Failed Tactical Intelligence in the Lebanon War

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The recent confrontation in Lebanon forced the State of Israel, once again and after many years, into a military confrontation on two fronts – in the south against Hamas and in the north against Hizbollah. In both cases it was Israel that decided to escalate in response to the attacks against IDF troops and Israeli civilians. In both cases the campaign was launched based on the assumption that the army was capable of victory.

The decision on intensive military action in Gaza was made following the abduction of Corporal Gilad Shalit. The underlying idea was to react forcefully to the abduction, which the Israeli public, already incensed by the ongoing flow of Qassam rockets into Israel, perceived as crossing a red line. Despite the surprise attack, the IDF was ready shortly after the government decided to escalate activities. Once the go ahead was given, the IDF took decisive action, utilizing its evident relative strength.

That Hizbollah might attempt action on the northern front was indeed discussed by decision-makers[1] who estimated that should this occur the incident would be well under control. When the campaign against Hizbollah was launched following the abduction of the two soldiers, it seemed that the IDF was once again demonstrating the same control and relative advantage of a regular army vs. guerilla combatants. Hizbollah infrastructure and weapon stores were destroyed, and it seemed that the strategic intelligence obtained prior to the war had served its purpose.[2] As the war progressed, however, battles in Lebanon claimed more and more lives, gaps emerged between expectations and abilities, and substantive weaknesses made it difficult for the IDF to claim victory and defeat its adversary in the north as it had done in the south. The reasons for these gaps and weaknesses are numerous, ranging from IDF capabilities to the opponent's capabilities.

This article focuses on understanding the gap between ideal and reality vis-à-vis intelligence on Lebanon at the tactical level, as evidenced during the ground forces fighting. The article reviews the shortcomings of the intelligence as manifested on the northern front in three major areas: intelligence gathering, intelligence assessment, and information dissemination to the requisite parties. It concludes by positing an explanation for these weaknesses and recommends two corrective measures.

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1   S. Kadmon, "Looking for the Guilty Party," *Yediot Ahronot*, September 8, 2006.
2   Yossi Melman, "Israeli Intelligence: A Positive Surprise," *Haaretz*, July 24, 2006.

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Obstacles in Intelligence Gathering

The impressive intelligence gathering capabilities demonstrated by the General Security Service (GSS) and the IDF in confronting Palestinian terrorism over recent years were not manifest on the northern front.[3]

Whether it was due to ranking Hizbollah lower on the intelligence gathering agenda; budget cuts for intelligence gathering in Lebanon; or obvious formidable challenges in agent infiltration[4] into Hizbollah, the gathering capabilities that Israeli intelligence had with regard to the organization, its activities, and deployment were significantly curtailed. The lack of human contacts to provide real time intelligence prevented Israeli intelligence from producing a viable product at the tactical level. Thus, for example, the short range missile launchers remained active, with the IDF unable to inflict significant damage to them.[5]

A similar lapse was felt regarding preemption means (e.g., operating an interceptive system), in contrast with GSS output in Judea and Samaria and in Gaza.[6] In Gaza the use of human sources has essentially become a necessity for supplying bombardment aircraft with their target; in Lebanon apparently no opportunity arose for forging such connections. Not intended here is any minimizing of the real difficulties facing those who handle agents remotely, especially in view of the especially suspicious and sensitive environment during war time. Nonetheless, Israel has in the past exhibited creativity even in the face of similar obstacles.

Finally, the SIGINT output, intended to control enemy communications, was problematic. Hizbollah, fearing Israeli eavesdropping, rigorously maintained a high level of security and encryption, as announced by Nasrallah in a speech in May.[7] Despite extensive war time activity, penetrating Hizbollah's communication systems proved a formidable challenge to Israeli intelligence.

Hurdles in Assessment

Military Intelligence's Research Division and Northern Command Intelligence are responsible for collecting, analyzing, and evaluating Hizbollah capabilities. The evaluation is intended primarily to provide state leaders with information to support their decisions. No less important is the role to provide troops with accurate information about the enemy. Apparently in several areas both Military Intelligence and Northern Command's Intelligence misevaluated Hizbollah capabilities.

- *Weapons*. Intelligence failed[8] in monitoring the weapons shipped from Iran and Syria to Hizbollah prior to the war, which therefore left many unknowns about the type and quality of weapons available to the organization. Reasons for the lapses include the nature of the transfer and supply routes, geographic distances, and the strict adherence to communication security demonstrated by Iran and Hizbollah. These constraints apparently rendered the material gathered by the intelligence community information of merely limited value.

- *Forces and Command*. In preliminary assessments conducted prior to the war, the IDF had only a fuzzy picture of Hizbollah's size and troop numbers. The figures ranged from 2,000 active combatants (the figure of a decade ago) to 8,000 members in the organization as a whole. Today, with post-war hindsight, the assumption is that the organization still has more troops available than those numbers indicate, despite the significant casualties inflicted on it. Another critical lapse lay in mapping and gaining familiarity with the command chain. Hizbollah has maintained secrecy re-

3   Y. Halevy, "Summary of Interviews with Intelligence Officers," News First Class website, July 20, 2006.

4   Kadmon, "Looking for the Guilty Party."

5   Ze'ev Schiff, "How We Missed Destroying the Short Range Rockets," *Haaretz*, September 3, 2006.

6   Schiff, "How We Missed Destroying the Short Range Rockets."

7   See Nasrallah's speech of May 23, 2006 on Hizbollah website, www.moqawama.org: "Israelis use codes and closed circuits in communicating among themselves. We have no need for those. If our neighborhood and village folks hold conversations, no machine and no electronics wizard can decipher the hints and symbols used by our people. This is the popular essence of our warriors."

8   Ze'ev Schiff, "The Slap in our Face," *Haaretz*, August 11, 2006; Amos Harel, "We Did Not Know Enough about Border Activities," *Haaretz*, September 19, 2006.

garding its commanders, their roles, and whereabouts. Thus only the most senior among them, who in any case have been exposed to the media and were well known, including Nasrallah and Imad Mughniyeh,[9] are "available" to figure at the top of the hit list.

• *Combat and Defense Tactics*. The IDF, whose combat training is rooted in familiarity with the enemy and whose modern training facilities are based on models grounded in reality, found itself fighting in Lebanon in an unfamiliar "work environment." The camouflaged "nature reserves" (Hizbollah's underground system of tunnels and fortifications), the vertical bunker systems, and wireless launching units posed a strong challenge to the IDF. By way of comparison, on the Palestinian front the intelligence corps was able to supply accurate information about the opponent's combat and defense tactics, and the fighting units were trained in "authentic" combat scenarios.

Failures in Dissemination

One of Intelligence's major roles in all its units is to provide current, valuable information to fighting forces in order to generate a relative advantage and to reduce the threat level they encounter.

Upon mobilization of ground forces in Lebanon and the addition of other units, a shortage of current in-

formation emerged. Moreover, where such information existed, it did not reach those who needed it, remaining untapped. For example, the sealed boxes prepared in advance by Intelligence that included relevant information for ground forces remained unused, while the "obsolescence" of aerial photos, dating back to 2002, featured prominently on the list of complaints raised by reservists. Information that was available did not reach its target due to inefficient information pipelines.

This shortcoming stands out in

contrast to the impressive achievements of the IDF and GSS in recent years in knowledge management and in ensuring that information flow is a reliable electronic resource. If indeed Intelligence's claims[10] about existing knowledge of Hizbollah's tactical combat level are accurate, this is yet another failure in disseminating information.

Possible Causes: Preconception and Prioritization

Two terms from the past – preconception and prioritization – have reappeared in Israeli discourse as possible explanations for the tactical intelligence failure.

The preconception of the second Lebanon War began with the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. Overwhelming international pressure and wishful thinking within the Israeli public became the cornerstones of a policy that eventually turned out to be Israel's honey trap. On the one hand, Israel publicly acknowledged that after evacuating the security zone, it no longer had any contest with Lebanon and therefore what occurred north of the border was Lebanon's concern. On the other hand, then-prime minister

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Ehud Barak declared that any attack on Israel's sovereignty would entail a response of previously unknown severity.

Prioritization dictated the allocation of resources to urgent tasks on the Palestinian front rather than to future (latent) ones on the Lebanese front – be this an error originating within the IDF or the outcome of a political decision, derived directly from government policy that contended that the constant threat posed by Hizbollah notwithstanding, the potential for conflagration is low. Decision-makers believed that it would be possible to contain the fire in case of a conflict in the north,[11] and in case of deteriora-

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9   Yossi Melman, "Argentina Officially Accuses Iran as Responsible for Terrorist Attacks," *Haaretz*, March 11, 2003.

10 G. Weitz, "All the Way to Beirut, if Necessary," *Haaretz*, August 11, 2006.

11 Moshe Arens, "Most of the Answers are Known," *Haaretz*, August 22, 2006.

tion there would be sufficient time to bridge the gaps that had been created by the emphasis on the Gaza Strip.

In actuality, several months after the withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, the intelligence corps discovered that Iran and Syria started shipping massive weapon shipments and transferring instructors to Hizbollah, and that the guerilla organization that the IDF had confronted in the years when it was present in southern Lebanon was about to change. Even though presumably Barak and Sharon possessed this information, no action was taken on this matter. Indeed, an attack by Israel on Lebanon in order to prevent this process of arming would have been denounced internationally, severely impairing the credit Israel earned following the withdrawal. The Palestinian front, which heated up in October 2000, required intensive Israeli effort in both the military and diplomatic arenas. It is likely that the aversion to military action was due to tolerant political preference rather than to misunderstanding the dangers inherent in Hizbollah's accelerated arms race. But in taking this passive position, the seeds of the "risk of convenience" were sown, which slowly led from a policy with a clear rationale to a policy of turning a blind eye.

The real problem with the political world view that claimed that "in the north you should sleep with one eye open but without rising" is its negative effect on the military, including the intelligence corps. In wishing to avoid crossing the border and causing provocations, and in the drive to exercise patience, low-altitude photo reconnaissance missions for intelligence gathering were curtailed, as were missions by field intelligence gathering units[12] and other operations that might have been perceived as aggressive.

While 2005 was declared by the intelligence corps as "Lebanon Year" and a multi-year plan was formulat-

ed with regard to Hizbollah, in fact the IDF continued devoting most of its resources to facing the immediate threat – the Palestinian front. The defense establishment's comptroller's report, published in March 2006,[13] a

period where the northern border seemed quiet, indicated, "severe gaps exist in combat intelligence on the northern front." This report mandated that a defined work plan be put in place to close those gaps, but as with the handling of other weak spots, reality trumped the implementation of this report.

Conclusion

On the one hand, Israel realized in a timely manner the wide strategic picture, and this was indeed conveyed to decision-makers. On the other hand, gaps emerged between what was known and what unfolded, and tactical intelligence bears the burden of responsibility. These gaps affected IDF actions and possibly also political decision-making.

While evaluation of the war's success requires a perspective over time, the evaluation of the weak spots of tactical intelligence operations necessitates immediate investigation in order to repair the problems as soon as possible. In this context one should ensure that the prioritization within the IDF – as existed up until the war – will change, and that the necessary resources be allocated to the intelligence corps.[14] One should also ensure immediate implementation of all capabilities available to the intelligence community, for use in Lebanon as well as elsewhere.

12 A. Eichner, "Intelligence Corps Commander: Palestinians Attempt to Imitate Lebanese Model," *Yediot Ahronot*, September 11, 2006.

13 Ze'ev Schiff, "Everything Had Been Put in Writing," *Haaretz*, August 31, 2006.

14 A. Buchbut, "Significant Increase in Intelligence Budget," *Maariv*, September 4, 2006.