

From the Second Intifada through the Second Lebanon War to Operation Cast Lead: Puzzle Pieces of a Single Campaign

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This essay seeks to view Operation Cast Lead as a piece in a developing sequence, beginning with the second intifada and continuing through the Second Lebanon War, in terms of two major components: the military response to the threat and the public understanding of the effectiveness of the military response. There is a close symbiotic relationship between the two components because Israel's response to the threat involves military combat elements alongside civilian stamina and defense capabilities. The two components are intertwined, as the supreme goal of the enemy is to harm the nation's civilians. Harming the Israeli military is the enemy's secondary goal; if achieved, it enables the enemy to proceed towards its primary objective.

The IDF embarked on Operation Cast Lead after many years in which the southern part of the country was subjected to severe ongoing rocket fire that completely changed the fabric of civilian life. The enemy's guiding principle was to exhaust the country's inhabitants and make life in Israel's public domain unbearable. During those years, the IDF took various actions in accordance with different operational approaches. These did not yield any real change in the scope of the high trajectory fire, and in practice did not lead to an improvement in the lives of the residents of the south. The period of calm during the last six months of 2007 produced brief intervals without terrorism, but did not change the state of affairs in any essential way. On the contrary, it allowed the enemy

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to grow stronger without any interference. In operational-professional terms, it was clear for some time that the situation could not continue for much longer and that military action was in the offing.

This essay examines how the threat against the State of Israel has changed and the process by which the response to this threat was formulated. Internalizing the deep significances of the change is important for understanding the country's security challenges and for producing relevant, up-to-date approaches to these challenges.

Changes in the Threat and the Components of Response

The threat against the State of Israel has undergone a dramatic change. The enemy¹ changed its strategic concept from an offensive maneuver aimed at conquering part of the country² to a strategy of long term attrition of Israel's citizens. The enemy reasoned that over many years, it would succeed in exhausting the country's residents and damage the fabric of life to such an extent as to make life intolerable.³ The phenomenon of attrition is not in and of itself new: since the establishment of the state, the enemy has used terrorism at varying levels of force against Israel, from the fedayeen to Palestinian terrorism of various stripes with limited success. That did not require a change of Israel's security concept, as Israel continued to deal with the primary threat of large military forces trying to conquer Israeli land. The change in the country's security philosophy occurred as a result of the change in the enemy's method of operation. The size of Israel and the fact that it has no strategic depth made Israel's enemies assume that high trajectory fire aimed at the Israeli home front in large quantities and with a minimum of variables⁴ would allow them to achieve their goal.⁵

Israel's security response as formulated by Ben-Gurion was based on three fixed principles. First, because Israel lacks the capacity to change the total strategic situation by means of aggression, its basic strategic goal must be defensive. Therefore, the goal of war is to act forcefully to achieve a quick decision against the enemy and create as long an interval as possible until the next confrontation. The second principle concerns the notion of deterrence. Once deterrence collapses, the IDF must move quickly and decisively in order to foil the threat and create the maximum number of years until the next confrontation. Underlying the

third principle is the notion of moving the fighting onto enemy soil and shortening the duration of the war as much as possible.

The application of this philosophy against the classical threat allowed Israel to foil several threats while creating intervals of several years between one violent confrontation and the next. The results of these confrontations, which did not involve Israel's civilians, created great expectations of the armed forces among the public. This view of the military did not change in recent years, despite the change in the nature of the threat and the subsequent outdating of Israel's security philosophy.

Starting to Understand the Change: The Second Intifada – “Let the IDF Win”

The second intifada forced the IDF to confront waves of deadly terrorism and obligated IDF commanders to conduct an in-depth examination of basic concepts such as “decision” and “victory.” As Shlomo Gazit summarized:

This is how a political reality was created, which allowed and justified our asking two persistent questions: (a) What constitutes an Israeli victory and decision in the violent struggle between us and the Palestinians? (b) Is it possible to attain such a decision using IDF forces in this Palestinian uprising?⁶

When it became clear to the Israeli public that the IDF's attempt to confront this threat did not provide an immediate response, rather continued to confront it with a complex challenge, the slogan “let the IDF win”⁷ fell on fertile public soil. The IDF was facing a critical difficulty in finding a response to terrorism, while large segments of the population were convinced that the army was capable of solving the problem in one fell swoop. The comments by GOC Southern Command on the popular slogan were also not helpful in this regard:

Saying such things is idiotic. I command the IDF forces in the Gaza Strip and the Southern Command, and I am telling the entire nation of Israel that I, as a military commander... am taking every step that needs to be taken and making every move that needs to be made.⁸

The complexity of the threat and the shortcomings of the response, while permeating the public discourse, did not ripen into an acute

understanding of the need to change the terminology of the strategic discourse in Israel, which instead continued to be based on irrelevant terms such as “victory” and “decision.” Between 2002 and 2005, the IDF, together with the General Security Services, managed to formulate an updated concept of warfare against terrorism and significantly reduce its scope in a gradual process until it was overcome in practice (in the Judea and Samaria region) in 2005 and removed from the State of Israel’s public agenda.

The Second Lebanon War: Media-Saturated Disappointment versus Lasting Strategic Achievements

The Second Lebanon War raised the public’s frustrations to new peaks. The IDF embarked on this war under a hailstorm of bellicose, sneering utterances using terms such as “victory” and “achieving a decision against Hizbollah,” based on an idea that the IDF had the capability of stopping the high trajectory fire, without bothering to clarify the meaning of such terms in the context of the confrontation with Hizbollah and the threat it represented. The end of the fighting set off a media-saturated wave of disillusionment and the most senior commentators on the war proclaimed a defeat for Israel. Moshe Arens said, “In the history of the State of Israel there has never yet been such a war...There has never yet been such a defeat, a defeat in a war against a few thousand Hizbollah fighters.”⁹ The lack of understanding of the essence of the threat and the ways to handle also encouraged the Winograd Commission to join in this wave. The Commission wrote in its report: “At the end of 34 days of fighting, there was no decision for the IDF, not even in isolated ‘points.’ Hizbollah fire at Israel’s home front stopped only because of the ceasefire. Israel did not win a clear victory in the war.”¹⁰

In practice, several strategic goals were defined for the IDF in the Second Lebanon War, and three major ones were in fact achieved:¹¹ (1) stopping terrorism aimed at Israel from sovereign Lebanese territory: the years since the Second Lebanon War have been among the calmest along the northern border since June 1982; (2) realization of Lebanon’s responsibility to rule its southern region: the Lebanese army has deployed through the south, Hizbollah has been pushed back into urban areas and is therefore finding it difficult to operate in open spaces, and its freedom of movement in the south has been significantly curtailed;

and (3) inflicting substantial damage on Hizbollah: the organization took an unprecedented blow with some 1,500 casualties among its forces, including over 600 killed, as well as severe damage to its assets in Beirut and the south. Therefore, the organization has been careful not to act openly against Israel.¹²

Understanding the complexity of the threat the IDF faces and internalizing the achievements of the war came only after some time had passed. To cite the words of Amir Peretz: "Lebanon was a war of awakening...We have to ask why so many important conclusions were reached only after the Second Lebanon War."¹³ In the army, it became clear that the achievements of the Second Lebanon War stemmed from the application of a different operational philosophy. This philosophy, applied in part in the Second Lebanon War, is based on understanding the army's limitation in paralyzing all the high trajectory launching capabilities of the enemy within the relevant time frame. The new way of thinking includes three fundamental notions: (1) a destructive strike of firepower against the enemy's core assets; (2) a quick maneuver to damage the enemy and paralyze its launching capabilities in the area of the maneuver;¹⁴ and (3) stamina and defensive capabilities on the civilian front.

Operation Cast Lead

Israel embarked on Operation Cast Lead two and a half years after the Second Lebanon War, and in that time efforts were made to implement its lessons. Regarding the operational concept, during the operation the IDF implemented two primary components: destructive firepower against the core assets of Hamas and terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, and a follow-up ground maneuver designed to deepen the damage and stop rocket launches from the area of the maneuver. The civilian defense component was also more effective than in the Second Lebanon War. In the course of the operation, the IDF garnered the support of the media, and most of the reports noted the positive aspects of the fighting and the changes for the better in the IDF, while pointing out that the commanders were fighting on the front lines, in front of their men.¹⁵

The comparison to the Second Lebanon War is self-evident. Did Operation Cast Lead attain any outstanding achievements not attained in the Second Lebanon War? In the Second Lebanon War, the fighting

stopped as the result of a ceasefire agreement, while in Operation Cast Lead, though the rocket fire continued, Israel unilaterally announced a ceasefire. The scope of the maneuver in Operation Cast Lead was immeasurably smaller than the scope of the maneuver in the Second Lebanon War. Complete paragraphs lifted from the Winograd Commission Report fit Operation Cast Lead, such as: “A para-military organization, numbering thousands of fighters, managed to hold out for long weeks against the strongest army in the Middle East, which enjoys total aerial superiority and vast advantages in size and technology.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, no voices were raised to cry about a defeat in this operation. This change in the public discourse is likely the result of two causes. The first is the desire to create a corrective to the defeatist criticism that emerged after the Second Lebanon War; the second relates to the understanding of the complexity Israel is forced to face.

Trends and Future Directions

The Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead must be viewed as a continuum in Israel’s campaign against the resistance movement. It seems that difficult confrontations still await Israel, but the cumulative achievements from Operation Defensive Shield through the Second Lebanon War to Operation Cast Lead, alongside the formulation of an appropriate strategic-operational philosophy and its realization in future confrontations, will supply the inhabitants of Israel with a satisfactory level of security. In this context, it is important to note several components:

A forceful response to every incident: Israel and the IDF must formulate disproportionate response packages for every attempt to undermine the security of the country’s citizens, using the principle that one rocket counts as much as one hundred, and understanding, on the basis of past experience, that one rocket is always followed by more. Israel must determine – in deeds, not in words – a forceful price tag for every enemy attempt from the north or the south to harm Israeli citizens, even if this means a possible deterioration into a widespread confrontation. Israel must view such a confrontation, if forced upon it, as an opportunity to respond with force and leave the enemy with high costs of continuing provocations. Only prior preparation and training of such response packages, alongside clarification of their underlying principles to the public, will allow for effective application in real time. Therefore,

and because of the nature of the threat, it is necessary to stop the unproductive, paralyzing discussion of what is called “exit strategy” or “exit scenario.” There is no point in looking for any exit scenario ahead of time; the attempt to prophesy such processes in the past has never succeeded, and it is hard to imagine how it would succeed any better in the future. It is necessary to identify the opportunities as well as the risks as they present themselves and to deal with them during the fighting. Constructing an infrastructure of strategic and operational knowledge that will allow Israel to manage the risks must be done both before and in the course of the fighting.

Civilian stamina and defensive capabilities: Israel must build up civilian stamina to handle long situations of confrontation when the home front is attacked by rockets and missiles. Such stamina requires first and foremost sharing with the public all the components of the security concept. The Israeli public proved its stamina in the years of suicide bombings during the second intifada, and there is no doubt as to its ability to withstand challenges that the future may hold. In addition, the State of Israel and the IDF must act in order to formulate an effective defensive philosophy for the civilian front, whose harbingers were already visible during Operation Cast Lead. It is necessary to continue the development of this component in the security philosophy taking shape.

The media and public opinion shapers: The media and various commentators have tremendous influence over the mood of the Israeli public. The stark contrast between the conduct of the media in the Second Lebanon War and its conduct during Operation Cast Lead, despite the similarities between the two events, requires closer examination. The various media personnel and commentators, not to mention former IDF commanders, must understand the enormity of their responsibility for the Israeli public’s stamina. Irresponsible talk on the part of any one of them is liable to cause twofold damage: (1) constructing a snapshot of the situation that is encouraging to the enemy, which feeds on its information and uses it as its primary source for understanding the reality on Israel’s side, and (2) weakening the social resilience and spreading panic and confusion.

A sober look at the fighting that was forced on the State of Israel in recent years necessitates a look at the fundamental bases of the country’s security concept. This philosophy must be brought up to date in order

to create the proper strategic-operational framework for the challenges awaiting the nation. One may look at the full half of the glass and see how Israel was able to stand up to the Palestinian terrorist threat coming from Judea and Samaria, formulate an appropriate response and patterns of conduct, and in practice remove this threat from the public agenda. Only a similar move against the high trajectory fire can provide a fitting security response.

Two and a half years after the Second Lebanon War it is clear that many achievements were attained, despite failures in the IDF's operation. The achievements of Operation Cast Lead too must be measured over time. We must stop measuring the success of the operation on the basis of fleeting events. Such an analysis must be made from a long term perspective, knowing that only in the future will it be possible to judge whether Israel's strategic situation improved as a result of this operation.

Notes

- 1 This essay uses the word "enemy" to refer to Syria, Lebanon, Iran, and organizations such as Hizbollah and Hamas
- 2 The threat embodied by this strategic idea will henceforth be called "the classical threat."
- 3 The sense of attrition is seen in the erosion of the public's trust in the state's ability to provide it with basic security, and damage to the economic and social fabric of life and the state's ability to provide basic services, such as maintaining the educational system routine.
- 4 The idea of changing dosage is a component in the enemy's philosophy striving to find the balance between operating firepower of great enough scope to damage the fabric of life yet contained enough to prevent a significant response on Israel's part.
- 5 See Gabriel Siboni, "High Trajectory Weapons and Guerilla Warfare: Adjusting Fundamental Security Concepts," *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 4 (2008): 12-18.
- 6 Shlomo Gazit, "Let the IDF Win," Council for Peace and Security, January 3, 2003.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Brig. Gen. Samiya, "The Slogan 'Let the IDF Win' Is Despicable" Ynet, December 7, 2000.
- 9 Moshe Arens in a speech at a gathering in favor of establishing a commission of inquiry into the events of the Second Lebanon War, Tel Aviv, September 8, 2006.
- 10 Winograd Commission Report, p. 369, paragraph 19.

- 11 See Gabriel Siboni, "From Gaza to Lebanon and Back," *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 1 (2007): 66-69.
- 12 See the essay by Ronen Manelis in this publication, comparing the response of the organization to Operation Defensive Shield to its response to Operation Cast Lead.
- 13 Attila Somfalvi, "Lebanon Was a War of Awakening," Ynet, December 28, 2008.
- 14 For more on the subjects of firepower and maneuver, see the essay by Giora Segal in this publication.
- 15 In the Second Lebanon War IDF commanders were greatly criticized even though they fought on the front lines no less than the commanders of Operation Cast Lead. However, as part of what was in media style at the time, they earned the nickname "plasma commanders."
- 16 Winograd Commission Report, p. 34, paragraph 9.