

THE WAR IN THE NORTH- DOES THE STRATEGIC BALANCE SHIFT AGAINST ISRAEL?

Eight months after 7 October 2023 and the well-known political science cliché about “unintended consequences” of wars seems to be a reality so far as the impact of the war on Israel is. It is NOT Gaza which has become Israel’s main military problem, rather it is the NORTH, the Israeli-Lebanese border. It is Hizballah, defined usually as a terror organization. Yes, they are but they are much more than that. They are an integral wing and a very effective one in the overall armed forces of IRAN, and they pose Israel with military problems which Israel has no answer to, not tactically and more importantly, not strategically. Here is THE “unintended consequence” of the Gaza war-Israel is in the midst of a potentially deadlier war-the war with Iran and its main proxy, Hizballah. This piece will deal with three issues-how it happened, what is actually happening now and what may happen in the future, the immediate and the foreseeable.

HIZBALLAH -ISRAEL 2006-2023

This is not a piece about Hizballah and its overall role in Lebanese society and politics, only referring to the Hizballah-Israel situation. After the war of July-August 2006, the UNSC adopted resolution 1701, which all sides formally agreed to. It was based on three elements; Israeli withdrawal from the territory it occupied in the war, full Lebanese government control with the support of UN Force[Unifil] in South Lebanon, so NO armed Hizballah presence along the border, and an effort to return the Israeli hostages whose kidnapping triggered the war in the first place. This resolution was violated consistently and proved to have no teeth, especially with regard to the fact that Hizballah remained firmly based where it was not supposed to be. They still refrained from unleashing another military confrontation so the border area became peaceful. Then came the Syrian civil war as of 2011 which seemed to occupy Hizballah attention for a few years, but it was NOT this conflict which became the main reason for the peace and quiet along the border.

The main reason was the Iranian interest. After the war of 2006, the Iranians were upset with the performance of Hizballah. From their perspective, Hizballah is a wing in their armed forces which should be used in its full capacity ONLY when it suits Iran interests. Hizballah should be fully used IF Iran were to be directly attacked by Israel and /or the US. In 2006, the Iranians castigated the leader of Hizballah Nasrallah for igniting a war which proved to be costly over an issue which had no importance and relevance for Iran. That the war was costly we knew right after its end, when Nasrallah declared that had he known how the war would end he would not have started it.

That said it does not mean that the Iranians and Hizballah did not draw strategic conclusions from the war of 2006 which they were to apply, and chief among them which was exactly in line with the Iranian interest was to create a strategic equilibrium between Hizballah and Israel based on two principles; First, the final goal of Hizballah remains the total destruction of Israel, Though rhetorically and for propaganda purposes, the organization presented itself as the guardian of Lebanon’s defense and territorial integrity. Second, to prepare the organization Towards war with Israel at the time when the order will come from Iran, but in the meantime to create enough abilities which will deter Israel from attacking Lebanon at will, and such abilities

they actually created. They built their revamped military power after 2006 based on two main criteria- having a mass of missiles and rockets of all kinds, but primarily precise-guided ballistic missiles as well as advanced drones, all with the aim to inflict as much damage as possible on the most vital Israeli strategic targets, to lead to mass civilian casualties and by so doing to overcome their lack of air power as opposed to Israel's. Obviously severely undermining Israeli civilian morale. They accumulated tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of rockets of all kinds, including hundreds of precise-guided missiles, and with that the ability to stretch Israel's air defense systems. including the Iron Dome to a point where the quantity of simultaneous launchings of the rockets and missiles could overpower the Israeli systems. Alongside this impressive ability they created a well-trained infantry elite unit, the Radwan Force in order to use it when possible for the purpose of penetration into Israel and the actual occupation of Israeli settlements.

Needless to emphasize that this entire build-up, both the doctrines behind it and the actual support came from Iran. Finally, it has to be emphasized that this relentless build-up lasted for almost two decades from 2006 onwards, taking place against the background of the chronic Lebanese political instability, the growing opposition of most Lebanese to the role of Hizballah in their politics, including opposition to another potentially devastating war with Israel, and the calamitous economic crisis in the country.

Bottom line of all that- Hizballah made no bones about their intentions and motivation. There could and should be no doubt in Israel as to what these have always been.

So with that happening, where was Israel? What was Israel's reaction to the obvious Hizballah and preparations for another round of fighting? Let us start with the fact, that as of the end of the 2006 war it was very clear that resolution 1701 was consistently violated by Hizballah, but the Israelis while raising hell about it, complaining to the UN and using it for their PR purposes did nothing beyond to counter these violations on the ground. In fact, there was a growing sense of complacency in Israel about Hizballah, because the latter were deeply involved in the ever chaotic internal politics of Lebanon and as of 2011 and for few years afterwards in the Syrian civil war on the side of Bashar Assad and in line and support of Iran interests, not these of the state of Lebanon. What added up to the sense of complacency was the fact that the border was quiet. Still, Israel was not completely complacent and as of 2013 the Israel Air force started a campaign of attacking convoys of arms shipped from Iran via Iraq to Syria from where they were under Hizballah control. The first such attack took place on 30 January 2013 and they continued with different levels of intensity all the way to October 2023. The attacks were NOT on Hizballah targets in Lebanon, which remained immune and they failed to stop the flow of arms as well as to slow down, let alone to paralyze the Hizballah project of building the precise-guided ballistic missiles. This was the weakness of what was called in Israel "the low level intensity" war.

Hizballah could get the sense that Israel possessed precious intelligence enabling her to attack so many convoys and shipments, but the question for Israeli policy makers was whether all these attacks in Syria, not in Lebanon really created a balance of deterrence whereby Hizballah realized that an all out war with Israel was either impossible or too costly to initiate.

Unfortunately, the overall sense in Israel since 2013, the years of NETANYAHU premiership [but for the year plus of Bennett-Lapid] was that Hizballah got the message and was deterred. It was a logical assumption which as in the case of Gaza with Hamas led to the adherence to the

doctrine of CONTAINMENT. Yet, another assumption was also logical, perhaps much more. Hizballah could have understood that its stated goal of deterring Israel from attacking it in Lebanon meant Israeli reluctance to get into an overall conflict out of fear of its missiles ability, and the fact was, that Nasrallah and all his mouthpieces kept saying it day and night. Policy makers in Israel believed that Hizballah was crucially damaged by its involvement in the Syrian civil war and ignored the reality that Hizballah's prime motivation remained the war against Israel despite its huge sacrifices in Syria. Motivation and ideological commitment were NOT taken too seriously by Israeli policy makers in the case of Hamas in Gaza nor in the case of Hizballah in Lebanon, and it reflected a fundamental weakness of Israeli thinking as well as American about the situation in the Middle East, which was based on the assumption that even extreme ideologies could be dealt with by policy based on economic inducements and diplomatic pressures. This weakness was in full display when the Lapid-Bennett government agreed to the American-mediated gas deal with Lebanon officially called the Maritime Border Deal signed in October 2022 with Hizballah blessing. Israel was the side which gave in more in order to achieve the deal believing that the economic inducements granted Lebanon would lead to a gradual decline of the tensions in the North, but the question really was how did Hizballah, not the Lebanese state viewed all this. Hizballah, for his part, could have and indeed has concluded that Israeli concessions were motivated by the power of its deterrence over Israel, whereby in Israel it was believed by the government and the IDF that by accepting the agreement, Hizballah showed its more moderate, realistic side, putting Lebanese national interest on top of its stated ideological commitment to destroy Israel. It took only one year for the actual reality of what Hizballah REALLY had in mind to unfold; Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 happened.

HIZBALLAH- ISRAEL WAR-OCTOBER 2023 TO PRESENT;

On numerous occasions Israeli statesmen and generals declared that in case of a full-scale war With Hizballah Lebanon would be brought back to the stone age. It was always an unnecessary, arrogant statement designed to instill fear in Lebanon. Alongside it being pompous, it always disregarded the sad reality of the actual situation in Lebanon, being ruled by Hizballah, an organization which had its own way of understanding statements like this and responding to them. Fast forward, and Here is a very brief description of the North of Israel eight months after the beginning of hostilities with Hizballah; Over 100000 Israelis living there were evacuated from homes and have stayed in temporary shelters for eight long months. Some Israeli Kibbutzim and Moshavim are mostly devastated, with damage there as big if not greater than that inflicted by Hamas on Israeli settlements in the South. Agricultural areas are burnt to the ground, and altogether tourism stopped and towns like Kiryat Shemona are ghost places. Most of the mayors in the North are loyal Likud members and they cried out loud-where is the government? Where is the IDF? Few miles away in the South of Lebanon, most villages are mostly intact, normal life are visible from the Israeli side of the border, and there has NOT been mass exodus towards Beirut, something that Israeli policy makers believed would happen in case of hostilities, something that if happens could completely undermine stability in Lebanon and lead to huge pressure on Hizballah to stop the fighting. In fact, there are Israeli retired generals, even government and public officials who state repeatedly that a full-scale war would unleash

Unprecedented havoc in Israel, so they call upon the government to evade such a war , almost at all cost. This section is NOT going to be a detailed description of the course of events in the North since 7 October 2023, rather a summation of the main points referring to how the fighting has been conducted and why the way it has been like that.

Hizballah did NOT participate in the Hamas attack on 7 October, and this fact led to an extensive discussion about Iran's role and complicity in the attack. This was an unnecessary discussion, as soon enough Hizballah did join the fighting, and by so doing broke its and Iran's self-imposed restriction on the use of its military power against Israel. No more Hizballah being the defender of Lebanese sovereignty and territorial integrity which in no time were under attack from Israel, nor even under any threat, perceived or actual. Now it was Hizballah which, in line with its deepest ideological commitments and Iran's regional interests, decided to join the fighting as the overall leader of the "Resistance axis " in the Middle East. The reaction in Israel was interesting, but not surprising if viewed in the context of the Israeli policy towards Hizballah since 2006. First, it was leaked that there was a suggestion discussed to start the massive reaction to the events of 7 October by inflicting a surprise lethal attack on Hizballah, rather than solely focussing on Gaza . This did not happen, the idea was rejected by Netanyahu, but it is not a moot point to briefly relate here to this. To me, at least, it shows that there were those in the security leadership who contrary to the policy of containment in the North, did believe and realize that Hizballah was THE NO 1 strategic threat and wanted to remove, or at least to greatly reduce this threat ahead of the planned massive retaliatory attack on Hamas. This thought was then rejected, and one can only wonder what it would all look like in the North if it was executed on the ground, not only on the drawing boards of generals. Returning to the actual situation in the North, the fighting developed according to a scenario which from its beginning matched more Hizballah's agenda, then Israel's. First, Israel practically acquiesced with the blatant violation by Hizballah of Resolution 1701. Clearly, that showed a signal to Hizballah that they should not expect an effective international pressure on them. Then, the policy adopted in Jerusalem was of partial containment. Retaliations were limited to the exact places from where Hizballah attacked, and the activity was accompanied by a consistent clarification that Israel was NOT interested in any escalation. One tactic which was exercised and successfully was to go systematically after the local commanders of Hizballah and targeting them. Also successful was the neutralizing of the Hizballah use of anti tank rockets. At the same time, the IDF ordered the evacuation of settlements along the border at a time when no such thing happened on the Lebanese side. The large-scale evacuation was not universally welcome in Israel, as it was understood by many to indicate the IDF fear that it would not be able to defend the communities. The evacuation order came in the aftermath of the 7 October attack and added to the general feeling of frustration in Israel, but probably more importantly , added to the sense of achievement in the Hizballah leadership. My readers here need to understand and internalize a very significant message about Israel-NOT SINCE 1948 JEWISH SETTLEMENTS WERE EVACUATED BECAUSE OF ARAB ATTACKS!-PSYCHOLOGY, PAST LEGACIES, MEMORIES ARE AMONG THE MOST IMPORTANT COMPONENTS OF THE ARAB-PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT!

The situation in the North deteriorated gradually as Hizballah introduced , never all at once, new, more lethal weapons, including unsophisticated heavy BURKAN rockets which the IDF

had no answer to, and later drones which again the IDF had no answer to. We see here, on the one hand, how the Hizballah strategy works-can be defined as a "test and see" strategy. Test the Israelis by escalating in a measured way, then see and check their reaction, and in the absence of a major response from them increase your attacks and then move to the use of another new weapon. On the other hand, the fact, that after monitoring Hizballah military build up for years, the IDF was still surprised by the weapons in their arsenal, indicated to the Iranians and their Lebanese stooges that they can intensify their campaign according to rules which they dictated. It is not to suggest that the IDF lacked local successes in targeting and killing some senior and many medium local Hizballah commanders but it all amounted to tactical gains, not something that could change the very nature of the situation. Advocates of the policy of the Netanyahu government pinpoint to a success which they consider a strategic gain-the fact that the Radwan Force mentioned before was pushed out from the border due to the constant aerial attacks of Israel, and that removed the danger of a ground invasion by the Hizballah. This is a success, though the use of the Radwan Force was NOT necessarily the planned main military effort by Hizballah. There was always and still is the threat of a multi simultaneous precise-guided missile attack on sensitive Israeli targets, and this possible scenario is indeed the main argument used by those in Israel who call for restraint even in the face of the most daring Hizballah provocations. In fact, these people, including in the IDF leadership and the government claim that Hizballah proved the deadly potential of their missiles when they attacked highly sensitive strategic installations of the Israeli Air Force, though with limited success. On top of all that, there is a reality which cannot be changed quickly or even in the medium term-the IDF lacks enough ground forces to launch a massive operation in Lebanon, and this obviously is a direct and near fatal consequence of the policy of "small and clever" army enacted 10-12 years ago when both Eizenkot and Gantz were chiefs of staff and Netanyahu was the PM who gladly approved these measures.

When the Muslim world celebrated EID AL ADHA, Hizballah stopped the fire-the IDF followed suit. It can be considered a gesture of good will, but many in Israel wondered-should all the gestures always be one-sided by Israel? There was Passover and NO religious pause enacted by Hizballah. It can be however a symbolic gesture, but under the circumstances of the fighting in the last eight months is an indication of the admission by Israel that it finds the conflict with Hizballah to be too much beyond its current capabilities. It is at that point that we have to ask the question -ISRAEL QUO VADIS? Is Israel REALLY incapable of causing Nasrallah to say also in 2024 as he said in 2006 that if he knew how it would end he would not have started, or is Israel unable to do it in the current and immediate situation and therefore will do good to swallow a bitter pill, not defeating Hizballah now, agreeing to a diplomatic end, such as discussed with the US and wait for better timing sometime in the future?

LATE JUNE 2024- THE CURRENT STRATEGIC EQUATION ;

In face of ever escalating Hizballah attacks and mounting criticism in Israel, the Netanyahu Government, and now after the resignation of Eizenkot and Gantz, and the dissolution of the war cabinet, it is TOTALLY the Netanyahu government there are more and more calls for Netanyahu to order a change of policy in the North. Those who call for it want a decisive Israeli military action, forcing Hizballah to agree to a cease-fire under conditions convenient to Israel.

Netanyahu is as usual blowing hot and cold , and there is an American mediation effort which enables Netanyahu to gain time in face of the pressures on him. It should be noted that there is also massive pressure on him NOT to act led very vocally by a retired general Yitzhak Brick who made a name for himself as the general who claimed for years that the IDF became too small and will not be able to fight in two or more fronts simultaneously.

The American mediation effort conducted by a former Israeli, Amos Hochstein, a good meaning though inexperienced diplomat who follows in the footsteps of the famous Lebanese-American diplomat Philip Habib, a highly experienced negotiator who was sent by Ronald Reagan in 1982-3 to deal with the implications of the war of 1982. Habib failed, Hochstein is failing, and there is at least one significant common denominator between the two efforts-the timing is not conducive to success. In May 1983 Habib could celebrate success when Lebanon signed the agreement with Israel which may have satisfied Israel's desire to normalize relations with Lebanon, but immediately it became a piece of paper and thrown to the dustbin, as the Lebanese President Amine Jumayyil caved to Syrian pressure, and Israel was too weak after almost a year of fighting to react. Now, Hochstein tries to bring about an agreement when Hizballah perceives itself strong and perceives Israel too weak .This is NOT the way to achieve an agreement which would meet Israel's needs.

Hizballah has currently [late June] an advantage over Israel. Why? If the war in Gaza ends , they can then end their war in the North, claiming victory on four accounts; First, they will say that the end in Gaza was achieved because Israel could not fully commit itself to the war there because of their pressure on Israel. Second, they will claim that their efforts in allegedly forcing Israel to end in Gaza strengthens their role and that of Iran as being the leaders of the "Resistance Axis" to Israel. Third , they will claim that the new status quo along the border between Israel and Lebanon is better from their perspective than what it was before 7 October. Fourth, they will further solidify their grip on Lebanon as the talks about Lebanese resistance to them will be silenced in face of what may seem as their victory over Israel. This is what , for a while, happened in Lebanon after 2006. Some hot-headed Maronite leaders made some combative statements against Hizballah during the recent fighting, but they were not taken seriously by anyone in Lebanon or in Israel. Overall, Hizballah can argue that they created a new strategic balance with Israel. No more about Lebanon only, from now on they will claim that they issue Israel with a threat of a Northern front whenever they consider Israeli actions against the Palestinians also in Judea and Samaria/ the West Bank to be too aggressive. Allow me here to connect it to Iran- This is EXACTLY the wet dream of Iran. With Hizballah they can achieve a strategic deterrence against Israel-Just imagine how this deterrence will become a complete paralysis for Israel if and when their nuclear program will come to its climax-and remember-in the last eight months they have come closer than ever to the attainment of this goal.SO HERE IS THE DILEMMA OF NETANYAHU-WHAT TO DO WITH HIZBALLAH?

Netanyahu can declare the war in Gaza to be over, even though many in Israel will not be happy about an ending which is not a complete rout of Hamas as promised by Netanyahu. Then, as suggested above, Hizballah will cease their fire and for a while there will be a sigh of relief in Israel with the evacuees back and the Netanyahu propaganda machine claiming that what the IDF did in Lebanon forced Hizballah to end the fighting. Many Israelis will not buy that, and more importantly the Hizballah. Netanyahu has another option-to continue the on and off war in Gaza

and the nearly No action in Lebanon in face of more Hizballah attacks and wait for Trump being elected in November , hoping that the latter will help Israel conduct the big war against Hizballah with more advanced American arms supplied to the IDF. Monitoring Netanyahu's activities until now , one should not be surprised if he chooses this option, even though it means waiting until January 2025. It will be a catastrophic decision on his part, but not the first , and not one out of line with his conduct of the war since October 2023.

But there is another option-For Netanyahu to order the IDF to launch a massive, lethal attack on Hizballah using arms which were not used until now, and which are possessed by the IDF, if we are to believe multiple reports, and which are NOT nuclear . An attack which will force Nasrallah to agree to a cease-fire from a position of weakness and one whose lessons will be felt, even sent shivers also in Tehran. Netanyahu's career has been marked by avoidance of big decisions , particularly ones which can lead to a war. For fifteen years he talked and talked and ...talked about the Iran nuclear program , but the talk was not leading to actions. Iran is a step away from the bomb under him .Hizballah became a force to reckon with under him, and Hamas committed the atrocious attack of 7 October. He can delay a big decision, making another useless speech in congress and use his propagandists in Israel to argue that Israel won the war against Hamas and led Hizballah to accept a cease fire. Problem for him and Israel is that it is not enough to convince himself and his sycophant fans in Israel , as the audience which really matters is outside of Israel-this is Hizballah and the Iranian masters.They may have different opinions . SO... I will end with four questions and their quick answers.

Can the IDF still be capable of launching the strike that I alluded to? The answer-IDF officially claims they can and are ready and willing. I opt to accept it.

Second question-Even if IDF pulls a first lethal, surprising strike , can the Hizballah and the Iranians retaliate in a way that will inflict significant damage to Israel?-answer is yes. They can and they will.

Third question-Can the Israeli civilian population endure a round of fighting in the North knowing what could be the price? Answer-Here I go by public opinion polls showing a majority in support and the public statements of the leaders of Northern communities demanding it .

Fourth question -will Netanyahu take the plunge? -He says that he will restore the balance in the North -Will see IF this time he is a man of his word.

Israel should not have come to this point where the situation with Hizballah requires such a fateful decision. I , for one, am always looking for non-military solutions and having war as a last resort. I wish that the gist and conclusions of this article were different, but we are almost in the twelfth hour. Israel cannot afford to live with an enemy in the North supported by Iran who believes that they are capable of defeating Israel, and are preparing to do it basing themselves on what they believe is their success in the current fighting. If they cannot still do it now , they will try again and soon. THAT SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO HAPPEN.

