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Air Operations in
**ISRAEL'S
WAR AGAINST
HEZBOLLAH**

Learning from Lebanon and Getting It Right in Gaza

Benjamin S. Lambeth

Prepared for the United States Air Force

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Summary

From July 12 until August 14, 2006, the IDF waged a 34-day campaign in Lebanon against the radical Islamist terrorist organization Hezbollah in response to a surprise incursion by Hezbollah combatants into northern Israel and the abduction of two Israeli soldiers in a well-planned provocation aimed at forcing the release of Islamist terrorists held by Israel. That campaign, code-named Operation Change of Direction, included the most complex air offensive to have taken place in the IAF's nearly 60-year history. At the same time, what eventually came to be called Israel's second Lebanon war ended up being the most inconclusive performance by the IDF in its many trials by fire since 1948, in that it represented the first time that a major confrontation ended without a clear-cut military victory on Israel's part.

As the IDF's counteroffensive got under way, Prime Minister Olmert declared that among his government's main campaign goals were the unconditional return of the two kidnapped soldiers and a permanent removal of Hezbollah as a viable fighting force in southern Lebanon. Not surprisingly in hindsight, those extravagant—indeed, unattainable—goals remained elusive throughout the 34 days of combat. Adding further to the frustration felt throughout Israel as the conflict unfolded was the fact that at no time during the campaign were IDF forces able to stem the relentless daily barrage of short-range Katyusha rockets that Hezbollah fired into civilian population centers in northern Israel until a ceasefire finally brought an end to that lethal harassment.

The IDF's Chief of Staff, who largely determined the campaign's complexion and vector, Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, had previ-

ously commanded the IAF and was, by happenstance, the first airman in Israel's history to have occupied the country's top military position at the time the crisis erupted. Because his chosen response to Hezbollah's provocation was to rely at first almost exclusively on precision standoff attacks rather than to opt for a concurrent commitment of IDF troops on the ground in large numbers, the campaign's halting progress and uncertain outcome led many in both Israel and the West to conclude afterward, and in some cases even before the fighting had ended, that because the IDF chief was an airman he had naturally allowed himself to be swayed by a parochial conviction that air power alone could somehow bring about the war's desired outcome. Furthermore, a predominant early impression among many, which persists in most quarters to this day, was that because of Halutz's initial choice of strategy, the IDF's disappointing performance in the second Lebanon war attested at bottom to a "failure of air power"—notwithstanding the fact that the IDF's counteroffensive from its very start entailed not just around-the-clock strikes by IAF fighters and attack helicopters but also thousands of daily rounds of ground-force artillery and battlefield rockets fired against enemy targets in southern Lebanon. In fact, what ultimately "failed" in the planning and conduct of Operation Change of Direction was not Israeli air power or any other instrument of warfare per se but rather a consequential blend of ill-advised civilian and military leadership judgments at the highest level regarding the nature of the adversary, the initial goals set for the campaign, the choice of alternatives for pursuing the campaign's objectives, and the management of public expectations as the counteroffensive unfolded.

As the first full day of combat drew to a close, it became clear that the preferred approach of the Olmert government, at least for the time being, would be to rely exclusively on precision standoff attacks rather than to resort to any early commitment of troops on the ground. Although the IDF had a fully developed contingency plan in hand for a joint air-ground counteroffensive designed for just such a possible circumstance, its leadership was not eager to implement that plan because of the near-certainty of high IDF casualties that any such action would generate. The IDF had no appetite whatever for a reprise of the sort of massive ground invasion that Israel had launched into Lebanon in

1982. It further presumed, rightly or wrongly, that the Israeli rank and file were not ready to countenance the large number of IDF troop fatalities that any such combined-arms operation would inevitably produce. After 18 costly and nonproductive years of previous occupation of southern Lebanon from 1982 to 2000, during which the IDF sustained more than 600 troop losses (almost as many as during the Six Day War of 1967), no one in Israel wanted to return for a replay of that experience. For Israelis, the Lebanon occupation was and remains the IDF's Vietnam. Accordingly, General Halutz rejected any idea of the IDF's going back into southern Lebanon on the ground to recapture and occupy Lebanese territory immediately north of the Israeli border.

The IDF's ground commanders were also opposed to a major land push for the simple reason that Israel's ground forces were unprepared for major combat against a robust opponent such as Hezbollah, however unconventional and asymmetric it was compared with the more classic enemy armed forces that the IDF had successfully faced in years past. Since the start of its preoccupation with the Palestinian *intifada* in 2000, the IDF had conducted virtually no periodic large-scale training of its ground troops for major combat. As a result, operational integration between the ground forces and the IAF had all but ceased to exist, and ground-force readiness for any contingency other than dealing with the Palestinian uprising had been allowed to lapse badly.

Yet at the same time, Halutz wanted to teach Hezbollah a lesson that its leaders would not soon forget. Ever since the IDF's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah had been continuously testing Israel's patience and limits of tolerance by means of a relentless series of unprovoked border incidents and random rocket firings into northern Israel. With the final provocation of the troop abduction, Halutz decided that the time had come to engineer a sea change in the situation by implementing a fundamentally different approach—hence the decision to code-name the IDF's counteroffensive Operation Change of Direction.

During the campaign's first seven days, the IAF flew some 2,000 fighter and attack helicopter sorties. With respect to airspace management, there were often 40 to 70 IAF aircraft operating concurrently in the compact battlespace above southern Lebanon. Most fighter opera-

tions were conducted at altitudes above 12,000 ft to keep IAF aircrews safely beyond the reach of any possible Hezbollah antiaircraft artillery and infrared-guided missile fire. However, the IAF's operating arena extended all the way from Blackhawk helicopters conducting nap-of-the-earth operations during medical evacuation missions to its Gulfstream G550 surveillance aircraft operating in the medium- to high-altitude block, often with only 1,000 ft of separation between blocks. Accordingly, there was a continual hail of munitions falling through the airspace assigned to aircraft operating on station in the lower altitude blocks, making flawless time and space deconfliction an ever-present airspace management requirement. By all indications, the IAF met that requirement with resounding success.

Despite the IDF's many combat achievements during the campaign's first week, it was becoming increasingly clear to the Olmert government's leaders that standoff air attacks and artillery and rocket fire alone would never bring about their sought-after objectives. As the counteroffensive ground on, those leaders found themselves caught in an acrimonious debate centered on the IDF's continued inability to stop the relentless Katyusha fire and the offsetting concern that any escalation to major ground operations would produce an unacceptable number of Israeli troop casualties. Eventually, with the continuing barrage of increasingly intolerable short-range rocket fire into northern Israel, ever more vocal calls began to be heard for a massive IDF ground incursion aimed at driving Hezbollah's forces out of southern Lebanon.

Israel's first significant ground move began on July 17 in a limited quest for an initial toehold north of the border. As operations with tanks and infantry got under way, they quickly came to include house-to-house fighting and responsive Hezbollah hit-and-run tactics that slowed the IDF's rate of progress. As the campaign unfolded and these initial ground forays began to falter, increasing tension arose between those in the IDF who believed that no further gains could be made without a sizable increase in committed troops and a government leadership, fearful of a resultant rise in IDF casualties, that remained reluctant to activate the IDF's reserve units.

As the decisive move to expanded ground operations neared, the IDF mobilized three reserve divisions on July 20 in its largest troop call-up in four years. Only after three weeks of strenuously resisting a ground offensive, however, did the IDF finally bow to the inevitable on August 1 and begin preparing for a major push into Lebanon. Even then, only after deliberations over ceasefire arrangements appeared to be going against Israeli interests did the government ultimately order the implementation of the expanded ground operation plan that was later approved in principle by the cabinet on August 9.

In the end, the issuance of the invasion order on August 11 left the IDF with only three days in which to make the most of its now-imminent ground offensive, rather than the initially hoped-for five or more days before the looming ceasefire went into effect. During those final 72 hours of combat, the IDF tripled its number of ground troops in Lebanon to an eventual high of around 30,000. Not surprisingly, it suffered its heaviest casualties during the last three days of peak-intensity fighting. Coordination among force elements was almost uniformly poor throughout this final phase of the conflict. In some cases, requests from embattled tank crews for immediate close air support (CAS) were denied by the IDF's Northern Command out of concern over the danger of an inadvertent friendly fire incident. The performance of IDF ground forces throughout this escalated endgame further revealed manifold shortcomings in combat tradecraft. Infantry units were often unable to coordinate with armor, and tank crews proved repeatedly nonproficient in night operations. From start to finish, IDF ground operations lacked a clearly identifiable operational pattern. Troops returning home from battle reported that Hezbollah's dug-in defenses and the combatants who manned them had proven far more resilient than expected. In the end, the IAF provided abundant on-call CAS, and many wounded IDF troops were promptly evacuated by UH-60 helicopters under heavy fire.

For the most part, in those mission areas in which it naturally excelled, the IAF performed to its usual high standards of competence throughout the 34-day engagement against Hezbollah. Indeed, the final report of the Winograd Commission, which had been established by Prime Minister Olmert after the campaign ended to investigate

and assess the performance of his government and the IDF, concluded that the IAF had registered “impressive achievements” as by far the most effective service participant in all aspects of Operation Change of Direction. Those achievements included, most notably, the IAF’s largely successful preemptive attack against Hezbollah’s known and targetable medium-range rockets during the campaign’s opening night and its subsequent highly effective time-sensitive targeting operations against the enemy’s short-range rocket launchers (and some medium-range launchers as well) within single-digit minutes after their squads had fired their weapons. The only disappointment in the IAF’s performance noted by the commission was in the realm of timely and effective CAS delivery. In some respects, IAF cooperation with the ground forces was said to have been exemplary, particularly with respect to the integration of utility helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). More problematic, in contrast, was the uneven involvement of IAF fighters and attack helicopters in air-land operations owing to the absence of prior joint practice during peacetime large-force training exercises.

As for the campaign’s final tally sheet, the IAF flew a total of 18,900 combat sorties and struck some 7,000 targets at an average rate of 340 sorties a day. Roughly 12,000 of those were fighter sorties in all mission categories, with attack helicopters racking up another 2,500 sorties. More than half of the IAF’s strike sorties were flown at night, thanks to the imaging infrared technology that was available for use in fighter targeting pods, attack helicopter sensors, and UAVs. In addition, more than 1,500 surveillance sorties and around 1,300 air mobility sorties were flown during the 34-day campaign. IAF rotary-wing aircrews conducted roughly 120 combat search and rescue missions, nearly half of them inside Hezbollah-infested territory and often under heavy fire. Furthermore, 110 combat medical evacuation sorties were flown, 94 of which entailed emergency rescue operations under fire. Compared with the three weeks of major combat in Operation Iraqi Freedom by American and allied forces in March and April 2003, Operation Change of Direction lasted longer (34 days against 21), saw a release of almost as many air-delivered munitions (24,000 compared

with 29,500), and featured more than half the daily aerial munitions delivery rate (705 compared with 1,340).

Viewed in hindsight, the IDF's counteroffensive against Hezbollah in 2006 does not now appear to have been entirely the unqualified setback for Israel that many had initially presumed in its early aftermath. This is particularly evident in light of the considerably more integrated and effective IDF response in December 2008 and January 2009 to a similar set of provocations that emanated from the terrorist organization Hamas, which controlled the Gaza Strip in southern Israel. Although Operation Change of Direction, much as the IDF's subsequent Gaza operation, ended in a less than decisive outcome for Israel given the inherent nature of the opponent, Hezbollah's combat capability was severely diminished by the IDF's unexpectedly and disproportionately massive retaliatory measures. For example, the IDF killed as many as 700 of Hezbollah's most skilled and valued combatants. In addition, a considerable portion of Hezbollah's military infrastructure was either destroyed or badly damaged during the course of the IDF's relentless aerial and artillery bombardment. Furthermore, the IDF learned much about Hezbollah's organization and strategy as a result of its campaign experience, rendering both more susceptible to focused and effective attacks than they had been before. In undertaking its response with such sustained ferociousness, Israel further showed its determination to answer any future challenges from both Hezbollah and Hamas with disproportionate levels of firepower that would have a persuasive deterring effect.

Israel also gained a greatly improved security situation in southern Lebanon as a result of the campaign, and the formerly volatile border region is now more quiescent than it has been in a generation. With the singular exception of three short-range rockets that were fired into northern Israel from southern Lebanon during the IDF's subsequent 23-day campaign against Hamas in the Gaza Strip more than two years later (for which Hezbollah's leaders were quick to disavow any responsibility), not a single Hezbollah rocket has been fired from Lebanon into Israel since the conflict ended, even though Hezbollah is now assessed as harboring far more short-range rockets (as many as 50,000 or so) in its since-reconstituted arsenal than ever before. This suggests

that Hezbollah's post-campaign motivations and conduct have, at least for the time being, all but certainly been influenced for the better by the significant bloodying that the IDF dealt to it and—two and a half years later—to Hamas.

However, this came at a substantial cost to Israel. The most compelling criticism that can be levied against the IDF with regard to its conduct of Operation Change of Direction has to do with the remarkably widespread destruction that its 34-day bombing effort wrought on Lebanon's civilian infrastructure and economy as the result of a misfounded assumption that the Lebanese government had any coercive influence over Hezbollah whatsoever. By the end of the war's first week, some 500,000 Lebanese had reportedly fled their homes to escape the IDF's air and artillery attacks. Most of Israel's attacks against Lebanon's infrastructure were militarily ineffective, having little discernible effect on the campaign's outcome and raising a legitimate question in the minds of otherwise unbiased Western observers as to whether such destruction was proportional to the anticipated gain. That infrastructure damage provided ready grist for Hezbollah's propaganda mill, which was quick to exploit it to the fullest in further securing the terrorist organization's clear advantage in the information war throughout the campaign.

As noted before, the war's less than satisfying outcome in no way reflected a failure of the IAF to perform to the fullest extent of its considerable but not limitless capabilities. Rather, it stemmed from a more overarching deficiency in strategy choice, the most flawed elements of which included a failure by the IDF's leadership to duly update and exploit standing contingency plans for the immediate needs of the challenge at hand, an inconsistency between its avowed goals and the available means and will to pursue them, and the leadership's placement of friendly casualty avoidance above mission accomplishment in its rank-ordering of priorities. There was nothing wrong in principle with the government's decision to respond to Hezbollah's provocation with escalated force. Yet its response was not fully explored in all its risks and ramifications before it committed itself to action. As a result, the IDF initiated its counteroffensive without having given adequate

thought to the campaign's likely endgame and to an appropriate strategy for ending it on a high note.

The greatest problem that undermined the IDF's combat performance throughout the campaign was the pronounced asymmetry between the exorbitant goals initially declared by Prime Minister Olmert and the incapacity of his government's chosen response option to achieve them. Not only were those declared goals progressively ramped downward as the campaign unfolded, they also created initial public expectations that had no prospect of being fulfilled. Although the first two weeks of Operation Change of Direction indeed bore ample earmarks of having been an air-only effort as seen by outside observers, we now know, with the benefit of subsequent revelations regarding the Olmert government's decisionmaking process, that Halutz did not insist on this approach out of a belief that it inherently offered the most promising means of achieving declared mission objectives. Indeed, Halutz never used the term "air power" in characterizing his initial response option. Rather, what he sought to employ to useful coercive effect was precision standoff *firepower*. In clear testimony to that fact, IDF operations from the campaign's first day onward included a total of some 173,000 artillery shells and battlefield rocket rounds fired, more than were expended during the much higher-intensity Yom Kippur War of 1973.

After all is said and done, the core explanation for the Olmert government's initial strategy choice, simply put, was that no one among Israel's top leaders, military or civilian, was ready to sign up for a ground war. In hindsight, one can fairly hold General Halutz, the government's most senior uniformed representative, to task for having failed before the campaign's start, when he admittedly knew better, to resist—forcefully, if need be—Prime Minister Olmert's initial avowed goals of getting the two soldiers returned and decisively crushing Hezbollah as a viable fighting force—goals unachievable by *any* mix of combat power that the Israeli people and the international community would have been likely to tolerate. Yet the decision to start the campaign with a standoff-only counteroffensive dominated by air attacks was not just Halutz's. It was the consensus view as well among Israel's key civilian leaders because it offered the least unacceptable

option for an initial military response. The IDF leadership, Halutz included, knew full well that such a standoff campaign alone would not end Hezbollah's continuing rocket fire into northern Israel, let alone bring about Prime Minister Olmert's most extreme declared goals of getting the two abductees returned and putting Hezbollah out of business once and for all. Nevertheless, there remained a widely felt compulsion to continue deferring the fateful transition to a major ground incursion for as long as possible. To repeat, no one who mattered was calling for an early ground offensive.

The main shortcoming in the government's campaign planning was the substantial disparity that quickly emerged between the government's initially articulated goals and the IDF's actual combat capability, most notably against Hezbollah's ever-elusive short-range Katyushas, which neither Halutz nor the Olmert government's most senior civilians took seriously at first as a core strategic threat to Israel's civilian population and economy. A related problem entailed not defining more attainable mission objectives at the campaign's outset and then applying more aggressive joint measures, including a massive combined-arms response from the very start, to yield a more conclusive and satisfactory outcome.

In the end, wrongly buying into a baseless view of what air power alone could accomplish, as most observers suggested both during and after the campaign—and as many continue to believe to this day—was not the Olmert government's main failing with respect to the planning and conduct of Operation Change of Direction. On the contrary, that belief was never held either by Halutz or by any of his civilian superiors at any time from the start of the crisis. Rather, the government's greatest misstep was taking an overly unreflective view of what military power of *any* kind, unaided by a coherent and effective strategy, could accomplish in a situation in which the declared campaign goals were so unbounded and the IDF's ground troops were so unready for combat against Hezbollah's robust forces since all they had done for the preceding six years had been to conduct lower-intensity operations against the Palestinian *intifada*. That misstep, which had nothing whatever to do with the strengths or limitations of Israel's air power per se, was handily corrected by the time the IDF was ready to embark on its sub-

sequent and more successful counteroffensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip a little more than two years later. There is a clear message in this experience for those among today's U.S. leaders who would postpone, or forgo altogether, due investment against potential high-end threats in the more distant future in order to focus their full concentration of effort against today's more immediate—but by no means exclusive—lower-intensity challenges of the moment.