Israel in Lebanon—Getting It Wrong: The 1982 Invasion, 2000 Withdrawal, and 2006 War

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Ever since the early 1970s, Lebanon has played a central role in the Arab–Israeli conflict, as the focus of ongoing low level hostilities, three major Israeli military operations (Litani 1978, Accountability 1993, and Grapes of Wrath 1996), two wars (the Lebanon War of 1982 and the Second Lebanon War of 2006), and a unilateral Israeli withdrawal in 2000. The outcomes of these events were far from what Israel's decision makers had intended at the outset; Israel was repeatedly unable to achieve its objectives, or arguably only partially successful in doing so. Indeed, Israel's difficulties in Lebanon culminated in what the Winograd Commission, the special commission established to investigate the failings of the 2006 war, called "the IDF's almost mystical fear of the Lebanese quagmire."[1]

The present study assesses the reasons for Israel's repeated policy failures in Lebanon by comparing the decision making processes (DMPs) in the three most important cases above: the two wars and the unilateral withdrawal. Failure, of course, is both a relative and subjective term. Indeed, it can be argued that not all of these cases were unequivocal failures; the outcome of the 2006 war was not entirely negative from Israel's perspective and the alternative in 2000, such as remaining in Lebanon, might have been worse. Thus, failure, for the purposes of this study, refers not to the quality of the outcomes, but to Israel's ability to achieve the objectives set out by its leaders.

The hypothesis: Three decision making pathologies, in essence independent variables, common to Israeli national security decision making generally,[2] are posited to largely explain the unsuccessful outcomes reached in the case studies:

- Independent variable 1: a dysfunctional cabinet DMP, characterized by ill-defined and overly ambitious objectives, faulty formulation of options and information processing, sequential and improvisational decision making, and the absence of an effective statutory decision making forum.

- Independent variable 2: the highly politicized nature of the DMP, due to partisan and coalition politics, as well as public opinion.

- Independent variable 3: the predominance of the defense establishment in the DMP, especially the IDF, at the expense of other agencies and viewpoints.

As a study of Israeli decision making, this article is written from the perspective of Israel's decision makers and how they perceived Israel's strategic circumstances, including the threats and opportunities they faced and the policy options available to them. In all three cases, Israel perceived itself to be reacting to major changes in its external environment and thus to have had important, arguably overwhelming, strategic reasons for responding as it did. Nevertheless, the three cases were not situations of immediate and overwhelming compellence, such as the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the initiative was at least largely in Israel's hands. Israel thus had the time needed to "get it right." Most Israeli leaders and analysts believe that it did not.

Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and the war in 2006 have been extensively chronicled,[3] the unilateral withdrawal in 2000 far less so. The literature on these cases from a decision making perspective, however, is more limited and the present study adds an entirely new dimension by adopting a comparative approach, seeking to identify the decision making pathologies common to all three cases. The historical contexts of the three were different, of course, but the challenges Israel faced, of an asymmetrical adversary (the PLO, then Hizbullah), deeply entrenched in Lebanese society and politics but posing a clear threat to the security of Israel's north, are sufficiently similar as to warrant comparison.

We shall begin with a presentation of the strategic settings in the three cases, in order to understand Israel's motivations for acting as it did, before turning to a comparative analysis of the DMPs. Rather than presenting each case as a comprehensive whole, we shall deal with only that part of the picture relevant to each of the independent variables, as a means of assessing their relative impact and highlighting the comparative dimension.

Responding to Strategic Imperatives: Proactive Decision Making

Invasion 1982

Israel's invasion of Lebanon on June 5, 1982 was directed against two distinct enemies, Syria and the PLO, and the strategic rationale for attacking each differed. Syria had long been Israel's most implacable enemy, and with the Israeli–Egyptian peace treaty of 1979, it now succeeded Egypt as the primary one as well. Lebanon, conversely, was the only one of Israel's neighbors that had refrained from initiating hostilities against it ever since 1949. Preservation of this heretofore peaceful border, now challenged by both the growing Syrian and PLO roles in Lebanon, constituted a fundamental strategic objective for Israel.

In April 1981, Syria deployed surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) in Lebanon, posing a clear challenge not just to Israel's aerial freedom of maneuver, but more importantly to its overall security interests in the north and general deterrent posture. From Israel's perspective, to acquiesce to the deployment of those missiles would have meant accepting Syrian hegemony in Lebanon; Lebanon becoming part of the confrontation states; and a change in the overall regional balance of power. Even more ominously from Israel's perspective, Military Intelligence (MI) warned that Syria was now completing a massive arms buildup, designed to enable it to wage war against Israel on its own, without Egypt, and that it intended to initiate hostilities in 1982. A Syrian missile umbrella would also greatly increase the danger the PLO posed to Israel.[4]

In July 1981, just three months after the deployment of the Syrian missiles, the PLO bombarded northern Israel for ten days with over 1,000 rockets and artillery shells. For the first time, the PLO had now become an actual military threat to Israel rather than just a highly painful terrorist one. In Kiryat Shmonah, the largest town in the north, 40 percent of the population fled. This was an unprecedented event that had a shattering effect on public opinion. Further exacerbating the picture was the long-term evolution of the PLO from a lightly armed guerilla force into a standing force. According to MI, the PLO planned to employ its new capabilities to attack the north once again and even try to overrun an entire town.[5]

The Syrian and PLO threats were perceived by Israel as constituting severe changes in its environment that required commensurate responses. In acting in Lebanon, Israel's motivations were initially clearly reactive, but by the time of the invasion, a year had passed since the deployment of the Syrian missiles and PLO shelling. As such, the invasion was a case of Israel taking the initiative to shape its environment and attain objectives exceeding those militated by immediate circumstances.

Withdrawal 2000

The war in 1982 was designed to be a short operation. Indeed, the primary military phase—the actual invasion—was. Once the invasion ended, however, Israel's entire strategy began unraveling and this episode proved to be just the beginning of an eighteen-year saga in Lebanon. Israel staged a partial withdrawal in 1983 and in 1985 withdrew to a narrow "security zone" along the border. By 1984, Syria had recovered from the fighting and succeeded in reasserting its control over Lebanon, forcing it to abrogate the peace treaty with Israel and ending the Israeli–Maronite alliance. Radicalization of the Shiites, partially in response to the invasion, contributed to the establishment of Hizbullah at this time.

The security zone proved a mixed bag: Highly successful in preventing cross-border infiltration, it was too narrow to prevent rocket fire into Israel. By the time of the unilateral withdrawal in May 2000, Hizbullah had fired 4,000 rockets into Israel and had an arsenal of some 7,000 more. The number of civilians killed was small, but the number of wounded was not and the disruption to civilian life was significant. Moreover, in the years preceding the withdrawal, the IDF lost an annual average of seventeen soldiers on the Lebanese front, a painful number for a country Israel's size.[6] In January 2000, some forty Hizbullah attacks, of all kinds, occurred each week.[7] In February, a major rocket attack forced 300,000 people into shelters, while 40 percent of the residents of Kiryat Shmonah fled once again.[8]

Over the years, Lebanon had become a relatively "safe" battleground in which the warring sides could pursue their goals without undue risk of a broader escalation. For Syria, the low-level warfare in Lebanon provided a means of keeping up the pressure on Israel to make concessions on the Golan, or at least of making it pay for the ongoing occupation, without risking a direct flare-up. For Iran, Lebanon provided a unique opportunity to engage Israel militarily right on its border. Hizbullah, both for its own reasons and as an agent of Syria and Iran, sought to use Lebanon to cause Israel an ongoing bloodletting. Israel, too, preoccupied with its other challenges, wished to avoid a major escalation in Lebanon and preferred the status quo in the Golan to all other options. In practice, it, too, thus acceded to Lebanon becoming the accepted theater of low intensity conflict. By 2000, however, the cost was becoming unacceptable and Israel was actively seeking new means of addressing its security concerns in the north.[9]

As originally conceived, the withdrawal from Lebanon was to be part of a dramatic attempt by Prime Minister Ehud Barak to change the course of the Mideast conflict. In just a little over a year, Barak sought to achieve peace with both the Palestinians and Syria and to resolve the conflict on the Lebanese border as well, preferably as part of the negotiations with Syria, unilaterally if necessary. With the

failure of the peace talks with Syria in Geneva in March 2000, Barak decided to withdraw from Lebanon unilaterally. In so doing, he cleared the way for the Camp David summit with the Palestinians two months later. Israel had good reasons for considering unilateral withdrawal, but this was not a case of overwhelming compellence and other options were feasible.

War 2006

On July 12, 2006, two IDF soldiers were kidnapped and eight killed in a Hizbullah border attack. The resulting war would turn out to be Israel's longest since 1948, putting an end to the six-year period of relative quiet along the Lebanese border.

Having completely withdrawn from Lebanon to its international border in 2000, with UN confirmation, Israel maintained that no further justification existed for conflict with Hizbullah and that it thus expected a quiescent border. Just to be on the safe side, as a deterrent to Hizbullah, it nevertheless adopted a declared retaliatory policy stating that it would respond massively to any future attacks.[10] With the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000, however, Israel found that it could not effectively wage two wars at the same time, diplomatically or militarily, and chose to give priority to the Palestinian front.[11] In October it thus refrained from retaliating to Hizbullah's first major attack in the post-withdrawal period, setting a pattern that continued throughout the ensuing years, despite periodic shellings of the north, repeated attempts to kidnap Israeli soldiers, and other painful, but low-level, attacks.

Israel found itself in a bind. The small number of casualties did not provide clear justification for a major response, particularly given its preoccupation with the Palestinian front. Conversely, it was clear to Israel's decision makers that the relative calm on the Lebanese border would not last long and that Hizbullah would ultimately initiate a major escalation, or force Israel to do so. Moreover, Hizbullah was making use of the passing time to build up a massive rocket arsenal—from 7,000 at the time of the withdrawal to over 13,000 by 2006—and every passing day made a future operation to eliminate them that much harder. In the absence of a better alternative, Israel chose to exercise restraint and try to perpetuate a tenuous balance of terror along the border, pending what was viewed as an almost preordained clash.[12] By late 2005, MI had presciently concluded that Hizbullah intended to provoke a major confrontation during the coming year, possibly in the summer, by repeatedly attempting to kidnap Israeli soldiers.

Events just prior to the Hizbullah attack of July 12 further contributed to Israel's decision to respond forcefully. Following the withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005, Hamas and other Palestinian organizations fired well over a thousand rockets

into southern Israel. Moreover, in late June 2006, two Israeli soldiers were killed on the Gaza border and one abducted (Gilad Shalit). As with the withdrawal from Lebanon, both Israel's public and decision makers were increasingly becoming convinced that even a complete Israeli withdrawal from Arab territory, albeit a unilateral one, had only diminished its security. Israel's deterrent image was crumbling and its leaders increasingly felt that something had to be done.[13]

At that time, moreover, Israel was seeking to promote a new peace initiative calling for unilateral withdrawal from most of the West Bank. The perceived failure of the two unilateral withdrawals, however, undermined the strategic rationale for the new proposal. If Hizbullah and Hamas could continue firing on Israel with impunity, even after Israel had withdrawn, the Israeli public would not support similar moves in the future. By demonstrating clear resolve to deter further attacks from territory from which it had withdrawn, the decision to respond massively was, at least in part, an attempt to "save" the new plan and with it the remaining prospects for peace.[14]

In a broader context, Israel's leaders viewed Hizbullah as part of the far greater confrontation with Iran. Israel assumed that the massive rocket arsenal Iran provided Hizbullah was intended primarily as a deterrent—to threaten Israel with severe punishment in the event that it attacked Iran's nuclear facilities. A strategic threat to Israel in its own right, Hizbullah was thus part of a much greater, in this case potentially existential, one.[15]

Therefore, Israel had compelling reasons for responding forcefully, even massively, to the Hizbullah attack of July 12. It did not, however, have to do so in that time frame, or in the manner and magnitude chosen. This was certainly the case if the IDF was ill-prepared to begin with and the proposed military strategy questionable. Israel's decision makers, in any event, sought to go beyond a response to the immediate provocation and to turn the war into a fundamental turning point with Hizbullah, which would change the ongoing balance of power. As such, the war in 2006, a clear reaction to the attacks of July 12, like the invasion in 1982 and withdrawal in 2000, became a case of pro active decision making designed to fundamentally change the prevailing circumstances.

It is typically argued that Israeli decision making is characterized by an essentially reactive nature. This was certainly not true in the three cases examined here. Although major environmental changes served as the background for the policy changes made, Israel's decision makers took the initiative in all three cases in the attempt to pro actively shape the environment.

We now turn to an assessment of the impact of the three independent variables on the cases studied. The first independent variable, as noted, refers to a dysfunctional cabinet DMP, characterized by ambiguous and overly ambitious objectives, faulty formulation of options and information processing, sequential and improvisational decision making, and the absence of an effective statutory decision making forum.

Objectives Are Ill Defined and Overly Ambitious

Invasion 1982

In reality, Israel launched two different invasions in June 1982. The first was the limited invasion officially approved by the cabinet and the second, the one actually launched by Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon.

The invasion's formal objectives, as approved by the cabinet, were the establishment of a security zone along the northern border designed to push PLO artillery out of range; the conclusion of a peace treaty with Lebanon; and the creation of a "new political order" in Lebanon. The cabinet further stipulated that Israel would not attack Syrian forces unless attacked first. The size of the security zone, nature of the "new political order," and means of achieving these goals, including the peace treaty, were not elaborated.[16]

The invasion's true objectives, as conceived by Begin and Sharon, were at least as ambiguous and far more ambitious. For Begin, the invasion was designed to lead to the PLO's expulsion from Lebanon and to its destruction, thereby enabling Israel to dictate the terms both of a settlement there and of the Palestinian issue. At the very least, the invasion was to stall the momentum of Palestinian nationalism and greatly diminish the possibility that the West Bank might ever be severed from Israel.[17]

Sharon, too, sought a fundamental solution to the Lebanese problem, including destruction of the PLO and withdrawal of Syrian forces, which he believed would pave the way for a Lebanese government willing to make peace with Israel.[18] Lebanon, however, was only a stepping stone in the broader transformation of the Mideast he envisaged. Sharon had long been an advocate of the "Jordan is Palestine" thesis, which held that the Palestinian state should be established in Jordan, in which Palestinians constituted close to a majority of the population, rather than in the West Bank. With the PLO in ruins, the Palestinians would have little alternative but to pursue their national aspirations in Jordan.[19]

If the invasion's formal objectives were ill defined and highly difficult to achieve, the broader ones Begin and Sharon adopted were far more so, arguably bordering

on the fanciful. With the exception of the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon and establishment of the security zone in the south, Israel ultimately failed to achieve even the formal objectives.

Withdrawal 2000

Barak's decision to withdraw from Lebanon reflected a fundamental change in virtually all Israeli defense thinking. Indeed, withdrawal from strategically important territory, certainly unilaterally, had previously been strategic anathema. Barak, however, sought to create an "invisible wall" of international legitimacy, which would deny Hizbullah justification for further attacks. He viewed the withdrawal, especially its presentation as the fulfillment of Israel's commitments under UNSCR 425, as the means of doing so. Concomitantly, as noted, Israel would adopt an aggressive retaliatory posture and respond massively were any further attacks to occur, with the international community now constrained to support it. Most importantly, the retaliatory threat would serve as a deterrent to other Lebanese actors, who, weary from the long years of conflict, would press Hizbullah to refrain from further provocation.[20] Lacking legitimization and not wishing to bear the blame for further destruction, Hizbullah would be forced to "go political" and over time its weapons would "rust from disuse." Surprisingly, Barak now claimed that Israel could defend itself from the border as effectively as from the security zone.[21]

Subsequent events did initially bear out the new strategy's objectives. For a few years, Hizbullah found itself in a bind, forced by domestic Lebanese politics to limit its operations against Israel, but able, nonetheless, to continue low-level attacks and thus ultimately lead to an escalation. The international community gave Israel somewhat greater support during the 2006 war than in the past, but not beyond the limited initial operations. In any event, Hizbullah was not deterred from knowingly staging a provocation that led to the war. Moreover, it took a leap of faith to expect that Hizbullah would accede to the new situation on the border for long, that it could be manipulated into foregoing its basic jihadi identity, or that the international community would indeed provide Israel with significant support. The intelligence and defense community repeatedly warned against what it considered to be the faulty assumptions behind the unilateral withdrawal concept, but to no avail.[22] Indeed, after a matter of just months, Hizbullah renewed its attacks along the Israeli border, ultimately culminating in the escalation that led to the 2006 war and in the collapse of Barak's strategy.

One of the primary reasons for the perceived failure of the unilateral withdrawal in 2000 was the outbreak of the Intifada just four months later. Although it had largely been foreseen, the Intifada rapidly absorbed virtually all of Israel's energies

and prevented it from implementing the retaliatory policy Barak had declared, thereby further emboldening Hizbullah. Had Israel been able to implement the new policy, or conversely, continued its policy of restraint, it is possible that the relative quiet on the Lebanese border could have been prolonged, even if Israel's leaders were convinced that Hizbullah would force a flare-up sooner or later. In any event, the basic objective of maintaining the long-term security of the north from within Israel's border was not achieved, nor did Israel long enjoy its newly found international legitimacy.

War 2006

Formally, the cabinet merely authorized a "strong" strike against Hizbullah on July 12, 2006. Most of the ministers agreed that they had only approved a limited operation, but beyond that there were substantial differences. Whereas Defense Minister Amir Peretz believed that the operation would last ten to fourteen days, Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni believed it would end by the following afternoon. Other ministers were similarly divided.[23] Remarkably, Minister Shaul Mofaz, the defense minister until two months earlier, stated that "…with the thinking stage still underway, I did not see anything wrong with the objectives being set only two to three days later" (i.e., *after* the war had begun).

The objectives, according to Prime Minister Olmert, were as follows:

- changing the strategic situation in southern Lebanon;
- pushing Hizbullah from the border and deterring further attempts to abduct soldiers;
- strengthening Israel's general deterrence; and
- engendering a diplomatic process that would lead to international intervention and to the full implementation of Security Council Resolution 1559.[24]

On July 13, the day after the war began, the IDF submitted a document to the cabinet stating its "strategic purpose." As with the premier's public statement, it referred to a strengthening of Israel's deterrence and the implementation of Resolution 1559, but there were important differences. The objective of changing the strategic situation and pushing Hizbullah away from the border now became the infliction of a severe blow to Hizbullah and the ending of terror originating from Lebanon, along with the "framing" of bilateral relations with Lebanon. Additional objectives were added, including keeping Syria out of the conflict, reducing possible linkages to the Palestinian front, and avoiding a major ground operation.[25]

On July 17, Olmert spoke only of an end to Hizbullah rocket attacks and the implementation of Resolution 1559, while adding an entirely new objective of ending Palestinian terror,[26] thereby expanding the mission beyond the conflict in Lebanon. For the first time, he now explained that the implementation of 1559 would include the disarmament of Hizbullah, the extension of Lebanese sovereignty over the south, and the deployment of the Lebanese army there. Changing the strategic situation in Lebanon, delivering a severe blow to Hizbullah, and strengthening Israel's deterrence were no longer mentioned.

In an internal Ministry of Defense meeting on July 18, Peretz, clearly concerned, raised the question of the war's objectives were it to last another five or six days.[27] The following day, he stated that Israel's objectives were to "refrain from conquering Lebanon and from expanding [the war] to Syria…fostering a new situation in Lebanon, breaking, eliminating and all sorts of definitions regarding Hizbullah."[28] A statement of objectives stressing what Israel would not do and "all sorts of definitions" was certainly novel.

On July 19, the Ministerial Committee on Defense (MCoD) made no mention of the Palestinian dimension in Olmert's July 17 statement, but otherwise the objectives were similar.[29] On July 20, Olmert and Peretz, apparently still dissatisfied by the definition of the war's objectives, each separately requested that the Chief of Staff (CoS) clarify them. On August 9, the MCoD approved the long-delayed major ground operation, formally adopting two new objectives: deployment of an international force and prevention of Hizbullah from re-arming.[30]

The ambiguous character of many of the objectives is striking. For example, it was never made clear what constituted a "severe blow" to Hizbullah or a "change in the situation in southern Lebanon." No mention was initially made of the kind of diplomatic process and international role Israel sought, how far Hizbullah was to be "pushed away" from the border, or if Israel truly thought that the implementation of Resolution 1559 would include the disarmament and dismantlement of Hizbullah. It is noteworthy that all of the different iterations of the objectives included the return of the abducted soldiers, even though the CoS informed the cabinet from the beginning that this could not be achieved militarily.

The Winograd Commission was bitterly critical of the cabinet's failure to formulate clear objectives and options. It found that the objectives that were adopted were understood differently by the various ministers and officials, that many were unattainable to begin with, and that the proposed means of achieving them were never elucidated.[31] The bottom line, the Commission concluded, was a highly deleterious impact on Israel's military performance and ability to pursue a diplomatic exit strategy.

In all three cases, Israel's objectives were indeed ill defined. In 1982 there was a clear gap between the invasion's formal objectives and the true ones, though both were ambiguous. In 2000 the objectives were based on highly dubious assumptions, challenged in advance by the intelligence community and defense establishment. The flawed nature of Israel's objectives in 2006 played a major role in both the cabinet level DMP and the IDF's inability to achieve its military goals, despite over a month of fighting. Not knowing precisely what it was supposed to achieve, it is not surprising that the IDF was unable to achieve it.

Faulty Formulation of Options and Information Processing

Invasion 1982

From the time the "big invasion" plan was first presented to the cabinet in December 1981 until the crucial vote on a limited invasion on June 5, 1982, five different proposals for invasion were rejected. All cabinet meetings were based on proposals presented solely by the primary policy advocates, Begin and Sharon, and on a "take-it-or-leave-it" basis. This was true of the proposal to launch the invasion on June 5 as well.

The cabinet was unaware that MI had concluded that the invasion plan was based on deeply flawed assumptions and that its objectives were almost unattainable. According to MI, the Phalangists, whose cooperation was the basis for Sharon's entire strategy, could not be counted on to live up to their commitments, and in any event did not have the strength needed to conquer Beirut, as called for by the invasion plan. MI further warned that Israel would get bogged down in the Lebanese quagmire if it attempted to do so itself; that the plan could not be realized in the short period envisioned; and that even a limited attack on Syrian targets would result in the escalation Israel sought to avoid. The IDF's primary pre-invasion war game corroborated MI's bleak assessment, as did the Mossad, which joined MI in warning about the invasion plan's feasibility.[32]

Begin and Sharon were ultimately able to obtain cabinet approval for the large-scale operation through domination of the flow of information. The information they presented was selective, slanted, and primarily sequential, designed to lead to the outcome they desired. For example, the cabinet did not know that the operational orders Sharon issued on June 5 conflicted with its decision to avoid a clash with the Syrians and to limit the operation to a security zone along the border. The cabinet and even Begin himself were similarly unaware that IDF forces had entered east Beirut, in contravention of its decisions and Sharon's promises. The other ministers could not independently assess the information and options, or the

prospects of achieving the stated objectives. There was simply no one, other than the policy advocates, to provide authoritative analyses.

Withdrawal 2000

For all practical purposes, no substantive cabinet-level discussions were held regarding Israel's objectives and options in withdrawing from Lebanon. The decision to withdraw, preferably as part of an agreement with Syria, but unilaterally if need be, had been a Barak campaign pledge and neither he, nor the cabinet, apparently ever gave serious consideration to other possibilities. The few cabinet meetings on Lebanon focused solely on unilateral withdrawal and even though the IDF proposed variations on the basic concept, such as retaining some outposts just over the border, these were minor tactical changes.

It is therefore hardly surprising that a clear disconnect existed between the policy inputs of the defense establishment, which was strongly opposed to the unilateral nature of the withdrawal, and the policies adopted by the cabinet. This was not necessarily inappropriate; the IDF's position was well known and the cabinet made a legitimate decision to the contrary. The cabinet, however, may not have been fully aware of the depth of the IDF's strategic thinking on the issue. An IDF simulation exercise had concluded that unilateral withdrawal would leave Israel with insufficient military depth and lead to a deterioration in the security situation, while the CoS presciently warned that the IDF would be forced to reconquer parts of southern Lebanon.[33] In June 1999, an IDF position paper concluded that unilateral withdrawal would not prevent continued Hizbullah attacks and that it was the worst of Israel's options.[34]

War 2006

The timing of the Hizbullah attack on July 12 was a surprise, of course, but the basic threat was not. For years, Israel had been aware of Hizbullah's determination to abduct IDF soldiers. Indeed, just a few weeks earlier, the IDF had conducted a simulation exercise of a scenario virtually identical to that which actually unfolded on July 12. [35]

On July 12 only the IDF presented an assessment of the situation. The cabinet was presented with just one option and its most important wartime decision, to abandon the six-year long containment policy, was adopted almost reflexively. Additional options existed. In fact, they were raised in the pre-cabinet consultations that Olmert and Peretz convened, but were never presented to the cabinet itself.[36] The cabinet also never knew that Olmert had already come to the conclusion, months before, that the policy of restraint had run its course and that a more aggressive approach was necessary.[37]

Significantly, the cabinet was also unaware that the IDF had long concluded that Hizbullah's rocket arsenal could not be destroyed from the air and that even a major ground operation would not fully eliminate it, since the rockets could simply be moved out of range. A fully effective ground operation would have required the conquest of all of Lebanon and a long-term occupation to prevent resupply, but no one in Israel was even contemplating an operation of that magnitude.[38]

It was thus clear to the IDF that no purely military solution to the problem existed and its strategy was predicated on the establishment of a new political order in Lebanon by means of a military operation designed to lead to international intervention. This fundamental strategic thinking, however, including the war's essentially diplomatic nature, was never articulated to the cabinet. Moreover, with the pressure of events and initial successes behind them, the IDF and primary decision makers appear to have become enamored of the military operation and to have simply lost sight of their own diplomatic strategy. It is thus hardly surprising that they gave little consideration to an MI analysis on July 14 that questioned Israel's ability to achieve its goals.[39]

On July 12, the cabinet rejected the IDF's request for approval to attack Lebanon's civil infrastructure, the very mechanism designed to bring about the international intervention, and limited the operation to Hizbullah targets. Neither the ministers nor the IDF itself raised the obvious question of whether the war's objectives could still be met once this central component of the strategy had been rejected. They continued prosecuting the war as if nothing had happened.[40]

On July 13, following the highly successful attack on Hizbullah's long-range rockets, the sole option presented to the cabinet was an expansion of the fighting to the Dahia neighborhood in Beirut where Hizbullah's headquarters and leaders were based, even though this was bound to lead to further escalation. No discussion was held of a possible end to the operation at this point, when it would have been a resounding success, even if limited in scope.[41]

Perhaps the most striking example of the paucity of options presented and of the policy input-output disconnect was the decision on August 9, after a month of fighting, to approve a major ground operation despite the impending Security Council ceasefire resolution. The operation was supposed to last ninety-six hours and to conquer southern Lebanon. It was to be followed by four to six weeks to clean Hizbullah out of the area, prior to its handover to an international force, or the Lebanese army. The CoS adamantly insisted, the imminent cease-fire resolution notwithstanding, that only an operation of this magnitude could achieve the desired objectives and that there were no other options.[42] The Security Council resolution, however, was adopted on August 11, forcing a mid-course end to the operation.

In all three cases the cabinet was presented with just one option, which it could accept or reject; however, in the absence of alternatives, it really had little choice but to agree. Options were presented solely by the policy advocates and a clear disconnect prevailed between the information flowing to the cabinet and the decisions made.

Sequential and Improvisational Decision Making

Invasion 1982

The cabinet's rejection of the "big invasion plan" in December 1981, as well as five scaled-down versions over the following months, led to Sharon's decision, in cooperation with Begin, to adopt a more circuitous approach. Instead of requesting cabinet approval for the full-scale invasion, Sharon now sought and received approval for a limited operation, which he then used to lead the cabinet in piecemeal fashion in the desired direction.

The invasion was the product of extensive planning in the defense establishment and reflected an overall, if controversial, strategic construct, largely shared by Begin and Sharon. A number of basic "unknowables," however, such as whether the Phalangists would indeed live up to their role, turned the DMP into an incremental one, while the need to obtain cabinet approval in piecemeal fashion ultimately made it sequential and even improvisational.

To illustrate, the cabinet decision of June 5 approved an invasion designed to create a security zone along the northern border, "understood" by the ministers to approximate twenty-five miles, and stated that Israel would do its best to avoid a clash with the Syrian forces in Lebanon. In practice, Israeli forces advanced beyond the twenty-five-mile line on the very first day. On June 7, ostensibly in order to avoid a confrontation with the Syrians, Sharon requested approval for an IDF move to outflank them. In fact, Sharon's flanking move was probably designed to elicit a threatening Syrian response, which would provide him with the pretext for requesting cabinet approval to attack them, as indeed happened later that day.[43]

On June 8, as a means of pressuring Syria into expelling PLO forces from areas under its control, Sharon requested cabinet approval for advancing on the Beirut–Damascus highway. In practice, the decision was used to open new axes of advance. On June 9, Sharon used heavy Syrian resistance against Israel's flanking force to justify an attack on the Syrian SAMs in Lebanon, thereby setting the stage for the confrontation with Syria that the cabinet had explicitly proscribed. On June 10, the cabinet approved Sharon's request to take the Beirut–Damascus highway

in order to sever the Syrians' contact with Beirut and undermine their control of Lebanon. On June 12, Israeli forces entered east Beirut despite the assurances Sharon had provided to the contrary. Later in the month they entered the rest of the city, leading to the expulsion of PLO forces. In effect, the entire "big invasion," repeatedly rejected by the cabinet, was completed in stages.[44]

Withdrawal 2000

Although Barak's intention to withdraw from Lebanon, unilaterally if necessary, was long known, Israel's planning was conducted almost throughout the DMP on the assumption of a negotiated withdrawal. Only with the failure of the talks on the Syrian track at the Geneva Summit in March, six weeks ahead of the planned withdrawal, did the IDF begin crash planning for a unilateral withdrawal.[45]

Barak announced in advance that Israel would fully withdraw to the international boundary, without knowing the ramifications of this decision. Indeed, it rapidly turned out that the precise delineation of some 60 percent of the border was still in dispute.[46] Consequently, Israel had to dismantle parts of the security fence and all of the fortified bunkers it had built along the border at great expense. Moreover, by announcing in advance that Israel would withdraw completely, Barak precluded any possibility of an agreement with the international community—which was anxious to see almost *any* positive change on the Lebanese issue—on a withdrawal that was less than complete, in exchange for the same level of security guarantees. Last-minute efforts to backpedal failed, as it became clear that only a complete withdrawal would now gain international recognition. The decision to do so was finally made in April, just weeks before the withdrawal.[47]

In early 2000, long after Barak had announced the withdrawal, a further major improvisation fundamental to the whole concept was made. It was now decided to try to gain international support and legitimacy for the withdrawal by presenting it as the implementation of Israel's commitments under UNSCR 425 and by obtaining UN confirmation that the withdrawal was indeed complete. In adopting this approach, the withdrawal in effect ceased to be unilateral, though Israel's *quid pro quo* would be provided by the international community, rather than Lebanon. Moreover, Israel reversed a decades-long policy of keeping the UN at arms length and now provided it with a key role in determining the success of a major policy initiative.[48]

From the outset, it was clear that the withdrawal would spell the end of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), Israel's proxy force. Israel, however, could not just walk away from the SLA; Hizbullah had made the dire consequences for the SLA clear, and potential future allies' willingness to cooperate with Israel would be greatly

diminished were it to simply abandon an ally. In practice, however, almost nothing was done to prepare and the SLA collapsed within weeks. Many of its members sought to cut deals with Hizbullah at Israel's expense, in exchange for shortened jail terms or to save themselves from an even worse fate, and hundreds frantically converged on the closing gates in the final hours, seeking refuge in Israel.[49]

War 2006

From the beginning, the 2006 war was explicitly designed as a "rolling," i.e., sequential, operation. Olmert and Peretz knew that the operation might have to be expanded significantly, though they hoped that this would not prove necessary. IDF planning explicitly called for a suspension of operations on day five to assess the situation and decide if and how to proceed.[50]

For CoS Dan Halutz, the war's length and scope were flexible variables to be determined by two factors: one military—Hizbullah's responses to IDF operations, especially its counter-attacks on July 12 and 13—and the other, political—the cabinet's willingness to continue approving further operations. He thus took into account that the operation might end within days if Hizbullah exercised restraint, but the planning he presented to the cabinet on July 12 was based on the assumption of four to six weeks of fighting.

On July 12, the cabinet approved a limited operation against Hizbullah's rockets and some other targets, but not a war. A majority, including Olmert, Peretz, and Livni, favored an attack solely against Hizbullah, but Halutz insisted that an attack on Lebanon's civil infrastructure was essential in order to produce the desired international intervention. A compromise was reached, with approval given for limited attacks against dual use targets, e.g., roads.[51] No consideration was given to the possible directions in which the operation might evolve; to an exit strategy; the diplomatic and military timelines; or to the massive anticipated Hizbullah bombardment of Israel's north.[52]

On July 13, in response to Hizbullah rocket fire on Haifa, the cabinet approved the attack on the Dahia neighborhood of Beirut.[53] That same day—one day after the fighting started—Livni began crafting an exit strategy, which she presented to Olmert on July 16. However, he was not yet interested in a ceasefire and only accepted it as a working proposal on July 23. By that time, other agencies had also proposed exit strategies, but Olmert still wanted to give the IDF more time to achieve its objectives and none of the proposals were presented to the cabinet.[54]

On July 20, Olmert and Peretz separately requested that the CoS clarify the objectives of the limited operation then underway. On July 23, two weeks after

the fighting had begun, the IDF still had less than a brigade in Lebanon; on August 1 it was still conducting battalion- and brigade-sized raids and withdrawing, and on August 5, its total force in Lebanon was just 10,000 men. Almost nothing could better demonstrate the cabinet's ongoing reluctance to approve a major operation.[55]

On July 27, with the fighting lagging, the MCoD faced a fundamental choice between expansion of the hostilities or a ceasefire. Halutz recommended that a major ground operation be launched and that the fighting be extended by another month, and again asked for approval to attack Lebanon's civil infrastructure. The mobilization of significant reserves was now approved and, remarkably, the cabinet held its first discussion regarding the possible deployment of an international force, even though international intervention had been at the heart of the entire wartime strategy. Cabinet resolve, however, remained unclear. In the words of the Deputy CoS "…if we put the big plan on the table tomorrow, it will not be approved…The right thing to do is to start with this thing [a limited operation] and be ready for the big plan."[56]

On August 1, after nearly three weeks of fighting, the IDF now requested approval to conquer a six-kilometer zone along the border, in effect to reestablish the zone Israel had left six years earlier. On August 5, Halutz again pushed strongly for a major ground operation, but Olmert and Peretz remained opposed. On August 9, with the Security Council ceasefire resolution looming, the cabinet finally approved a major operation, but even then only "in principle," with Olmert and Peretz authorized to decide when (and thus if) to launch it. Olmert vacillated for two days and only on August 11, with the ceasefire hours away, finally ordered the IDF into action, but with instructions to be ready to stop virtually immediately. Combat was apparently planned to last five days; the cabinet, however, approved only three. In reality, the operation ended a little after one day, once the ceasefire had come into effect.[57]

The Winograd Commission found that the fear of casualties and of a prolonged guerrilla war were among the primary factors contributing to the sequential nature of the DMP. Indeed, these fears were found to have been so pervasive that they created a basic reluctance to engage even in in-depth wartime planning, particularly regarding the major ground operation and exit strategy. Instead, decision making came to be focused on those immediate measures requiring approval at any given moment, rather than the overall strategy.[58]

In all three cases, the DMP was found to have been essentially sequential in nature. The endgame was decided upon only late in the process, once the decision to withdraw had been made or after the war had begun, instead of adopting an overall strategy in advance. As a result, the DMP was also found to have been highly improvisational, especially in 1982 and 2006.

Absence of an Effective Statutory Decision Making Forum

Invasion 1982

During the half-year preceding the invasion, the cabinet discussed the situation in Lebanon repeatedly and met daily during the early weeks of the fighting. Unlike most major military operations in Israeli history, the cabinet plenum, not the MCoD or some other sub-cabinet forum, was the formal locus of decision making. The real decision making, however, was done elsewhere.

Paradoxically, it was the cabinet's firm opposition to the "big plan" in December 1981 that led to its circumvention. For Begin, the cabinet became an obstacle to be overcome; for Sharon, it was an adversary to be defeated. From that point onward, Sharon no longer presented it with a full elucidation of his thinking, choosing instead to gradually overcome its opposition to an invasion through selective and slanted reporting. "I knew I would break them in the end," he said.[59]

The June 5 cabinet decision approved an invasion designed to create a security zone along the border by pushing PLO artillery out of range, and was to last, Sharon informed the cabinet, up to forty-eight hours. He made no mention of a possible advance beyond the twenty-five-mile limit, of a link-up with the Phalangists in the north, or of his true assessment that "creation of a new political order" in Lebanon, one of the invasion's stated objectives, would require that the IDF remain there for three to six months. Sharon further assured the cabinet that Israel would not enter Beirut and that it would do its best to avoid a clash with the Syrians.

In practice, the IDF advanced beyond the twenty-five-mile line on the first day, with Sharon instructing it to prepare for implementation of the "big plan." He also told a meeting of IDF officers that day that it would be necessary to attack the Syrian missiles, but omitted any mention of this when briefing Begin and the cabinet. On a different occasion, he told IDF officers that it was unclear what the cabinet would decide regarding an attack against the Syrians and that they should therefore move against them gradually "without creating the impression of a big war."[60]

Sharon manipulated cabinet approval for a flanking move—ostensibly to avoid a conflict with the Syrians—precisely to lead to the clash that the cabinet had proscribed. The cabinet, including Begin, was unaware that the IDF had entered Beirut. This was the first time Israel had ever conquered an Arab capital, which was considered taboo until then. With Begin's acquiescence, Sharon led the cabinet step-by-step toward the realization of the "big plan" it had explicitly

rejected. Simply put, the cabinet had little idea of what was going on and being done in its name.

Withdrawal 2000

A unilateral withdrawal had been a central Labor Party campaign platform during the 1999 elections and thus enjoyed considerable cabinet support from the outset. The IDF, however, was strongly opposed to the unilateral nature of the proposal and thus, the cabinet's own inclinations notwithstanding, obtaining its approval would not be trivial. Barak handled these contradictory considerations by keeping the cabinet at arms length from the withdrawal issue, convening it on just a few occasions. He did this even though he himself was intensively involved, holding numerous meetings with top defense officials.

In practice, the first cabinet meeting on withdrawal was only held in late February 2000, eight months after its formation. Even then, Barak's immediate objective was not to engage the cabinet substantively, but to deflect growing pressure for an immediate withdrawal and to shore up support for his phased approach (an agreed withdrawal if possible, unilateral if not). In a highly unusual step, Barak did not invite IDF officers and other senior officials to attend the cabinet meeting, explaining that he wanted to ensure that it would be a "strategic" policy discussion rather than a narrowly focused military one—as if the IDF did not participate in such meetings as a matter of course. In reality, it is far more likely that Barak simply feared the IDF's impact on the cabinet had the ministers been forced to face its arguments against unilateral withdrawal.[61]

For all practical purposes, the meeting on February 20, in which the cabinet unanimously approved the unilateral withdrawal, *was* the cabinet DMP on this foremost strategic issue. A few additional cabinet-level meetings touched on the issue, but were largely technical in nature. In late April, the MCoD met to consider IDF preparations for the withdrawal and in late May the cabinet gave its final approval.[62]

War 2006

From the beginning, Olmert decided that in-depth discussions of Israel's wartime objectives and options would not be held in the leak-prone cabinet plenum. Instead, substantive discussion of policy and wartime developments would be held in the MCoD, with actual operational matters to be further restricted to a specially constituted and discrete "Forum of Eight." Thus, the cabinet was by design not the true locus of decision making. When it transpired that the MCoD and even the Forum of Eight suffered from leaks, sensitive information was withheld from them, too, and they were convened on just a few occasions.[63]

The absence of a discrete and effective statutory decision making body further contributed to the natural tendency to conduct wartime decision making in small and informal groups. In practice, the true decision making was conducted in closed meetings of the premier, defense minister, and CoS, and at times with other defense officials. In most cases, Foreign Minister Livni was not asked to participate even when the issues were of a primarily diplomatic nature.[64] The cabinet, however, or at least its sub-forums, was not completely sidelined and did play a substantive role in some of the important decisions made. Chief among them was the decision to launch the major ground operation at the end of the war.

In all three cases, Israel lacked an effective, discrete, and expeditious forum for decision making. The cabinet and its sub-forums were not convened and barred from the full range of sensitive information in 1982 and 2006 and in the former case, even intentionally misled. In 2000 the cabinet hardly played a role at all. The absence of an effective statutory forum for national security decision making continued to plague Israel in later years, even after the MCoD's legal responsibility for this was established by statute (under the new title of "Committee on National Security"). Benjamin Netanyahu, for example, found it expedient to conduct sensitive discussions in a specially constituted "Forum of Seven," which later became the Forum of Eight and then Nine.

A Highly Politicized DMP

Invasion 1982

Partisan politics were minimal in the cabinet throughout the invasion DMP. Following the rejection of the "big plan" in December 1981, however, cabinet meetings came to be all about coalition politics, not policy, with Begin and Sharon seeking to build the minimum majority necessary to obtain approval for almost any invasion. A process of political give-and-take, of compromise and deception, became the order of the day. What would "fly"—the minimum military operation the cabinet would approve, not what was truly necessary—became the focus. The ministers' opposition was substantive, not partisan.

In January 1982, faced with cabinet opposition to the "big plan," Begin and Sharon stepped back and proposed that Israel respond to a further PLO terrorist attack with limited airstrikes. A majority of the ministers remained opposed, however, fearing that their true aim was to draw the PLO into shelling the north, thereby providing a pretext for the big operation. In April, following the murder of an Israeli diplomat, the cabinet approved air strikes.[65] On May 10, following a number of minor incidents, a majority of the eighteen ministers voted in favor of a limited ground operation, but seven remained opposed; Begin concluded that cabinet support was still insufficient.

An attack on the Israeli ambassador in London in June was the final straw. Some of the ministers feared that the approval granted for a limited operation would prove to be the beginning of a far broader invasion, as indeed happened, but they no longer felt that they could stand firm following the attack and Begin's emotional advocacy.[66] In the battle over coalition politics, Begin and Sharon won.

Domestic politics and public opinion played a clear role in the decision to invade. Following the deployment of the Syrian missiles in April 1981, Begin repeatedly demanded their removal and threatened that Israel would take them out itself if necessary, even going so far as to make this a campaign pledge during the June elections. At US insistence, Begin deferred action as long as diplomacy appeared to bear some prospects of success, but the missiles' ongoing presence became a clear challenge to his credibility.[67] In July 1981, events became even more problematic: The PLO's massive bombardment of the north, which caused the first mass flight of civilians in Israeli history, led to a political outcry and to a new public pledge by Begin that "not one more Katyusha will fall on Kiryat Shmonah."[68]

By mid-1982, Begin was in an untenable position. The ongoing US failure to secure a withdrawal of the missiles, along with the IDF's inability to counter the new PLO threat through means short of a large-scale ground operation, convinced Begin of the need for this. Moreover, his public pronouncements bound him to action. An invasion became largely a question of when, not if.[69]

Throughout the early weeks, the invasion enjoyed broad public support and the cabinet was able to make decisions free of partisan politics, with public opinion contributing to its decisions to further expand the fighting. Public opinion would later change, however, once it emerged that the invasion had gone awry, but by then the military phase had been largely completed.

Withdrawal 2000

The unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon was mostly the result of grassroots political pressure, not strategic design. Over a period of three years, as stated previously, what had previously been considered strategic anathema gained broad support across the political spectrum and led to cabinet decisions that the defense establishment clearly opposed and which, indeed, made debatable strategic sense.

Despite the IDF's best military efforts, Hizbullah's continual and increasingly sophisticated attacks created the public perception of a seemingly endless and futile bloodletting and had a cumulative, grinding effect that eroded public support for Israel's presence in the security zone. For reasons of operational secrecy, the public had only limited knowledge of the IDF's constant, often heroic, efforts to prevent Hizbullah attacks, whereas every failure was blasted in the media.[70]

The turning point occurred in 1997. Two major accidents—a collision between IAF helicopters ferrying troops into Lebanon and a botched commando operation—caused devastating losses and had a galvanizing effect, leading to the rise of a number of popular protest movements and even to growing opposition from public groups close to the defense establishment. Public support for unilateral withdrawal grew from 41 percent in 1997 to 55 percent in 1999 and 62 percent in 2000.[71]

During the 1999 elections, Barak, heretofore strongly opposed to unilateral withdrawal, found himself tied with Netanyahu and in search of popular issues with which to distinguish his candidacy. The concept of unilateral withdrawal had already been raised toward the end of the outgoing Netanyahu government, at the unlikely initiative of Ariel Sharon, who argued that Israel should withdraw unilaterally if an agreed withdrawal could not be reached. Both Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai were opposed to unilateral measures, but the idea now became a legitimate part of Israeli political discourse even among the hawkish Likud, and public support continued to grow. By the time of the electoral campaign, all sides found that unilateral withdrawal had become a popular platform and Netanyahu vied with Barak in supporting it. Barak's victory, based partly on his pledge to withdraw within a given time frame, made doing so a matter of personal credibility.[72]

War 2006

The 2006 Second Lebanon War was not politically divisive and both party and coalition politics were of little significance. By rapidly taking decisive action and then further expanding the operation, Olmert defused opposition from the right. Given the events preceding the war, including the perceived failure of the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza as well as the kidnappings on both the Gaza and Lebanese borders, the left supported the war too. Indeed, with dovish Labor Party leader Peretz serving as defense minister, opposition from the left could have only come from the fringe.[73]

Disagreement within the cabinet was limited to begin with and remained substantive in nature, not political, with ministers going out of their way to further mute it. Livni, for example, never made an issue over Olmert's failure to formulate an exit strategy, while Mofaz remained silent throughout the war and, at Olmert's request, even dropped his own proposal for a major ground operation, voting instead for the IDF plan he deeply opposed. Other ministers withheld their criticisms throughout the war in order to maintain a united front.

If partisan politics were not an important factor, public opinion was. The public was overwhelmingly supportive of the war and the criticism that did eventually emerge was over the government's willingness to end the fighting prematurely, without having achieved Israel's objectives. To the end, the public was more than willing to give the government additional time to prosecute the war, if it would just do so effectively.

As the war lengthened, however, and a sense of failure set in, political leaders grew concerned over the possible erosion of public support. Considerable attention was thus given to an "exit photo," i.e., to an achievement that would allow the cabinet to "declare victory" and end the fighting, regardless of the actual outcome.[74] Public opinion may have also contributed to the launching of the commando operations during the final days.[75]

On August 6, with mounting public frustration over the ongoing rocket attacks, Shimon Peres warned Olmert that "another week of Katyushas and ten more dead and you will no longer be prime minister." On August 9 Livni angrily commented that if the cabinet did not approve a large-scale ground operation "we will look like the enemies of the people."[76] On August 11 a fellow minister warned Peretz that his political career would be over if the war ended as things stood then, prompting him to ratchet up pressure on Olmert to launch the ground operation. Olmert's fear that he would be held publicly accountable if he failed to order the operation after it had been approved by the cabinet was one of the primary reasons he finally did so.[77]

Surprisingly, perhaps, partisan politics were thus not an issue in the cases studied. Significant differences did exist within the cabinet in 1982, but they were substantive, not partisan. In 2000, the differences within the cabinet were minimal and in 2006 they were again substantive, not political. Public opinion, conversely, played a significant role in all three cases, contributing to the decisions to expand the fighting in 1982 and 2006 and in fact spurring the entire decision to withdraw from Lebanon unilaterally in 2000.

Predominance of the Defense Establishment

Invasion 1982

Sharon and CoS Raphael Eitan were indeed the predominant players in the invasion DMP, but not the IDF General Staff as a whole or the other primary organs of the defense establishment. With considerable skepticism and even opposition to his plans emanating from the defense establishment, Sharon set out from the start to monopolize the information flow to the premier and cabinet.

The General Staff was cut off from important information and from decisions made by Sharon and the cabinet, and dissenting officers were shunted aside. By June 1982, an atmosphere had been created in which senior officers were reluctant to turn to the cabinet with their knowledge of the distorted information Sharon was presenting and of his true intentions. Some leaked this to the press; others met informally with senior officials. A majority went along and, in any event, most sincerely supported the operation's limited, official objectives.

To circumvent IDF opposition, Sharon established a new entity, the Unit for National Security, which became the locus of wartime planning. MI, long skeptical of the entire war plan, found itself in a particularly difficult position. In contrast with all accepted practice, Sharon restricted MI chief Uri Saguy's access to the premier and cabinet, while Begin demonstrated a clear lack of interest in the contrary assessments Saguy and other officials presented. By early 1982, Saguy concluded that further opposition was futile. The cabinet thus never knew of his assessment that the invasion plan could not be carried out without attacking the Syrians and that the twenty-five-mile line would itself necessitate this. It was similarly unaware of the reservations that the heads of the Air Force and Northern Command had regarding the missile strike and that the deputy chief of staff opposed some of the proposed ground operations as well.[78]

The only other potentially influential player within the defense establishment, Mossad Director Yitzhak Hofi, shared MI's skepticism, but refrained from expressing his true assessment, at least partly out of concern that Begin would attribute it to his longstanding rivalry with Sharon.

The role played by the Foreign Ministry was notable only for its insignificance.[79] There were no other power centers in the field of national security at the time and Sharon, as defense minister, but not the defense establishment, did achieve predominance within the DMP.

Withdrawal 2000

The defense establishment was united by a broad consensus against a unilateral withdrawal. It was firmly opposed to a unilateral withdrawal, though not to a negotiated one, and its position was well-known to the cabinet.[80] Unilateral withdrawal, the IDF and other agencies stressed, would be viewed by Hizbullah as a victory, encourage it to further increase violence, and undermine Israel's deterrence. Moreover, unilateral withdrawal might increase the danger of conflict with Syria, which had viewed Lebanon as a convenient arena for limited conflict with Israel and which might now have no recourse other than to escalate on the Golan front.[81]

IDF opposition to the withdrawal continued virtually up to the last minute, even while it was busy making the final preparations necessary to implement it.[82] No other power centers, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the newly established National Security Council, played a discernable role. The defense establishment's opposition notwithstanding, the cabinet unanimously approved the withdrawal.

War 2006

The primacy of the premier and defense establishment was clearly pronounced during the 2006 war. Although the cabinet and its sub-forums did reject or modify a number of important proposals, most of the decisions were made by the "triumvirate" (premier, defense minister, and CoS), and the IDF's predominance was clear.[83] Not only was it the only agency that prepared military options, it also played the central role in formulating diplomatic options and bore sole responsibility for formulating Israel's strategic objectives.

The CoS enjoyed unusual influence. Both Olmert and Peretz lacked significant experience in defense affairs and the former took something of a "chairman of the board" approach.[84] Neither Olmert nor Peretz were passive, nor was the cabinet, but instead of the political leadership determining the objectives and consulting with the IDF on whether and how they could be achieved, the process was reversed. With few exceptions, it was the IDF, at the political leadership's request, which defined the objectives.

Moreover, CoS Halutz was a highly charismatic and popular figure, commonly assumed to be a future candidate for the premiership. His self-confident aura and gift for presentations played a highly influential role in convincing the cabinet of the need to stage a major response on July 12, expand the operation subsequently, and ultimately launch the major ground operation at the war's end.[85] Convinced of the IDF's ability to prevail and clearly desirous of facilitating approval for the war's expansion, he acted more as an advocate than an adviser, refraining from presenting the cabinet with a full picture of the situation and of the consequences of the various options.[86]

Perhaps the most striking example of the IDF's preponderance was in regard to the ground operation at the war's end. On August 8, Olmert met privately with Mofaz and presented the IDF proposal for a large-scale operation to him. Mofaz was adamantly opposed and proposed an alternate plan, which Olmert enthusiastically embraced and asked Peretz to present to the cabinet.[87] Halutz refused to even raise Mofaz's proposal in the General Staff, while Peretz was equally adamant regarding the cabinet. During the August 9 cabinet meeting,

Olmert feared that Halutz would resign if Mofaz's proposal was brought to a vote and that Peretz, too, would be placed in an untenable position. Concerned about the public reaction to a cabinet split on a vital wartime decision, Olmert killed Mofaz's proposal in mid-session and asked the MCoD to approve the IDF proposal. Even Mofaz chose to avoid a confrontation and voted in favor.[88]

In the three cases, the defense establishment was found to have differing levels of influence. In 1982 it was Sharon and the CoS, not the defense establishment as such, who had a preponderant influence. In 2000 the withdrawal was made over the defense establishment's strong opposition. In 2006, in contrast, the defense establishment, especially the CoS, played a clearly predominant role, in effect replacing a political leadership that had absolved itself of its primary responsibility of setting the war's objectives.

A Comparative Analysis: What Went Wrong

In all three cases, Israel was reacting to what its leaders perceived to be major changes for the worse in its external environment, which they believed warranted important changes in policy. In 1982 it was the deployment of the Syrian missiles and the PLO bombardment of the north, in 2000 the limited effectiveness of the security zone and increasing cost of maintaining it, and in 2006 the vast buildup of Hizbullah's rocket arsenal and ongoing attacks. The importance of the challenges Israel faced in these cases makes the failure to achieve its objectives that much more significant.

As important as these environmental changes were, however, none posed a case of overwhelming compellence, requiring that Israel respond when and as it did. A number of realistic options existed in all three cases and were identified by the senior decision makers, even if they did not usually reach the cabinet. Moreover, in the cases of the 1982 invasion and the 2000 withdrawal, the DMP was protracted, lasting months. Even in the 2006 war, Israel did not have to respond massively and immediately and could have sought to contain the incident, or to respond at a time and manner of its choosing. In short, Israel had the substantive decision making freedom and time needed to weigh its policies carefully and presumably increase the prospects of success.

Independent Variable 1: A Dysfunctional Cabinet DMP

The hypothesis regarding the first independent variable was largely substantiated. In all three cases the objectives were, indeed, found to have been poorly defined and overly ambitious, and at times simply unrealistic. This was true of the formal objectives adopted by the cabinet in 1982, but the invasion's true objectives, fully

known only to Sharon, were actually far more ambiguous and ambitious — indeed, almost unachievable by any reasonable measure. In 2000, the expectation that a unilateral withdrawal to the border, backed by international legitimacy and an aggressive deterrent policy, would ensure that Hizbullah no longer attacked Israel was dubious at best. In 2006, the absence of clearly defined objectives was at the heart of Israel's military and decision making failures.

Options were not presented to the cabinet or its sub-forums in any of the cases and they repeatedly faced the choice of either accepting or rejecting the recommendation presented by the policy advocate. In June 1982, it was the invasion or nothing. Unilateral withdrawal had been a campaign promise and no other options were considered by either Barak or the cabinet in 2000. In 2006, a number of options were raised prior to the cabinet meeting, but it was presented with only one, a pattern that continued throughout the war. In 1982 and 2006, the "triumvirate" (premier, defense minister, and CoS) had already agreed on the preferred option prior to cabinet meetings and in all three cases only policy advocates presented the options. There was no "honest broker" even in 2000 and 2006, by which time the National Security Council had been established.

Israel's strategy, in all three cases, was based on deeply flawed assumptions, which decision makers could have identified in advance. In 1982, MI had long warned that the invasion's objectives were unattainable, *inter alia*, because the Phalangists would not fulfill their commitments and Israel would get bogged down in the Lebanese quagmire. Other defense agencies also expressed skepticism regarding the feasibility of the invasion plan. In 2000 the IDF warned that unilateral withdrawal would not prevent continued attacks and that it was actually the worst option Israel faced. IDF simulation games corroborated MI and the other agencies' findings in both 1982 and 2000. In 2006 Israel ended up trying to destroy Hizbullah's rockets, even though the IDF had concluded that this could not be done through military means and its pre-war strategy was essentially diplomatic — a military operation to engender international intervention.

All three cases were characterized by a sequential and improvisational DMP. Sharon and Begin shared an overall strategic construct in 1982, but the need to obtain cabinet approval piecemeal turned the DMP into a sequential and even improvisational one. In 2000, Barak decided on the endgame from the beginning, but the withdrawal was initially to be part of a negotiated agreement with Syria, and only became unilateral after the failure of the peace talks. Fundamental changes were then made to the plan, including the decision to base the withdrawal on international legitimacy. In 2006, the sequential nature of the DMP was built into the pre-war planning, but as events turned sour and the IDF and cabinet sought to make a failing policy work, it deteriorated into improvisation and even

trial and error. In 1982 and 2006, in effect, Israel went to war first and only then asked itself what precisely it was trying to achieve. Moreover, in both cases the evolution of the war was to be determined largely by the cabinet's willingness to repeatedly approve further steps, rather than by an overall initial strategy.

In all three cases Israel lacked an effective statutory decision making forum and most of the true decision making was done in small consultations held by either the premier or defense minister, sometimes jointly, with senior defense officials. In 1982, uncharacteristically, the cabinet plenum was the formal locus of decision making, but in reality it was sidelined by Sharon, who subverted its intent and pursued his own objectives. In 2000, the cabinet DMP was highly attenuated. Unilateral withdrawal enjoyed broad cabinet support from the beginning and Barak obtained its approval easily. In 2006, Olmert decided from the outset that the cabinet would not be the locus of wartime decision making and he had barely convened the MCoD and "Forum of Eight" when it turned out that they, too, leaked.

Independent Variable 2: A Highly Politicized DMP

At the cabinet level, the hypothesized impact of the second independent variable, a highly politicized DMP, was not substantiated. Although all three cases involved critical strategic decisions, they were neither politically charged nor characterized by significant partisan differences. Cabinet debates were thus based primarily on substantive differences of opinion, rather than partisan politics. Cabinet opposition to Sharon in 1982 reflected varying assessments of the cost-benefit ratio, not political differences; even the opposition supported the invasion. In 2000, the cabinet was virtually united in its support for withdrawal, as was the opposition. Differences within the cabinet in 2006, to the extent that they existed, were again substantive, not partisan.

At the popular level, conversely, the hypothesis was fully substantiated, with domestic opinion playing a major role in all three cases. In 1982, Begin's public commitments to deal with the Syrian missiles and PLO rockets largely bound him to action and the public was overwhelmingly supportive of the invasion until it went awry in its later stages. In 2000, public opinion was *the* driving force behind the decision to withdraw. In 2006, the public was again overwhelmingly supportive of the war and was a major factor in the government's repeated decisions to extend it.

The failure to substantiate the hypothesis at the cabinet level is less surprising when viewed in the context of the overwhelming public support for the policies adopted in the three cases. Lebanon, unlike the West Bank or the Golan Heights,

was never a deeply value-laden issue for the Israeli public, but rather was viewed almost solely through a security prism. As such, security considerations were paramount and led to cabinet DMPs that were relatively free of partisan politics. Had this study focused on issues that were ideologically charged for the public, the posited nature of the cabinet DMP would probably have been substantiated. The important conclusion here is that on some issues Israel is capable of a DMP largely devoid of partisan politics.

Independent Variable 3: Predominance of the IDF and Defense Establishment

Hypothesis 3 was partially substantiated. In 1982, Sharon imposed his views on the IDF and other defense agencies, which were only partly supportive of the invasion planning. Together with Begin, he was successful in forcing the invasion he wanted on the cabinet. In 2006, the cabinet rejected the IDF's calls for an attack on Lebanon's civilian infrastructure and only reluctantly approved a major ground operation at the end of the war. Aside from these and a few other exceptions, however, the IDF had overwhelming, even inordinate, influence on the cabinet's decisions throughout the war. In 2000, in contrast, the IDF and other agencies of the defense establishment strongly opposed unilateral withdrawal, but Barak, who was then both premier and defense minister, decided otherwise, with the cabinet's full support.

In all three cases, even in 2000 when its views did not prevail, the IDF was the primary bureaucratic player, to the near exclusion of all other agencies. Indeed, it was the sole agency that formulated and presented situational assessments, Israel's objectives, and policy options to the cabinet.

Conclusion

"Better" decision making processes should, as a rule, lead to "better" policy outcomes, but this is not always the case. Circumstance, intuition, and luck all play a role and can contribute to, or subvert, even the best processes. External environmental forces and domestic factors often have an overwhelming influence. Moreover, "better" processes, and certainly outcomes, are subjective.

We have thus adopted a different criterion of success as the measure of a DMP: not the quality of the outcome, but the degree to which decision makers achieved their objectives. The central argument is not that Israel would have achieved better outcomes had the process been better, but that the prospects of it actually achieving its objectives would have increased significantly.

Presently, all eyes are focused on the turmoil in the Arab world. The deterrent effects of the 2006 war may, however, be waning and Hizbullah now has a mammoth arsenal of over 50,000 rockets. A further major clash may be a question of when, rather than if.

For Israel, the next clash will have vital consequences, and will demonstrate whether it can finally "get it right" and achieve its objectives in Lebanon. For over three decades Israel has failed to formulate an effective strategy for dealing with the unique challenges posed by irregular forces armed with long-range capabilities. Partly, this has been the result of the time-lag typical of any paradigm change in warfare, but it has also been the result of obviously flawed Israeli DMPs. Only if clear and attainable objectives are formulated, along with carefully thought out means of linking the options with the outcomes desired, will the next round look substantially different from its precursors.

Notes

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[3] Noteworthy texts on this subject include those by Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's War in Lebanon* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1982); Avner Yaniv and Robert J. Lieber, "Personal Whim or Strategic Imperative?: The Israeli Invasion of Lebanon," *International Security*, VIII:2 (Fall, 1983); and Aryeh Naor *Government at War* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1986). The reports of the Winograd Commission (2007 and 2008) provide unparalleled insight into the DMP during the 2006 war and the works of Ofer Shelah and Yoav Limor, *Captives of Lebanon: The Truth about the Second Lebanon War* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2007); Shlomo Brom and Meir Elran (eds), *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives* (Tel Aviv, 2007); and Amos Harel and Avi Issascharoff, *Spider Web* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2008) add further insight. All three cases were the subject of extensive news reporting.

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