THE MYTH OF HEZBOLLAH'S MAY 2000 VICTORY
By David Daoud

"They [Hezbollah] are screwing us, wasting our fighters, and your answer is fortifying [the outpost?] …Let us go down to Arnoun [a village in south Lebanon] so that at least we feel like we're doing something. What, nothing? Nothing?! The IDF won't retaliate? If we're staying in Lebanon – and I don't see us leaving anytime soon – then let us do our jobs. I can't put another soldier on guard duty and tell him, 'sorry, I don't have a solution for you'…If he sees the IDF retaliating, firing back, trying to kill whomever is out to hurt him, then fine, he's part of a battle. But this? 'Just stand around like an idiot and wait to get hit by a missile.' It's a total failure. The four ladies [FMM] beat us. They're right." –
Lt. Liraz Liberti, from the movie [*Beaufort*](#).

On June 6, 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon with the ostensible purpose of rooting out Palestinian armed militias in south Lebanon that were threatening the Galilee. In its wake, the Israeli invasion catalyzed the rise of Hezbollah. Eighteen years later, Israel seemingly abruptly withdrew from south Lebanon, and ever since or almost two decades, Hezbollah [has](#) [cultivated](#) the [myth](#) that, on May 25, 2000, it militarily [defeated](#) and [ejected](#) the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from the Security Zone. On its face, Hezbollah's claims appear true: the IDF withdrew six weeks before schedule, ostensibly overnight, and abandoned its South Lebanon Army (SLA) allies in the process. In reality, complex domestic Israeli factors – not Hezbollah's fighting prowess – both constrained the IDF's military actions throughout the South Lebanon Conflict and eventually prompted its pullout. However, by letting their withdrawal look like a rout, the Israelis were indeed defeated. Not on the battlefield or in any classical military sense. But days after leaving Lebanon, when Hezbollah employed its most potent weapon – propaganda – to claim [divine victory.](#)

The Rise of the Security Zone and Israel's "Catch-22"
Israel's Security Zone was the remnant of its 1982 Operation Peace for Galilee, the IDF's destructive invasion of Lebanon. The war was highly unpopular with large segments of Israeli civilians, [and](#) even [soldiers,](#) despite the IDF swiftly defeating Palestinian militias in south Lebanon. Their distaste rose as as the IDF chased the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) past the Litani River – 40km into the country – to the outskirts of Beirut, far beyond where they posed a threat to northern Israel, and then occupied the city.

The IDF's extended incursion revealed that the Operation's objectives were political, increasing Israeli social ire. The IDF soon found itself entangled in the morass of the Lebanese Civil War to back the political aspirations of their Maronite Christian allies – the Phalangists – and enthrone their leader Bachir Gemayel as president, in exchange for a promised peace treaty. In light of this, Israeli opposition rose with Israeli casualties, believing their soldiers' lives were being wasted in an unnecessary war of choice where – unlike the 1956 clash with Egypt – Israel was not confronting an existential threat.

Ultimately, Israel's bet on the Maronites failed, and it began gradually pulling the IDF back towards the border. However, as the Israeli government headed by Shimon Peres weighed entirely withdrawing from Lebanon in January 1985, they were confronted with a new problem. The invasion's brutality, and particularly its effect on Lebanese Shiites, catalyzed the rise of Hezbollah, which replaced Palestinian militias as a new threat to Israel's north.

Some of south Lebanon's Shiites had initially welcomed the invading Israelis as liberators, hoping the IDF would rid them of the Palestinian militias controlling the area. But Israel had almost entirely disregarded their invasion's material and psychological impact on Lebanese communities besides the Maronites. In the case of the Shiites, this proved critical.

Hezbollah emerged from the shadows almost concurrently with the invasion, even though it was not created by it. The group – according to its own leadership – had existed as a minor ideological current in Lebanon long before 1982. But the invasion's impact provided Hezbollah with the ideal opportunity to catalyze its rise from obscurity by transforming the very Shiites who had welcomed the IDF into Lebanon into its support-base and source of its permanence.

Therefore, despite Israeli social opposition to remaining in Lebanon, Hezbollah's rise precluded an immediate or unilateral IDF withdrawal. Instead, the Peres government redeployed the IDF in June 1985 to a strip of territory adjacent to the Israeli border, which became known as the Security Zone.

The South Lebanon Conflict

As the IDF dug into the Security Zone, it had to balance Israeli society's begrudging acceptance of occupying south Lebanon with the need to confront Hezbollah. Therefore, particularly during the 1990s, the IDF adopted casualty-prevention as its imperative, to prevent public opinion from tipping against the occupation and prompt a premature withdrawal. This social constraint forced the IDF into a pattern of static,

passive defense and overreliance on air and artillery power to simultaneously combat Hezbollah and minimize casualties. Rather than striving to defeat Hezbollah, the IDF's minimalist strategy aimed to merely ensure quiet in northern Israel.

Hezbollah seized upon these constraints to tie the IDF's hands. The group learned early on, particularly after Israel's successful 1988 Operation Law and Order, that it could be destroyed by IDF ground forces initiating an all-out direct confrontation. Lacking the means to constrain such an IDF action by itself, Hezbollah sought to capitalize on Israeli society's skepticism about their army's adventure into Lebanon (and its vestigial manifestation, the Security Zone) – to keep Israeli troops locked up in their south Lebanon fortifications. Israel's national psyche – not the IDF troops it fought and killed in the Security Zone – now became the real target of Hezbollah's attacks

The group therefore attacked Israeli troops in Lebanon hundreds of times each year to create a constant – if small – trickle of casualties. These attacks weren't intended to defeat the IDF or directly push it out of Lebanon. They were far too ineffective for that. Instead, they were meant as a constant reminder to Israeli society that their sons were dying in what they thought was the unnecessary war in Lebanon. The group also sought to capitalize on Israeli military censorship to convince Israeli society that it had turned south Lebanon into a killing field for Israeli soldiers. Hezbollah began broadcasting edited recordings of its attacks that transformed its otherwise mediocre military successes – or even failures – into psychological victories that made the Israeli public averse to unleashing IDF ground troops on the scale, and in the manner, required to defeat Hezbollah.

By thus playing on the Israeli psyche, Hezbollah largely confined Israeli ground troops to their fortifications, maximizing the impact of its attacks and guerilla strategy. It opted for increasingly effective and elusive raids on Israeli fortifications, and minimized its exposure to the IDF's retaliatory stand-off firepower. Having virtually negated the possibility of a massive Israeli ground retaliation, Hezbollah could harass Israeli troops in the Security Zone at will. Without such a ground deployment, Hezbollah was even able to survive Israel's two massive retaliatory operations during that decade – 1993's Operation Accountability and 1996's Grapes of Wrath – virtually unscathed.

The Helicopter Disaster and the Beginning of the End
Hezbollah's attrition strategy was only a limited success, however. Given its inability to directly defeat or dislodge the IDF, its victory strategy depended on gradually eroding the Israeli *public*'s support for the occupation. And while Hezbollah succeeded in using Israeli society to constrain the IDF, Israeli casualties were never large or frequent

enough – on average, 1 death every two weeks – to create a critical mass of Israelis backing a unilateral pullout. Even at the height of Hezbollah's success – when it had virtually bridged its casualty gap with the IDF – most Israelis deemed the price proportionate to the group's threat, and supported holding the Security Zone.

Israeli society's crisis of confidence eventually came, but it wasn't Hezbollah's doing. On February 4, 1997, two Israeli transport helicopters entering Lebanon collided in mid-air, killing all 73 soldiers on board. The so-called "Helicopter Disaster" dealt the IDF its largest blow during the South Lebanon Conflict and exposed the raw nerve of Israeli society's casualty-aversion. the crash hit Israeli society collectively. Now, fighting Hezbollah – which appeared to Israelis be a relatively minor threat because it only occasionally menaced only northern Israel – did not seem worth such large casualties.

In one day, the helicopter crash accomplished what Hezbollah – in 6,058 operations between June 1985 and May 2000 which killed only 235 IDF soldiers – couldn't. Within weeks of the crash, Israeli support for unilateral withdrawal – which stood at from 21% in January 1997 – to 41% and continued to steadily rise: 44% in 1998, 55% in 1999, and 62% in 2000, reaching 70% by May 25, 2000.

The crash also led to the creation of the Four Mothers Movement (FMM) by parents of soldiers in the Security Zone. FMM waged a relentless popular campaign demanding immediate withdrawal from Lebanon. After the crash, IDF fatalities returned to a trickle. But in the Israeli psyche, they were now tacked on to the crash's fatalities, not standalone figures. Israelis reacted to them differently now, swelling FMM's numbers into a social current.

Admittedly, Hezbollah scored subsequent successes. On September 5, 1997, Hezbollah ambushed and decimated an Israeli commando force in Ansarriyeh. On February 28, 1999 – after repeated failed attempts to assassinate high-ranking Israeli generals, including OC Northern Command Yitzhak Mordechai in Houla in 1991, COS Amnon-Lipkin Shahak in 1998 in Barasheet, and two attempts on Brig. Gen. Eli Amitai in 1998 in Aishiyyeh and Barasheet – Hezbollah finally succeeded in killing Brig. Gen. Erez Gerstein, the commander the Lebanon Liaison Unit and of Israeli forces in Lebanon.

Like most of Hezbollah's operations, these were of limited strategic value, but they were psychologically devastating. Nonetheless, they only occurred well after the die had been cast, and only served to compound the effect of the Helicopter Disaster, rather than create the impetus for withdrawal.

1999: The Myth of Hezbollah's "The Year of Resistance"

Hezbollah dubbed 1999 – the penultimate year of the occupation – the "year of resistance par excellence," because the group exponentially increased the rate of its attacks on the IDF that year. In reality, however, by 1999-2000, the IDF had regained the initiative against Hezbollah. Maj. Gen. Amos. Malka notes that, on a tactical level, the IDF remedied many of its deficiencies. In fact, in 1999, the IDF succeeded in reducing its casualties – 13 in total – by half from 1998, while forcing the group on the defensive by inflicting a "period of humiliating defeats in close contact" on it. As a result, Hezbollah militarily sputtered and its casualties spiked – losing seven fighters in a failed November 1999 attack on the IDF's Sujud compound alone – while Israel suffered no fatalities between August and November 1999. These developments led IDF Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz to dub it a "good year" for the IDF.

Hezbollah attempted to save face by attributing the drop in Israeli casualties to an overall reduction of Israeli troops in the Security Zone. However, the IDF had actually doubled its forces in south Lebanon after 1996, even as the group increased the rate of its attacks during the same period – conducting 4,928 of its total operations during those years.

Despite this uptick, Hezbollah never defeated the IDF, nor accomplished its goal of making the Israeli defense establishment feel like its entire security apparatus in south Lebanon was superfluous. And while Israeli soldiers in the Security Zone were indeed demoralized, it wasn't Hezbollah's attacks *per se* that had accomplished this. To the contrary, it was their anger at not being allowed to fight Hezbollah, instead being sent to Lebanon to die as sitting ducks, that caused their low morale. As the withdrawal drew near, that feeling only increased. As General Moshe Kaplinsky, commander of the 91st ("Galilee") Division in 2000, noted this was because "no one wanted to be the last casualty" in an occupation that was ending anyway.

In fact, during the occupation's final two years, the IDF was eager to strike back at Hezbollah. As the group tried to regain the upper-hand in early 2000 – killing 7 Israeli soldiers in three weeks – the IDF's brass prodded newly-elected Prime Minister Ehud Barak to greenlight an extensive retaliation. But Barak, cognizant of Israeli social opposition to a wide scale operation against Hezbollah, vetoed his generals. The IDF's successful shift had come too late, and in any case, was only on the tactical level.

Ehud Barak vs. The Generals

In 1985, Ehud Barak – while head of IDF Military Intelligence – had privately opposed the Israeli government's decision to establish the Security Zone and remain in Lebanon. In contrast to the Israeli defense establishment, Barak believed Hezbollah's use of Katyusha rockets had made the Security Zone irrelevant to protecting northern Israel – the stated goal behind maintaining the occupation.

When he ran for the premiership in 1999, his private sentiments therefore dovetailed with Israeli society's now-dominant sentiment regarding Lebanon. On March 1, 1999, the day after Gerstein's assassination, Barak promised to withdraw from Lebanon within one year of taking office. He said he would do so either through a peace deal with Syria – which *de facto* controlled Lebanon at the time – or if that failed, despite his misgivings, unilaterally. By tapping into this Israeli discontent, Barak surged in the polls, handily defeating the incumbent Benjamin Netanyahu to win the premiership.

Soon after taking office on July 6, 1999, Barak began preparing the Lebanon pullout, but the IDF was skeptical. In October of 1999, Barak and GOC Northern Command Gabi Ashkenazi set July of 2000 as the withdrawal deadline. The Prime Minister meanwhile ordered Chief of Staff Mofaz to begin withdrawal preparations, assuring him that he would do all in his power to ensure it would be done through negotiations with Syria. Nonetheless, he also ordered Mofaz to prepare plans for a unilateral withdrawal, even under fire.

Peace talks with Syria failed in March of 2000. Barak returned to Jerusalem and ordered the IDF to speed up the beginning of the pullout – envisioned as a gradual process – to May, to be concluded by early July. On March 5, 2000, Barak's cabinet adopted his proposal for a unilateral withdrawal, with July 7 later set as the deadline.

The IDF mounted stiff opposition to Barak's plan. At the height of Hezbollah's military success, they had prevented his predecessor – Netanyahu – from unilaterally withdrawing, and hoped to repeat that now. Mofaz and Ashkenazi both pushed back, supported by other senior Northern Command officers who believed the low casualty rate justified the occupation. They asked Barak for more time -- "another couple of years" -- to defeat Hezbollah. In fact, the majority of IDF's intelligence officials and commanders unequivocally backed holding on to the Security Zone.

But Barak rejected their advice. Less than a year into his short-lived 21-month premiership, his popularity was plummeting. Elected on a platform of change, he had yet to fulfill any of his campaign promises – and withdrawing from Lebanon was

low-hanging fruit to improve his poll numbers. Moreover, Barak – Israel's most decorated soldier, and a former IDF Chief of Staff himself – firmly believed in the decision to withdraw. Hezbollah's rockets and the IDF's static deployment made the Security Zone irrelevant. Nor – given his poll numbers – could he override Israeli public opposition to the South Lebanon occupation and launch a massive ground operation to protect the Galilee, which – if the need arose – he believed could be carried out from within Israeli territory in any case. He also believed that a unilateral withdrawal would deprive Hezbollah of its excuse to carry arms or attack Israel, thus accomplishing the occupation's goals without its casualties.

Withdrawal

In theory, Barak was correct in thinking an orderly and voluntary IDF exit from Lebanon would have undermined Hezbollah's "resistance" narrative. But he misread the group's *raison d'etre* and underestimated its ability to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. If it couldn't actually defeat or expel the IDF, the group would at least create the impression that it had forced Israel to disengage from south Lebanon under fire and use its propaganda to reap the same results. Hezbollah therefore feverishly increased its attacks as the withdrawal became more imminent: 1,528 attacks in 1999 - shortly after Barak promised withdrawal - and 325 in May of 2000 alone, as the pullout deadline approached.

Constrained by Barak, the IDF continued with the withdrawal plans, rather than decisively and overwhelmingly striking back at Hezbollah to demonstrate that it was not being forced out of Lebanon. Thus, final withdrawal preparations began on May 3, while Israeli troop reduction had been underway since the collapse of peace talks with Syria. By May 19, Israel had withdrawn most of its soldiers, in total secrecy from both the SLA and Hezbollah. Only a skeletal force of 120 troops remained to man the IDF's stripped-down outposts until the final withdrawal on July 7.

Unexpected events, however, overtook the Israelis. On May 14, the IDF handed its SLA allies the strategically critical Taibe outpost. On May 21, a week later, the SLA – demoralized by months of rumors of Israel's imminent withdrawal – abandoned the post. Not to Hezbollah, but to a crowd of Lebanese civilians who had broken through its defenses.

Taibe's collapse surprised Hezbollah as much as the Israelis, and precipitated a domino-effect total collapse of the SLA and, with it, the Security Zone. Hezbollah quickly recovered from its shock and encouraged the civilians to continue moving towards the Israeli border, hoping to bisect the Security Zone, and to capitalize on its premature

disintegration in order to claim it had expelled Israel. The events in Taibe soon repeated themselves in Houla, Markaba, and other southern Lebanese villages.

The IDF – supported by Ashkenazi – considered stopping the civilian flow, saving the SLA, and ensuring an orderly withdrawal on schedule, even if it meant a massive Israeli redeployment to hold the Security Zone. Barak again overrode his generals. He knew the Israeli public would oppose such a move so close to the withdrawal deadline. His priority was now holding the line to facilitate a safe – rather than orderly – IDF withdrawal. With his cabinet's support, Barak ordered an immediate pullout that was completed on May 24, six weeks ahead of schedule.

The IDF looked like it had been routed, and now Hezbollah could claim victory.

Conclusion

Israel underestimated the importance of the psychological dimension of its conflict with Hezbollah, and thus cared little to ensure its withdrawal didn't look like a rout. Meanwhile, the group's propaganda offered a simplistic narrative to explain the withdrawal that – coupled with the pullout's optics – obscured the fact that the IDF had never fully confronted Hezbollah while occupying south Lebanon. May 25, 2000 thus became the cornerstone of Hezbollah's resistance mythology. Two days after the Israeli withdrawal, a triumphant Hassan Nasrallah mounted a stage in newly-liberated Bint Jbeil and declared that his fighters had defeated Israel and proved its vaunted military was "weaker than a spider's web."

Ehud Barak once again recently claimed the withdrawal was a success, noting that the defense establishment's worst predictions – of daily rockets landing on northern Israel – failed to materialize. Nonetheless, the pullout and its implications would come back to haunt the Israelis. It allowed Hezbollah to present itself as Lebanon's defender and liberator, strengthening the group's hold on Lebanese Shiites, earning it the unanimous gratitude of Lebanese citizens and Rafic Hariri's government, and - for a time - made it the darling "resistance movement" of the Arab world.