



# From Lebanon to Gaza: A New Kind of War

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The Gaza experience was very different from the Lebanon War and even those of us who were there are trying to fully understand why. Lebanon was a wake-up call for Israelis and was the result of many years of foolish thinking. Since the so-called “Middle East Peace Process” began in the early 1990s with the Oslo Accords, many Palestinian children were raised on ideals of  *jihad*  (holy war) and hatred of Israel and the West, while Israeli children were generally taught that “peace is on the horizon”. A euphoric and asinine attitude persisted on the Israeli street throughout the 1990s, leading to the problems that we experienced in Lebanon. The Israeli political echelons and the upper ranks of the army had not established any real

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plans for entering Lebanon because they wanted to believe that, just like Jordan and Egypt, we had another border about which we could begin to relax. The Israeli public wanted to believe that we really were getting closer to peace. Not only was the army unprepared on a tactical level, but, since the threat was largely marginalized, the equipment that was available to reservists during the Second Lebanon War was far from adequate. Furthermore, the reservists themselves were generally psychologically and physically unprepared for war. They had lived for at least six years – since Israel pulled out of southern Lebanon in 2000 – in a bubble of “peace”. In 2004, the army had claimed that we would never go back to Lebanon.

### A New Kind of War

After the Second Lebanon War, we learned some very valuable lessons. We learned that we had been living in an imaginary world and that the most dangerous type of war is the one that you call peace. We learned that we are not in fact in a “peace process” at all. We are at war. On their own accord, many reservists began formidable fitness programs. The army invested in state-of-the-art equipment for us. We began planning for possible wars and attacks that might occur at any or all of our borders. And the whole army became much more serious about training again. The debacle of Lebanon set the stage for the success of Gaza. If there is one thing that Israelis are good at, it is taking lessons from their losses and being creative on the battlefield.

The Israel Defense Force (IDF) developed a different mentality toward Gaza. Lebanon, before the war, was very quiet and even boring, giving the perception that it was not a threat. Gaza, on the other hand, was

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always considered a hot zone. Certainly since Lebanon, we were told that “it [was] not a matter of IF, it [was] a matter of WHEN.” As Special Forces operators we were often crossing into the Strip and we knew the enemy. Now, after the Gaza war, the world has developed a perception that Hamas is not nearly on the level of Hezbollah. That in itself shows how successful we were—and lucky. Hamas is NOT a rag-tag group of thugs. They are a vicious, well-trained, well-supplied, motivated, and creative fighting force. They are an unconventional army, no less capable than Hezbollah. The difference between Lebanon and Gaza is simply how Is-

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rael adapted to the enemy. Lebanon reminded each individual soldier that he has to be a warrior. It reminded the army that good intelligence and well thought-out plans with realistic goals are key elements to the solution. It reminded the home front that we are still in a “war process” and it reminded the government that

ego has no place in war and that politicians who are incompetent at military actions should step aside and allow those who know to take charge.

A new kind of enemy has become formidable over the last ten years. Western armies can look to Lebanon and Gaza to gain lessons for operating against this enemy. Even now, the Western concept of warfare is quite conventional, prompting us to think that if we can capture territory, and certainly if we can neutralize the enemy's leadership, we will win. And we are confused when, no matter how well we do on the battlefield, the enemy continues and even increases its attacks. What we have not yet come to grips with is that the enemy is not playing by our rules. The new war is unconventional and is motivated by ideology. The enemy cannot hope to match Western technology, so he operates in a way to



During recent IDF operations in the Gaza Strip

make the technology relatively meaningless. He simply refuses to meet the conventional army on the battlefield. The Western army invades enemy lands with almost no resistance, even captures the enemy's leadership, developing the erroneous conception that victory has been achieved. Only then do the conventional soldiers begin being blown up by an enemy that cannot be identified or differentiated

from the civilian population. The conventional soldier has no idea of how to operate in this environment because he is looking for a uniformed foe. A nine year-old child with a bomb does not fit the Western model of "combatant" and takes soldiers by surprise. The conquest of territory by a Western army only brings new targets closer to the terrorist so that he does not need to travel as far to blow up Western targets. It does not serve to bring the enemy to his knees. Likewise, Middle Eastern societies are tribal in nature and are fiercely proud of their ideology. They will not play chess with a conventional army, accepting defeat simply because their king is captured or their territory is occupied.

### **Lebanon: What NOT to do**

Lebanon is a perfect example of the wrong way to confront the problems that the West faces in this new kind of war. The challenges that US forces face in Iraq are comparable. Let's forget about the lack of Israeli leadership in 2006 and simply analyze the strategy. Israeli soldiers understood that the goals upon entering Lebanon were to destroy Hezbollah and end

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rocket attacks from the northern border. These goals were difficult to achieve and set Israel up for failure. Hezbollah, like any terrorist movement, is an ideology, and unless you are willing to kill *everyone*, an ideology cannot be toppled through military conquest. There only had to be *one* vigilant team left alive who held to its creed for Israel to fail in achieving its goals. Likewise, the moment that one rocket hit Israel from Lebanon after it withdrew to its own borders, Hezbollah would be victorious. Israel fell into the age-old trap that has caused much larger and seemingly stronger armies to be defeated by their unconventional foes: a poor evaluation of the enemy. It made no difference how much destruction Lebanon incurred or how many men Hezbollah lost. Perception is the deciding factor in this new kind of war. Hezbollah came out of the war appearing strong and, therefore, gained the respect of the world. Once the Israeli army entered from the south, the only real strategy for achieving its elusive goals was to reach the Litani River with ground forces, sweeping through Lebanese villages and towns. The Western military model had the Israelis convinced that by moving from one line on the map to another, all of the territory in between would be “conquered”. In the uncon-

ventional model, every moment that the army was moving forward, they provided ample targets to Hezbollah, who were attacking while retreating. They did not have to hold territory and they did not need to kill or injure huge numbers of Israeli soldiers. They only had to instill fear in the conventional force, a sense of hopelessness in the Israeli home front, and frustration in the military ranks. There are



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no front lines or rear lines in the new kind of war; the enemy will hit you from behind just as quickly (if not more quickly) as he will hit you from the front, and if you understand how the enemy operates, you can combat his ability to achieve his objectives.

### **Gaza: The Learning Curve**

The lessons of Lebanon were immediately put into practice in preparing for the next conflict. The Special Forces (SF) were always very adept at urban warfare tactics, and during missions in the West Bank we operated ferociously, pulling missions almost every night. This combat experience produced a very high level of operational knowledge which trickled down through army doctrine for how to deal with our enemies. The regular army, and certainly the reserves, were lacking in their fighting skills in general until after Lebanon. In 2006, army leadership put new policies into action. The army supplied new gear to almost all combat units. Reservists had never seen such good equipment and their duty stopped being a vacation and became intensified training. The construction of an urban warfare training facility was completed in the desert, at about the same time that the Second Lebanon War was being fought. This facility is, perhaps, the most advanced urban warfare training facility in the world. It is built like the other facilities that we use, just much bigger. It resembles a real Arab city with Middle Eastern architecture, complete with mosques, schools, hospitals, large multi-story buildings, streets, squares, alleys, and vehicles. This offered the first opportunity for large scale training that allowed us to practice the

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concert of war, with SF, regular infantry, tanks, and artillery all operating together as a symphony. There is a strict training rotation that has all combat units drilling open-field combat techniques and urban warfare every few months. For almost three years, there were no illusions; we knew that we were training for Gaza. Unlike Lebanon, we knew that when we entered Gaza, the military goals and the execution of the missions in order to reach those goals would be methodical and well-prepared.

The IDF entered Gaza with realistic goals—significantly reduce Hamas' ability to inflict damage on Israel and Israeli targets. We were told specifically that our goal was NOT to topple Hamas and was NOT to destroy all of its capabilities. Those goals would have been too difficult to achieve and would have set us up for defeat and a blow to the morale of the army and the nation. Likewise, the tactics would be unconventional. We were not to think in terms of conquest and holding territory. Concepts of front and rear lines had no place in this war. We were to frustrate and attack at the morale of the enemy, fighting much like he would fight us. The only rule was, don't fight by the rules. The IDF went in, simply to wreak havoc on Hamas without getting into any situations that could afford our enemies the opportunity to achieve anything that would resemble a victory. We were to keep them at arm's length, not attempt to engage them in combat, and use anything within our means to destroy them. And when Israel decided the desired perception had been



A booby trap found during IDF operations in Gaza

reached (because perception is everything in these kinds of conflicts), we pulled out. Unlike Hezbollah, Hamas came out of this conflict without the world taking them very seriously. Even though Hamas was still shooting missiles into Israel, in a desperate attempt to save face, its capabilities had been seriously reduced and Israel had achieved its goals.

### **A New Kind of Success**

It is not good training, technology, or strategy that makes bullets miss their targets or causes your eye to notice a trip-wire. For those experiences, I have to thank the Big Guy upstairs. He and I became very close during those cold nights. With all of our training and preparation, we were still afraid to go into Gaza. We knew the enemy and we had lost men even in the last year to their ambushes. When we were entering the Strip, we were fully prepared for high casualties. In Gaza they were waiting for us; they were looking for a fight. There were snipers, teams that were waiting to ambush us with anti-tank rockets, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), booby traps, and mortars falling around us.

The successes that we saw in Gaza resulted from a combination of an appropriate response to the new kind of enemy, a healthy Israeli attitude that fiercely guarded its men and its right to stop intolerable attacks against its people, and protection from the Almighty, which some people call "luck". I saw an attitude that I have been waiting to see for a long time from a nation that has too often apologized for every move that it makes. Today the question is still asked, "But how do we WIN?" And that is another question coming directly from a Western mindset. There is no such thing as winning in this new kind of war. The war is ongoing, with periods of more violence and periods of less violence, during which the enemy regroups and plans his next attack. When we feel the enemy is getting strong, we must be prepared to make preemptive strikes, hard and fast at key targets, with viciousness, as the enemy would do to us. Only then can we acquire, not peace, but sustained periods of relative calm.