The Arab Perspective of the 2006 Israeli War with Hezbollah

The Egyptian Strategic Research Center al-Ahram Annual Strategic Report

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The United States has been involved in the global war on terrorism for more than six years, yet the importance of reading what Arab intellectuals, analysts and security officials are saying about regional conflicts remains elusive for many American military planners. It is vital that we assess and highlight Arabic books of military significance to understand not only our adversary, but also those Arab governments who assist in the fight against terrorism. Egypt's al-Ahram Center for Strategic Research based in Cairo publishes an annual report on the impact of crises, policy decisions both external and internal to the region, and changes of government that take an overall holistic approach to the problems stretching from Iran to North Africa. This Arabic tome is eagerly awaited by political and security analysts in the region and is read by serious Arab academics on terrorism, military affairs, and regional national security issues. The 2005-2006 volume will be the subject of this review essay and will focus on the eagerly anticipated chapter on Israel's war with Hezbollah.

This article is designed to provide American military readers with the Arab perspective of this war, and it is highly recommended that Arabic, Hebrew, English, and European sources be studied and read to gain an overall appreciation of the 33-day conflict between the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and the Shiite militant group Hezbollah. This is important because many experts believe this conflict will flare up again in the near future. Studying this particular conflict is important for American military leaders at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, as it represents the future types of insurgency warfare that has become the staple of the 21st century American way of war. There is no question that Israel's adversaries — Syria, Iran, and Palestinian rejectionist groups — will eagerly study the reaction and response of Israel to Hezbollah's tactics. Even as you read this essay, Hezbollah is likely rearming itself in preparation for a future confrontation with Israel. Hezbollah is acquiring weapons systems that no doubt will reflect what they have learned in fighting the Israelis. Arabic books of military significance represent the cutting edge of what should be the focus in educating America's future military leaders; however, we ignore such books written by friends and foes of the region at our peril.

Lebanon's Machiavellian Political Landscape

On the eve of the war between Hezbollah and the IDF, there were political stressors within Lebanon as a result of the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005. These stressors altered the status of Syria's hegemony over Lebanon after the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and Lebanese politics coalesced into two major blocks, which were clearly evident within Lebanon's *Majlis al-Nuwab* (Parliament). One faction was made up of the *Mustaqbal* (Future) Party led by the Prime Minister Hariri's son Saad Eddine, the Socialist Progressive Party led by Walid Jumblatt, and the Action Party led by Samir Geagea. This block was unified by their anti-Syrian stance and the removal of Lebanon's President Emile Lahoud, who simply ignored the constitutional precedent that set presidential term-limits and remained Lebanon's president at the behest of Syria. Opposing this faction was the Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, Hezbollah led by Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Amal led by Nabih Berri, and the Free Nationalists led by Colonel Michel Aoun. Their platform was to maintain arms and resistance as long as the Israelis occupy the Sheba Farms. Note that Lebanese Christians are divided into both camps, the Action Party and Free Nationalist, while the Druze, which were represented by the Socialist Progressive Party, are in the Hariri (Sunni) anti-Syria camp. Hezbollah and Amal both represent Shiite interests and are in the Lahoud pro-Syria camp. There are those in Lebanon, primarily within the current government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the anti-Syrian coalition, who believe Hezbollah attempted to break the deadlock between these two political blocks by introducing a new dynamic when it kidnapped the two Israeli soldiers. The book highlights internal pressures within Hezbollah to obtain the release of its guerillas from Israeli captivity. Of interest is that when Hezbollah kidnapped the two Israeli soldiers (Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser), Lebanese politician Suleiman Franjieh, the Lebanese Communist Party, and the Lebanese Baathists all

expressed support for Hezbollah tipping the balance between the two coalitions. When Hezbollah engaged the Israelis by kidnapping two of their soldiers, the Lebanese government and its armed forces saw in this the opportunity to assert control over South Lebanon once Hezbollah was weakened by what was expected to be a route undertaken by Israeli forces.

Arabs in the region refer to the 2006 Israeli war with Hezbollah as the Sixth Arab-Israeli War. The kidnapping of the two Israeli soldiers represented an opportunity to remove Hezbollah from Lebanon's political equation, using force as a means of restructuring a weakened Hezbollah within Lebanon's fractious political factions that were divided into anti and pro-Syrian camps. Israel tactically has to address the number of Hezbollah rockets fired in North Israeli towns and settlements. Israeli Chief of Staff General Danny Halutz, who rose through the ranks of the Israeli Air Force (IAF) to become commander of the IAF, was heavily influenced by his service. His staff drew up a list of Hezbollah targets that included bases, electrical grids, media outlets, and water stations. After extensive IAF bombardment, ground forces would push Hezbollah north of the Litani River with armor and mechanized infantry. The IDF planned a 20-40 kilometer buffer zone, sanitizing the area and cutting off Iranian and Syrian resupply of Hezbollah.

Impact on the Wider Arab World

Hezbollah's kidnapping and killing of the two IDF soldiers along the Lebanese and Israeli border led Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan to contend that Hezbollah initiated the war. These three Arab states stated that non-state actors cannot be allowed to drag sovereign nations into a war. Opposing this viewpoint were Syria, Iran, and Palestinian rejectionist groups that supported Hezbollah's actions. The Druze leader Walid Jumblatt was blatant when he said, "*Lebanon will not be an arena for proxy wars between Iran and Syria on the one side and Israel and the United States on the other*." This is a veiled reference to the mess Hezbollah had dragged the country into. Saudi Arabia and Jordan refused overflight of Iranian aircraft proceeding to Lebanon, despite claims Iran's flights were humanitarian in nature. Perhaps the most tangible example of differences over Hezbollah's precipitation of conflict with Israel is the July 15, 2006, Arab League Ministerial in which Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Tunisia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, and the Palestinian Authority (Abu Mazen) were openly critical of Hezbollah. While Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Yemen, Sudan, and Qatar justified Hezbollah's actions, holding on to the same tired anti-Israeli rhetoric that characterizes past Middle East politics. While the Arab League is typically viewed as an ineffective instrument, such votes need to be noted by the United States as it develops bilateral and multilateral policies in the region. The 2006 Hezbollah war with Israel identified like-minded nations who see the unacceptability of non-state actors starting and bringing a war upon a nation-state and its citizens. From this, a regional multilateral alliance can be formed designed to prevent the destabilizing influence of destructive non-state entities like al-Qaida and Hezbollah.

Hezbollah Strategy

Arab reports presuppose Israel had many military contingency plans for Lebanon and the conflict gave regimes, as well as terrorist organizations the ability to assess those plans and Israel's reaction. ... Israel knew the types of weapons Hezbollah had, but what the Israelis missed was how Hezbollah would tactically deploy and utilize its rocket arsenal.

Hezbollah's overall strategy is one of general defense, denying the Israelis an outright political and military victory in south Lebanon. The organization prepared offensive traps for advancing IDF units. These traps included establishing urban kill zones, ambushes, and improvised explosive devices.

The volume highlights that Hezbollah was surprised by the amount of ground forces the IDF committed. Hezbollah's operational plans in support of the overall defensive strategy was to implement plans for psychological warfare, the attrition of advancing IDF ground units, and undermining the IDF's logistical trail.

Hezbollah put much thought into IAF strikes and studied previous IDF ground operations like Peace for Galilee (1982) and outlined the problems over the course of two decades into how Hezbollah could absorb Israel's potent aerial and artillery barrages. Other conflicts that shaped Hezbollah's military thinking were Vietnam and the Soviet-Afghan War. This analysis led to a decision to find ways of dispersion, denial, and deception. It also led to the development of a strategy of prolonging the conflict, which they viewed as a military-psychological victory. Hezbollah constructed extensive tunnels, underground bunkers, secret hideouts for command and control, logistics, hiding Hezbollah leaders, and protecting arsenals. The success of Hezbollah in protecting their leadership is evidenced by the inability of Israel to target Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah. Not only was the Secretary General of Hezbollah successfully hidden between 12 July and 27 August 2006, he taped and gave 10 speech broadcasts to the Lebanese public and the wider Arab world. These announcements, coupled with the constant firing of rockets, became a symbol of the IDF's lack of success. What is unique about the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli conflict is Hezbollah's views of its rocket arsenal as a central strategic asset.

Arab reports presuppose Israel had many military contingency plans for Lebanon, and the conflict gave regimes, as well as terrorist organizations the ability to assess those plans and Israel's reaction. There was much focus on the opening phase of the conflict, and how Hezbollah would absorb the punishing first-strike by the IAF. Israel understood Hezbollah's weapons stockpile: its possession of Sagger-3, Spigot-4, and TOW anti-tank missiles. Israel knew the types of weapons Hezbollah had, but what the Israelis missed was how Hezbollah would tactically deploy and utilize its rocket arsenal.

IDF Military Strategy

The first phase of the Israeli military strategy was a combined IAF and IDF artillery barrage. The second phase was to merge the aerial and artillery barrage with a mechanized and armored advance

of IDF ground forces. These phases must not be viewed as distinct but regulated to provide the IDF maximum options in the achievements of military objectives. These objectives included leaving Hezbollah in a position of weakness vis-à-vis other Lebanese factions. Another objective was to expose the self-evident reality that Lebanon, a sovereign nation, was not in control of all parts of the country. This would in turn lead a significant portion of Lebanese to blame Hezbollah for drawing the nation into a war. The war would also expose the way in which Lebanon was a stage for a proxy war between Iran and Syria on the one hand and Israel on the other.

Hezbollah's Objectives

Hezbollah reduced its primary objectives to active defense and attritional guerilla assaults on the IDF, retaining as long as possible the option of launching Katyusha and other rockets into northern Israel to demonstrate the IDF's inability to defend its citizens. Another facet of Hezbollah planning was preparing for Israeli Special Forces raids. The issue of information denial and deception took on greater importance for this weaker adversary. Hezbollah understood the efficacy of Israeli aerial reconnaissance as a means for the IAF to conduct precision strikes; Hezbollah wanted to deny Israel this advantage and channel strike to maximize collateral damage to:

· Play to al-Jazeera;

· Outrage regional public opinion;

· Alienate the populace;

· Galvanize the region to Hezbollah's advantage; and

· Demonstrate IDF failure by continuing rocket strikes and broadcasts from Shiekh Nasrallah.

From Hezbollah's perspective preserving its rocketry represented an ability to terrorize one million Israelis living in the north.

Israelis needed to focus on decapitating the Hezbollah leadership, destroy its weapons stockpiles and rockets, weaken Hezbollah light infantry, and retrieve IDF prisoners dead or alive.

Development of the Conflict

Concentrated IAF strikes beginning July 11, 2006, were designed to accomplish Israeli objectives, and three days into the conflict, the Hezbollah headquarters in Beirut was struck. Israel applied its target assassination tactics in specific areas known to house Hezbollah leaders, weapons, and command centers. The only impact this was to have in hindsight was to slow down Hezbollah's ability to exercise command and control, but not entirely eliminate it. IDF units entering south Lebanon expected the same resistance seen in 1982, but instead encountered a new Hezbollah in which guerillas emerged from tunnels, urban strongholds, and densely packed towns to lay ambushes for IDF mechanized forces. An order to take the village of Bint Jebeel ended in fierce fighting, with Hezbollah using saturation RPG tactics and machine-gun fire to channel IDF armor towards anti-tank weapons. These are not spray and pray tactics, but a well thought out insurgency tactic of drawing IDF armor and mechanized infantry into kill zones.

Hezbollah flag

On July 27, the Israeli cabinet decided not to push further north and withdraw its forces from Maran, Ras Aytrun and Bint Jebeel. On July 30, the IAF bombed Qana, wounding 60. The collateral damage of this particular town gave Hezbollah much propaganda mileage, since it is among the symbols Islamist militants use to amplify Muslim victimization, and even Usama Bin Laden has mentioned the town. In 1996, Israelis shelled a UN compound in Qana with 800 refugees causing 106 Lebanese deaths. The incident occurred April 18, 1996, and the war still raged on to April 2006, 10 years to the month. This would become a galvanizing public relations coup for Hezbollah.

On August 1, 2006, Arabic sources reference an Israeli Special Forces raid at the Dar-al-Hikmah Hospital in Baalbek, where Israeli prisoners were being held. Five Lebanese were taken hostage, and airwaves were filled with propaganda and counter-propaganda as to whether the five Lebanese hostages were Hezbollah or simple citizens. It was then revealed that among those taken by the Israelis were individuals who had similar names to Hezbollah leaders; Israel released all five on August 22.

Between August 1-22, 2006, the IDF ground assault was widened with a plan to push 6-7 kilometers into southern Lebanon and the Litani River to reestablish the pre-2000 buffer zone. This was to seize the opportunity and provide United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) forces more geography that would satisfy Israel, as to strategic depth away from the range of most Hezbollah rockets. The IDF pushed only 3 kilometers from August 1-13 with some Israeli ground units making it 8 kilometers around Rehraah but not en-masse, and therefore the Israeli forces were subject to Hezbollah guerilla assaults, anti-tank weapons, and added firings of Katyushas on northern Israel.

From August 9-14 on the eve of negotiated settlement that would be UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701, the IDF also attempted to destroy as much Hezbollah military hardware as possible. The fiercest fighting between Hezbollah and the IDF occurred between August 12-14.

Statistics from 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War:

* 15,000 Israeli Air Force sorties

* 100,000 bombs, mines and cluster bombs dropped in Lebanon

* 1,081 Lebanese civilian deaths

* 4,054 Lebanese civilians wounded

* 970,000 Lebanese displaced

* $6 billion in Lebanese property damage

* 534 Hezbollah fighters killed (Hezbollah claimed only 69 of their fighters died)

* 309 Hezbollah rockets launched

* 1,800 Hezbollah facilities damaged or destroyed (this figure contested by Hezbollah)

* 46 IDF tanks attacked, 15 tanks impacted by AT weapons

* 14 IDF armored vehicles attacked, 5

destroyed (Hezbollah claims 124 IDF tanks and 12 armored carriers destroyed.)

* An Israeli naval patrol craft damaged by Hezbollah C802 missile
* Hezbollah claims 5 Israeli helicopters damaged or destroyed

Hezbollah Missile and Rocket Attack

Apart from increased sophistication in Hezbollah's light infantry and guerilla tactics, the most troubling aspect of the conflict is the advancement in Hezbollah's rocket arsenal. Israeli intelligence understood the types of missiles in Hezbollah's inventory and that it was developing a strike capability against Israel. What came as a surprise were the quantities and tactical deployment of these missiles in actual combat. Hezbollah's incorporation of missiles and rockets into their order of battle and combat doctrine was the single most surprising aspect of the conflict.

Hezbollah's disinformation campaign and ability to conceal their rocket capabilities must be considered a counterintelligence success. During the 33-day war, 4,000 rockets were fired, an average of 125 rockets per day. The Arab report assesses August 3 as a saturation strike with five batteries of Katyusha rockets, over 50 rockets, fired in Kiryat Shmona; this would be the largest Hezbollah rocket strike on Israel in one day. This saturation strike was in response to the Israeli commando raid on Dar-al-Hikmah Hospital, in which five Lebanese were seized and later released.

Hezbollah timed the firing of their rockets to political-military events on the ground such as retaliation for heavy IAF strikes, and there appears to be a correlation between the amount of Hezbollah rockets fired and the ferocity of Israeli air and ground strikes. Hezbollah decreased its rocket attacks on July 31 in response to Prime Minister Olmert's call for a 48-hour cessation of hostilities after the collateral damage inflicted on Qana. During combat Hezbollah attempted to increase the quality of its rocket strikes such as their attack on the Israeli airbase of Ramat David. Attempts were made by Hezbollah between the July 19 and August 4 to undertake rocket strikes on:

- Israeli command centers (rockets reached Thaknah Command center and the Ayn Hamur IDF Headquarters); and
- Staging areas for IDF forces.

Israeli intelligence understood the types of rockets and missiles in Hezbollah's inventory and that it was developing a deeper rocket and missile strike force with farther reach into Israel. What came as a surprise were the quantities, tactical deployment, and ability to sustain those rocket strikes in over one month of warfare with the IDF. Another surprise was the amount of thought Hezbollah has given to the military operational impact of its rocket forces, as centerpiece of its strategy to fight Israel. The al-Ahram Strategic Report claims that Hezbollah had the following rockets and missiles before the 2006 war with Israel began:

- 12,000 Katyusha rockets with a range of 12 miles. These World War II Soviet-designed rockets are saturation terror weapons with no guidance.
- 500 Fajr-3 rockets with a range of 22-30 miles. These are Iranian manufactured artillery rockets with a 45-kilogram warhead that are mounted and launched from smaller trucks.
- Unknown quantity of Fajr-5 missiles with a range of 45 miles. These are Iranian manufactured, typically mounted in four tubes on larger trucks as an artillery rocket system. Hezbollah calls this system Khaibar-1.
- Unknown large quantity of Ra'ad missiles. These are the Iranian version of the Sagger AT-3B anti-tank missile, supplemented by European-made MILAN and the Russian-made Metis-M. More than 40 IDF troops were killed with anti-tank missile strikes by Hezbollah.
- Unknown quantity of Zilzal-2 missiles. These are Iranian versions of the Soviet FROG-7 missile with a range of 124 miles and warhead of 600 kilograms. It is estimated Hezbollah may have a dozen or fewer of these missiles.

Hezbollah monitored the Arab and international satellite media to see the impact their rocket strikes were having on a tactical and strategic public relations level. They paid close attention to how their strikes brought pressure on the government of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Hezbollah noted that Patriot batteries moved around the Israeli port of Haifa, which was designed to assure the Israeli population, but was in reality ineffective for Katyusha and artillery rocket strikes. The Patriot is only effective for larger, higher-altitude flying missiles and aircraft. When Israel announced it had neutralized Hezbollah launch sites (both fired and mobile), Hezbollah responded with a July 19 barrage coupled with an announcement that they had a stock of rockets to last months. The southern Lebanese town of Soor was the focus for Israeli forces as it was believed rockets were being stored and fired from there; it was also seen as a logistical opportunity for Hezbollah to be resupplied from Syria. The assaults on the town did not seem to impact the tempo of Hezbollah operations.

Israel imposed a media blackout to deny Hezbollah the chance to adjust rocket fire and boost Arab morale. However, it was a gamble, as Arab media accused Israel of hiding the extent of damage done to Lebanon. It is unclear whether the benefits outweighed the risks and is a subject worthy of debate.

The book contains an excellent outline of the conflict that reduces what Arab military planners and strategists consider of importance vis-à-vis Hezbollah's use of rockets. They are:

·July 12-14 — The Arabs' perspective of these two days was to feel the pulse of one another. Limited strikes were observed and Israel's reaction and response were noted.

· July 14 — Haifa attacks with rockets landing 40 kilometers into Galilee in northern Israel in the settlements of Safad and Naharia. Israel threatens war.

· July 27 — Areas beyond Haifa are hit to include the settlement of Afula with Khaybar-1 artillery missiles, which are also known as Fajr-5. Striking 50 kilometers from the Lebanese border along the Tel-Aviv to Haifa road; Carmel, Safad, and Haifa are struck.

· August 2 — Hezbollah (Fajr-5) missiles land 68 kilometers along Israeli settlements bordering Jordan; the deepest strike into Israel of a Hezbollah missile was recorded on that day 80 kilometers from the Lebanese border and only 40 kilometers from Tel-Aviv. The response is a combined IDF and IAF strike on the Bekaa Valley, to which Hezbollah responds with its rocket strike on the IAF airbase of Ramat David.

· August 11-13 — 250 rockets and missiles launched within a 72-

hour window by Hezbollah.

Why didn't Hezbollah use longer range missiles that could strike Tel-Aviv? The book explains that Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah threatened to hit Tel-Aviv if Beirut was invaded. Of note, Hezbollah did not fire the larger Zilzal-2 variants; the only complex guided missile they launched was the C802 that damaged an Israeli naval patrol boat. One of the unanswered questions is: if Hezbollah had missiles that could reach Tel-Aviv why did they not fire them during the conflict? Was this a strategic decision not to overplay Iran's material support of Hezbollah in the international scene?

The book offers these theories as to why Nasrallah did not deploy longer range missiles:

1. Tactically, such missiles needed a larger predesignated launch pad, which was difficult to construct and maintain with Israel's air dominance.

2. There were larger geo-strategic concerns to using longer range missiles that could widen the conflict and drag Lebanon into further warfare should an unprecedented missile strike on Tel-Aviv happen.

3. The firing of longer range missiles would deepen the United States support for Israel. In addition, the use of such missiles would clearly and unequivocally show the extent to which Iran has supplied Hezbollah.

Hezbollah rocket claims:

· 4,000 rockets fired;

· Rockets caused 41 deaths of Israeli citizens, 16 of whom were Israeli Arabs;

· Rockets caused the displacement of 1 million Israelis;

· Rockets caused hundreds of damaged Israeli homes;

· Rockets caused damage to 42 Israeli farms and fields;

· Rockets landed on 57 Israeli factories causing damage or disruption; and

· Rockets damaged 120 vehicles.

Israel's vulnerability as a result of the 2006 conflict with Hezbollah is the failure to:

- ☐ Disarm Hezbollah;
- ☐ Deal with Hezbollah's rocket forces during the battle; and
- ☐ Free or recover the two Israeli soldiers held by Hezbollah.

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White smoke rises from a hillside following an Israeli air force strike July 22, 2006, in Beirut, Lebanon.

On the regional front, the Israeli performance in 2006:

- ■ Rearranged the Lebanese political landscape to favor Hezbollah and make it among the premier rejectionist and radical movements in the Middle East; and
- ■ Placed nations like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia who all criticized Hezbollah expecting an Israeli sweep, as having expended political capital that must be repaired. These nations must be rewarded by those nations who stand firmly against Hezbollah and their state sponsors Iran and Syria.

Conclusion and End State

The Arab report states that 1,500 Hezbollah fighters shattered and eroded the invincibility and deterrence factors of the IDF. Israeli forces could not advance at will towards Beirut as they did in 1982, and this is already being touted as Hezbollah offering a major deterrence factor to Israeli military movement towards the Lebanese capital. Arab articles and books on the war refer to this conflict as the Sixth Arab-Israeli conflict, which is indicative of the timeline by which the mass media in the region view its long-term wearing down of Israel. The fact that the Israelis leaned too heavily on airpower makes some wonder whether their planners had taken lessons from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Al-Qaida and Sunni militants are now under increasing pressure to make their presence felt in Israel and along Israel's border. They cannot allow Hezbollah, a Shiite group to usurp the mantle as defender and avenger of Palestinian victimization. As of this writing, Lebanese forces are engaged in a struggle to eradicate the al-Qaida sympathetic group Fatah al-Islam. Iranian and Syrian strategy of indirect conflict and multiple insurgency attacks by Hezbollah will likely allow them to explore agitating other rejectionist groups. Finally, UNIFIL will likely not be able to disarm Hezbollah as mandated by UNSCR 1701, and the way the hostilities ended almost certainly will result in a renewed conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. Both sides know this, and Hezbollah is likely rearming and taking valuable lessons from the 2006 engagement with the IDF. One could argue that it is in Israel's security interest to seek a rematch with Hezbollah to regain military prestige and morale. In August 2007, Sheikh Nasrallah gave an anniversary speech, commemorating its clash with Israel saying: *Oh Zionists, if you think of launching a war on Lebanon, I don't advise to do it. ... I promise you a big surprise that could change the fate of war and the fate of the region."* I will leave it to the reader to imagine what is meant by "big surprise."

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