BICOM Strategic Assessment

The Second Lebanon War: 10 Years on

Key Points

- On the tenth anniversary of the Second Lebanon War, a future war with Hezbollah is considered the most threatening scenario for the IDF due to the organisation's significant military capability.

- In light of the failure of an 'enhanced' UN force to prevent Hezbollah rearming, Israel is sceptical of relying on international forces to defend its borders, a policy that has consequences for the security component of negotiations over the establishment of a Palestinian state.

- The IDF's new security doctrine reflects a focus on non-state actors and asymmetric warfare, and establishes new military and strategic approaches as well as redefined standards of what victory means.

- Israel's political leadership has failed to fully implement recommendations for improving the national security decision-making process that were exposed during the war.

July-August 2006: The Second Lebanon War

On the morning of July 12, 2006, two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped and eight others killed when Hezbollah fighters carried out a surprise cross-border raid, thus effectively ending the six-year period of relative quiet that had existed along the Israel-Lebanon border following the unilateral withdrawal of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) from Lebanon in May 2000.

What later became known as the Second Lebanon War ended 34 days later on August 14, when the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701 went into effect.

When the war ended, both Hezbollah and Israel claimed victory. Yet the government's failure to achieve its self-declared war aims, the relatively high Israeli death toll – 120 Israeli soldiers and 43 civilians – and the heavy impact of Hezbollah rocket fire on the civilian population in Northern Israel, shocked and angered the Israeli public. Meanwhile Israel faced international condemnation, accused of using 'disproportionate' force in its military operations in Lebanon. With many Israelis demanding the resignation of the prime minister, defence minister and IDF chief of staff, the government set up a commission of inquiry chaired by retired judge Eliyahu Winograd.

The Winograd Commission's final report on the government's handling of the Second Lebanon War referred to it as "a great and grave missed opportunity" with its harshest criticism aimed at the military and political leadership. In particular, the commission found "serious failings and flaws in the quality of preparedness, decision-making and performance in the IDF high command... [and] serious failings and flaws in the lack of strategic thinking and planning, in both the political and military echelons," noting that the "inadequacies of preparedness and strategic and operative planning go back long before" the war. Among its many criticisms, the commission found that the cabinet had failed to formulate clear objectives and policy options.

Ten years on from the Second Lebanon War and with Israel enjoying relative quiet on its northern border, this paper seeks to evaluate what has changed since the events of 2006 and which lessons have (or have not) been learned from it.

Ten Years on: An Evaluation of Developments Post-2006

How Israel's security doctrine was altered by the Second Lebanon War

Since its establishment in 1948, Israel's security doctrine has been based on three strategic pillars,

often referred to as the three "D's" – deterrence, early detection, and the decisive defeat of the enemy (military decision).

Yet the 2006 Lebanon War marked a turning point in Israel's strategic priorities, with the threat of engaging in armed conflict with conventional armies shifting. Instead, Israel's military and political leadership were forced to grapple with developing a response to asymmetric conflicts against actors who, while being non-states, possessed the military capacity and strength akin to regular armed forces, and had no 'political address' with whom to engage in post-war diplomacy. Moreover, Israel's inability to militarily defeat these non-state actors enabled them to capitalise on a narrative that they won the war, as Hezbollah claimed in 2006. In light of the Second Lebanon War, two of the classic pillars of Israel's traditional security concept – deterrence and decisive victory, both of which were further challenged in subsequent conflicts in Gaza – underwent a radical transformation.

Israel's military: Learning the lessons

In 2006 the IDF was largely unprepared for a war with Hezbollah, having been in the process of adapting operational concepts for the Lebanese theatre after the Syrian withdrawal and due to being predominantly focused on counterterrorism operations in the West Bank during the Second Intifada. Thus, on July 12, the IDF had no updated plan for the widespread military campaign that the political leadership authorised.

However the IDF has learned from its failures in the Second Lebanon War and from subsequent wars between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. In August 2015, the newly installed IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot unveiled a new national security strategy for the military: the Gideon Doctrine. The document highlights major changes in Israel's strategic landscape, noting that the main threat confronting Israel today is from violent and well-armed non-state organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah, which have forced Israel into five instances of armed conflict in the past ten years (including Operation Summer Rains in Gaza in June 2006).

Responding to the challenge posed to Israel's security by these hybrid actors, the doctrine updates one of the three D's, "deterrence" – a central pillar of Israel's security doctrine – clarifying the IDF's role in developing a means for

prolonging the period between wars. Moreover, the strategy redefines the concept of "military decision", tying it to "achieving the political goals set for the campaign, leading to a post-war improved security situation". This reflects an acknowledgment that in asymmetric conflict, conclusive defeat or surrender of the enemy should not typically be the expected outcome. The strategy also emphasises the importance of international media, humanitarian concerns and international legitimacy as relevant to the IDF's ability to fight.

Eisenkot's strategy confirms the addition of a fourth "D" – "defence" – to Israel's core security pillars: "defence" – described as preparing the military and the public for steps the army will take to address threats on Israeli soil – constitutes a crucial addition, especially as the increasing rocket arsenals and the evolving subterranean threat along both the Israel-Lebanon and the Israel-Gaza borders has increased the likelihood that the next war will impact the home front in unprecedented ways.

The adoption of the new IDF strategy marked a milestone in Israeli national security. In the wake of the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge in 2014 – both of which were marred by the failure of the political leadership to set out clear objectives for the war – the army set out to provide a more realistic definition of what "decisive victory" meant in the emerging era of hybrid warfare. Releasing an unclassified version of the strategy is intended to clarify to the public what the military can and cannot achieve based on political directives.

Israel's political echelon: still muddling through

The army's preparedness for the next war stands in stark contrast to that of the political leadership. The adoption of the new IDF strategy is notable in that its existence follows years of failed attempts by the political leadership to formulate a written national security doctrine. While Israel is often lauded for its tactical proficiency, it is frequently chastised both by domestic commissions of inquiry and policy analysts for its decision-making process as well as lack of long-term planning and clear strategic agenda. To Israel's detriment, this has not sufficiently changed over the past decade. The government's decision-making process with respect to national security continues to suffer from several key flaws, most notably the weakness of the security cabinet, which is often

ill-informed to make suitable decisions during security crises, and which – due to the number of coalition partners – is heavily politicised and wracked with competing agendas.

A major section of the forthcoming state comptroller report (the Shapira report) on the government's handling of Operation Protective Edge in 2014 reportedly excoriates the government for failing to fully implement the Winograd Committee recommendations. Indeed the cabinet's deliberations during Operation Protective Edge were indicative of this in that once again, the problem was less a lack of quality intelligence information provided to cabinet members, but rather the lack of an understanding of the government's overall strategy as well as insufficient processes to keep cabinet members informed of developments. In July 2016, former National Security Advisor Uzi Arad testified before a Knesset Committee, noting that decision-making within the security cabinet – on a range of issues including the handling of the 2010 Gaza Flotilla crisis, Israel's natural gas industry, and the recent reconciliation agreement with Turkey – was deeply flawed. Recent efforts to reshuffle the coalition nearly collapsed over the issue of appointing a military secretary to regularly apprise the cabinet – a recommendation that has been debated for ten years but still never implemented.

The UNIFIL model: the failure of third parties to enforce political solutions to asymmetric threats

In previous wars, Israel has sought to rapidly transfer the battle to enemy territory and make significant gains before the international community intervened. However, the challenge of obtaining political achievements from a battle against non-state actors like Hezbollah meant that 2006 marked the first time that Israel actively sought the assistance of the UN Security Council in order to bring about a cessation in hostilities.

The key provisions of UNSCR 1701 called for the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, ensuring that there would be "no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state". The resolution also enhanced the mandate for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL II), which would now allow for UNIFIL troops to, among other things, accompany and support the Lebanese army (LAF) as they deployed throughout south Lebanon as the IDF withdrew, and to assist the LAF with

ensuring that it served as the only armed presence in southern Lebanon.

However UNIFIL and the LAF have failed to live up to expectations as demonstrated by Hezbollah's significantly increased military strength. This situation, as well as the international community's failure to successfully pressure Hamas to demilitarise in Gaza, offers a lesson. While international actors are increasingly needed as interlocutors to end asymmetric conflicts against non-state actors, they are rarely strong enough to help Israel achieve its political objectives vis-à-vis these groups.

Israel's negative experience with the efficacy of international forces also ties in to the government's opposition to an international presence along the Jordan Valley in the context of a future peace agreement with the Palestinians. The feeling that the best guarantor of Israel's security is Israel itself – a long held belief by the framers of Israel's security concept – is perceived as being validated by the UNIFIL experience.

Hezbollah since 2006: Focus on Syria but expanded military threat vs. Israel

Since the implementation of the cease-fire in August 2006, the border between Israel and Lebanon has been relatively quiet with both sides seemingly mutually deterred. However, Hezbollah has effectively utilised the "quiet" to prepare for its next confrontation with Israel, continuing to expand its arsenal in flagrant violation of UNSCR 1701. Despite the resolution's changes to UNIFIL's mandate, Hezbollah now has over 100,000 missiles – thousands of which have a range and accuracy to strike cities and strategic sites throughout Israel. The organisation has also built extensive new infrastructure – further embedding it into communities and the terrain in southern Lebanon. Rumours abound that Hezbollah has constructed a network of tunnels that extend under the border into northern Israel that would be utilised by fighters in the next war.

Hezbollah has diverted much attention and resources to fighting in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime, which has resulted in the loss of an estimated 1,300 fighters, and 5,000 wounded. The on-going fighting and high rate of casualties reduces the chance that it will look to open a second front with Israel in the near term, and the organisation has also suffered a steep decline in domestic support within Lebanon.

However, although Hezbollah is preoccupied with the Syrian war for the time being, a number of prominent members of Israel's security establishment have expressed concern that the combat experience gained in the war will render the next Israel-Hezbollah war more challenging for the IDF.

A future conflict would most likely see Hezbollah conducting both offensive and defensive operations, including a ground incursion into northern Israel. While Israel's anti-missile Iron Dome system may be able to intercept the vast majority of Hezbollah rockets directed at key civilian and military targets, it will be unable to fully cope with the rate of fire. In light of the ominous military threat now posed to Israel's civilians by Hezbollah, Israel will likely be forced to escalate the conflict in order to try and bring it to an end as quickly as possible.

Conclusion

While Israel's northern border has been relatively quiet since the Second Lebanon War, the prevailing view of Israel's military intelligence is that another round with Hezbollah is inevitable, even if unlikely in the foreseeable future. Yet similar to 2006, the situation remains delicate, and continued risk exists of a miscalculation that may drag the parties back into another round of fighting. On the eve of the tenth anniversary of the Second Lebanon War, a future conflict with Hezbollah is considered the most threatening scenario for the IDF due to the organisation's significant military capability.

Ten years and multiple wars later, the IDF has designed a strategy for confronting non-state actors, though it accepts that there is no "once-and-for-all" military operation that can entirely eliminate the threat posed by groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Moreover, the lack of a strong political address in Beirut (and Gaza) – as well as the relative weakness of the UN and other third parties – renders unlikely the possibility that Israel will achieve a decisive military victory in the traditional sense, and successfully transform its battlefield advantage into political gains. In this context, as some experts have suggested, the best that can be hoped for is maintaining the status quo – predicated on mutual deterrence – while doing everything possible to prolong the periods between hostilities.

One additional challenge for policymakers will be finding a way for the electorate to embrace this "new normal". It is also imperative that in the wake of the IDF's new strategy, the political leadership seizes the opportunity to reform its decision-making processes in accordance with both the Winograd and Shapira reports' recommendations, and enact a national security strategy that includes coordinating the public's expectations with the new concepts of deterrence and military decision.

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