



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Intelligence Dimension of the IDF's Flight from South Lebanon in May 2000

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The extent of the current military threat to Israel posed by Hezbollah is the outcome of the hasty Israeli withdrawal from the security zone in South Lebanon in May 2000. Then-PM Ehud Barak appears to have made this fundamental decision without consulting Israeli intelligence.

The IDF's departure from Lebanon after 18 bloody years was the fulfillment of a campaign promise by then-PM Ehud Barak. Whatever the virtues of a withdrawal in principle, its execution remains controversial to this day. The hasty manner of the unilateral retreat of the IDF, considered the strongest army in the Middle East, left a bitter taste of defeat.

Hezbollah claimed victory, touting itself as the great liberator of the soil of Lebanon that had achieved the banishment of the IDF with its tail between its legs. To make matters worse, Israel's partial abandonment of the South Lebanon Army (SLA) exposed many of its members and their families to mortal risk.

The manner in which Israel left Lebanese territory on May 24, 2000 suggests it was a rushed move designed to minimize IDF casualties. The departure was in fact originally scheduled for July 7, 2000. No doubt a series of incidents in which IDF soldiers were ambushed and killed in clashes, solidifying the image of a reckless Israeli policy with no hope on the horizon, played a critical role here, as did the efforts of the ad hoc group "The Four Mothers."

No one will argue that the Israeli decision to evacuate the security zone in South Lebanon was a strategic demarche par excellence. One might logically assume, therefore, that a profound strategic assessment of the prospective

evacuation involving the Israeli intelligence community, with an emphasis on military intelligence, must have been conducted at the highest levels.

The reality was quite different. In his book *Intelligence and Decision Making: The IDF Leaving Lebanon as a Case Study* (2016), Brig. Gen. (ret.) Amos Gilboa, a former head of the analysis department of Israeli military intelligence, revealed that Barak made his fundamental decisions on the evacuation without consulting Israeli intelligence. The book states that military intelligence was completely absent—as was the IDF—from the PM’s “planning group” in advance of the government’s unilateral decision to leave Lebanon.

According to Gilboa, “The main relevant intelligence that Barak needed was the condition and stamina of the SLA (South Lebanon Army), and the attitude of the relevant international agencies with regard to the realization of [Security Council] Resolution 425, including the delineation of the border behind which the IDF would redeploy.”

As Gilboa notes, the assessment of the analysis department of Israeli military intelligence was pessimistic. It predicted a deteriorating scenario in which Hezbollah might pose a severe threat to the Galilee as a result of the withdrawal from South Lebanon. A counter-analysis was issued by the review department of military intelligence, however, that suggested that the evacuation would contribute to establishing a kind of armistice on both sides of the border due to Hezbollah’s interest in becoming a part of the Lebanese political system.

An important insight on this aspect was recently aired in *Haaretz* (April 24, 2020). The article addresses the logic that underlay the standpoint of the review department of military intelligence. The article quotes Col. (ret.) K, then head of the review department, speaking at an open debate in 2015:

I [believed] that Hezbollah didn’t want Israel to withdraw from Lebanon; namely that the intelligence analysis angle should judge Hezbollah’s behavior based upon the understanding that Hezbollah doesn’t desire Israel to evacuate South Lebanon, notwithstanding its public statements...[The withdrawal] would be a colossal disaster for [Hezbollah], since Hezbollah would lose its *raison d’être*—the “resistance”...Hezbollah was interested in the IDF’s continuous deployment in South Lebanon so that it could let Israel bleed on the ground, servicing its image as the great fighter against the IDF.

The fact that Israel hastily vacated its self-proclaimed security zone in south Lebanon and redeployed on the other side of the border could suggest that Barak accepted the review department’s assessment while rejecting that of the

mainstream intelligence analysis. The “courageous” and “creative” judgment of Col. K, in the face of the dominant intelligence analysis supported by then Chief of Staff Lt. Gen Mofaz, is a unique phenomenon in the history of the Israeli intelligence community.

Col. K’s logic was that because Hezbollah had an interest in the IDF’s continued deployment in South Lebanon, the right thing to do was to withdraw, and advantages to Israel would subsequently accrue.

It appears that no one in the Israeli intelligence community at any stage of the strategic assessment prior to Barak’s decision to withdraw considered the possibility of Hezbollah deception. Further, and even more worrisome, was the intelligence belief that Hezbollah was an authentic Lebanese organization that aimed primarily to “liberate” the territory of Lebanon from foreign forces, namely Israel.

This approach was hardly challenged, though there were continuous indications of the radical ideology behind Hezbollah’s foundation—to say nothing of the presence of 180 members of the Iranian IRGC (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) in Syria in the midst of the 1982 Lebanon War. It became an unofficial intelligence conception, possibly inspiring the long-lasting estimate exposed by the IDF/military intelligence.

The assumption that Hezbollah’s military/terror aspirations would be fulfilled the moment the last Israeli soldier quit Lebanon could have been the result of a deception plan implemented by the Shiite organization. If so, one might wonder about the shortcomings of Israeli intelligence at the time. It was well known long before the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon that Hezbollah was an Iranian proxy.

The Israeli authorities considered the Lebanon flight in May 2000 a wise and courageous strategic decision by Barak, but the facts of the event should raise doubts about that conclusion. The intensive PR campaign conducted in Israel to justify and hail the withdrawal may have whitewashed the risks deriving from the decision.

As expressed by Prof. Efraim Karsh and Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hachoen in their BESA Perspective Paper “Israel’s Flight from South Lebanon 20 Years On” (May 22, 2020),

Hezbollah exploited the demise of Israel’s security zone to transform South Lebanon into an ineradicable military stronghold crisscrossed with fortified defenses, both above ground and in a complex underground tunnel system, designed to serve as a springboard for

terror attacks on Israeli territory [and] to shelter Hezbollah's burgeoning rocket and missile arsenal.

The hasty disengagement of Israel from South Lebanon turned out to be a mistake, considering the actual military threat posed by Hezbollah at the time. No one doubts the good intentions that underlay the Israeli strategic decision in 2000, but it's hard to argue with the bottom line: The consequences of that decision, and the manner in which it was executed, left Israel in a worse rather than a better position.

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