

## An Analysis of Israel's Counter-Hezbollah Strategy

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*Israel's four-decade struggle against the Shi'a terrorist group Hezbollah has largely failed to produce positive results for the Jewish state. Since Hezbollah's emergence in the early 1980s, their broad cross-sectarian appeal within Lebanon and vast financial support from the Islamic Republic of Iran continue to present a challenge to the Israeli state security apparatus. Having consolidated support of the historically disenfranchised Lebanese Shi'a population and with vast amounts of funding from Iran and a worldwide Shi'a diaspora, Hezbollah solidified itself as the vanguard of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the primary bulwark against Israeli aggression. Following the failed assassination attempt of an Israeli diplomat in 1982, Israel launched a full-scale invasion of southern Lebanon as a means of finally defeating the Palestinian Liberation Organization, providing the stimulus for the various Shi'a militant groups simultaneously fighting sectarian militias as well as the Lebanese Army in the midst of a bloody civil war.*

*During the course of Israel's subsequent 18-year occupation of Southern Lebanon, Hezbollah's terrorist tactics evolved, eventually transforming the group into an insurgent army whose sole aim was to expel Israeli troops from Lebanon and implement traditional Islamic law. The Israeli Defense Forces' (IDF) strategy to confront Hezbollah during the course of their occupation experienced persistent change; frequent changes in military leadership strained Israel's civil-military relations and failed to produce a coherent strategy that adapted to Hezbollah's changing tactics.*

*In the years since Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000, the lessons learned from their nearly twenty-year war as well as the shorter armed conflict against Hezbollah in 2006 failed to materialize. With domestic political turmoil and a resolute Iranian source of funding to Hezbollah, Israel's strategy to counter Hezbollah's political influence in Lebanon and its formidable military wing face continued difficulties for the foreseeable future.*

### Introduction

For nearly four decades, Israel has been engaged in a perpetual—albeit sometimes sporadic—war of attrition against Hezbollah, or the “Party of God.” Hezbollah first appeared as a loose confederation of disgruntled, politicized Shi'a fighting against the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and other militias for control of southern Lebanon in the early 1970s. Following Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon in June 1982, Hezbollah established itself as *the* preeminent Shi'a militant group fighting the “Zionist occupiers,” beating out the likes of the

secular, former co-belligerent from which they split, Amal.<sup>1</sup> Now a significant force in Lebanese politics as part of the March 8 Alliance, Hezbollah primarily exists to provide essential services to its constituents while simultaneously serving the regional interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran through a three-pronged approach, encompassing military, political, and religious pretexts and representing a perpetual thorn in the side of the Jewish state.

The cornerstone of Israel's strategic doctrine—strength through deterrence—is preventing large-scale conventional wars

with its Arab neighbors, like those in 1948, 1967, and 1973.<sup>2</sup> Relying on preemptive offensive operations and leveraging defensible borders, intelligence superiority, and air force supremacy, the IDF utilized an “indirect approach.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the IDF categorized its security threats into “fundamental” and “routine” security.<sup>4</sup> The former involved countering conventional threats from neighboring Arab armies, while the latter focused on border infiltrations and continual terrorist and guerrilla incidents.<sup>5</sup> For the IDF, threats posed by Palestinian militants from Jordan, Lebanon, and other Arab states fell into the latter. At the same time, they relied on punishment, or the threat thereof, as the primary form of deterrence for any perceived or actual acts of aggression by several hostile actors. This line of thinking shaped the IDF’s earliest efforts against Hezbollah throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s, with little credence given to diplomatic efforts. Since Hezbollah’s formal inception in February 1985 and entry into the political arena in 1992, the success of Israel’s continued counterterrorism efforts directed at the Party of God is limited, ebbing and flowing with the tides of regional politics and punctuated by periodic flare-ups and “small wars,” both within its borders and beyond.<sup>6</sup> While Israel maintains a significant conventional military compared to Hezbollah, to this day, the group remains a significant terrorist threat with a vast network of international training, funding, and sympathizers.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Israel’s strategy to counter Hezbollah’s political and military influence within the region and reduce its threat to the Israeli state has largely failed.

This essay discusses and analyzes Israel’s countermeasures against Hezbollah and their impacts in four parts. Part one provides a historical background of Hezbollah’s ideology and the group’s formation amid

Lebanon’s civil war. Part two examines Israel’s counterterrorism efforts through distinct phases: phase one covers from 1982 through 1992; phase two, from 1992 through 2000; phase three, from 2000 through 2006; and phase four, from 2006 to the present. Part three addresses a few lessons from Israel’s fight against Hezbollah that apply to the United States’ campaign against groups such as al-Qa’ida and the Islamic State. Finally, part four summarizes this essay’s findings and comprehensively reviews Israel’s counterterrorism strategy against Hezbollah.

## **Part I: History of Hezbollah**

For even the most well-rounded historians, political scientists, and counterterrorism analysts, attempts at accurately portraying the authentic character of Hezbollah continue to prove difficult, engaging in semantic debates surrounding the subtleties and differences between Hezbollah’s political and military lines of effort. However, participating in such discussions is beyond the scope and purpose of the following analysis. Despite the absence of an agreed-upon definition of terrorism in academic and policy-making circles, Israel and the United States classify Hezbollah’s military activities as terrorism. In doing so, “by definition, any act of violence that it commits or seeks to commit is an act of terrorism, and so there are no gray areas of justifiable behavior.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, working within the confines of Israel’s designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization satisfies the conditions required for properly analyzing its countermeasures against the group and their corresponding outcomes.

## *Geopolitical Landscape*

After the Six-Day War in June 1967, a massive influx of Palestinian refugees fled to the surrounding countries of Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon. Nearly 300,000 refugees settled into camps around Amman and other cities, igniting tensions between the indigenous populations and the Palestinian newcomers.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the 1982 Israeli invasion, the most significant event transforming various factions of discontent Shi'a Muslims in Southern Lebanon into Hezbollah was the expulsion of PLO *fedayeen* from Jordan following the Jordanian Civil War (also known as “Black September”) in 1970. The PLO and other radical Palestinian groups, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), used the Karamah refugee camp in Jordan as a forward operating base, conducting frequent cross-border raids into Israeli territory and attacking IDF patrols.<sup>10</sup> Inevitably, heavy-handed reprisals by the IDF were commonplace, and tensions between Jordan’s King Hussein and the Palestinians boiled over, primarily due to their regular border skirmishes jeopardizing Hussein’s aspirations for peace with his Jewish neighbor. After three failed assassination attempts by Palestinian militants and the events at Dawson’s Field, King Hussein declared martial law on September 16, 1970, and the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) launched a brutal campaign against the refugee camps, killing as many as 15,000 Palestinian militants and civilians.<sup>11</sup> As fighting continued through 1971, the predominantly Sunni Palestinian refugees continued flowing into southern Lebanon, raising the potential for disturbing the country’s already delicate sectarian balance that was decades in the making.

## *Shi'a Politicization*

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Lebanese Shi'a became politicized through the efforts of the prolific cleric Musa al-Sadr. Al-Sadr began his clerical journey in the elite Shi'a seminary of Najaf in Iraq and returned to Lebanon in 1959 to unite the Shi'a youth under a shared ethnic and sectarian identity, encouraging his followers to speak out through their religion and overcome their condition.<sup>12</sup> Al-Sadr’s aspirations came when the Lebanese Shi'a were known for their poverty, underdevelopment, and the growing temptation to adopt leftist and nationalist ideologies such as Ba’athism, Marxism, and Nasserism.<sup>13</sup> Al-Sadr rose to prominence in 1969 as the elected leader of the Lebanese Supreme Islamic Shi'a Council, a representative body authorized by the Lebanese parliament that provided the Shi'a political autonomy independent of their Sunni countrymen.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the PLO—heavily concentrated in the suburbs of Beirut and southern Lebanon—established a “state-within-a-state” following their expulsion from Jordan, challenging the authority of the Lebanese government and undermining the progress of al-Sadr’s *Harakat al-Mahrumin* (“Movement of the Deprived”) and its armed militia, Amal.<sup>15</sup> Founded in 1974 by Musa al-Sadr, Amal sought to challenge “the stifling and often brutal domination of the Palestinian guerrillas whose public support plummeted in the late 1970s and early 1980s for bringing southern Lebanon into the crossfire with Israel.”<sup>16</sup>

As intense clashes between Amal and the Palestinian militias increased in frequency during the early 1970s, so did those between the Maronite Christian-led Lebanese Front and the Palestinians.<sup>17</sup> This fighting eventually metastasized into an all-out civil war in 1975, and the various militias divided

along sectarian lines, further sinking Amal into relative obscurity.<sup>18</sup> In March 1978, Israel invaded southern Lebanon in Operation Litani to eliminate its Palestinian foes and establish a security zone along its northern border.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the introduction of Israeli troops to Lebanon combined with Musa al-Sadr's disappearance the same year and the Iranian Revolution in 1979 resulted in a resurgence of sectarian fervor among the Shi'a population and, thus, a second wind for Amal.<sup>20</sup>

## **Part II: Israel's Counterterrorism Strategy**

### *Phase 1A: 1982-1988, Hezbollah's Early Resistance*

On June 6, 1982, the IDF invaded southern Lebanon after, according to Israel, the PLO violated an eleven-month cease-fire through the failed assassination attempt of the Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom, Shlomo Argov.<sup>21</sup> In response, Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon ordered the commencement of Operation Peace for Galilee. According to Schulze, the operation's objectives were "to destroy the PLO's military and political infrastructure, strike a serious blow against Syria, and install a Christian regime that would sign a peace treaty with Israel."<sup>22</sup> "Utterly preoccupied with the PLO when it invaded, Israel paid little attention to the Lebanese Shi'a community, which predominates in southern Lebanon, the northern Biqa valley, and Beirut's southern suburbs."<sup>23</sup> For Iran and Ayatollah Khomeini, the deployment of approximately 1,500 military advisors from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to Lebanon shortly after the invasion "represented the realization of the revolutionary state's zealous campaign to spread the message of the self-styled

'Islamic Revolution.'"<sup>24</sup> The Ayatollah's order followed the meeting of a limited contingent of nine Shi'a Islamist movement leaders, calling themselves the "Shura Council."<sup>25</sup> This Shura Council became a reference point for the Lebanese Shi'a resistance to Israeli occupation until May 1984, when the name "Hezbollah" was officially adopted.<sup>26</sup>

Following the opening phase of high-intensity combat operations, Israel had no intention of disengaging from the Lebanese theater. The IDF's operational focus after 1983 was low-intensity warfare against the various groups hostile toward their occupation. This period of 1982-1985, according to Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general, Naim Qassem, "was foundational for the crystallization of a political vision, the facets of which were harmonious with faith in Islam as a solution and for the establishment of an effective jihad operation as represented by the Islamic Resistance forcing Israel's partial flight from Lebanon in 1985."<sup>27</sup> It was during this time that the nascent Party of God pioneered the tactic of suicide bombings, or "martyrdom operations," against Israeli targets in Lebanon beginning in November 1982 when an attack against an Israeli government building in Tyre claimed the lives of 91.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, Hezbollah demonstrated the primary purpose of suicide terrorism: "to use the threat of punishment to coerce a target government to change policy, especially to cause democratic states to withdraw forces from territory terrorists view as their homeland."<sup>29</sup> These suicide operations also suggested that Hezbollah's religious fervor could compensate for the gross imbalance in capabilities between the competing forces, therefore laying claim to a devotion from its adherents that no other militia—not even Amal—could match.<sup>30</sup>

Over the next year, Hezbollah continued using high-profile suicide bombings, most notably against the United States Embassy and Multinational Force barracks in Beirut in April and October 1983, respectively. The “use of suicide bombing was based on clear cost-benefit calculations and was adopted because of early lessons learned of its propaganda value and its effectiveness in achieving both political and military goals.”<sup>31</sup> In response, the IDF launched massive bombing raids deep into Lebanon “to ensure that everyone ... gets the message ... a successful attack like the car bomb is likely to become a model for imitation.”<sup>32</sup> While the IDF was practically defenseless against suicide tactics, they experienced greater success repelling Hezbollah’s more conventional assaults. Marcus states:

“Hezbollah carried out large-scale (but ineffective) ‘hill-storming’ operations, which entailed fighters openly charging the IDF’s hilltop fortifications and were partially inspired by Iran’s tactics during the Iran-Iraq War. An incident in February 1987—a frontal assault on IDF positions at Beaufort Castle in which Hezbollah was easily targeted by IDF forces and suffered eight casualties—exemplifies Hezbollah’s ineffective early military strategies and tactics.”<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the IDF’s success in countering Hezbollah’s primitive conventional tactics corresponded with an increase in the group’s use of suicide bombings, reaching their peak in the late 1980s.<sup>34</sup>

Israel’s response to Hezbollah’s religiously inspired suicide bombings and human-wave attacks throughout this phase was comparable to other military powers blinded by conventional asymmetries, blissfully unaware of the growing guerrilla insurgency

in their occupied territories. Similarly, even the February 1985 release of “An Open Letter Addressed by Hezbollah to Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World” failed to signal to the IDF Hezbollah’s commitment to driving them from Lebanon.<sup>35</sup> Hezbollah’s open correspondence with the world clearly stated the group’s objectives: 1) to force “the final departure of America, France, and their allies from Lebanon and the termination of the influence of any imperialist power in the country;” 2) to use “Israel’s final departure from Lebanon [as] a prelude to its final obliteration of existence and the liberation of venerable Jerusalem from the talons of occupation;” and 3) implement an Islamic state modeled after that of 1978-1979 Iranian revolution under *velayat-e-faqih*.<sup>36</sup> By 1984, the rate of attacks against the IDF was so intense that an Israeli soldier was dying every third day.<sup>37</sup> The climax during this period of the conflict between Hezbollah and the IDF came in June 1985, when two members of Hezbollah hijacked TWA flight 847 from Athens, demanding the release of more than seven hundred combatants held in Israeli prisons.<sup>38</sup> Frequent suicide bombings, including those against American and Multinational Force (MNF) targets in Lebanon, combined with the TWA hijacking would prompt the IDF to withdraw a majority of its forces from Beirut in 1985 and consolidate into an enlarged “security zone” encompassing nearly 10 percent of all Lebanese territory.<sup>39</sup>

#### *Phase IB: 1988-1992, From Civil War to Abroad*

As the Israeli occupation entered its sixth year, training and funding from the IRGC continued to flow into Hezbollah’s coffers. Its fighters received advanced training in explosives and demolition, field intelligence, and reconnaissance.<sup>40</sup> One of the earliest recipients of the IRGC’s training in the

Baalbek region of southern Lebanon was Hezbollah's second Secretary-General, Abbas al-Musawi. Al-Musawi recognized the efficacy of this training, utilizing it to pass on to other Hezbollah fighters for use against their rival Amal and the IDF in the late 1980s.<sup>41</sup> As a result, Hezbollah conducted more complex ambushes using rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) and small arms during day and nighttime raids against IDF positions, precipitating significant IDF reprisals. In May 1988, the IDF conducted combined-arms combat operations outside the security zone for the first time to target the Hezbollah strongholds of Maydun and Luwayza, killing sixty militants.<sup>42</sup> These operations reflected "the IDF's increased entrenchment in southern Lebanon and its ... willingness to confront Hezbollah in reactive, higher-tempo operations."<sup>43</sup> Considering its previous tactical shortcomings, Hezbollah adapted to the operational environment again; it began using roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against the IDF, carrying out 178 attacks in 1988 alone.<sup>44</sup> In response, the IDF improved the protective capabilities of its defensive fortifications, further highlighting the IDF's hubris and static and passive mode of operation.<sup>45</sup>

Violence between Hezbollah and Amal culminated from 1988 to 1989 following the kidnapping of United States Marine Corps Lt. Col. William R. Higgins, resulting in an eruption of clashes in the southern suburbs of Beirut and Hezbollah, ultimately winning the Shi'a heartland and significantly degrading Amal's influence in the conflict.<sup>46</sup> In October 1989, the Taif Accords ended the civil war, calling for all militias to disarm. However, with Iranian support, Hezbollah circumvented these requirements and justified the continued existence of its armed factions by referring to them as "Islamic resistance" groups committed to ending Israel's occupation.<sup>47</sup>

The IDF continued operating under the flawed assumption that the Taif Accords would end most of the attacks directed their way. Despite this formal peace process, under the direction of al-Musawi, Hezbollah's rocket attacks into northern Israel continued, prompting his assassination in 1992 by the IDF.<sup>48</sup> Succeeded by current Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah after al-Musawi's death, Hezbollah retaliated with increased rocket attacks, forcing the IDF to implement a more liberal targeting policy. According to Marcus, "this tit-for-tat exchange of firepower marks the origins of the deterrence equation that would evolve throughout the next decade."<sup>49</sup> Although more liberal targeting policies resulted in nominal battlefield results in Lebanon, Hezbollah struck Israeli targets abroad. In 1992 and 1994, Hezbollah attacked the Israeli Embassy and a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, highlighting Israel's continual failure to adapt to its evolving threat landscape.<sup>50</sup>

#### *Phase II: 1992-2000, "Rules of the Game" and the Egoz*

In light of the continued violence, the Oslo Accords in 1993, and domestic political pressures calling for an end to the occupation, the IDF remained engaged with Hezbollah in Lebanon and attempted to secure peace for Israel's northern communities.<sup>51</sup> Former Israeli defense officials classify this period as one in which the IDF operated with "one hand behind its back," unable to change the strategic considerations for its involvement in Lebanon, succumbing to political restraint, and culminating in "the rules of the game."<sup>52</sup> Restricted to "containment operations" against Hezbollah in Lebanon, the IDF's tactics had a limited impact. They often resulted in significant drops in morale and disproportionate responses to Hezbollah's attacks, thereby violating the "rules of the

game” in which both sides agreed [in principle] not to attack civilians.

Following an attack that killed seven IDF soldiers in July 1993, the IDF conducted its first large-scale conventional operation of the decade with “Operation Accountability.” The underlying goal was to inflict a “heavy price” on Hezbollah by pressuring the Lebanese population and government to cease supporting the group.<sup>53</sup> After action reviews (AARs) revealed much of the same: Hezbollah fired more Katyusha rockets into northern Israel, hoping to deter the IDF from conducting future operations of this kind.<sup>54</sup> Still adhering to the “rules of the game,” the IDF’s slow and sporadic operations under General Mordechai proved inadequate to quell the violence from Hezbollah, commanding a significant paradigm shift in the IDF’s counterterrorism strategy beginning in 1994.<sup>55</sup>

Under Major General Amiram Levin, the IDF refocused their efforts by conceptualizing Hezbollah as a “guerrilla army” instead of a “terrorist group.” Opting for a more offensive approach to the group, the IDF formed an elite specialized commando unit—the Egoz. Bearing some resemblance to the U.S. Army’s Special Forces, the Egoz’s primary mission was to train others in the necessary tactics of “counterguerrilla” or “counterinsurgency” warfare.<sup>56</sup> Utilizing “pinpoint” operations, the Egoz launched missions deep into Lebanese territory, away from the security zone, to selectively strike prominent Hezbollah fighters.<sup>57</sup> Complementing the Egoz’s debut in 1995, the IDF launched “Operation Grapes of Wrath” in April 1996, resulting in significant Lebanese civilian casualties and once again incurring the wrath of Hezbollah’s Katyusha rockets.<sup>58</sup> The operation intended to undermine popular support for Hezbollah among the Lebanese

populace and quell their support from Syria. It ultimately failed due to the massacre at Qana, a United Nations (UN) base housing Lebanese civilians seeking refuge from IDF ground and air attacks. The 1996 offensive failed to achieve its strategic goals, demonstrating that the reconceptualization of the group from a terrorist to a guerrilla threat operating as a commando force proved too little too late.<sup>59</sup> Although IDF casualties continued to decrease until its withdrawal in May 2000,

“the small and intimate nature of the IDF and the sacrosanct cultural importance of the IDF in Israel as the ‘guarantors of Jewish survival’ ensured that even limited casualties reverberated deeply in Israeli public discourse and civil society and impacted the thinking at the top and bottom of the military.”<sup>60</sup>

### *Phase III: 2000-2006, Beyond Occupation*

Contrary to predictions of mayhem following Israel’s withdrawal, from 2000 to 2006, an “uneasy quiet” fell over the region. Hezbollah limited its attacks to the Shebaa Farms area in the Golan Heights—a territory disputed by Israel, Lebanon, and Syria that eventually became Hezbollah’s justification for maintaining its arms.<sup>61</sup> From 2000 to 2003, Hezbollah initiated more than 250 anti-aircraft, mortar, and rocket attacks, which Hassan Nasrallah described as “reminder operations.”<sup>62</sup> In this context, Nasrallah compared Israel’s stoic and militaristic public image to a spider web, describing it “as a formidable military power, but one that is rooted in a civil society that has become materialistic and lazy, with self-satisfied, comfortable, and pampered citizens who have gone soft.”<sup>63</sup> Despite the frequency of these small-scale attacks, only 27 Israeli soldiers were killed

between 2000 and 2006, compared to the annual rate of 25 throughout the IDF's 18-year occupation of Lebanon.<sup>64</sup> With Syrian forces continuously supporting Hezbollah and being the only foreign power remaining in Lebanon, the IDF adapted its deterrent posture "from the 'routine security' realm vis-à-vis Hezbollah to the realm of conventional state-on-state deterrence vis-à-vis Syria."<sup>65</sup> Thus, Syria received the brunt of Israeli retaliation in response to Hezbollah's attacks on the IDF.

During this phase, the most telling aspect of the Israeli counterterrorism strategy against Hezbollah was the perceived erosion of IDF deterrence, punctuated by Israeli's willingness to participate in large-scale prisoner swaps and failure to follow through on its avowal to respond to attacks and kidnappings. The reasons for this relatively weak response were twofold. First, the risk-averse and casualty-sensitive Israeli public would not tolerate further entanglement in Lebanon after nearly two decades of war. Second, the IDF failed to capitalize on the lessons learned during its occupation and establish a coherent deterrence strategy against Hezbollah's hybrid threats. As a result, Hezbollah operated on the expectation that Israel would continually endure intermittent incursions and minor border skirmishes as part of the long-held tit-for-tat "rules of the game" that defined the post-withdrawal environment.

Adherence to the "rules of the game" would only last until July 12, 2006, when Hezbollah launched an attack on Israeli soil and ambushed an IDF patrol on Lebanon's southern border with Israel. In the attack, Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers and killed three more.<sup>66</sup> Drawing on the IDF's prior inaction, Hezbollah took on the role of a rational actor and operated within the confines of what it perceived as Israel's "red lines."<sup>67</sup> While initially successful, the

daring cross-border raid to fulfill its *wa'd al-sadiq* ("faithful promise") to secure the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli custody was a grave miscalculation. According to Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, Israel's retaliatory offensive readily displayed the IDF's commitment to fighting terror "by inflicting continuous, painful blows that inflict on the other side a much higher price than he ever expects ... one that produces deterrence."<sup>68</sup>

Relying on air power and heavy artillery bombardment, the IDF attempted to achieve Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's war aims: 1) returning the kidnapped soldiers to Israel; 2) a complete cease-fire; 3) the expulsion of Hezbollah from the area in line with United Nations (UN) Resolution 1559 (which calls for Hezbollah's disarmament), and 4) the deployment of the Lebanese Army in southern Lebanon to maintain security.<sup>69</sup> However, in an eerie repeat of 1996's "Operation Grapes of Wrath," the Israeli bombing of Qana during the 2006 war that killed 28 civilians quickly shuddered its base of Arab support from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>70</sup> The Israeli operation lasted 34 days, and despite killing approximately 500 fighters and using psychological operations to discredit Hezbollah, the IDF failed to achieve its strategic goal of restoring the credibility of its deterrence.<sup>71</sup>

#### *Phase IV: 2006-Present, Syria and the "Calm Between Wars"*

Israel envisioned its survival through a dichotomous lens of peace or war for nearly its entire existence. In the wake of the 2006 Lebanon War's strategic failure, the IDF concluded that a "total victory" over a highly-capable, well-funded guerrilla group such as Hezbollah was not possible in the near term. High-level leadership recognized that non-state actors conduct a long, twilight



struggle—a slow-motion, slow-burning war against them.<sup>72</sup> Rather than accumulating “tactical” victories that would lead to an overall strategic win, the IDF’s *strategic* goal in its fight against Hezbollah is to degrade its military capabilities—sometimes dubbed “mowing the grass.”<sup>73</sup> Through sharp, decisive blows that restore Israel’s deterrent position and deliver a period of “relative” quiet, the IDF anticipates draining the motivation from enemy fighters to harm Israel and eventually cause the movement’s collapse.<sup>74</sup> Referred to as the “campaign between wars,” Israeli counterterrorism operations during these periods of “relative” quiet are used to “foil enemy military buildup, and led to the deaths of figures in Hamas, Hezbollah, and the ranks of the Syrian military.”

Conversely, “Israel understood that its enemies use the years of quiet on its borders to build up their ranks and capabilities, incrementally raising the threat to Israel’s population and encroaching on its freedom of operation.”<sup>75</sup> According to the Atlantic Council, Hezbollah’s active manpower is approximately 30,000 fighters, with a reserve force of another 10-20,000.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, Israeli estimates place Hezbollah’s surface-to-surface rocket and missile arsenal at 130,000 to 150,000, signaling a marked increase in the group’s strength during the “campaign between wars” and suggesting a significant weakness in the IDF’s strategy of gradually degrading Hezbollah’s military capabilities.<sup>77</sup>

With the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011, Hezbollah’s military priorities and Israel’s countermeasures against them took on a new dimension, entrenching themselves in regional politics and great power competition. Initially justifying its intervention in the conflict to protect the Syrian-Lebanese border from spillover, Hezbollah’s role transformed from

“advising” and “assisting” to direct combat operations against the Islamic State, al-Qa’ida, and other Sunni militant groups.<sup>78</sup> In the broader context of Iran’s regional interests, Tehran’s vested interest in the Assad regime’s stability and ultimate survival is twofold. First, Syria serves as the physical and symbolic land bridge through which weapons, funding, and other forms of support reach Hezbollah in Lebanon. Second, as a physical *and* ideological extension of the Islamic revolution, Hezbollah is an external expression of Iran’s perpetual war of annihilation against Israel. Given the implications of the drastic transformation in the geopolitical landscape over the last decade, alterations in the Israeli strategy for countering Hezbollah are hardly surprising. Consequently, Israeli air strikes against Iran, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime in Syria reflect this. Recognizing attempts at holding the Lebanese government accountable for Hezbollah’s actions are futile, “IDF strikes are designed to erode Hezbollah’s capabilities as a part of a long-term attritional campaign to cumulatively deter Hezbollah.”<sup>79</sup>

### Part III: Evaluations

#### *Israeli Strategic Evaluation*

In nearly four decades of asymmetric competition accented by periods of intense violence, numerous opportunities for the IDF to adapt its strategy to that of Hezbollah presented themselves but failed to materialize. While successful during the opening phase of “Operation Peace for Galilee” and subsequent occupation of southern Lebanon in the early 1980s, the IDF’s strategic doctrine historically emphasizing conventional military power to counter existential threats left it ill-equipped to defend against the nascent Hezbollah’s

guerrilla and terrorist tactics. Moreover, the formation and early success of the Egoz and strained civil-military relations during the Oslo Accords peace process in the early 1990s hamstrung the IDF's efforts to assimilate its strategy to Hezbollah's evolving threat profile in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil war. Lastly, sustained external support from Iran and Syria amplified Hezbollah's effectiveness.

With mounting pressure from a war-weary Israeli public, the looming realization within the Ministry of Defense and Knesset that the status quo was untenable, and the IDF's false hope for Hezbollah's continued adherence to "the rules of the game," Israel unilaterally withdrew from southern Lebanon in May 2000. The subsequent "calm between wars" prompted an uneven recalibration of the mutual deterrence equation defining the Israel-Hezbollah conflict. As Hezbollah continued to gain domestic and international support in the early 2000s, Israel's focus on the Second Intifada detracted from its ability to focus on launching an effective campaign targeting Hezbollah's leadership, counternarratives against its propaganda efforts, and its primary sources of funding and training. The 2006 war is the last example highlighting the strategic failures of the IDF in countering Hezbollah. Israel's conventional retaliation after Hezbollah's deadly attack on IDF soldiers in the Shebaa Farms area killed approximately 600 fighters but took the lives of nearly twice as many civilians, prompting massive international condemnation and an UN-brokered cease-fire after 34 days of fighting.<sup>80</sup> More importantly, the war resulted in Hezbollah's military capabilities and domestic popularity emerging more potent than before. Pew Research polls in 2007 indicated Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah was among the most popular leaders in the Middle East and North Africa,

completely negating one of the IDF's goals of the 2006 war of diminishing Hezbollah's popularity.<sup>81</sup>

### *Lebanon: Israel's Afghanistan?*

On August 30, 2021, the last U.S. troops left Afghanistan, marking the end of the longest war in American history and evoking comparisons to the withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975. In the aftermath of 9/11, the initial U.S. invasion of Afghanistan aimed to remove the Taliban regime from power, destroy al-Qa'ida's training camps, and prevent them from carrying out future attacks against the U.S.<sup>82</sup> In March 2003, the United States invaded Iraq; it toppled the regime based on intelligence suggesting Saddam Hussein harbored al-Qa'ida training camps and continued its nuclear weapons program in direct contravention of multiple United Nations decrees.<sup>83</sup> The American military engaged in perpetual nation-building and counterinsurgency operations for nearly twenty years as part of the broader Global War on Terror. Since the American national security posture pivoted back to great power competition, "over-the-horizon" capabilities remain the centerpiece of American counterterrorism policy, as demonstrated by the drone strike killing al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in August 2022.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, several lessons emerge when comparing Israel's fight against Hezbollah to that of America's against al-Qa'ida.

First, the United States and Israel heavily relied on conventional military strength to defeat adversaries utilizing guerrilla and terrorist tactics. In its germinal stage, Hezbollah was primarily a religious terrorist organization that sought to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon. Turning to suicide bombings to impose its will and drive the Israeli occupying force from Lebanon, Hezbollah's use of such tactics "suggested

that religious fervor could compensate for small numbers.”<sup>85</sup> Subsequent Israeli countermeasures to Hezbollah’s suicide attacks were overwhelmingly subservient to the military deterrent posture that emerged from the IDF’s previous existential wars against its Arab neighbors. Drawing on conclusions from the previous analyses in this essay, attempting to counter Hezbollah’s religiously motivated extremist violence “by pursuing qualitative superiority” did not produce the intended effects and, in turn, further emboldened Hezbollah’s resistance activities.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, when responding to the asymmetric threats of al-Qa’ida, the U.S. strategy fell victim to the same short-sightedness.

Second, involvement in the Second Intifada in September 2000, less than four months after the withdrawal from Lebanon, had two detrimental effects: 1) allowing Hezbollah to reconstitute and increase its military capabilities and 2) degrading the IDF’s ability to make doctrinal changes to a deterrent posture better suited to combatting Hezbollah’s transformation into a hybrid threat. Analogous to the Second Intifada, America’s shift in priorities to Iraq—an [near] immediate engagement in a new area of operations—detracted from developing a coherent strategy conforming to the conditions on the ground in the nation’s preceding military contest. Afghanistan, America’s “original” combat theater in the Global War on Terror, inevitably played second fiddle to the deteriorating situation in Iraq at the expense of allowing al-Qa’ida to regain its strength and preventing the U.S. from harmonizing competing priorities.

## Part IV: Conclusion

With its heavy human and financial capital investment in nearly all sectors of Lebanese society, Hezbollah presents a particularly unique challenge to Israel against the backdrop of more “traditional” terrorist organizations in its immediate vicinity, such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). As the most formidable opponent to Israel’s occupation of southern Lebanon in the early 1980s, Hezbollah’s evolution from a Shi’a terrorist group hellbent on Israel’s destruction to a legitimate player in Lebanese politics with a visibly armed resistance wing constitutes a national and regional security threat extending beyond its home in Beirut. Conversely, the Israeli countermeasures against the group failed to adapt to Hezbollah’s Janus-faced nature. Instead, its perpetual reliance on conventional military superiority projected through its deterrent posture against its regional neighbors left the IDF woefully unprepared to meet the challenge posed by a militant organization as multifaceted as Hezbollah.

Since the 2006 war’s conclusion and Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian civil war beginning in 2011, Israeli countermeasures continue to reflect a strategy that ignores various alternative mechanisms. Both sides understand that the next round of conflict invites mutually devastating consequences, and neither can eliminate the threat of retaliation in the event of a first strike. Therefore, the current solution presupposes that each side is deterring the other through the promise of a full-scale retaliation.<sup>87</sup> The accumulation of sharp, decisive blows directed against Hezbollah’s military capabilities may give Israel a comparative advantage in a future conventional conflict. However, participation in electoral politics, its deep integration into the Lebanese state, and the

maintenance of its armed wing to serve the interests of Iran and vanguard of the Islamic revolution illustrate Hezbollah's complex nature and ability to withstand Israeli countermeasures.

Finally, shifts in Israel's domestic political stability present similar challenges to the IDF and political leadership as during the 1990s. Last December, Benjamin Netanyahu's return as Prime Minister of Israel and leader of the country's most far-right government in history risks reigniting tensions between Israel and Hezbollah.<sup>88</sup> Similar to the IDF's involvement in the Second Intifada distracting the Israeli government from Hezbollah's rearmament between 2000 and 2006, the domestic fallout from protests over Israel's proposed changes to its Supreme Court could strike a blow to its focus on combatting Hezbollah's rocket attacks and border incursions.<sup>89</sup> Hezbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, echoes these sentiments, stating that Israel's domestic crisis will prevent them from "responding too harshly."<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, mixed responses from the IDF in confronting Hezbollah's activities on its northern border with Lebanon further obfuscate any resemblance of a coherent strategy to deter the Party of God. Continued provocations by Hezbollah fighters and activists, such as damaging Israeli surveillance equipment, establishing small outposts, and firing anti-tank missiles at the

fence demarcating the UN-recognized Blue Line, are met with limited responses from the IDF, thus testing their resilience.<sup>91</sup> However, at the IDF's insistence, the force with which the IDF retaliated against Hezbollah during the 2006 War openly deters the group from undertaking any serious military operations. With domestic political upheaval, increasingly brazen attacks on Iran<sup>92</sup>—Hezbollah's primary source of funding—and a muffled response to Hezbollah's probes into Israeli territory, Israel's campaign of mixed messages to Hezbollah threatens the current "uneasy peace" and risks further bloodshed.

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