

# Conceptual Flaws on the Road to the Second Lebanon War

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The failures of the Second Lebanon War and the strong waves of protest that arose in their wake forced the government of Israel to appoint a government investigative commission. Its mandate was to examine how the political and military levels functioned both with regard to the preparedness of the IDF and the home front, and with regard to the decision to go to war and how the war was conducted.<sup>1</sup>

The Winograd Commission's interim report, made public on April 30, 2007, points to failures in the State of Israel's conduct by both top political and military officials. Some of these failures were caused by inefficient management of the campaigns, and others were caused by a mistaken worldview and faulty situation assessments. These failures led to the State of Israel's ending a major military confrontation, for the first time in its history, without achieving a clear military victory.<sup>2</sup>

When the report's conclusions were published, public attention, fanned by the media, naturally emphasized the personal responsibility of the current leadership for the war's failures. It appears that the public's desire to "nail" those responsible for the failures was the culmination of the demand for changes necessitated by the commission's conclusions. And indeed, there is almost no disputing the personal responsibility of Prime Minister Olmert, Defense Minister Peretz, and Chief of Staff Halutz for the failed conduct of the war. However, this article intends to shift the focus, even if only slightly, to what is dealt with indirectly by the report but what should be understood as the main factor behind the war's failures: Israel's policy on the northern border from the withdrawal from Lebanon on May 24, 2000 until July 11, 2006.

This essay highlights the risks entailed in a superficial focus on the specific personal conclusions of the investigative report and on the lapses in the conduct of the war. This sort of emphasis on rather marginal symptoms from a strategic perspective, rather than on a comprehensive focus on the root of the problem itself, is ultimately liable to turn the positive soul searching now taking place in Israel into a tangential aside whose benefit will dissipate over the years.

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Accordingly, this article will deal with the problematic legacy inherited by the present leadership, a legacy that resulted, inter alia, from what was the normative way of thinking among large segments of the leadership and large segments of the public sector. This legacy made a decisive contribution to the circumstances that according to the Winograd report caused the difficult security situation, which the current leadership failed to confront successfully. The report's approach to these circumstances will be reviewed, as well as the possible implications of the report's findings for issues on Israel's current security agenda.

### **The Intoxicating Lull**

The commission determined that the years since the IDF's withdrawal from southern Lebanon were years of relative calm and prosperity for the border towns in the north. This period, according to the commission, "benefited towns well-versed in suffering and heavy bombardment by Katyusha rockets, from Kiryat Shmona and Metulla in the east, to Nahariya and Rosh Hanikra in the west." The commission stated that "the land of the guest houses," the label affixed to the northern region throughout this relatively calm period by military personnel, was well chosen.<sup>3</sup> The commission went so far as to declare that this perception was part of a worldview common to many important political and military officials, according to which "the age of wars [at least in this region] has passed."

With these words the commission put its finger on one of the main factors molding Israel's policy in the period under discussion, namely, the deliberate avoidance by the IDF of massive action against Hizbollah's intensive deployment and its provocative activity

along the northern border. The drive, justified in and of itself, was to perpetuate the lull at any price in order to benefit the residents of the northern Galilee "and to allow them to recover from the long years in the shadow of the Katyushas."<sup>4</sup>

One gets the impression that this lull also made a decisive contribution to the assessment/hope, dominant among many figures in Israel's public circles, that even Hizbollah would be inclined to accept, albeit unwillingly, the status quo created after Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. It was often argued that henceforth Hizbollah would attempt to achieve its objectives mainly, though not exclusively, through political means and propaganda rather than through the use of force. Hizbollah's intensive attempts to enhance its political power in the domestic realm in Lebanon during that period almost certainly strengthened this perception. Furthermore, the report cites a complex of reasons that could support what from Israel's point of view was an encouraging situation assessment, including:

1. The increasing criticism of Hizbollah's military activity from within Lebanon, mainly from opponents of Syria, and the demands to disarm the organization.
2. The international community's increasing pressure on Iran and Syria, Hizbollah's patrons.
3. The weakening of Syria following Hafez al-Asad's death and the ascent to power of Bashar al-Asad, a weak and inexperienced leader.

It seems that these factors were tapped as proof of the fundamental change that Israel desired so heavily regarding the situation of the northern border towns. On the eve of Israel's withdrawal, it is likely that no serious authority deluded himself that Hizbol-

lah was about to refrain completely from provocative actions against Israel.<sup>5</sup> However, the statement of then-prime minister Ehud Barak that “the IDF’s departure from Lebanon will bring about an erosion of the legitimacy of Hizbollah’s continuing its violent struggle against Israel in the Lebanese arena” seems to have reflected a widespread perception.<sup>6</sup>

There were also contrasting views. In his testimony before the commission, Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Malka noted that his assessment as head of military intelligence differed from Barak’s statements. He contended “that the Middle East reads Nasrallah’s messages more than Ehud Barak’s messages.”<sup>7</sup> In his view, the Arab world attaches more credibility to Hizbollah’s threats than to Barak’s calming assessments. The withdrawal from Lebanon was thus naturally presented in the Arab world as a defeat for Israel,<sup>8</sup> and was exploited by Hizbollah for significant momentum in building its combined military force with the assistance of Iran and Syria.<sup>9</sup> Gabi Ashkenazi, OC Northern Command at the time of the withdrawal, warned in a letter to the chief of staff in August 2000 that despite the (relative) calm in the north, Hizbollah’s provocative military actions might bring about a serious deterioration along the northern border. “If this phenomenon continues [uninterrupted by Israel], it will lead to a situation that we will not be able to accept.”<sup>10</sup>

In July 2005 the assessment of Military Intelligence was that Hizbollah was liable to act on its threats and attempt to kidnap soldiers. The following December, Intelligence’s assessment continued to be that there was a high probability of an effort to kidnap an Israeli soldier. That same month, Maj. Gen. (res.) Aharon Ze’evi (Farkash), then head of

Military Intelligence, sent a letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, and Chief of Staff Dan Halutz stating

that “[appropriate] deployment and preparedness [of the IDF] are required to cope with the possibility of escalation on the northern border.”<sup>11</sup>

It appears that these insights, which evinced a critical challenge to the accepted ways of thinking, were not accepted by the decision makers at the political level; the latter’s approach emphasized the relative lull prevailing since the withdrawal as one of many factors likely to contribute to “sustained calm in the northern region.” The commission’s report makes it quite clear that the dominant thinking was based on the assessment that Hizbollah would continue to undertake violent acts against Israel, but that the organization’s hostile actions would be carried out in relatively small doses, of specific and limited dimensions, and over long intervals of time. According to this worldview, such a *modus operandi* was supposed to allow Israel to retaliate with a low profile response and thus confine the prevalent calm – or more precisely, the prevalent tension – to limited dimensions.<sup>12</sup>

The commission stated that it had no intention of challenging past policy with the wisdom of hindsight. It rightfully gives expression to the need to examine the decisions that were made from the point of view of the decision makers in real time, and not in retrospect.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, from the commis-



*Members of the Winograd Commission*

sion's comments one can infer that in spite of the clear economic prosperity prevailing in the north once the forces were withdrawn and other heavily calculated considerations, the situation on the northern side of the border required that assessments opposed to the prevalent point of view among senior political officials be raised more vigorously. Thus, it was the obligation of those who held contrasting opinions to present an opposing assessment with greater determination. The gist of those evaluations should have emphasized that Hizbollah was pursuing a trend toward escalation, to the point of a calculated and nearly certain risk of a comprehensive confrontation with Israel. Indeed, this is what ultimately happened.<sup>14</sup>

### **Unilateral Action**

Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon on May 24, 2000 took place in coordination with the UN, which determined that when Israel moved to the international border it fulfilled UN resolution 425 from 1978 (adopted following the Litani Operation). The withdrawal from Lebanon was therefore unilateral, occurring without coordination with the Lebanese government or Hizbollah. The Lebanese government officially rejected the UN's decision and stated that fulfillment of the resolution required Israel to withdraw from Shab'a Farms. Israel continued to claim that Shab'a Farms were conquered from Syria in the Six Day War and that therefore, from Israel's perspective, it was territory whose future would be discussed in negotiations with Syria.

The logic on which the unilateral action was based is simple: since Israel was unable to reach an agreement with the other side, it would carry out what it saw as essential and desirable for itself in accordance with its na-

tional interests. Since Israel would appear to the international community as the party that did what it was obligated to do, the other side would be forced to accept the new rules of the game that would be imposed upon it and act accordingly. This way of thinking also led to the comprehensive disengagement from Gaza and the end of the Israeli presence in that region (August 2005).

In the Lebanese context, the logic of unilateral action failed to produce the desired outcome. It became clear that the arrangement on the ground had to be coordinated not with the UN and not with the superpowers, but with those who control the territory, that is, the Lebanese government and Hizbollah. This way of thinking also failed in the Gaza Strip. In neither case did Israel succeed in convincing anyone – and it is doubtful whether Israel itself was convinced – that its withdrawals from Lebanon and from the Gaza Strip were not “capitulations to terror” but rather actions taken to realize its national interests. It is highly questionable whether Israeli leaders who took those decisions believed so. The other side's assessment, which enjoyed far more credibility, was that the withdrawals were caused by Israel's fears concerning its ability to continue coping with the challenges posed to it by Hizbollah and the Palestinian organizations. This, however, does not necessarily mean that those withdrawals did not in principle also serve Israel's national interests.

### **Restraint Will Prevent Escalation**

The commission determined that in practice, the mindset underlying Israeli policy toward Hizbollah was restraint and moderation, even in situations when Hizbollah initiated the aggression. This policy, it should be stressed, was contrary to the security con-

cepts of retaliation, preemption, seizure of the initiative, and surprise embraced by the State of Israel since its founding. In practice, it was implemented throughout the period following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon with varying degrees of intensity.

On October 7, 2000, some five months after the withdrawal, three IDF soldiers were kidnapped from the Mount Dov area. This incident was clearly an open act of defiance and provocation against Israel and the IDF. Hizbollah blatantly conveyed that it was not ready to accept the rules of the game that Israel had stipulated following its unilateral withdrawal to the international border. Furthermore, Hizbollah demonstrated that it was not deterred by the vehement Israeli threats about a tough response in the event that Israel, its citizens, or its soldiers were attacked. Thus Hizbollah opted for action far more severe than shooting at Israeli targets and soldiers: its operatives penetrated Israeli territory – a serious blow to Israel's sovereignty – and kidnapped its soldiers (who died in or subsequent to the attack).

The IDF sought to respond in accordance with what had been planned, drilled, and declared on the eve of the withdrawal, and according to what the severity of the action required. The proposal for an appropriate response, however, made by Shaul Mofaz, chief of staff at the time, was rejected by the cabinet.<sup>15</sup> As the commission states, Israel decided on a limited, pinpoint response. The IDF was careful not to cross any lines and made do with several insignificant and ineffective aerial attacks. "This," the report notes with undisguised criticism, "was in fact the beginning of the policy of restraint and containment, moderation and a low-key response, which continued after the next attack as well."<sup>16</sup>

According to the commission report, the IDF had prepared a set of actions that would impose "levers of influence" on Hizbollah so that it would curb its

actions against Israel. These levers of influence "included attacks on Syrian targets in Lebanon, attacks on Lebanese infrastructure sites, and others." The assumption was that "using these levers of influence when necessary would restrain Hizbollah and lead to a reduction in attacks against Israel." But in practice almost no use was made of these levers of influence in the years after the withdrawal, and if use was made, it was with a very low and ineffective dosage.<sup>17</sup>

The political limitations, the policy of containment, and the desire for calm in the north were conveyed to the army, and influenced not only its patterns of response but also its mode of deployment. From the beginning of 2002 reserve forces replaced regular army soldiers in the northern sector (although it had been the accepted practice that only regular forces would guard the northern border), and in that way, too, the idea was ingrained in the army that as long as it restrained itself, the tensions would lie low.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as part of the policy of containment, the IDF chose to reduce its mobile activity along the border, transferred its bases to a rear line, built bypass access roads, and forbade military and civilian vehicles from moving near the border (in territory that according to the international border was under Israeli sovereignty). The forward lookout points were eliminated and replaced by electronic look-



*Retired judge Eliyahu Winograd gives Prime Minister Olmert a copy of the interim report*



out equipment. Eventually even the open-fire orders were changed and the ability of IDF soldiers to respond to hostile activity on the other side of the border was restricted.<sup>19</sup>

The commission revealed that in November 2005, three days before the attack in Rajar (November 21, 2005), Military Intelligence relayed data about Hizbollah's intention to attack IDF soldiers along the border. Hizbollah squads were identified with certainty, and nevertheless, approval to liquidate them with precision fire was not granted.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the consistent message to the army was that the cabinet will authorize measured, pinpoint responses to Hizbollah provocations, and the State of Israel will not become entangled again in the Lebanese quagmire. The IDF accepted and acted in accordance with the political officials' instructions, as legally required by the State of Israel. The restraint, however, failed to produce the reciprocal response in Hizbollah. Hizbollah's provocations continued afterwards as well, and were even stepped up. On November 21, 2005, an attempt was made to kidnap soldiers while Hizbollah aimed heavy fire at Kiryat Shmona, Metulla, and Nahariya.<sup>21</sup>

The policy of restraint, though based on serious and thoughtful considerations, obligated the IDF to undergo a revolution in orientation. From a force that initiates and attacks, which espouses moving the arena of battle to the enemy's territory, the army in the Northern Command turned to defense and entrenchment. Its declared goal was to reduce the points of friction, contain Hizbollah's provocations, and prevent hostile activities, mainly but not exclusively with the aid of a defensive posture. Former OC Northern Command Udi Adam defined the containment policy as instituted in the north this way: "Its practical meaning was relin-

quishing Israeli sovereignty on the northern border, and giving Hizbollah a free hand on the border."<sup>22</sup>

Under these circumstances, it was clear that Barak's assurance after the October 2000 kidnapping that Israel reserves the right to respond at the time that suits it<sup>23</sup> was devoid of content. In this context journalist Ze'ev Schiff wrote the following:

Did Israel not make a serious error by failing to respond with force to Hizbollah-Iran-Syria's building of a military formation next to its border? Over the years a threatening formation was established there, which required a preventive strike. Recoiling from such a strike ultimately led to war. Israel even avoided signaling its enemies that it would not ignore the building of a threatening formation. It did not strike at the transfer of Iranian weapons to Damascus, a move the Americans hinted they would accept with understanding; nor at the convoys transferring rockets to Lebanon, nor at any of the rocket warehouses in Hizbollah's possession, nor even at short range rockets near the border. It is true that Israel prepared itself properly [to cope with] long range rockets and also carried out several painful pinpoint actions, but these did not affect the building of the formation. The result was that in this period Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis Hizbollah and Iran was eroded.<sup>24</sup>

The latent assumption likely underlying the political approach chosen by Israel upon its withdrawal from Lebanon was that restraint and moderation by Israel would be matched by restraint and moderation by Hizbollah. It eventually became clear that this assumption was mistaken, and the mistake incurred high costs for Israel in terms of human and economic resources. Indeed, the

commission determined that “the IDF’s departure from Lebanon did not cause Hizbollah to change its basic way of thinking [continuation of the war against Israel]. Despite a certain erosion of its legitimacy to continue fighting Israel, the organization refused, from domestic Lebanese considerations as well, to disarm and stop the armed struggle against Israel.” At the same time, however, and notwithstanding its general desire to continue the confrontation with Israel, Hizbollah sought to preserve a limited level of conflict with Israel, which would not necessarily evolve into an all-out conflict, as actually occurred in July 2006.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most serious results of the containment policy was a reduction in defense budgets. The government began to believe that years of calm and economic prosperity were guaranteed to Israel in general and the north in particular (an assessment enhanced by the downfall of Saddam Hussein’s regime). Thus it decided that it was now reasonable to cut the defense budget, and the IDF, in order to cope with the budget slashes, applied the cuts in the northern sector. According to the commission, forward positions were eliminated for budgetary reasons, forces were reduced, and less skilled and professional units were directed to the sector.<sup>26</sup>

In our view, the commission’s manner of expression on the policy of restraint/containment is too moderate and not sufficiently decisive. The report tries to display empathy and understanding with regard to the considerations that led to adoption of the containment policy. One can understand the commission’s reservations about declarations that are in the realm of 20/20 hindsight and its desire not to harm the privilege bestowed on decision makers in a democratic

government to make decisions in accordance with their worldview. Nonetheless, the commission’s approach, which emerges as critical of this policy, is not critical enough.

### **Southern Parallels**

The policy of restraint along the northern border did not reflect merely a decision based on constraints that emerged from Hizbollah’s capabilities and its connections with Syria and Iran. It was apparently a mistaken worldview that gained a foothold among the Israeli leadership over a long period of time. In comparing Israel’s policy of containment on the northern border with the current policy in the Gaza Strip one can find many similarities:

1. In both sectors Israel evacuated the territory in a unilateral withdrawal, and not with an agreement with those in control of the territory.
2. In both sectors Israel declared a policy of harsh response in the event of provocations.
3. At the critical moment in both sectors Israel chose to adopt a policy of measured response and restraint.

The firing of Qassam missiles at the western Negev and at the city of Sderot in particular has become a routine event in recent years. Palestinian organizations in Gaza have reiterated their intentions to kidnap Israeli soldiers, and since the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit other attempts to kidnap soldiers have followed.

It is therefore clear that in the Gaza Strip too, as in Lebanon before the war, Israel is broadcasting a message of containment and restraint, and sees this policy as part of the accepted rules of the game between it and the Palestinian organizations. This policy does not match the declarations of Israel’s leadership following the disengagement from Gaza

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that any provocation against Israel would be met by a harsh response that “would set the Gaza Strip on fire.”

The State of Israel must realize that the credibility of its threats is a central element in shaping its deterrence capability. Its inability or lack of willingness to carry out the threats made by its highest ranking officials necessarily projects weakness and harms its deterrent capability. If Israel’s deterrent capability is important to it, it would do best to avoid making unequivocal threats that it has no intention or ability to carry out.

Against the backdrop of Hizbollah’s accelerated activity to regain its pre-war capabilities and to redeploy along the border, and against the backdrop of the serious strategic threats facing Israel on the Palestinian front as well, it is to be hoped that the final report of the Winograd Commission will accelerate the soul searching and the process of drawing the requisite conclusions in the entire realm of the policy of containment and restraint that the government of Israel has adopted since the withdrawal from Lebanon, and which has been challenged in this article.

## Notes

1. Government decision of September 17, 2006 in accordance with paragraph 8a of the Basic Law: The Government 2001.
2. Partial report of the Winograd Commission, chapter 1, p. 11, article 9.
3. Ibid., Preface, chapter 4, p. 38.
4. Ibid., p. 44, article 25.
5. The commission mentions this, stating that “there was no one who deluded himself into thinking that Hizbollah would beat its swords into plowshares upon Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon.” Partial report, Winograd Commission, p. 38.
6. Testimony of former prime minister Ehud Barak before the commission on November 28, 2006. See Ibid., p. 39, article 4.
7. See testimony of Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Malka before the Winograd Commission, November 2, 2006.
8. Thus on the eve of Israel’s withdrawal Dr. Ramadan Abdullah Shallah, secretary general of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, stated in an interview with al-Jazeera, on May 16, 2000, “that this is the first time that the occupier has withdrawn frightened because use was made here of psychological warfare.” His conclusion is that no one recognizes Israel’s ability any longer, and that now Muslims everywhere, and in Palestine in particular, will celebrate this.
9. See partial report of the Winograd Commission, article 6, p. 40.
10. Ibid., p. 47, article 38.
11. See “The Winograd Jolt” at <http://www.ynet.co.il/home/0,7340,L-4749,00.html>.
12. Partial report of the Winograd Commission, p. 46, article 34.
13. Ibid., p. 62, article 113.
14. Ibid., p. 46, article 33.
15. Ibid., p. 44, article 24.
16. Ibid., p. 44, article 26.
17. Ibid., p. 39.
18. Ibid., p. 47, article 42.
19. Ibid., p. 47, article 40.
20. Ibid., p. 47, article 43.
21. Ibid., p. 41, article 10.
22. Ibid., paragraph 41, p. 47.
23. Ehud Barak, summary of cabinet meeting, October 9, 2000.
24. Ze’ev Schiff, “Six Years Later,” *Ha’aretz*, April 12, 2007.
25. Hizbollah’s increasing activity on the northern border fits the arguments made by Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan in the mid-1950s about the IDF’s response policy. Dayan stated that even restraint and moderation are liable to lead to a wide scale conflict. Restraint creates an impulse in your adversary to test the boundaries of your patience. Lack of a response “requires” it to step up its activity. Ultimately, the opposing side’s raising the threshold will require a comprehensive response, and thus an all-out conflict will ensue. See Moshe Dayan, “Military Actions in Times of Peace,” *Ma’arachot*, 118-119 (1959): 54-61.
26. Ibid., p. 47, article 42.