

# Lessons and Consequences of the Israel-Hizballah War: An Early Assessment

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## Brief Analysis

**O**n August 25, 2006, Jeffrey White, David Makovsky, and Dennis Ross addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Jeffrey White is the Berrie Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute and the coauthor, with Michael Eisenstadt, of the Institute Policy Focus Assessing Iraq's Sunni Arab Insurgency. David Makovsky, senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Project on the Middle East Peace Process, is author of the Institute monograph *Engagement through Disengagement: Gaza and the Potential for Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking*. He, like Jeffrey White, recently returned from a trip to Israel. Dennis Ross, the Institute's counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow, is a former U.S. Middle East peace envoy and author of *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

### JEFFREY WHITE

The war between Hizballah and Israel, in which from a military standpoint there was no decisive winner, was fought on complex physical, human, political, and informational terrain. Whereas Hizballah fought as hard as it could, Israel was shackled by its faltering senior military and political command. The air force, which was skilled in destroying Hizballah's medium-range rocket launchers and claims to have destroyed 90–95 percent of the group's long-range rockets, was able neither to compel the Lebanese government to act against Hizballah nor to disrupt the firing of

short-range rockets. Israel's active ground forces, in which most special units were committed, adapted well to the fighting, but its reserve ground forces were ill prepared for the fight. According to one former Israeli officer, the reserves were not adequate for the task of garrisoning whatever parts of southern Lebanon will remain under Israeli control, leaving this task to the active duty forces.

Hizballah demonstrated effective command and control and used its medium-range Fajr 3, Fajr 5, and Syrian 220-mm and 302-mm heavy artillery rockets to inflict most of the civilian casualties. Short-range katyusha rockets presented the most difficult challenge to Israel. Hizballah's guerilla fighters fought like a well-trained conventional force and effectively employed mines and antitank guided missiles. Contrary to much press reporting, Israel's Merkava tank proved resilient. Whereas Israel was surprised by the cross-border kidnapping raid that set off the conflict and to some extent by Hizballah's ability to fight, Hizballah was surprised by the scope of Israel's action, the destruction of its long-range missiles, Israel's willingness to confront Hizballah fighters, and the resiliency of northern Israel. Ultimately, this was a contest of wills among Israel, the United States, and Hizballah.

Should a second round of fighting occur, it will be more intense, lethal, and concentrated in time. The outcome will be determined by who is more adaptive. Hizballah had its tactical and operational doctrine validated, due largely to the way Israel fought rather than any intrinsic superiority of arms or tactics. In a second round, Israel will seek an answer to the short-range missile problem and will hit harder, deeper, and faster, while Hizballah will seek to strike deeper, dig-in more deeply, and defend its high-value assets. If Hizballah's military capabilities are seriously degraded, Syria will have to make a decision regarding resupply and perhaps even intervention. Bashar al-Asad's record to date suggests he may well make the wrong decision—namely, to get involved.

DAVID MAKOVSKY

On the positive side of the ledger, this war has made clear that Lebanon is accountable for actions inside its borders. While Hizballah may be subjectively strengthened by surviving Israeli strikes, it is objectively weakened by the degradation Israel inflicted on the numbers of Hizballah's fighters and weapons. This war also brought into international focus how Iran is a destabilizing force in the region, since its missiles were provided to a militia not even adjacent to its borders. Only time will tell, but it is also possible that when the Lebanese military assumes control of the south for the first time in thirty-one years, it may do so in a fashion that erodes Hizballah's ability to be a militia within a state.

On the negative side of the ledger, Israeli failures can be seen in the civilian, military, and political spheres. Taken together, these failures have contributed to a loss of faith in the leadership of the military and the cabinet by many in Israel that arguably could be compared to the crisis of confidence in 1973. Not even in the prestate era have 160 cities, towns, villages, kibbutzim, and moshavim been hit as they were during the war. However, Israel often emerges resilient after a period of introspection and recrimination.

The critique of civilian performance is analogous to what the United States experienced in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina—namely, a failed evacuation of the poor and elderly. The critique of the military performance includes issues of intelligence, preparedness, and training due to budget cuts and the Israel military's focus on West Bank policing.

Two different critiques have emerged of Israel's political decisionmaking at the start of the conflict and the government's management of the war. The predominant public critique is that Israel did not have a strategy to obtain its ultimate objective of delivering an unrecoverable blow to Hizballah. Many in the Israeli public are upset that Israel did not have a ground strategy that would immediately take the area south of the Litani River and thereby give Israel a better chance to knock out katyusha rockets, which are virtually impossible to destroy from the air before they are fired. According to this view, Israel did not use sufficient manpower and firepower on the ground

early on to obtain the necessary territorial objective.

The alternative critique, associated with Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni is that Israel's objective was never realistic; therefore, it would have been preferable to have started with a more modest but achievable goal. The thesis is that since it is impossible to destroy Hizballah, it would have been sufficient to go into Lebanon for a limited operation of a few days and inflict a massive blow, such as was done on the second day of the war when Israel hit fifty-nine permanent rocket launchers in thirty-four minutes. Moreover, during conduct of fighting, it seems that failure to match strategy and objectives contributed to political indecision that in turn contributed to a sense of military indecisiveness.

Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert's major preoccupation for the coming months will be political survival, rather than policy initiatives on the Palestinian or Syrian track. To try to survive, he may name a new defense minister; bolster the cabinet by adding someone with experience in decisionmaking like Ehud Barak or Dan Meridor to help restore public confidence; broaden the government's base to include additional parties; budget more money for the north; and perhaps create a department of homeland security to restore public confidence in Israel's ability to defend itself now that Israel's last three conflicts, dating to the 1991 Gulf War, have involved the firing of rockets at Israeli population centers.

While the idea of a Syrian diplomatic track has gained some interest amid hope that Damascus can be peeled away from Teheran, Olmert is not likely to pursue this now, when Asad believes he was on the winning side. More likely, even if Hizballah wants time to consolidate after the war, the Syrian-Lebanon border could be the flashpoint for the next conflict if Israel feels that neither the Lebanese military nor multinational forces are sufficiently interdicting the resupply of missiles from Iran or Syria to Hizballah. An Olmert government, already challenged at home for being insufficiently focused on national security, cannot let such movement of missiles go unchecked.

DENNIS ROSS

In 1993 and 1996, Israel failed to stop katyusha fire from Lebanon because of the mobility and small size of the rockets. That reality did not change in 2006, and it drove the timing of the eventual ceasefire just as it did in the past. Should there be a second round of fighting between Israel and Hizballah, the goal of eliminating the katyusha threat will continue to be unobtainable.

It is important to distinguish between the objective and subjective realities of the war's aftermath. Objectively, Hizballah is now far less capable militarily due to Israel's offensive operations. Subjectively, Hizballah is seen as a winner because the idiom of Arab political culture heralds resistance and not submitting. Hizballah, however, will be sensitive to the political dynamics within Lebanon, particularly to those domestically who did not support its actions and do not want to subject the country to further conflict.

Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora's strategy includes deploying the Lebanese Armed Forces to the south, ensuring the presence of an international force, and maintaining Hizballah's level of comfort with these developments. Siniora wants to establish Lebanese sovereignty and authority throughout the country and preserve the unity of the army. He is counting on the objective reality that Hizballah wants a respite to rebuild Lebanon and reconstitute its own forces.

As the Lebanese military and multinational forces coexist with Hizballah, they will face the reality of Syrian efforts to resupply Hizballah. Although Israel has conducted operations since the ceasefire that were specifically aimed to interdict shipments, resupply is actively taking place. Because there are four main thoroughfares from Syria into Lebanon and at least fifty small roads, disrupting resupply would entail disrupting all crossborder commerce. If there is no serious effort made to address the problem of resupply, it may become a flashpoint for future conflict.

Any nervousness the Syrians may have felt in the aftermath of the war was replaced by confidence as the Europeans

struggled to agree on the composition and mandate of the international force. Changing the behavior of an emboldened Assad requires changing the calculus of what Syria stands to gain or lose by continued support for Hizballah. The deployment of a strong international force to serve as a buffer between Syria and Lebanon is one threat the Syrians may take seriously. Further, the United States and the Europeans should develop a common strategy that would inflict a serious economic costs on the Syrians. The Europeans, who represent the economic lifeline to Syria, should be prepared to impose a range of crippling sanctions, and the Bush administration should fully implement the Syrian Accountability Act for the first time. Before the Syrians will consider modifying their behavior, they will have to see these potential costs and also understand what they can gain if they change their policies.

During the first week of the war, the Saudi, Jordanian, and Egyptian governments criticized Hizballah for adventurism and for being tools of Iran. They were reacting to Iran's assertion of influence and Tehran's use of the conflict with Israel to gain stature in the Arab street. Saudi Arabia's view of Hizballah as a threat was a potential asset for American diplomatic efforts, but it was not used effectively. If Israeli and Saudi strategic interests had been integrated into one coherent approach, a more favorable political outcome would have been more likely. The point was always to integrate the military tactics with the strategic political objective.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Daniel Fink. ❖

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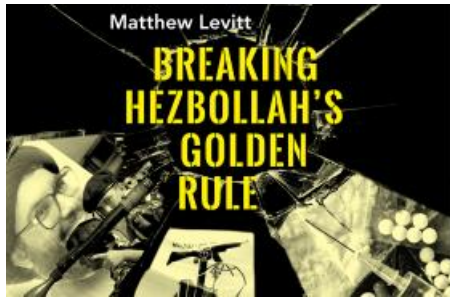
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