

## **The War of Unintended Consequences**

The latest Middle East conflict underlined the acute need for effective counter-guerrilla responses

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The cacophony of views and the flood of contrasting accounts on the latest war in the Middle East would leave even a seasoned observer a bit perplexed: who won this conflict? Was it Hezbollah, as suggested by the Economist in a recent cover story, or was it Israel, as asserted by Lebanese protestors who called for the resignation of Fouad Siniora's government in Beirut shortly after the ceasefire started ?

As more and more details emerge on the operational and humanitarian aspects of the war, it is fair to say that such question is of little or no relevance. In fact, the international community has had a first glimpse into the nature of twenty first century warfare. Was this war a precursor for future conflicts?

It should be spelt from the outset, that any attempt to judge a limited, asymmetric warfare in accordance with the same yardstick of conventional conflict is not only flawed but also misleading. A clash between a regular army and a non-state actor is almost always part of a broader and longer conflict, which cannot be decided militarily at a single stroke. Objectives that can be sought and achieved in an all out war are not usually attainable in a low intensity or asymmetric conflict. Inevitably, expectations of quick, low cost battles are almost always proven to be short-lived and unrealistic, replaced by bitter sense of disappointment. Currently, regular armies are not catered well for asymmetric warfare, and therefore the stronger party is not necessarily the triumphant one.

The Lebanon war was a case in point. For 34 days, following the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah from within Israel, both sides were engaged in a fierce combat during which the Israelis performed more than 10,000 sorties and aerial strikes and pounded Lebanon with more than 130,000 shells, rockets and ammunition of various kinds (including

cluster bombs). At the height of the conflict, Israel mobilised about 500 tanks and armoured vehicles into southern Lebanon and deployed between 15,000 to 25,000 soldiers, assisted by the navy's battleships, which placed Lebanon under a naval blockade. Hezbollah countered by launching more than 4,000 short range rockets at northern Israel, while its elite ground units held their guns and conducted face to face battles in the face of a superior and bigger opponent.

During the war, it became clear that Hezbollah acquired operational skills and manifested features and capabilities of a regular army. With its hierarchical command structure, compartmentalised cells and commando units, equipped with advanced Russian and Iranian made weaponry, Hezbollah was propped up to become a retaliatory Iranian arm, should the US or Israel decide to attack its nuclear facilities. The scale and depth of Hezbollah's military infrastructure in southern Lebanon was formidable: it amassed thousands of rockets, missiles and light weaponry, and developed an airborne arm. While improving its fighters skills, Hezbollah – with the help of Iran and Syria – have invested tens of millions of dollars in building a network of fortified posts, bunkers and tunnels near the Israeli-Lebanese border, and created underground command and control units, and communication and eavesdropping centres throughout the country. In addition, it prepared hundreds of hiding places across southern Lebanon for ammunition, rockets launchers and missiles, mainly in open spaces (like forests and garbage dumps) and within civilian infrastructure (building blocks, hospitals, schools and private houses). During the fighting, Hezbollah combatants used advanced Russian-made anti-tank missiles (originally destined for the Syrian army), which wreaked havoc among the Israeli ground forces, while keeping their communications exchange to a minimum. At times they utilised surprisingly primitive methods, such as transfer of operational messages via human couriers on bikes and donkeys (thus circumventing interception by signal and electronic intelligence measures).

In addition to tactical problems, the Israelis were facing significant humanitarian dilemmas, which placed major limitations on the use of military force (and probably contributed to the relatively small number of Lebanese casualties in this war: around 1,200 compared with more than 6,000 in 1982). The nature of asymmetric unregulated warfare is such that unlawful combat forces like Hezbollah's, whose fighters usually wear civilian clothing and move in unmarked vehicles, have effectively turned the entire population into a legitimate target. To isolate and find the right culprits would have required Israel to occupy all of Lebanon, or, alternatively, to kill innocent civilians in indiscriminate attacks (acts which in themselves contravene international conventions). The attacker, in this case Israel, subsequently lost the all important international public relations battle while facing calls for withdrawal and threats of legal proceedings against military commanders. While this happened, graphic images of bombed sites have had an adverse impact on public opinion in the Arab world, thus tempering the initial criticism of Hizbullah in Arab capitals.

Opting for an asymmetric warfare approach was, in the case of Hezbollah, a win-win option. It knew that its military capabilities were, in the final analysis, inferior to those of the Israelis, but its strength lied in its agility, intimate knowledge of local topography and non-compliance with international treaties (unlike Israel). Luring a bigger, slower, and regular army into an attrition war, in which insurgents have the upper hand (note the difficulties of the US forces in Iraq) was therefore the trap, which Israel tried to avoid at all costs. It delayed the mobilisation of ground forces, and gave priority to an extensive aerial offensive, which was at the heart of a counter-guerrilla doctrine called 'the vulture and the snake'.

The air force (the vultures) was assigned the lead role in combating the guerrillas (the snakes), in a pinpointed, around the clock fashion, and under all weather conditions. Ground forces were to be used sparingly, moving in and out of the enemy's territory in rapid successions to clear pockets of resistance and destroy targets that were not dealt with by the air force; there would be no attempt to maintain occupation.

This approach, devised after the Israeli pullout of Lebanon in 2000, gained much support in the defence establishment and among political circles. It was viewed as a 'clean' and cost-effective method, with minimal or no direct friction with the local population, and therefore with little chance of international outcry. Successful air led operations by the US in Iraq (operation 'Shock and Awe' in 2003) and NATO in the Balkans (operation 'Allied Force' in 1999) also lent credence. Its advocates were also bolstered by the success of aerial attacks on Palestinian targets (most notably, targeted killing operations) in the past five years, which significantly spared the use of ground forces; the success of these attacks was attributed to excellent intelligence, which enabled Israel to carry out precision air strikes against leaders of Hamas and other outfits.

In practice, this doctrine yielded mixed results. On the one hand, Hezbollah was stunned to discover that most of its long-range missile capability had been destroyed within 72 hours, and its headquarters in Beirut reduced to rubble. The wide-scale nature of Israel's swift, extensive attacks shocked the population and the Lebanese government, thus setting an important psychological and physical deterrence. The unpredictability of Israel's response sent shockwaves in other neighbouring countries and helped to reaffirm Israel's willingness to use massive force, should certain red lines be crossed; however, Israel, did not clarify the nature of these red lines, leaving potential aggressors to infer them on their own.

On the other hand, Israeli air superiority was of little effect against the many hundreds of missile launchers that Hezbollah has scattered throughout south Lebanon; these small targets, characterised by low visibility, small radar cross section and minimal infrared signature, proved to be a significant operational headache. While the Israel Air Force eventually managed to expose and destroy many of them, Hezbollah quickly put replacement launchers, most of them carried on small trucks or sheltered within civilian infrastructure; the pace and ferocity of its attacks remained therefore intact, and even increased towards the end of the war. It is likely that the relative success of Hezbollah's tactics against Israel will inspire other radical Islamist organisations with revolutionary agendas to follow its *modus operandi*.

What can be done in the face of a cynical enemy that uses the cover of civilian population as an integral part of its doctrine? This is a major military as well as a legal and humanitarian challenge, one, which Israel cannot tackle on its own. There is an urgent need not only for new and more effective military and diplomatic responses not just against well equipped militias but also against rogue, terror sponsoring countries bent on the acquisition of WMDs. This can be successfully achieved through a concerted effort, which simultaneously addresses the following factors:

- Diplomacy: as attested by the contrasting examples of Iraq and Libya, one could not disarm a country from its weapons of mass destruction unless it was willing to cooperate. Regrettably, diplomatic means alone cannot achieve this; Friedrich the Great famously noted that 'diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments'. The latest Middle East conflict sharpened and crystallised the growing

danger posed by a nuclear Iran to the free world – and, increasingly, to the Sunni Arab world as well – and there is greater willingness than before July 2006 to confront this issue head on. However, the effectiveness of the international UN-backed force in Lebanon in disarming Hezbollah and preventing a further conflict with Israel remains unclear; the end result will underpin the ability – or inability – of the international community to successfully address issues of global concern.

- Legal: international law that governs wars and matters of self-defence has remained perilously dated and static despite new developments in the nature of modern warfare involving non-state actors. While military planners advocated a move from reactive to pre-emptive, with an emphasis on sustained expeditionary operations against asymmetrical opponents, the international legal framework within which Israel and other western countries operate is largely unchanged. The Geneva Conventions were created almost fifty years ago, and were last updated thirty years ago; the world has undergone significant changes since then. Further, these conventions were aimed at regulating conflicts in which armies of sovereign states were involved; they did not cover a scenario in which terrorist organisations were concerned. Consequently, the current international law framework prohibits pre-emptive strikes against imminent threats as a matter of self-defence.
- Technological: public criticism of Israel's army inability to effectively tackle the threat of short and medium range rockets led to renewed effort by the Israel Ministry of Defence to develop technological solutions that will complement other elements in the country's anti-missile defence. However, a current timetable suggests that an Israeli-made operational solution against short range missiles and rockets will not be ready before 2011, and therefore there is an urgent need for a collaborative effort between countries with significant military research capability to join forces together in speeding up the process of development.
- Educational: One of the root causes for the ongoing hostility and hatred for the West among Muslim populations in third world countries is grounded in their education systems. The US administration pioneered a new programme in Pakistan which may lead the way: The two countries signed in July 2006 a \$62.7 million agreement to improve primary and higher education in Pakistan, including school administrator and teacher training; school improvement through parental and community involvement in schools; and school construction. The main thrust of this and similar programmes is on the improvement of literacy level among women, which is directly linked to reduction and better control of fertility levels, low infant mortality and better health of children.

Only by adopting a multi-tier counter response can democratic and freedom-loving countries improve their ability to effectively counter asymmetric opponents. Applying older approaches to conflict in this case will not produce, as it was with Lebanon last summer, decisive results on the battlefield and may in fact prove, tactically and strategically, to be counterproductive.

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