



Hezbollah Must Be Fought Like a State Army, Not Like a Terrorist Organization

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The IDF's recent spectacular successes in the north, while refreshing and very much worthy of praise, also revealed limitations. The pager operations were not carried out as part of a broad move; neither was the elimination of Aqil and his gang. Precision factories in Lebanon were not destroyed in the manner of the destruction of the Syrian facility in Masyaf. Years spent fighting the war on terror and the "war between the wars" have influenced Israeli strategic thinking. Hezbollah is a military force, but the war is still being conducted as a series of counter-terrorism operations.

The daring operations carried out by Israel in the northern arena in recent weeks deserve to be praised for the exceptional feats they were.

According to *The New York Times*, the raid by the IDF's Shaldag unit on the precision missile production site in Masyaf in Syria hit a vital site for Iran and Hezbollah in the field of precision missile production. The raid not only harmed the accelerated preparations of Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards for the war in Lebanon but also provided evidence of the IDF's ability to raid and destroy similar sites in Lebanon.

The two waves of attack via remote detonation of personal communication devices were also very important, as they introduced a new dimension to the conflict. The operation, attributed to Israel, caused significant horizontal damage to the

organization both in terms of the dramatic scope of casualties and the disruption of the organization's command and control. The surprise factor, as well as the sense of penetration inflicted on Hezbollah, are also very important. While it is better for such an operation to be carried out simultaneously with air and ground strikes as part of an all-out war, the decision to conduct it on its own was reasonable if the IDF was in a use-it-or-lose-it position.

It is possible that the elimination of Akil and his command group was related to the success of the previous operations. Some security managers may have been pushed aside in the emergency caused by Israel's successes, creating another opportunity for Israeli intelligence.

The successes in Lebanon highlight the overall dragging on of the war in Gaza. The political reasons for this are clear and are being widely discussed in the Israeli media. The gap between the IDF's tactical successes and the stubborn refusal to formulate a strategy for the war in the south – i.e., to come up with an alternative civilian control mechanism in Gaza – is visible to every Israeli citizen. What is less clear is the long and deep background at the level of Israeli military culture for this phenomenon.

In the decades since the 1990s, with the exception of Operation Defensive Shield, Israel has refrained from embarking on decisive military moves. Operational decisiveness, let's remember, is an original Israeli-military concept. Israel has never aimed for absolute victory and the evaporation of its enemies as political bodies – only for the removal of an immediate military threat. The war on terror, which focused on terror groups rather than armies, accustomed the IDF to a pattern of surgical (and eternal) pursuit of terrorist leadership on the one hand and deterrence operations from the air, usually according to the "steps of escalation" method, on the other.

In the last decade, another military theory emerged - the "campaign short of war". In the professional literature and in IDF strategy, this campaign is known as the "war between the wars" (WBW) or the "prevention" approach. Formulated as Israel's central strategy during the years of the Syrian civil war, this approach was based on delaying and preventing the enemy's intensification through close

intelligence surveillance and countermeasures (mostly airstrikes and occasionally special operations).

Some drafters of the approach stressed that it is not a substitute for the IDF's ability to decisively defeat an enemy at war. "Whoever wants will prepare for war," [wrote Major General Nitzan Alon](#).

The logical connection between WBW and the idea of war itself was clarified in the same article. Disrupting the enemy's plans to build up and prepare is part of the arms and war-readiness race. The balance of deterrence and freedom of strategic maneuver of the warring parties is closely related to the question of how each side perceives the degree of success it can expect.

But the culture and way of thinking of large organizations is shaped mainly through their actions. While to all intents and purposes Hezbollah became a military power many years ago and is now one of the largest and strongest armies in the region, decades of anti-terror operations have engrained strong habits into the IDF. Alon's emphasis on war duty can be understood as evidence of his sense that not everyone in the IDF thought like him.

In the last decade, great attention was devoted to the WBW. In a retirement interview Chief of Staff Gadi [Eisenkot gave to *The New York Times* in January 2019](#), for example, extensive space was given to that campaign, which was presented with undisguised pride as a new strategy. Eisenkot told of thousands of airstrikes carried out by Israel in the years preceding the interview. Indeed, the General Staff spent years devoting thousands of hours to monitoring intelligence extending from the development of production facilities in Iran through unknown routes in the Middle East and the Red Sea to storage, production facilities, and operational infrastructures in Syria, Gaza, Lebanon, and other places. For years, the Air Force's strike capabilities were honed in the face of anti-aircraft missile sites in Syria. Cooperation was perfected between the Mossad and IDF special units in undisclosed operations throughout the region.

These efforts bore partial fruit. Iran does not maintain combat formations in Syria of the scope and quality it originally planned. Hezbollah would like to have much more significant capabilities in the field of precision missiles and in other fields.

But for all of that, here we are. The war has been going on for a year and seems to be escalating. Although many thought this was its role, the preventive approach did not prevent the war in the north.

The focus on WBW also came at a cost. WBW became a way of thinking and a pattern of behavior. Special operations are centrally managed at high levels. They exist within an almost perfect envelope of intelligence, air support and rescue capabilities. They always rely on the element of surprise, without which they are delayed or canceled. They give decision makers a sense of control and security.

Many commanders in the IDF testified that, in their opinion, these patterns affected the way the war in Gaza was conducted, at least in its first months. Too much centralized control, a slow pace of execution, and too limited freedom of action for the commanders on the ground.

The successes of the last few weeks point to another possible price. The war in the north is, to a large extent, still managed under the same conceptual framework. Even after the assassination of Akil in the Dahaya district, Israel remains committed to the idea of the "threshold of escalation". It was not for nothing that the IDF spokesman emphasized that this was a "targeted attack". The fact that an underground production site was destroyed in Syria about two weeks ago but parallel sites in Lebanon were not destroyed using a similar method of operation indicates that the IDF's thinking has not sufficiently evolved. Haven't we already reached the stage where a special site in Lebanon can be raided? Even the intense airstrikes initiated on September 22 were not followed by preparations for either a ground offensive or the concrete threat of one.

The pager/walkie-talkie operations attributed to Israel stirred the world's imagination and returned some of the luster that had been eroded from the IDF, and they no doubt hit the enemy hard. But as exciting as those successes were, the combination of covert capabilities in the Israeli concept of war must be seriously examined. According to reports, the operation was launched at the moment it was due to fear of disclosure. It is likely that Israel was forced to escalate the war without gaining the operational benefits for which this capability was surely intended: throwing the enemy off balance as the IDF pushed into Lebanon.

However severe the damage to Hezbollah, it is likely to recover. Furthermore, Israel may have been forced into a strategic decision due to a tactical constraint: the fear of exposing the operation.

If this is the reality, then Hamas in Gaza – and Sinwar personally, who cut ties with the negotiation efforts for a hostage deal a few weeks ago – are the big beneficiaries. For almost a year, Hamas has hoped for a strategic rescue through a flare-up of war in Lebanon. The IDF's operational capability, a "red button" skillfully embedded in Hezbollah's equipment, may have offered it new hope that this will come to pass.

This situation obliges us to think about the dependency of military capabilities on secret "red buttons". That is not meant to diminish the vital role of secret intelligence in war. On the contrary: the closer integration of the Mossad in IDF operations, a trend to which the WBW contributed, is important and welcome. But a distinction must be made between the integration of the Mossad and its capabilities, if indeed that took place here, and the integration of covert operational capabilities in military moves.

Excellent intelligence obtained by the Mossad was also at the basis of Operation Moked at the start of the Six-Day War. But it was intelligence that enabled the air force's preemptive attack on the Arab airbases. The opening operation of the Six-Day War did not depend for its success on devices planted by the Mossad in the Egyptian planes or on pre-prepared sabotage of the Syrian airports.

Covert sabotage and surveillance operations usually depend on the planting of devices in enemy equipment and terrain ("red buttons"). This kind of capability will always be under threat of premature exposure, and often involves complex and difficult maintenance over time.

Also, the one-time use of special capabilities deployed in enemy territory creates dramatic decision dilemmas. It was decision dilemmas combined with maintenance difficulties that caused "special measures" not to be activated on the eve of the Egyptian attack in 1973 and for the special systems of Unit 8200 to be unavailable on the eve of the attack on October 2023. In retrospect, a huge gap was discovered between the sense of security provided by these systems and their actual operational benefit.

It is possible that capabilities of the type demonstrated in Lebanon are now providing a similar illusion to our decision makers. Considerable effort and resources were certainly invested in these operations. Could those resources have bought Israel less sensitive operational capabilities? Can we be satisfied with the benefits of the type of intelligence that made Operation Moked possible? This is just one series of questions to ask.

The other series of questions concerns the way the IDF's long focus on special operations has affected Israeli military thinking. "[We have a lot of capabilities. At every stage where we operate, we are already prepared two stages ahead,](#)" the Chief of Staff was quoted as saying during his visit to the Northern Command after the pagers attack in Lebanon. This statement indicates that the IDF continues to think of the war as a chain of capability demonstrations and retaliation balances. In the past, this was called "steps of escalation".

A year into the war, the Chief of Staff is not quoted as briefing his subordinates in the Northern Command on the main goal of removing the Hezbollah threat in the North. Principles such as concentrating the effort and shortening the war are not mentioned. Such ideas, called "theory of victory" in the professional literature, have a huge role to play not only as a war plan but also as a platform for a strategic coordination of expectations.

It is true that the Chief of Staff's words were meant to be quoted in the open media. But precisely because of this, he could be expected to leverage the prospect of severe damage to Hezbollah or at least to convey the deterrent message that the IDF is facing a military decision. Instead, the strategic message he sent is that the pager operation has not changed our strategic approach. The IDF spokesman's statement after the assassination of Ibrahim Akil in the Dahyah district, in which he called it a "targeted attack", carried a similar message.

None of this is a coincidence. The words of the Chief of Staff do not differ in essence from the famous "dynamic and evolving" approach that has characterized the contingency plans of the Southern Command in recent years. The meaning of the phrase, which appears in many IDF documents today, is that plans do not strive for a distinct known operational purpose but rather focus on the idea of flexibility.

Flexibility is an important tactical principle, and it can even be valuable in the management of a long-term strategy like the WBW. But flexibility is not a virtue for the conducting of war-fighting. At that level, clarity and concentration of effort are vital. Clarity of purpose, not fuzziness, is what allows for tactical flexibility. The hidden assumption behind the "dynamic and evolving" approach is that operations are not conducted against the enemy as a military entity but as part of a strategic dialogue with its leadership. This is not a theory of victory.

The current Chief of Staff and his General Staff did not invent the WBW, the fight against terrorism, the deterrence operations or the steps of escalation. These appeared about 30 years ago and gradually became an almost intuitive way of thinking at our military and political level. The WBW greatly strengthened the muscle behind our intelligence and special operations and made the Israeli war machine dependent on them. Our military thinking has adapted to the centralization that characterizes these disciplines.

But the State of Israel has long faced terrorist armies, not terrorist organizations. A warlike way of thinking is required.

It is appropriate to congratulate and bless the IDF's recent successes. It is also right to continue to support the IDF and its commanders in the conduct of the war. But the war is also an opportunity for learning. The unfortunate reality is that even if we escalate to all-out war in Lebanon, chances are that it will end in some kind of agreement, not the complete removal of the military threat. This means yet another war will break out in Lebanon within a few years. The current war is above all else a correction opportunity for Israeli strategy and the IDF's theory of war.

A combatant force should strive to dismantle the enemy as a combatant system. It should be built for this end while making strict assumptions regarding conditions of execution, the absence of the element of surprise, and non-optimal timing, because wars are not series of special operations. The forces should benefit from mutual support, such as air support for ground forces, but not be completely dependent on these envelopes.

The Air Force, Israeli Army Intelligence (IAI) and the Mossad are first and foremost Israel's strategic long arm against Iran. They should be allowed to focus on that role. The ground forces need to be prepared and built to conduct more

independent ground operations in the near circle and be less dependent on a special operations envelope. The success of the operations in Gaza, for which tight and superior air-intelligence envelopes are a critical component, may obscure this need.

Israel must not allow itself to be fooled by success. The facts are that Israel chose not to destroy the enemy's critical production infrastructure in Lebanon though it had done just that in Syria, even though the operational capability to do so was proven.

Like any serious military organization, the enemy will recover from the recent blows, simply because we are allowing him the time he needs to do so.

The IDF's theory of war should be based on solid foundations that distinguish between the world of special operations and the world of war. Hezbollah is an army. Anti-terrorism methods will not do. A year into the war, our learning of lessons and adaptation to the new strategic reality is still ahead of us.

Brig. Gen. (res.) Eran Ortal recently retired from military service as commander of the Dado Center for Multidisciplinary Military Thinking. His book The Battle Before the War (MOD 2022, in Hebrew) dealt with the IDF's need to change, innovate and renew a decisive war approach. His next book, Renewal - The October 7th War and Israel's Defense Strategy, is about to be published by Levin Publications.