine of the army command did not understand and did not do enough to project and behave the way we should have in light

of the changing situation. True, there were attempts. In every situation assessment the chief of staff said, "Troops, we're at war; start thinking differently." Division 91 had the word "war" written on its wall. But this was not enough. We were also under the obligation to take concrete steps. Avigdor Kahalani in his book *The Heights of Courage: A Tank Leader's War on the Golan*, as I recall in the first chapter, talks about how the Syrian MiGs attacked the Golan Heights in 1973. He sent his tanks up the ramps, and one of the tank commanders asked him – even though he had already drawn fire – "Am I allowed to go on the blacktop?" i.e., on the road, since in routine times it is forbidden to take a tank on a paved road so as not to damage it.

In Lebanon too, it took us a long time to understand that we were allowed to go on the blacktop. Clearly, "getting on the blacktop" in this context included many other actions. We, the senior echelon of army commanders, should also have taken more concrete steps. So, for example, at the beginning of the war, a debate in the army developed about opening a supreme command post and whether it was significant or not in conducting the battle or the campaign in its early days. In hindsight, this discussion was totally beside the point, because the very fact that we did not open the post made us all think that the situation was more or less as always, i.e., we just had to do a little bit more than we had been doing till then. This sent a certain message downwards to the most basic ranks. Not calling up the reserves did not help us change the situation. We continued to follow the same work procedures we had always followed at all levels of the army.

Another expression of this mindset was the continued "operations and sorties discussions." These were totally irrelevant to the type of activity and decision we should have been engaged in. As far as I recall, these discussions continued until the advanced stages of the battle. Similarly, we should have divided the Northern Command into sectors. Further, the nature of the commands delegated downwards continued to resemble the commands we had issued for the six years leading up to the war and were, at best, relevant to fighting terrorism in Judea and Samaria.

It seems to me that even formally we did not define an emergency situation for the home front until the end of the war. Many discussions have been held on this issue, and many questions concerning the effect of such a declaration on the economy have also been debated. Again,

with the benefit of hindsight, this question and others like it seem less relevant. In practice, we missed many opportunities to use different tools to demonstrate to ourselves, our troops, and the public in general that we had now entered a different reality.

The implications of this blunder were varied: some of us stayed close to our plasma screens; we did not define missions the way we should have at the time, and this affected the presence or absence of certain values among the lower echelons. Take the value of "maintaining the mission," for example: on the basis of close acquaintance with the command on the ground and how it operated, I am convinced that had we defined the missions correctly and had we been able to influence the general mindset, no division commander would have postponed an action he was supposed to carry out because of a weather problem. Perhaps this would have been the right thing to do in Nablus, but not in Lebanon. Many examples may be used in this context, but it seems to me that the point is clear enough.

In my opinion, our failure to change the general mindset of the army grew even worse because of the approach that developed on the northern border since the withdrawal from the security zone in May 2000, at whose center lay the principle of "sit and wait." The primary mission was simply to prevent kidnappings, and nothing more. The security of IDF soldiers was defined as of overriding importance. The combination of all these elements, together with our inability to say, "that was then – this is now. From this point onwards, the situation has changed," was among the central causes – if not the central cause – for the manner in which the war was conducted.

The second way we erred was by not seeking to shorten the length of the campaign. True, the battles we have to enter these days are doomed to be long. The enemy we will have to face in the years to come is not the kind of enemy one can vanquish in one fell swoop. Sporadic attacks are not the answer, and their effectiveness is limited. This is also true of the Lebanese context: even should the IDF conquer the area up to the Litani River, the battle will remain undecided, and many stages will remain before it is concluded. Nonetheless, I think that we assumed too much freedom in extending that war. Looking back, we did not appreciate the cumulative effect that the missile and rocket attacks had on the civilian front. The other side understood better than we did what rockets could

do over time. Statements from mayors who declared that the home front was strong and would support the IDF, and that the army had to continue doing its mission heartened us. Indeed, we assumed too much freedom in everything concerning the length of the war.

Here it is also necessary to look at our assessment of the United States' reaction and the pressure we expected the United States to exert on us. We were all waiting for the administration in Washington to stop us. This approach was totally mistaken. We failed in analyzing their needs, their insights, and the understandings they were formulating at that time with regard to Hizbollah. In my opinion the Americans understood, just like we did, the importance of this battle not just for Israel alone but for the entire world and the weltanschauung it represents, and therefore they allowed us full freedom of action. We did not understand that this was how things stood, and we conducted ourselves according to a totally different political clock on the basis of the belief that American pressure to stop the campaign was around the corner and that very soon we would be forced to bring it to a halt.

Another issue linked to shortening the length of the campaign has to do with the exit mechanisms. These should have been defined at the beginning of the campaign. We should have defined precisely what we intend to do and what we want to achieve and formulated the desired exit mechanisms accordingly, i.e., if we suffice ourselves with a preventive blow or if we aim at a decision against Hizbollah, or any other goal. From that moment onwards we should have focused all our efforts in that direction and generally defined and formulated the exit mechanisms we wanted. We did not do so. In my opinion, it was possible to create these mechanisms immediately after the air force's successful strike against Hizbollah's long range rocket batteries on Wednesday night and Thursday, and accordingly at that point create the mechanisms that would have allowed us to shorten the duration of the campaign. In this context, for example, it is my understanding that we should have decided at a much earlier stage that we were embarking on a ground maneuver. At the same time, we should have demonstrated greater determination in performing the partial ground maneuvers we did decide on. In addition, we should have operated other anti-rocket means at our disposal much earlier. I am not referring here to any secret weapon, but rather to the

intelligent application of special forces we brought into the circle of warfare too late in the battle.

The third point relating to the failure in managing the campaign concerns the fact that the reserves were not called up immediately at the beginning of the war. It needs to be said again: when we decided on a large scale attack in response to the kidnapping, we, in the same breath, should also have decided whether to suffice ourselves with this attack or to prepare ourselves for an extended campaign. We made decisions that straddled the fence. We said, we were embarking on an attack; let's see what happens then. In hindsight, it is clear that that was not the correct way to operate and is not the way to prepare properly for the future. The situation was greatly exacerbated by the fact that as I described above, our reserve units lacked training and cohesion. The army had a plan to bridge some of the operational gaps created in reserve units due to a lack of training over years. While the plan was not perfect, its implementation would have allowed us to bring reserve units into the fighting better than we did. We simply gave up on implementing the plan. In any case, I think that even if in the end we had not brought the reserves to the front lines, the very fact that they were called up would have sent a message of deterrence indicative of our intentions, and may have served as a means of formulating the campaign exit mechanisms more quickly.

In any future campaign, we will have to face some dilemmas in terms of the reserves: when to call them up, how many to call up, the ramifications for the economy, the public's reaction should it be decided not to deploy them, and the responses of the reservists themselves if some are forced to sit around doing nothing. My opinion on the issue is clear. When a decision is made we should use the full array of resources at our disposal in order to turn that decision into reality; things should be done ahead of time and not incrementally.

The fourth point combines preparedness and management. We entered the fighting in the summer of 2006 without a prepared operational plan for fighting in this sector. To my mind, the operational plan is the keystone of an army. It is on the basis of such plans that resources are allocated, command level virtual training and exercises are conducted, deliberations are held, and command and control concepts are analyzed and formulated. Operational plans are the basis for developing know-how and accumulating experience, for focusing intelligence efforts

and planning training and exercises. This is the only way it is possible to prepare properly for the battle to come. Without operational plans, the dialogue between the different echelons in the army, and between the army and the political echelon, will necessarily be incomplete. In practice, the plan furnishes the common denominator of all the parties, and without one it is difficult to access that denominator, certainly in the course of fighting.

In the future too we are liable to become embroiled in a situation where we have to operate in some arena or other without a ready operational plan. Still, in the Second Lebanon War, we failed to conduct ourselves and command the troops the way we should have in light of the lack of an appropriate operational plan. It was indeed possible to have taken various steps that would have somewhat closed or even completely bridged this gap. For example, we could have changed the nature of the deliberations, delved more deeply into the discussions, and not focused on transmitting information, especially in everything relating to the dialogue with the political echelon but also within the army itself. We should have been very, very careful with the way we defined the commands and the way in which we transmitted them down through the command structure. We did not do any of these.

The fifth point is actually a combination and result of the four points enumerated thus far, and may be summarized under the title "initiative, assault, and maintaining the mission." We lacked these three components. In addition to all that has been said here, it seems that this is the most important lesson to take away from the war; it must not be forgotten in the next battle.

The Second Lebanon War also had many achievements, though this is not the place to discuss them. All of us can sense them for ourselves. To my mind, one of the most important elements about that war – and I know that this is compared to the many very bad aspects – was that it served as a wake-up call for the IDF and, I hope, for the country as a whole.

I had the privilege to serve as deputy chief of staff under Dan Haloutz when he charged me with the mission of leading the debriefings held in the army after the war. I had the privilege of transmitting the lessons we learned in these debriefings to Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi in order to fix what that needed fixing in the army. I think that these two moves merit recognition on the part of every citizen of Israel. The public

and media atmosphere that prevailed after that war generated many debates, some of them cynical, led by people who were looking for heads to roll. Still, other than this phenomenon, the process of learning the lessons was in fact impressive, even, as I understand it, unprecedented in the scope, depth, and maturity shown by the army, and most importantly in the lessons learned that would later on become working plans in use in the IDF today.

Many of the results of this process were visible in Operation Cast Lead. For the first time in many years, this was an operation I watched as a civilian at home on the TV screen. Besides the fact that we talk too much, I watched with pleasure and pride the systematic application of the many lessons we generated and the fact that this time, the military operation was conducted very differently, in a much better way. In contradistinction to the Second Lebanon War, this time the army entered the campaign in the Gaza Strip with prepared plans that had been drilled from the division and brigade levels down to the level of the solitary soldier. I think that the fitness of the equipment, the war reserves storehouses, the integration of all the systems to increase the degree of readiness, the joint efforts of elements applying force, the air and the ground forces, the integration and synchronization of intelligence, and many other points that had emerged as failures in the Second Lebanon War, this time emerged as noteworthy strengths.

I am not certain, so I say this with some caution, that all state systems have learned the same lessons the army did and have indeed fixed all that needed fixing. In Operation Cast Lead, I too felt that there was no essential change in the dialogue between the military and the political echelon. I too felt that the definition of goals was not clear, certainly not at the outset of the battle. Here too I felt that we were not doing everything in our power, especially in terms of the military political dialogue, to shorten the duration of the battle or maximize other issues related to the systems enveloping the army. It seems to me that this is our duty, precisely because of that war, to organize these systems better. There is no doubt that there remain many aspects in need of fixing or improvement.

At the same time, in the army too it is important to remember that in Operation Cast Lead the mass of shortcomings was fixed and the lessons applied. It was a unique operation under unique circumstances that will not prevail the next time. The challenge for the commanders, and I am sure

they are facing it, is to deal properly with the lessons of the operation and to make sure that the process of integrating and assimilating the lessons from the Second Lebanon War continues even after the success in Gaza. In this context, it is important to note that it is much more difficult to fix shortcomings and generate lessons after a success than after a failure. I am sure this is a familiar phenomenon.

In conclusion, in my opinion, as a result of the Second Lebanon War, the army and the country find themselves in a completely different situation, not only because of the current situation on the northern border and in Lebanon itself but also because of the lessons that were learned. I have no doubt that the army will perform even better next time. The challenge we face today is to prepare for the army's coming threats and challenges. These are difficult and complex indeed. The Iranian threat hovers in the background, and in my opinion one of the ways to deal with it is to know how to handle short time frames much more decisively and effectively than we did in the Second Lebanon War with regard to Iran's satellites – Hizbollah and Hamas. That is a genuine challenge for us all, including the IDF.