

TURNING THE CLOCK BACK 20 YEARS IN LEBANON

On 24 May 2006, Israel's prime minister, Ehud Olmert, was invited to address a joint session of Congress. In his widely publicised speech, he claimed that Iran stood 'on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons', a development that would pose 'an existential threat' to Israel. He added: 'It is not Israel's threat alone. It is a threat to all those committed to stability in the Middle East and to the well-being of the world at large.'⁵² Less than two months later, on 12 July 2006, Israel launched a war against the Lebanese Shia militia Hizbullah, publicly – if simplistically – identified by Israel and the US as a proxy for Iran.⁵³ After a month's futile fighting, 119 soldiers and 43 civilians had been killed in Israel, and at least 1,000 civilians and a small but unknown number of Hizbullah fighters had died in Lebanon.

There were obvious reasons why Israel and the US might have regarded the destruction of Hizbullah as the necessary gambit before an attack on Iran. Were Tehran to be targeted first, Israel would be vulnerable to retaliation not only from long-range Iranian missiles but also, as Israel's defence officials had suggested two years earlier, from Hizbullah's short-range Katyusha rockets across the northern border. And if Israel launched a combined attack on Iran and Hizbullah, almost inevitably drawing in Syria too, Israel would face military reprisals on three fronts at once. Instead, dealing with Hizbullah's rockets first – and at the very least intimidating the Syrian army – would isolate Tehran militarily and free Israel and the US to attack Iran at a time of their choosing. That was the assessment of the White House, according to Seymour Hersh's conversations with officials.⁵⁴

The July 2006 hostilities began with a relatively minor incident by regional standards: Hizbullah launched a raid on an Israeli military post on the border with Lebanon, during which three Israeli soldiers were killed and two captured. A brief Hizbullah rocket strike on sites close to the northern border left no one seriously hurt and was described at the time by the Israeli army as a 'diversionary attack'.⁵⁵ Five more soldiers died shortly afterwards when their tank crossed over into Lebanon in hot pursuit of the

captured Israelis and hit a landmine. This was the latest in a long-running round of tit-for-tat strikes by Israel and Hizbullah since Israel's withdrawal from its military occupation of south Lebanon in May 2000. A few weeks before Hizbullah captured the two soldiers, for example, Mossad had been strongly suspected in the assassination of two Islamic Jihad militants in a car bombing in the port city of Sidon in south Lebanon.⁵⁶

Israel was well aware of the reasons for the Hizbullah attack. The Shia militia had several outstanding points of friction with Israel since the latter had withdrawn from its two-decade occupation of south Lebanon in May 2000. First, as recorded by United Nations peacekeepers stationed in south Lebanon, Israeli war planes had been flying almost daily over Lebanon to carry out spying operations in violation of the country's sovereignty, and to wage intermittent psychological warfare by creating sonic booms to terrify the local civilian population.⁵⁷ Second, since Israel's withdrawal, its army had continued occupying a small corridor of land known as the Shebaa Farms. Israel, backed by the United Nations after Tel Aviv had exerted much pressure on the international body,⁵⁸ claimed that the Farms area was Syrian – part of the Golan – and that it could only be returned in negotiations with Damascus; Lebanon and Syria, meanwhile, argued that the land was Lebanese and should have been handed back when Israel withdrew.⁵⁹

But third and most important in explaining the July 2006 border raid was a bitter dispute between Hizbullah and Israel over prisoners. Israel had refused after its withdrawal in 2000 to hand over a handful of Lebanese prisoners of war (the exact figure was difficult to establish as Israel had opened a secret prison, called Facility 1391, into which many Lebanese captives disappeared during the occupation of south Lebanon).⁶⁰ Regarding this issue as a point of honour, Hizbullah had vowed to capture Israeli soldiers so that they could be exchanged for the remaining Lebanese prisoners. It had seized three soldiers in October 2000, six months after the Israeli withdrawal, without incurring major reprisals.⁶¹ Although on that occasion the soldiers had died during their capture, Israel later agreed an exchange of 23 Lebanese, 12

other Arab nationals and 400 Palestinians it was holding for the return of the soldiers' bodies and a captured Israeli businessman.⁶² According to reports in the Israeli media, there had subsequently been three unsuccessful attempts by Hizbullah to capture soldiers to ensure the return of the last two or three remaining Lebanese prisoners, and especially Samir Kuntar, who had been held by Israel since 1979.⁶³ The day after the eruption of the July 2006 hostilities, a *Ha'aretz* editorial noted:

The major blow Israel suffered yesterday, the circumstances of which will certainly demand explanations, is particularly harsh primarily because this did not come as a surprise. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned in April that he planned to get back Samir Kuntar, even by force ... Freeing Kuntar along with the other Lebanese prisoners and captives may have prevented yesterday's kidnapping.⁶⁴

As expected, following the border raid, Hizbullah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, offered a prisoner swap for the two soldiers.⁶⁵

Israel, however, was in no mood to compromise or negotiate.⁶⁶ Calling the seizure of the soldiers an 'act of war', Israel began bombing Lebanon from the air the same day and launched a limited ground invasion. (Notably, a senior Israeli army commander later admitted that the point of destroying Lebanon was not the return of the two Israeli soldiers but to weaken Hizbullah.⁶⁷) The next day Israeli war planes destroyed airports, roads and bridges, factories, power stations and oil refineries – part of Israel's campaign to 'turn back the clock in Lebanon 20 years', as the Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz, phrased it.⁶⁸ Was Halutz referring, even if unconsciously, to better times for Israel, before Hizbullah's establishment in the early 1980s? The civilian death toll in Lebanon rose rapidly. Hizbullah responded, cautiously at first, by firing its primitive rockets at areas near the northern border, including the towns of Kiryat Shmona and Nahariya, that were well prepared for such strikes. The Shia militia waited four days before extending its reach and hitting Haifa with a volley of rockets that killed eight railway workers. By then more than 100 Lebanese civilians were dead from the Israeli bombing.⁶⁹

When Israel failed over the course of four weeks to significantly dent Hizbullah's military capabilities – the rocket attacks continued and expanded, and the army's attempts at invading south Lebanon were repeatedly repulsed – Israel and the US were forced to go down diplomatic channels, seeking a United Nations resolution, 1701, that they hoped would limit Hizbullah's ability in the future to resist Israel. The two demanded disarmament of the militia by the Lebanese army and enforcement by UN peacekeepers. However, given the weakness of Lebanon's army and the reluctance of the international community to commit troops, the chances of defanging Hizbullah looked remote. Israel, therefore, spent the last three days before the ceasefire was due to come into effect dropping some 1.2 million US-made cluster bombs over south Lebanon.⁷⁰ The use of these old stocks of US munitions, which were reported to have a failure rate as high as 50 per cent,⁷¹ meant that hundreds of thousands of bomblets – effectively small land mines – were left littering south Lebanon after the fighting finished. The intention seemed clear: to make the country's south as uninhabitable as possible, at least in the short term, and the job of isolating Hizbullah fighters that much easier should Israel try another attack.

There were three early indications that Israel might be seeking to widen the war to Iran and Syria. First, within hours of the attack, the deputy director-general of Israel's Foreign Ministry, Gideon Meir, was trying to implicate Iran in Hizbullah's capture of the two soldiers, and by extension Syria too: 'We have concrete evidence that Hezbollah plans to transfer the kidnapped soldiers to Iran. As a result, Israel views Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria and Iran as the main players in the axis of terror and hate that endangers not only Israel, but the entire world.'⁷² The 'concrete evidence' never emerged from the dark corridors of the Mossad.

Second, Israel claimed that Hizbullah's arsenal of some 12,000 rockets hidden across south Lebanon – from which it managed to fire as many as 200 a day into northern Israel – had been supplied by Iran and Syria.⁷³ This may have been true but applied a double standard typical of Israel's relations with its neighbours: Israel was supplied by the US with the latest weaponry, including cluster

bombs. Arriving at the Haifa railway depot where the workers had been killed, Shaul Mofaz, Israel's Transport Minister and a former Chief of Staff, said the fatal rocket contained Syrian ammunition.⁷⁴ At the same time, Israeli military commanders held a press conference at which they claimed that they had destroyed a Syrian convoy trying to re-supply Hizbullah. 'These are rockets that belong to the Syrian army. You can't find them in the Damascus market, and the Syrian government is responsible for this smuggling', said the army's head of operations, Gadi Eisenkott.⁷⁵ Both Iran and Syria had good reasons to want Hizbullah strong: Israel's difficulties invading Lebanon might deter it from attacking them; and Israel's problems with Hizbullah on the northern border were one of the few leverage points Syria and Iran possessed in international negotiations.

And third, Israel's leaders took advantage of the Western media's instant and convenient amnesia about the chronology of Hizbullah's rocket strikes. Israel argued that its army's massive bombardment of Lebanon, far from being an act of barely concealed aggression, was a necessary defensive response to Hizbullah's rockets.⁷⁶ The attacks were popularly referred to by Israeli officials and commentators as Hizbullah's attempt to 'wipe Israel off the map' – a clear echo of a phrase closely (though wrongly, as we shall see later) associated with Iran's leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In fact, the Hizbullah rockets had been fired in retaliation for the Israeli aerial onslaught, and Nasrallah had repeatedly used his TV appearances to call for a ceasefire.⁷⁷ When at one point the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, won Israel's agreement to a 48-hour suspension of air strikes on south Lebanon, Israel broke its promise within hours while Hizbullah largely honoured the pause in hostilities, even though it was not party to it.⁷⁸ Nasrallah appeared keen to show that his militia was disciplined and that it had a specific aim: namely, a prisoner swap.⁷⁹ The Western media, however, concentrated on Israeli arguments that Hizbullah was seeking the Jewish state's destruction – with the implication that Iran was really behind the plan.⁸⁰

There was one sense, however, in which Hizbullah's rockets may have been fired for Tehran's benefit – though few seemed to

understand the significance. Most critics, including international human rights organisations, regarded the rocket fire from south Lebanon either as ‘indiscriminate’ or as targeted at Israeli civilians. But while Hizbullah’s projectiles were not precise enough to hit specific or small targets, they were often accurate enough to suggest the intended target. Though not reported by the local and international media, some observers on the ground, including myself, saw that a significant proportion of the rockets landed close by – and in some cases hit – military sites in northern Israel, including weapons factories, army bases, airfields, communication towers and power stations.⁸¹ Israel was able to conceal this fact through its military censorship laws, which ensured that reporters were unable to explain what had been hit, or what military targets might exist, at the site of Hizbullah strikes. Nazareth, for example, was repeatedly mentioned as a target of rocket attacks, with the implication that the Shia militia was trying to hit a ‘Christian’ city (most observers appeared not to appreciate that the city has a Muslim majority),⁸² without journalists noting that military facilities were located close by Nazareth. I can reveal this information now only because a subsequent *Ha’aretz* article noted in another context the existence of an armaments factory in Nazareth.⁸³

The same conclusion – that Hizbullah had been trying, at least on some occasions, to target military sites in Israel – was subsequently reached by the Arab Association for Human Rights, based in Nazareth. Its researchers found a close correlation between the existence of a military base or bases close by Arab communities in the north and the high number of Hizbullah strikes officially recorded against the same communities.⁸⁴ After the war, the Israeli media admitted a few successful strikes on military sites, including a hit on an oil refinery in Haifa.⁸⁵ Hizbullah’s ability to direct its fire towards such targets, if less often hit them, was possible because on several earlier occasions pilotless Hizbullah drones, supplied by Iran, photographed much of northern Israel, mimicking on a small scale Israel’s own spying operations.⁸⁶

Another direct hit was reported by Robert Fisk, a British journalist based in Beirut who was not subject to the censor.

Fisk revealed that the army's most important military planning centre in the Lebanon war, an underground bunker in the hillside of Mount Miron close to the border, had been repeatedly struck by rockets – a fact later confirmed by Israel's leading military correspondent Ze'ev Schiff. Fisk wrote:

Codenamed 'Apollo', Israeli military scientists work deep inside mountain caves and bunkers at Miron, guarded by watchtowers, guard-dogs and barbed wire, watching all air traffic moving in and out of Beirut, Damascus, Amman and other Arab cities. The mountain is surmounted by clusters of antennae which Hizbollah quickly identified as a military tracking centre. Before they fired rockets at Haifa, they therefore sent a cluster of missiles towards Miron. The caves are untouchable but the targeting of such a secret location by Hizbollah deeply shocked Israel's military planners. The 'centre of world terror' – or whatever they imagine Lebanon to be – could not only breach their frontier and capture their soldiers but attack the nerve-centre of the Israeli northern military command.⁸⁷

Hizbullah's futile targeting of these well-protected military sites with their Katyusha rockets served a purpose, however. It suggested to Israel not only that Hizbullah knew where Israel's military infrastructure was located but that Iran knew too. Why reveal this to Israel? Because, we can surmise, Tehran may have hoped that, by showing just how exposed Israel was militarily to Iran's more powerful, long-range missiles, Israel's leaders might think twice before attacking Iran after Hizbullah.

EVIDENCE THE WAR WAS PLANNED

Iran and Hizbullah had good reason to fear that the assault on Lebanon – and whatever was supposed to follow it – had been planned well in advance. Nasrallah's deputy, Sheikh Naim Qassem, certainly thought so. He told the *an-Nahar* daily that two days into the fighting Hizbullah learnt that Israel and the United States had been planning an attack on Lebanon in September or October. 'Israel was not ready. In fact it wanted to prepare for two or three months more, but American pressure on one side and the Israeli desire to achieve a success on the other ... were factors

which made them rush into battle.⁸⁸ Are there any grounds for Qassem's belief that Israel was working to a prepared, if secret, script with the Americans rather than, as the official version suggests, improvising after the two soldiers' capture? There are several strong indications that it was.

First, in an interview and separate article published shortly after the ceasefire between Israel and Hizbullah was agreed, respected American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh revealed that Vice-President Dick Cheney and his officials, led by neocon advisers Elliott Abrams and David Wurmser, had been closely involved in the war. US government sources told him that earlier the same summer several Israeli officials had visited Washington 'to get a green light for the bombing operation and to find out how much the United States would bear. Israel began with Cheney. It wanted to be sure that it had his support and the support of his office and the Middle East desk of the National Security Council.' After that, 'persuading Bush was never a problem, and Condi Rice was on board'.⁸⁹ With these agreements in place between Washington and Tel Aviv, a war of reprisal could be launched the moment a Hizbullah violation of the border took place. A hawkish former head of intelligence at Mossad, Uzi Arad, expressed it this way: 'For the life of me, I've never seen a decision to go to war taken so speedily. We usually go through long analyses.'⁹⁰

The main concern in Tel Aviv and Washington, Hersh pointed out, was with Hizbullah's rockets. 'You cannot attack Iran without taking them [the rockets] out, because obviously that's the deterrent. You hit Iran, Hezbollah then bombs Tel Aviv and Haifa. So that's something you have to clean out first.'⁹¹ But the neocons had other reasons for supporting an Israeli attack on Hizbullah, according to Hersh. First, they wanted the Lebanese government of Fuad Siniora, seen as loyal to Washington, to be able to challenge a weakened Hizbullah and assert the Lebanese army's control over south Lebanon.⁹² And second, the US air force was hoping that their Israeli counterparts would be able to field-test US bunker-busting bombs against Hizbullah before they were turned on Iranian sites. From the spring, he added, the US and Israeli military worked closely together. 'It was clear

this summer, the next time Hezbollah made a move ... the Israeli Air Force was going to bomb, the plan was going to go in effect ... I think the best guess people had is it could have been as late as fall, September or October, that they would go. They went quickly.⁹³ Hersh noted that a US government consultant had confided in him: 'The Israelis told us it would be a cheap war with many benefits.'⁹⁴

Second, a report by Matthew Kalman in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, published a week into the war, supported Hersh's account:

More than a year ago, a senior Israeli army officer began giving PowerPoint presentations, on an off-the-record basis, to US and other diplomats, journalists and think tanks, setting out the plan for the current operation in revealing detail. Under the ground rules of the briefings, the officer could not be identified. In his talks, the officer described a three-week campaign: The first week concentrated on destroying Hezbollah's heavier long-range missiles, bombing its command-and-control centers, and disrupting transportation and communication arteries. In the second week, the focus shifted to attacks on individual sites of rocket launchers or weapons stores. In the third week, ground forces in large numbers would be introduced, but only in order to knock out targets discovered during reconnaissance missions as the campaign unfolded.⁹⁵

And third, there is the self-serving, though nonetheless revealing, evidence about the build-up to war from Israel's Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, to the Winograd Committee, a panel he set up to investigate the army's dismal performance against Hizbullah. Olmert told the Committee that he spoke to the Israeli General Staff in January 2006, as he became acting prime minister after Ariel Sharon was felled by a brain haemorrhage, about preparing a contingency plan for attacking Lebanon should a soldier be captured by Hizbullah, an event Israel was expecting but seems to have done little to prevent. Olmert said he then held further talks with the military in March about drawing up more definite plans. He claimed that he was the one directing the army to ready itself for war.⁹⁶ There is good reason to believe that Olmert's testimony is right in respect of there existing by July 2006 a military plan for

attacking Lebanon, but wrong about when the plan was drawn up and about his role in its preparation.

In fact, after Olmert's testimony was leaked to the media, members of the General Staff criticised him for having kept them out of the loop: if Olmert was planning a war against Lebanon, they argued, he should not have left them so unprepared.⁹⁷ That claim can quickly be discounted as a red herring. Apart from the improbability of Olmert being able to organise a war without the senior command's knowledge, references can be found in the Israeli media from the time of the war acknowledging the fact that the army was readying for a confrontation with Lebanon, just as Olmert claimed. On the first day of fighting, for example, the *Jerusalem Post* reported of the planned ground invasion: 'Only weeks ago, an entire reserve division was drafted in order to train for an operation such as the one the IDF is planning in response to Wednesday morning's Hizbullah attacks on IDF forces along the northern border.'⁹⁸

But even more importantly, there is every reason to doubt that in Israel's highly militarised system of government – where prime ministers are almost always generals too – Olmert, a military novice, would have been allowed to take a significant role in the army's plans for how to deal with a regional enemy. The General Staff would have had their own plans for such an eventuality, regularly revised according to changing circumstances and coordinated in part with Washington. Olmert would at best have been able to choose from the plans on offer. That was certainly the view of General Amos Malka, a former head of military intelligence, when he testified to the Winograd Committee. He told the panel that politicians came to the army to discuss a military operation 'as if coming for a visit', adding that the politician

does not come with anything of his own, he has no [military] staff, no one prepared papers for him, he has not held a preliminary discussion, he comes to a talk more or less run by the army. The army tells him what its assessment is, what the intelligence assessment is, what the possibilities are, option A, option B and option C.

Malka also dismissed Chief of Staff Dan Halutz's claim that he was following the orders of politicians in prosecuting the war against Lebanon. Such a relationship, he said, 'does not exist in Israeli decision making. The army is part of the political echelon.' Giving the Committee members a brief history lesson, Malka concluded: 'David Ben-Gurion [Israel's first Prime Minister] was both defense minister and prime minister, and the army was his executive branch, for education and establishing settlements as well. Since then, we've placed strategy in the hands of the army, but we forgot to take it back when the reasons for doing so ceased to exist.'⁹⁹ Malka's view was supported by Binyamin Ben Eliezer, the Infrastructures Minister and a member of the war cabinet, who told the Winograd Committee that Olmert had been 'misled, to put it mildly' by the army. 'Olmert said to me: "I am not a company, platoon or brigade commander, nor am I a general, as opposed to my predecessor [Ariel] Sharon. All of the generals I met with did not present any plans".'¹⁰⁰

Experienced military analysts also inferred the same conclusions from the Winograd Committee's heavily censored interim report, published in May 2007. While endlessly castigating the Israeli leadership over its 'failures' in prosecuting the war against Lebanon, the report revealed almost nothing on the most important questions: what had happened at the start of the war and why had Israel's leaders taken the decisions they did? The reporter Ze'ev Schiff of *Ha'aretz* observed:

The main conclusion emerging from the testimony given to the Winograd Committee by the three most important players – Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defense Minister Amir Peretz and former chief of staff Dan Halutz – is that the army dominates in its relationship with the government ... The conclusion is that the Israel Defense Forces has too big an impact on decision making.¹⁰¹

That may in part explain the Committee members' failure to understand the process by which Olmert reached his decision to go to war.

Our impression is that the prime minister came to the fateful discussions in those days with his decision already substantially shaped and formulated. We have no documented basis from which it is possible to obtain hints as to his process of deliberation, as to what alternatives he considered, nor as to the timeline of the decisions that he made and their context.¹⁰²

This passage echoed the conclusions of Aluf Benn of *Ha'aretz* two days into the war: 'The brief time that passed between the abduction [of the two soldiers] and Olmert's announcement of a painful response indicates that his decision to undertake a broad military operation in Lebanon was made with record speed. That he had no doubts or hesitations.'¹⁰³ Unusually, the Committee could find no evidence of the conversations between Olmert and Halutz that preceded the war, and therefore concluded that this was because the Prime Minister made the decision 'in haste' and 'informally' – in other words, that Olmert did not consult with anyone. A more convincing explanation is that Olmert and the Israeli military concealed the true circumstances surrounding the launching of the war because the decision had been taken in advance.

Both the General Staff and Olmert probably had additional reasons for wanting to muddy the waters on the issue of responsibility for the war. After the army's dismal performance in Lebanon, commanders were keen to restore a little of their dignity and the army's deterrence power by claiming that the politicians had interfered in ways that damaged their ability to defeat Hizbullah. Olmert, on the other hand, was facing some of the lowest popularity ratings ever for a serving prime minister, almost universally regarded as a leader without the military experience needed to cope with the new climate of confrontation in the Middle East. Admitting that he had simply rubber-stamped the General Staff's plans would have damaged him even further, underlining to Israelis that he was not a warrior like Ariel Sharon they could trust in difficult times. It would also have set him on course for a clash with the army, a fight he would have inevitably lost against one of the institutions most respected by Israeli society.

A far more probable scenario was that from the moment Olmert took up the reins of power, he was slowly brought into the army's confidence, first tentatively in January and then more fully after his election in March. He was allowed to know of the senior command's secret plans for war – plans, we can assume, his predecessor, Ariel Sharon, a former general, had been deeply involved in advancing and that had been approved by Washington. Olmert was brought into the picture relatively late. If the observations of Hersh and the Hizbullah leadership are to be believed, the hasty and chaotic nature of Israel's prosecution of the war – and the resulting dismal military failures – reflected, at least in part, the fact that the Israeli army was pushed into war too early, before it had fully prepared, by Hizbullah's capture of the soldiers. Comments from an anonymous senior officer to *Ha'aretz* suggested that the army had intended an extensive ground invasion of Lebanon in addition to the aerial campaign, but that Olmert and possibly the Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz, shied away from putting it into effect after the unexpected failure of the aerial bombardment in defeating Hizbullah. 'I don't know if he [Olmert] was familiar with the details of the plan, but everyone knew that the IDF had a ground operation ready for implementation.'¹⁰⁴

SYRIA WAS SUPPOSED TO BE NEXT

Had Hizbullah been beaten, what would this plan have required next? The answer, it seems, is an attack on Syria, with Israeli air strikes forcing Damascus into submission.¹⁰⁵ According to reports in the Arab media during the early stages of the war against Lebanon, that was the fear in Syria and Iran. The newspaper *al-Watan* reported a phone conversation in which President Bashar Assad of Syria was supposedly told by the Iranian leader Ahmadinejad: 'The Zionist-American threat on Damascus has reached a dangerous level, and there is no choice but to respond with a strong message so the aggressors will reconsider whether to launch a preventive attack against Syria.'¹⁰⁶