



Hizballah at War

A Military Assessment

Andrew Exum

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Front cover: A Hizballah fighter watches over Israeli army positions near Bint Jbeil, Lebanon, August 16, 2006.

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Introduction

JUST OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE of Ayta ash Shab in southern Lebanon, a school for the handicapped is being built on a hilltop with money from the U.S. Agency for International Development. A few months after “the July War” (*Harb Tammuz*), as it is known in Lebanon, one can look out from the second story of the uncompleted school and see where all the violence began on July 12, 2006, when Hizballah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers just over the border.

Despite thick greenery on both sides of the border, one can still make out two dark stains in a bend in the road that indicate where Hizballah hit two Israeli Humvees with rocket fire and made off with two prisoners. An Israeli position lies just down the road and up a hill, but tellingly, no cameras or fighting positions might have prevented such an attack from taking place. The area just south of Ayta ash Shab was a chink in Israel’s armor along the Lebanese border from Rosh HaNiqra to Shebaa.

From the Lebanese side of the border, one can gain a sense of what Hizballah needed to pull off such an operation—the weapons, the skill, the planning, and the audacity. The kidnapping of July 12 was no amateur affair: it was the result of years of training and dedicated study of the adversary to the south. However, Hizballah’s performance during the thirty-three days of fighting that *followed* the initial kidnapping revealed the most about the kind of fighting force Hizballah has developed into over the course of its twenty-four-year existence.

This paper examines Hizballah’s actions in the July War from a military and tactical perspective: *military* because this paper is not concerned with the political aspects—significant as they might be—of the war, and *tactical* because this paper is primarily concerned with

the tactics used by Hizballah in southern Lebanon during its thirty-three-day fight against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and not with whatever larger strategic goals Hizballah aimed to achieve. This paper explores—in a “nuts and bolts” fashion—how Hizballah fought the IDF on the ground in southern Lebanon.

This report was written following a two-week research trip to both Israel and Lebanon in the aftermath of the war, during which the author was able to speak with combatants and politicians on both sides as well as independent observers such as journalists and United Nations officials.¹ This paper also draws on the author’s own military experience leading conventional and unconventional units in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the eighteen months he spent living and studying in Lebanon until February 2006. Hizballah was approached several times regarding this project, but its participation was limited: the author has attempted to piece together Hizballah’s version of events through speeches by Hizballah leaders and media reports, such as news specials aired on pan-Arab television stations. The real difficulty presented by this project, however, is trying to divorce the military from the political in what was at its heart a political war.

What should stand out for U.S. military planners and policymakers as they study the July War is the simple fact that an army fighting with largely U.S. equipment and American-style tactics struggled greatly—or was at the very least *perceived* to have struggled greatly—in its conflict with Hizballah. Thus, enemies of the United States are highly likely to seek to emulate Hizballah’s preparation, tactics, and performance on the battlefield. For that reason, U.S. strategists should attempt to distill from the recent conflict as many military lessons learned as possible.

1. Most of the persons interviewed for this study are not identified by name because of the sensitive nature of the research and the political situations both in Lebanon and Israel.

Hizballah in Southern Lebanon: Background

HIZBALLAH AND ISRAEL have been in a state of war since 1982—when the former was established in the aftermath of the latter’s invasion of Lebanon that same year and of Iran’s Islamic Revolution several years prior. Hizballah began as an Islamic splinter group that broke off from another Shiite militia, Amal, and carried out attacks—including suicide bombings—on both Israeli and Western targets in Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War.

Following the 1989 Taif Accord—which brought an end to that conflict and enshrined Hizballah’s right to keep its arms to fight the continued Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon—Hizballah intensified its efforts against the IDF.¹ Despite military setbacks that included the assassination of Hizballah’s secretary-general in 1992, Hizballah’s performance against the IDF gradually but steadily improved through the 1990s—in no small part owing to security reforms instituted by Hizballah’s charismatic new leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Significantly, suicide attacks ceased to feature in Hizballah operations as its tactics and methods grew more sophisticated. From the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 until the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, Hizballah fought a classic guerrilla campaign against the Israeli occupation forces in southern Lebanon and enjoyed credit in both Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world for Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak’s decision to withdraw unilaterally. Emboldened following the Israeli exit, Hizballah continued its rocket attacks and cross-border raids against Israel after 2000, contending both that Israel had not made a complete withdrawal and that Israel still held Lebanese captives.²

On July 11, 2006, Israel had ample reason to suspect Hizballah would attempt to kidnap one or more of its

soldiers.³ A previous attempt launched on November 21, 2005, in the divided border town of Ghajjar had failed, thanks largely to the intervention of an Israeli sniper as well as some quick and intelligent decision-making by the Israeli platoon leader on the ground. No one in the IDF doubted that Hizballah might attempt such an operation again.

At the same time, following the 1996 “Grapes of Wrath” air and artillery campaign against Hizballah, Israeli responses to Hizballah rocket attacks and cross-border raids had been measured and largely confined to the border area. Hizballah guessed—incorrectly—that an Israeli response to a successful kidnapping would be similarly restrained. Had Hizballah made a more careful reading of Israeli domestic politics in the summer of 2006 and similarly studied the Israeli response to the recent kidnapping of an IDF soldier in Gaza, it might have reached a different conclusion. But fatefully for all parties in the coming conflict, it did not.

Southern Lebanon as a Battlefield

When Lebanese talk about “the South” (*il-janoob*), they usually mean a region that begins where the southern Chouf region of Mount Lebanon ends. For the purposes of this paper, however, “southern Lebanon” will be used to describe the area now under the administration of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and what was previously Israel’s “security zone” in Lebanon prior to 2000.

Physically, southern Lebanon is green and hilly, broken up by deep valleys, or *wadis*, and bordered by the Litani River Gorge to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, the Bekaa Valley to the east, and the high east-west ridges that mark the Israeli border to the south.

1. The 1989 Taif Accord was the basis for the end of the civil war, though fighting between various factions continued until October 1990.
2. As Israel pulled back behind the United Nations “blue line” demarcating the border between Israel and Lebanon, Hizballah—together with the Lebanese and Syrian governments—claimed that the Shebaa Farms region between Lebanon and Syria was Lebanese territory. Hizballah and its allies have exploited the dispute over this deserted mountain region to justify Hizballah’s continued “resistance” against Israel.
3. The July 12 operation was Hizballah’s fifth attempt to kidnap Israeli soldiers since the November 21, 2005, failure. See Zeev Schiff, “Kidnap of Soldiers in July Was Hezbollah’s Fifth Attempt,” *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), September 19, 2006.

Sour (Tyre) is the only major city, and most of the rest of the population lives in the small villages that dot the landscape. Many of these villages, such as Aytash Shab, are perched on top of small hills, and although the majority of the population is Shiite Muslim, quite a few of the villages along the Israeli border are predominantly Christian, while others are predominantly Sunni Muslim.

For the defender, the rocky, hilly landscape of southern Lebanon provides several advantages. The terrain, while allowing unrestricted dismounted movement, largely restricts armored maneuver, channeling vehicles toward roads or other easily identifiable avenues of approach. If the defender is willing to fight from populated areas—as Hizballah often has been—the villages become, in a battle, *de facto* fortresses from which the defender has no shortage of cover and concealment. In addition, the easily defensible hilltop villages offer clear fields of fire that overwhelmingly favor the defender in the event of an attack.

Southern Lebanon is, essentially, infantry country. It differs from the terrain to Israel's south and east in that it is uncongenial to the IDF's preferred form of warfare—mounted, maneuver warfare on desert terrain. In addition, the terrain of southern Lebanon diminishes many of the other advantages that technology confers on the IDF in more open terrain.

Finally, the time at which Israel began its assault into southern Lebanon—the middle of the summer—favors the static defender over the dismounted attacker. In July, the average temperature in Beirut is 81°F,⁴ and though it can be somewhat cooler in the hills of the south, heat and humidity are still factors any commander must take into account.

Preparing the Battlefield

Hizballah spent the years leading up to the 2006 war improving on the favorable topography of southern Lebanon to better resist an invading army from the south. As one Israeli general put it, Hizballah had spent the



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Israeli soldiers uncover a camouflaged entrance to a Hizballah bunker complex near the village of Maroun al-Ras, September 4, 2006.

years from 2000 until 2006 thinking about the coming war in *tactical* terms. That is, Hizballah thought about its defense of southern Lebanon with an eye toward how the IDF would fight and what weapons, personnel, fortifications, and tactics would be needed to stop the IDF or at the very least slow its progress.

In several areas, far from villages or other built-up areas, Hizballah constructed massive fighting positions capable of sustaining fighters for weeks at a time. Although the positions had been largely destroyed by the IDF prior to the author's visit to southern Lebanon in November 2006, large blocks of concrete suggested sophisticated bunker systems built up over an extended period of time. In one spot, south of Naqoura and within view of both the Mediterranean and the Israeli border, a Hizballah position with eighteen inches of concrete overhead cover had been built a mere 20 meters from a UNIFIL position and just 100 meters from an IDF position.⁵

Although the IDF knew Hizballah was building positions, it was caught off guard by their size and complexity. In photographs shown to the author, wide-eyed IDF soldiers stand inside Hizballah bunker systems complete with electrical wiring; reinforced concrete fighting positions; and enough water, food, and ammunition to withstand a sustained siege.⁶ "We never saw them build anything," a UNIFIL officer complained to

4. WorldClimate, Beirut, Lebanon. Available online (www.worldclimate.com/cgi-bin/data.pl?ref=N33E035+I202+0004162G2).

5. Author trip to Lebanese border, November 10, 2006.

6. Interview by author, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006.



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An Israeli soldier stands next to a katyusha rocket emplacement inside the Hizballah bunker.

journalist Nicholas Blanford. “They must have brought the cement in by the spoonful.”⁷

The IDF, however, had planned for the Hizballah positions, going so far as to build a “mock-up” of a Hizballah bunker system for training in northern Israel.⁸ The problem was, because the IDF was unaware of the exact location of the positions, it could not target them from the air. Neither could the IDF provide reliable intelligence to its ground commanders about the location or size of any of the Hizballah positions.⁹

In the same way, Hizballah prepared friendly villages in the south to become fortresses in the event of an Israeli assault. Israeli intelligence officers complain that Hizballah used civilian homes in southern villages to store small arms, rockets, and other supplies while using the villages as staging areas for cross-border rocket attacks.¹⁰ IDF intelligence officers also claim they often knew more about the preparations being made in the villages of southern Lebanon than the residents of the villages themselves, implying that Hizballah often stored arms without the knowledge of the civilians. But seen from the eyes of Lebanese civilians, the fortification of the villages in the south was a necessary defensive pre-

caution against an eventual Israeli assault. In fact, since 2000, Hizballah and the residents of southern Lebanon have viewed a third Israeli invasion—following those of 1978 and 1982—as inevitable. Some analysts suggest that Hizballah began to fortify the southern villages and hillsides beginning as early as 1996—before the Israeli withdrawal from its “security zone” along the border.¹¹

In addition to the fortifications built into the Lebanese countryside and inside the villages of southern Lebanon, Hizballah extensively mined the high-speed avenues of approach that Israel might use to invade southern Lebanon. One of these massive antitank mines destroyed an Israeli Merkava tank on the first day of the conflict and forced the IDF to carry out its eventual ground assault not along the roads but through the countryside—causing the Israeli assault to proceed much slower than it had in 1982. Hizballah also created—according to the IDF—up to 500 arms caches in southern Lebanon in the event of an Israeli invasion.¹²

But Hizballah’s success in the coming war would depend not just on its ability to survive and to slow the progress of the IDF through southern Lebanon, but also on its ability to strike back at Israel—through rocket attacks—until the end of the conflict. Consequently, Hizballah went to great lengths to protect its rocket arsenal and to ensure its ability to launch as many rockets on the last day of the fighting as on the first. Throughout southern Lebanon, Hizballah built protected launchers for both its short-range (katyusha) and medium-range rockets. Many of these launchers were built into the ground, using pneumatic lifts to raise and lower the launchers from their underground shelters. The launcher teams were also given protection in the form of bunkers and caves in which they could hide from the inevitable Israeli counter-battery attacks. When the ground campaign began, a week into the war, Israeli units were shocked to find these camouflaged rocket teams continuing to launch their rockets from behind Israeli lines.

7. Nicholas Blanford, “Deconstructing Hizballah’s Surprise Military Prowess,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, October 24, 2006.

8. Interview by author, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006.

9. *Ibid.*

10. One IDF officer claimed that Hizballah stored munitions in mosques, knowing the IDF would not hit them aerially. This claim, however, cannot be independently verified.

11. For instance, see Amir Kulick, “Hizballah vs. the IDF: The Operational Dimension,” *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 3 (November 2006), Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University.

12. Interview by author, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006.

Hizballah's Military Structure, Weapons, and Training

IN CONTRAST TO its political wing, Hizballah's military wing is horizontally organized and can be divided into two types of fighters: the so-called "elite," or regular, fighters—numbering around 1,000 men and often given advanced weapons training—and the village fighters, whose numbers cannot be estimated because they often include men not formally associated with Hizballah. In the July War, for example, the villages of southern Lebanon were defended not just by Hizballah but also by men hailing from other political parties or unaffiliated.¹ The first "Hizballah" combat fatality in Maroun al-Ras, for example, was not from Hizballah at all but was in fact a member of Hizballah's one-time rival party, Amal.²

Hizballah organized its fighters into small, self-sufficient teams capable of operating independently and without direction from higher authority for long periods of time. In general—but not exclusively—Hizballah's fighting units were squad-sized elements of seven to ten men. These squad-sized elements were afforded a great deal of autonomy during the fighting but were able to remain in contact with their higher units through a complex system of communications that included an elaborate system of radio call signs as well as a closed cellular phone system. At the lower levels, fighters made use of two-way radios for communication within the villages and between isolated fighting positions.

The most significant aspects of Hizballah's organization are the high degree of autonomy given to junior leaders and the lack of any significant logistical train. Traditionally, one of the enduring weaknesses of Arab militaries has been the inability of junior leaders to seize initiative and make necessary decisions independent of orders from higher command. As Kenneth Pol-

lack notes, historically it has been "commonplace for even the most minor issues to be referred up the chain of command, overburdening the top leaders and further slowing reaction times."³ As we shall see, however, Hizballah's tactical leaders not only were given the freedom to make quick decisions on the battlefield but did so with a degree of competence that rivaled their opposite numbers in the IDF.

By the same token, although Hizballah maintained a chain of command that survived the July War more or less intact, the way in which Hizballah's smaller units were structured to fight without resupply or guidance from higher authorities had a tremendous effect on the way the war was fought.

Weapons and Training

In the July War, Hizballah used a variety of weapons systems and—what is most important—used them to great effect. As far as small arms are concerned, the AK-47 remained the standard, while some fighters carried either the M-16 or M-4 carbine. These two assault-rifle systems are the most common in the world, easy to use and maintain, and present little to no difficulty in procuring ammunition or spare parts.

Hizballah used both short- and medium-range rockets with varying degrees of success. For short-range rockets, the 122-millimeter katyusha was and remains the most common rocket used by Hizballah. In the thirty-three-day war, Hizballah launched more than 4,000 katyushas into Israel.⁴ Hizballah also used a variety of medium-range rockets (see figure 1, next page, for details).

But the July War will forever be the war of the anti-tank missile. Antitank missiles—bought from Russia by Syria with Iranian money—were used by Hizballah.

1. This fact was mentioned to the author by several observers in Lebanon and was confirmed both by IDF officers and by politicians from parties other than Hizballah.
2. In several trips made to the Dahye, the Shiite suburbs of Beirut, the author observed posters hung by both Amal and Hizballah celebrating Hani al-Alawi, the first "martyr" in Maroun al-Ras.
3. Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 558.
4. Yaakov Katz, "Katyusha Defence at Least 4 Yrs Away," *Jerusalem Post*, October 11, 2006.

Figure 1. Weaponry Used by Hizballah during the July War

TYPE	NAME	CALIBER (MILLIMETERS)	MAXIMUM RANGE (KILOMETERS)	COMMENTS
Surface-to-surface rockets; short range (0–25 km)	Katyusha	122	20	
Surface-to-surface rockets; mid to long range (> 25 km)	“Extended-range” katyusha	122	35	New version of standard katyusha
	Fajr-3	240	43	12 barrels, truck-mounted launcher
	Uragan	220	70	Syrian-made
	Fajr-5	333	75	4 barrels, truck-mounted launcher
	Khaibar-1	302	100	Syrian- or Chinese-made
	Zelzal-2	610	210	Launch attempted; did not hit Israel
Shore-to-ship missiles	C-701		15	Television guidance
	C-802 Noor		120	Onboard active homing
Unmanned aerial vehicles	Mirsad-1			Hizballah version of Iranian Mohajer-4; three flown during conflict
Antitank missiles	RPG-29	105	0.5	Shoulder-fired, tandem warhead
	AT-13 Metis-M	130	2	Tandem warhead
	AT-4 Spigot	120	2	Wire-guided semi-automatic command to line of sight (SACLOS)
	AT-3 Sagger	125	3	Wire-guided SACLOS
	TOW		3.75	American-made
	AT-5 Spandrel	135	4	Tandem shaped-charge warhead
	AT-14 Kornet-E		5	SACLOS guidance

Sources: Yiftah Shapir, “Artillery Rockets: Should Means of Interception Be Developed?” *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2006), Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University; Noam Ophir, “Look Not to the Skies: The IAF vs. Surface-to-Surface Rocket Launchers,” *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 3 (November 2006), Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University; Amir Kulick, “Hizballah vs. the IDF: The Operational Dimension,” *Strategic Assessment* 9, no. 3 (November 2006), Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University; Nicholas Blanford, “Deconstructing Hizballah’s Surprise Military Prowess,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, October 24, 2006; GlobalSecurity.org; Federation of American Scientists Military Analysis Network.

lah fighters against all types of targets. Hizballah used them against tanks, personnel, houses, shelters, and any vehicles Israel used in its attack. The AT-3 Sagger was used in this way and remained the most commonly used antitank missile. Among the new entrants onto the battlefield, however, was the AT-14 Kornet-E, which Hizballah used to great effect on IDF tanks and vehicles. Also new to the battlefield, of course, was the C-802 antishipping missile, which Hizballah used to kill several Israeli sailors and damage one Israeli ship off the coast of Lebanon.⁵

Hizballah effectively used all of its weapons systems—both old and new. In this way, its performance differs from the traditional performance of Arab militaries whose general lack of technical skills ensured that, “even when their equipment should have given them a commanding advantage over an adversary, they frequently found themselves beaten in the very area of military operations in which their equipment was so dominant.”⁶ Hizballah trained on, maintained, and used all of its weapons systems in a skilled and disciplined manner.

As far as training is concerned, some IDF officers maintain that Hizballah is completely trained by Iran in both its weapons skills and its tactics.⁷ This is not, however, entirely the case. To be sure, Hizballah receives a great deal of training and support from Iran,

especially in the newer and more complicated weapons systems such as the medium-range rockets and anti-tank missiles. Nevertheless, the fighters of Hizballah have infinitely more combat experience and acquired tactical *nous* than their Iranian sponsors, leading one independent observer to wryly note that Hizballah trains Iran, not the other way around.⁸

Indeed, although a degree of specialized training takes place in Iran, the majority of Hizballah’s training takes place in northeast Lebanon in the relatively safe confines of the upper Bekaa Valley. Indeed, the IDF’s attitude toward Iran’s relationship with Hizballah reflects a wide divergence of opinions about Hizballah—some dismiss it as a “gang” while others go so far as to label it an “Iranian commando division.”⁹

As Hizballah’s performance during the July War illustrates, however, Hizballah deserves to be taken seriously as a fighting force independent of any outside sponsor. Whether the decision to kidnap the two Israeli soldiers on July 12 originated in Beirut or Tehran is still unclear, but most observers of Hizballah believe the most likely scenario is that although Iran (and Syria) were informed of the operation, all major decisions concerning both the kidnapping and the operations that followed originated in the Dahye—as the Shiite suburbs of Beirut are commonly known.

5. For more on the July 14 C-802 attack on the INS *Hanit*, see Josh Brannon, “Panel: ‘Hanit’ Attack Was Preventable,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 6, 2006.

6. Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948–1991* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), p. 564.

7. Interview by author, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006.

8. Interview by author, Beirut, November 10, 2006.

9. Interviews by author, Tel Aviv, November 19, 2006.

The July War: Hizballah's Mission and Performance

HIZBALLAH'S MISSION during the July War was to remain intact as a cohesive fighting force while at the same time inflicting as many enemy casualties as possible. In short, it was a mission of survival. Because Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert initially stated Israel's goals in the conflict were to destroy Hizballah, cease the rocket attacks into northern Israel, and free the two captured soldiers,¹ Hizballah's strategy was simply to deny the IDF as many of those three goals as possible.

Hizballah, it must be said, had a lot at stake in this battle with the IDF. Its place of prestige within the Arab world—and within Lebanon—rested largely on how well it performed against the IDF and whether or not, at the end of the fighting, it remained standing and able to strike back at the Jewish state.

Hizballah's tactics in the summer's war were tailored to the mission. Accordingly, different units and groups within Hizballah had different missions and, thus, used different tactics. Hizballah's rocket teams, of course, had the mission of raining a steady stream of rockets into northern Israel until the conflict's end to create the appearance that Israel's actions were not having their desired effect.

Hizballah's mission in the villages, notes former UN official Timur Goksel, was "to bleed the IDF, not to defeat it."² In short, the men defending the border villages had the task of causing as many IDF casualties as possible while slowing the IDF's movement through southern Lebanon. If the IDF were given free rein over southern Lebanon, the rocket teams' mission would become more and more difficult. And finally, for the Hizballah teams in the border fortifications, the mission was more or less the same as the mission given to the men in the villages: bleed the IDF.

The July 12 Operation

The kidnapping operation of July 12 was, as we have noted, not the first time Hizballah had attempted such a bold operation. It was, however, the first to have succeeded so spectacularly since 2000.³ It is safe to say that Hizballah had learned from its previous failures and had incorporated its own "lessons learned" into its plan for July 12.

In the attempt at Ghajjar, Hizballah attacked within occupied (Syrian) territory. Ayta ash Shab, in contrast, is nowhere near either Ghajjar or the disputed Shebaa Farms region, leading one Hizballah-allied politician to grumble that although the attack was the right thing to have done, it was done in the wrong place—that is, all attacks against Israel, in his view, should be confined to the Shebaa Farms region.⁴

Nonetheless, Hizballah likely saw that the "blind spot" near Ayta ash Shab represented exactly the chink in Israel's armor for which it was looking.⁵ Hizballah conducted a thorough reconnaissance and used anti-tank missiles to great effect. The group obviously "task organized" its operation to include a support element, an assault element, and a breach team. After completion, it had a solid withdrawal plan that enabled its fighters to retreat to a safe zone before the inevitable Israeli counterattacks and rescue operations could begin. Furthermore, Hizballah had mined its line of retreat, accounting for the Merkava tank that was destroyed while attempting a rescue operation.

The Aftermath of July 12

Following the kidnapping, however, Hizballah was caught off guard by the ferocity and ruthlessness of the Israeli counterattack. On the day of the kidnapping,

1. "Address by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to the Knesset," Prime Minister's Office website, July 17, 2006. Available online (www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Communication/PMSpeaks/speechknesset170706.htm). See also Helena Cobban, "The 33-Day War," *Boston Review*, November/December 2006.
2. Timur Goksel, former spokesman for and senior adviser to UNIFIL, interview by author, Beirut, November 10, 2006.
3. In October 2000, Hizballah succeeded in a similar operation a few months after the Israeli withdrawal, kidnapping three soldiers whose bodies were later returned in a prisoner swap. That kidnapping took place in the Shebaa Farms region.
4. Interview by author, Beirut, November 11, 2006.
5. The IDF saw it as a potential problem area as well and had planned to put a camera in place the following week.

Hizballah officials assured Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora that the Israeli response would be measured.⁶ Instead, the IDF responded with a merciless air campaign that immediately cut southern Lebanon off from the rest of the country and soon reduced large portions of the Dahye to rubble.

The multiday Israeli air attack targeted not just known Hizballah positions but also much of the infrastructure in Beirut and southern Lebanon. Statements by Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert indicated that Israel was holding the entire nation of Lebanon responsible for the kidnapping and that the Israeli response would be felt by all segments of the Lebanese population.⁷ Accordingly, the IDF targeted not only positions in southern Lebanon but also the Beirut airport, all roads leading out of Lebanon, and even neighborhoods populated by Lebanese uniformly opposed to Hizballah.⁸

Why the IDF did not limit its air campaign to just targets that could be positively identified as being associated with Hizballah is not known. But what is clear is that the force and brutality of the attacks caused Hizballah's own leadership to doubt the intelligence of the kidnapping decision. Nasrallah himself has stated that had he known the full scale and intensity of the Israeli retaliatory attacks in advance, he would not have ordered the kidnapping operation to take place.⁹ But if Israel succeeded in surprising Hizballah by its strategic response to the attack, it did not succeed in surprising Hizballah tactically when the fight moved to the south. As one Israeli general admitted, Hizballah had good tactical intelligence: it knew the IDF's commanders, the likely routes of advance through Lebanon, and, most important, the IDF's tactics.

Why Israel did not combine its air campaign with an immediate ground invasion is the matter of much heated debate in Israel today. Israel's highest political

and military leaders appear to have been confident that air alone could achieve the majority of Israel's strategic goals in Lebanon—hard to believe considering those goals at one point included the destruction of Hizballah as well as the return of Israel's two hostages. Nonetheless, what is sure is that the IDF's decision to delay a ground assault allowed Hizballah to reinforce its defenses in southern Lebanon and—after a few days of shock—institute the plan to defend the south it had been honing since the Israeli withdrawal in 2000.

From July 12 until the Israeli ground attack began on July 17, Hizballah moved both its regular fighters and reinforcements for the village defenders into southern Lebanon. Fighters in the villages and in the isolated fortifications were able to make final preparations, unsure of when or even if the Israeli ground assault would come—but gathered and ready to oppose it.

The Fight for the Villages

The Israeli ground attack began on July 17 with a series of initial probes along the border near the village of Maroun al-Ras. Immediately, the IDF discovered that its Hizballah adversaries were dug-in and capable of mounting a strong defense of the village. Maroun al-Ras became, in effect, a harbinger of what was to come for the IDF in southern Lebanon. Not until July 23 could the IDF declare Maroun al-Ras under Israeli control, and the vicious fight that took place in the village and its environs resulted in the deaths of six IDF soldiers and the wounding of eighteen more.

Hizballah's tenacity in the villages was, to this observer, the biggest surprise of the war. As has been mentioned already, the vast majority of the fighters who defended villages such as Ayta ash Shab, Bint Jbeil, and Maroun al-Ras were not, in fact, regular Hizballah fighters and in some cases were not even members of Hizballah. But they were men, in the words of one

6. Thair Abbas, "Asharq Al-Awsat Interviews Lebanese Interior Minister Ahmad Fatfat," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), September 3, 2006.

7. "PM Olmert: Lebanon Is Responsible and Will Bear the Consequences," Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, July 12, 2006. Available online (<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2006/PM+Olmert+-+Lebanon+is+responsible+and+will+bear+the+consequences+12-Jul-2006.htm>).

8. The most infamous example of such an attack might be the IDF's destruction of two water-drilling trucks in the overwhelmingly Christian neighborhood of Achrafiyyeh. But the IDF also targeted ports in Christian towns such as Amsheet and Jounieh.

9. Hassan Nasrallah, interview with New TV, Beirut, August 27, 2006.

Lebanese observer, who were “defending their country in the most tangible sense—their shops, their homes, even their trees.”¹⁰

All the same, the performance of the village units was exceptional. Their job—to slow and to bleed the IDF as much as possible—was carried out with both determination and skill. In Maroun al-Ras, nearby Bint Jbiel, and other villages, Hizballah made the IDF pay for every inch of ground that it took. At the same time, crucially, Hizballah dictated the rules of how the war was to be fought. Or as one observer put it, “This was a very good lesson in asymmetric warfare. This was not Israel imposing its battle on Hizballah but Hizballah imposing its battle on Israel.”¹¹ The narrow village streets of southern Lebanon do not lend themselves to tank maneuver, so the IDF would have to fight with infantry supported by armor, artillery, and air power. This kind of fight negated many of the IDF’s natural advantages and forced the IDF ground forces to fight a very different kind of battle than the one for which they had trained.

From 2000 until 2006, the typical mission for an Israeli infantryman was to man a checkpoint in the Palestinian territories or to snatch a suspected Palestinian militant out of his house in the middle of the night—missions very similar to those currently being executed by U.S. infantrymen in Iraq. Now—with the possible exception of the Golani Brigade—the IDF was fighting different battles and in a different environment from those of the Palestinian territories. Said one IDF general when asked if the units sent into southern Lebanon had enough intelligence on the region, “It’s one thing to give the troops maps, target lists, etc. It’s another thing to be trained for the mission—they weren’t trained. . . . [T]here was a big difference between the units who came from the south and those who came from the north.”¹²

Hizballah, significantly, was able to fire and maneuver to great effect in the villages even while under

Israeli artillery and air barrages. For the IDF, fighting an Arab military proficient in tactical maneuver under fire was a new experience. Hizballah’s small-unit leaders successfully maneuvered their units from room to room and from house to house against the IDF. They also used their weapons systems—especially their anti-tank weapons—to great effect, often firing antitank missiles through the walls of houses and from well-concealed bunkers into rooms where IDF soldiers were taking shelter. Hizballah’s tactics, in turn, surprised and at times exasperated the IDF. “They’re not fighting like we thought they would,” one soldier said. “They’re fighting harder. They’re good on their own ground.”¹³

The decentralized way in which Hizballah organized its forces, however, carried with it advantages and disadvantages. The autonomy given to Hizballah’s small-unit commanders afforded them great flexibility and encouraged them to take the initiative against their opposite numbers in the IDF. In addition, the lack of a significant “logistical tail” allowed them to be more or less self-sufficient during the course of the war. Hizballah’s small units had enough water, food, and supplies to last them through the course of the five-week war.

But the decentralized way in which Hizballah arrayed its forces prevented its units from supporting one another in the way that the IDF’s small units were able to do. In a battle, every man and every unit sees his own battle. In Hizballah’s case, this is certainly true because individual units had few resources available to allow them to know—in the midst of the fighting, despite their communications gear—what their sister units were encountering and how to help them. Also, though Hizballah’s small units displayed a great deal of mobility within their villages and individual areas of operations, Hizballah’s decentralized organization forced them to fight a more or less static defense. There was no question of units retreating or moving forward to support other units because the Israeli Air Force

10. Interview by author, Beirut, November 13, 2006.

11. Interview by author, southern Lebanon, November 10, 2006.

12. Interview by author, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006. When the interviewee refers to units in the north and south, he is referring to the units based in Israel’s north (such as the Golani Brigade) versus those that were deployed from the south or from the Palestinian territories.

13. Quoted in “Israeli Troops Praise Hezbollah Tactics,” Al-Jazeera.Net, July 25, 2006. Available online (<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/archive/archive?ArchiveId=24673>).

(IAF) had successfully isolated the villages and fortifications from which they were fighting.

But what is “withdrawal” for a unit organic to the village from which it fights? Dismissing reports that Hizballah had withdrawn units into Syria after the fighting turned against it, former UN official Timur Goksel scoffed, “For a guy fighting in Ayta ash Shab, ‘withdrawal’ means going home, putting your AK-47 under the bed and changing your clothes.”¹⁴

Although the answer may not be quite so simple, in effect that sentiment wraps up two of the reasons why the fighters in the villages were so difficult for the IDF to defeat. Coming from the villages they now defended, they needed no extra motivation to fight hard. And if the battle indeed went against them, the fighters could just go back to being “civilians” with no Hizballah uniforms or unit patches to inform the IDF of their dual identity.

The question of who, exactly, trained these village fighters is one of the enduring mysteries of the war. It is unlikely that any of them received training in Iran—or even by the Iranians in Lebanon. More likely is that they were former militia—or perhaps even former Hizballah—fighters who carried with them knowledge and experience from prior conflicts that Hizballah was able to use in the summer war.

The Antitank Battle

On August 10, an IDF armored column descended into Wadi Salouqi—a deep north-south valley that bisects southern Lebanon—and met with disaster. Forty-eight hours earlier, the IDF unit had been given orders to cross Wadi Salouqi and seize the town of Ghandourieh. But for reasons unknown, the unit was told to halt movement just as its lead vehicles reached the bottom of the valley. The unit then turned around and headed back to a position west of At-Tayyabah while it awaited further orders.¹⁵ The delay in the IDF movements gave its adversaries all the time they needed to

prepare a defense of the valley. Hizballah moved anti-tank teams into the valley on both sides and waited for the IDF to try again.

Accordingly, as the commander leading the column reached the bottom of the valley on August 12, his tank was destroyed by an improvised explosive device. The rest of his unit then came under heavy fire from Hizballah antitank units burrowed into the steep slopes of the valley. Eleven IDF tanks were hit by Hizballah antitank missiles, while eight crewmen and four other soldiers were killed. The casualties made up over a tenth of all IDF casualties in the July War.

Unaware that the tank unit had been held up for forty-eight hours, one neutral observer caustically commented that the unit’s commander should have been a cook—not a tank commander—in the IDF.¹⁶ But chalking up the disaster of Wadi Salouqi merely to Israeli incompetence ignores one of Hizballah’s great tactical successes of the July War: its use of a wide variety of antitank weapons that consistently created problems for the IDF on the ground.

As has already been noted, Hizballah used a much wider variety of antitank weapons in the July War than it had used in the past. But as countless Arab militaries have demonstrated over the years, just possessing technology and advanced weaponry is no guarantee of success. Hizballah’s success with antitank weapons during the July War reflects many years spent training on these weapons systems as well as a good plan to use these weapons once the battle began.

The organization of Hizballah’s antitank teams differs slightly from the organization of its “infantry,” or village, squads. The typical Hizballah antitank team is composed of two men, highly trained on their weapons system and often with advanced training provided by the Iranians, and two or three other men, who serve mainly as less skilled “porters” for the others.¹⁷

How many of these teams saw action in the July War is unclear. One of the war’s ironies is that many of Hizballah

14. Timur Goksel, former spokesman for and senior adviser to UNIFIL, interview by author, Beirut, November 10, 2006.

15. The author interviewed an officer in the unit in question, northern Israel, November 19, 2006.

16. Interview by author, Beirut, November 10, 2006.

17. Interview by author, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006.

lah's best and most skilled fighters never saw action, lying in wait along the Litani River with the expectation that the IDF assault would be much deeper and arrive much faster than it did. But the antitank teams that *did* see action were able to inflict significant losses on the IDF.

The Rocket Battle

Although this paper endeavors to remain focused on the tactical battle and not the strategic aims of any of the combatants, it must be said that Hizballah's rocket attacks against Israel in the July War were at once a tactical success and a strategic failure.

Tactically, Hizballah managed to sustain a consistently heavy rate of rocket fire against northern Israel throughout the war. In the first ten days of the war, according to Israeli sources, the rate of rocket fire into Israel averaged between 150 and 180 rockets a day. On July 18 alone, 350 rockets were fired before rates of fire dropped to about 100 per day toward the end of the month.¹⁸ On the last day before the ceasefire, however, Hizballah managed to fire 250 rockets into northern Israel.

Hizballah's success in maintaining a high rate of fire throughout the conflict is a testament above all to the planning that took place before the war but also to the dedication and skill of the fighters involved. Without question, the way in which the rocket teams both maintained and used their weapons was impressive. But they were aided by the preparations Hizballah had made prior to the war, entrenching their short-range rockets in underground positions built to evade detection and withstand bombardment.¹⁹ Once again, Hizballah gave its leaders a large degree of autonomy here, often leading the rocket teams to their katyusha launchers in the first days of the war, giving simple mission-type instructions, and then not returning until after the fighting had ceased.²⁰

The Hizballah fighters in the border fortifications also must be mentioned alongside the rocket teams because they, like the rocket teams, were often stranded in areas separated from villages and thus away from any organic lifeline. Nonetheless, thanks to determination and also good prewar logistical planning, the fighters in fortifications such as those in the Labboune area south of Naqoura were able to continue launching rockets into Israel until the ceasefire took effect on August 14, 2006, despite being, essentially, behind IDF lines.

At the same time, however, Hizballah's rockets did not have their desired effect of breaking the will of the people of northern Israel and instead—as is often the case with aerial bombardments—stiffened the resolve of the population under fire. This result is a strategic loss for both Hizballah and Iran, who in the event of an Israeli attack on Iran proper, had counted on Hizballah's rockets in Lebanon as being a way of launching an effective counterattack.

In addition, although Hizballah enjoyed great success launching its short-range rockets into Israel, its medium-range rockets were almost entirely destroyed by the IAF. Particularly successful were the IAF's efforts to cripple Hizballah's ability to deliver the mid- and long-range rocket volleys against targets beyond Haifa that Nasrallah had promised on July 14.²¹ The early air assault on the second day of the war, for example, "knocked out fifty-nine permanent launchers of the intermediate Fajr missiles and Zelzal missiles in thirty-four minutes."²² Because the katyusha attacks really have only a psychological effect, the fact that Hizballah was not able to launch many of its longer-range weapons toward targets deep in Israel's interior should be cause for concern in both the Dahye and Tehran, given that so much time and energy was expended acquiring them and training Hizballah in their use.

18. Nicholas Blanford, "Deconstructing Hizballah's Surprise Military Prowess," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, October 24, 2006.

19. See Zeev Schiff, "How the IDF Blew Chance to Destroy Short-Range Rockets," *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), September 5, 2006.

20. Obviously, some communication took place between the rocket teams and higher authorities. How else to explain the way in which Hizballah was able to raise the number of rocket attacks on the crucial final day of fighting?

21. Hassan Nasrallah, al-Manar, July 14, 2006.

22. David Makovsky and Jeffrey White, "Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizballah War: A Preliminary Assessment," *Policy Focus* no. 60 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2006). Available online (<http://washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus60.pdf>).

Conclusion

IN THE END, the best way to view Hizballah's performance in the July War is by comparing it to the performance of other Arab armies that have fought against the IDF since 1948 and noting where Hizballah's performance differs. Three differences stand out with Hizballah: its ability to maneuver tactically against the IDF, the autonomy given to its small units and the initiative taken by the small-unit leaders, and the skill Hizballah displayed with its weapons systems.

Since 1948, few Arab military units have performed well against Israel in a fluid battlefield. But through experience gained in the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli occupation, excellent training, and an ability to force the IDF to fight on Hizballah's terms, Hizballah did just that.¹

By the same token, one of the reasons Arab militaries have fared poorly in the tactical fight is that the small-unit leaders have rarely been entrusted to make independent decisions on the battlefield. In contrast, Hizballah gave its small-unit leaders a high degree of autonomy by both design and necessity. Hizballah's small-unit leaders then responded by displaying a high degree of initiative on the battlefield. In other words, Hizballah on the battlefield behaved a lot like the IDF—a worrying trend for an IDF grown used to Arab military units reacting to events on the battlefield in a slow and hesitant manner. In addition, unlike many other Arab military units, Hizballah displayed a willingness to fight at night. Although it possessed limited night-vision equipment, Hizballah was nonetheless somewhat adept at fighting (and certainly willing to engage) IDF units in what had previously been hours during which only the IDF operated.

Finally, Hizballah displayed the ability during the July War to make good use of whatever weapons systems it was provided, whether those systems were sim-

ple assault rifles or complex antitank missiles. Again, this fact contrasts with the IDF's historical experience with other Arab militaries.² In the next conflict between Hizballah and the IDF, it seems a safe bet that Hizballah's next goal will be to break the IDF's stranglehold on the air by using man-portable anti-aircraft missiles with the same degree of skill with which it used antitank missiles in this most recent conflict. If Hizballah succeeds in doing that, it will be able to solve its other great difficulty in the summer's war—how to reinforce units and move men and equipment from village to village, thus creating a truly fluid battlefield.

For all these reasons in addition to those mentioned above, Hizballah emerged from the July War having taken a beating but not quite beaten. Even IDF commanders eager to demonstrate the ways in which the IDF severely weakened Hizballah's fighting capabilities and inflicted high percentages of casualties upon it admit in the same breath that the enemy they faced was "a galvanized organization with real spirit" possessing good leadership at both the political and military levels.³

Hizballah's display on the battlefield should worry U.S. policymakers and military planners as well. Enemies of the United States will likely seek to emulate Hizballah's perceived successes in southern Lebanon, and the lessons learned by the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan may or may not apply to such a fight. As the IDF learned in the occupied territories and Lebanon, the fight you have today might be completely different from the one you have tomorrow. Thus, it is important that U.S. military commanders remember that Iraq and Afghanistan will not be the last battles fought by the American military. The next war could just as easily be back in the jungles of Southeast Asia against Islamic militants or in the mountains of South America against leftist guerillas.

1. Of course, exceptions to the rule exist: Syrian commando units, for example, have often enjoyed a degree of success against the IDF.

2. Again, exceptions to this rule exist as well: in 1973, for example, the Egyptian army made good use of its new Sagger antitank missiles following the crossing of the Suez Canal.

3. Interview by author, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006.

American military planners should carefully study the way Hizballah fought against Israel in the summer of 2006 and then prepare to fight such an enemy on terrain unlike that on which U.S. infantrymen find themselves today. As the IDF has learned in recent fights against Palestinian militant groups, tactics, techniques, and procedures used with success by Hizballah often migrate to other organizations. As former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage has said in an oft-quoted statement, Hizballah is the “A Team” of terrorist groups.⁴ And in one way, it is: Hizballah is looked up to and often imitated by other groups in the Middle East and beyond.

U.S. military planners, however, should take heart from the fact that when the IDF was able to mass combat power and make effective use of combined arms, it roundly defeated Hizballah’s formations—even in their makeshift village fortresses. But for the U.S. military to duplicate those successes, it will have to shrug off the complacency that naturally develops in an army and Marine Corps worn down and exhausted by five years of war. The good news is America’s robust military presence in Iraq may be coming to an end. The bad news is, after Iraq ends, preparation for the next fight must begin in earnest.

4. Richard Armitage, “9/11 a Year On: America’s Challenges in a Changed World” (speech at United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., September 5, 2002).

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