

Our World: Israel's strategic rot

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Again last week our hopes were raised, only to be dashed once more. OC Northern Command Major General Udi Adam raised our hopes when he resigned his command. Adam, the first of our incompetent leaders to leave his job after mishandling the war against Hizbullah this summer, made us think that perhaps other incompetents in the IDF and the government would follow his example.

Our hopes were also raised later in the week when former IDF chief of General Staff Lt. Gen. (ret.) Moshe Ya'alon made public his demand that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defense Minister Amir Peretz and his successor, Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, quit or be forced from office due to their mismanagement of the war.

Charging at the heels of Ya'alon's frontal assault were the retired generals. In a meeting with Halutz Friday afternoon the IDF elders, too, told him he must go. And Halutz isn't the only commander who needs to resign.

During the meeting, one of the retired generals read aloud an order of battle authored by Division 91 Commander Brig. Gen. Gal Hirsh, who led much of the ground operation in Lebanon. Hirsh ordered his forces to conduct "a massive infiltration with a small signature, charge, quick deployment in the commanding territories and the creation of cataclysmic contact with the built-up areas while inducing shock and awe."

Got that? While the incoherent order evoked laughter in the audience, as one of the generals commented to *Yediot Aharonot*: "It is more sad than funny. It sounds like a poem, not an order of battle."

Clearly the IDF is due for a serious house-cleaning. But Halutz, like Olmert and Peretz, refuses to follow Adam's example and go away.

LIKE OLMERT and Peretz, Halutz justifies his refusal to take responsibility for his failure and resign by arguing that letting someone else try to succeed where he failed would be irresponsible. Halutz will fix Halutz's mistakes.

But his investigation of the war's operational and tactical management makes you wonder. Division 91's operations are being reviewed by none other than Brig.-Gen. Hirsh - who has asked to extend his command.

So if Halutz won't quit and his investigations won't solve the problems, then we place our hopes in the newly appointed Winograd Commission, which received a governmental mandate Sunday to investigate the war.

The committee, chaired by a retired judge and manned by a law professor, a political scientist and two retired generals, received a broad mandate for investigation. Not only is it empowered to investigate the conduct of the war and the preparations leading up to the war, it has been mandated to investigate the actions of past governments and IDF General Staffs going back to "the period when Hizbullah first began fortifying itself along the border."

That is, the committee will investigate how successive governments and IDF General Staffs contended with the Hizbullah threat as it grew since the IDF withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000.

It isn't clear what professional qualifications the members of the committee have to judge military and policy blunders. But assuming that its members are competent to fulfill their mandate, is there room for hope that this committee of retirees can fix what needs to be fixed?

Unfortunately, no matter how talented its members may be, the Winograd Commission has no chance of fixing what is broken in the IDF, or in the government. Its failure is preordained by its mandate.

THE OPERATIONAL and tactical failures of the brigade, division and regional commanders in the war did not come out of thin air. They stemmed from a basic strategic misreading of reality which has informed all governments from 1999 until today. That strategic failure does not relate to what Israel did or did not do after the withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000.

The strategic error that stands at the root of the latest war, as well as at the root of the war with the Palestinians is the IDF's withdrawal from south Lebanon itself and the erroneous thinking that caused it. By beginning the inquiry into the latest war from the period that followed the withdrawal, the commission, whatever its qualifications, is blocked from investigating the source of the operational and tactical confusion and incompetence that followed.

Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon was predicated on the unfounded notion that Hizbullah - an Iranian-proxy organization dedicated to the eradication of Israel and the US and the establishment of a global caliphate through jihad - was only fighting Israel because Israel maintained its security zone in south Lebanon. Were we to leave, Hizbullah would magically abandon its core belief, accept Israel and become a political party.

THE IDF and the entire defense establishment completely opposed this militarily and strategically unjustifiable initiative. Yet the notion of embracing surrender as a national security doctrine, spawned circa 1996 by EU-financed Israeli politicians like Yossi Beilin and EU-financed non-profit organizations like Four Mothers, captured the imagination and received the unqualified backing of the radical leftist media, particularly at publicly financed Israel Radio and TV.

And so it was that Ehud Barak, who until Ehud Olmert's ascension to power had no competition for the title "The worst prime minister in Israel's history," scored his greatest "achievement" in the office of prime minister by carrying out the strategically indefensible withdrawal. In so doing he handed the global jihad movement its first strategic victory against the "infidels" since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Hizbullah, an Iranian-commanded Shi'ite band in the Lebanese backwater, became, overnight, a symbol of Islamic strength. It earned the distinction of being the first Arab army to defeat the Jews.

THE PALESTINIANS made no attempt to hide the fact that it was Hizbullah's victory over Israel that inspired them to begin their jihad against Israel four months later, in September 2000. Hizbullah's victory convinced them that the Jews would run away if you attacked them. Terror, not negotiations was the way to destroy the Zionist entity.

As to Israel, neither the media, which was directly responsible for pressuring Barak to order the withdrawal, nor the Barak and Sharon governments had an interest in questioning the wisdom of the withdrawal from Lebanon.

And so, rather than sound the alarms as Hizbullah overtly armed itself with thousands of rockets and missiles, the government and the media lulled the public into complacency. Any general, politician or commentator who dared to point out that since the withdrawal Hizbullah had been transformed from a tactical nuisance into a strategic threat, was dismissed as a warmonger.

And based on the perceived success of the Lebanon withdrawal, the Sharon-Olmert-Livni government convinced the public that the model ought to be implemented in Gaza and northern Samaria as well.

Olmert insisted that the Winograd Commission investigate the handling of the Hizbullah threat since the withdrawal because he, Halutz and Peretz want to spread the blame as widely as possible. In line with these efforts the three failed leaders are blaming the war on Ya'alon and former defense minister Shaul Mofaz by asking why they did nothing to contend with the growing Hizbullah threat during the years they led the IDF under Ariel Sharon.

BUT HERE we enter the heart of the matter. The moment Israel left Lebanon, the political cost - both domestically and internationally - for contending with the growing threat from Hizbullah was raised exponentially. After bragging about how brilliant we had been to enable Hizbullah to build fortifications adjacent to Metulla and Kiryat Shmona, how could the government have taken action against a few thousand silly missiles? Particularly in light of the media's pro-European pacifism, the reputational cost of striking Hizbullah was too high for politicians to bear.

By propagating its own delusions Israel had maneuvered itself into a position where it could take no preemptive action against Iran's proxy force at its doorstep.

Yet, one may argue, Israel's intelligence capabilities are such that the IDF didn't need to maintain its presence in Lebanon to contend with Hizbullah. Our spies in the Mossad or Military Intelligence or the Shin Bet could have taken on the missile threat through "massive infiltration with a small signature," to quote the poet.

Yet to argue this is to ignore one of the side effects of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon. When the IDF pulled out it abandoned the best allies Israel had ever had - the soldiers and officers of the South Lebanese Army, who fought side by side with the IDF for nearly 18 years. After this betrayal it doesn't take a genius to understand the kind of difficulties Israel experienced in finding spies.

It is clear, then, that our irresponsible and incompetent leaders have placed us in a situation where no effective action is being taken to fix what is clearly broken. It is similarly apparent that they wish to lull us again into complacency by investigating everything except the cause of everything. They intend to capture our attention with juicy stories about various generals' malfeasance on the third or 13th day of the war, and so delude us into believing that something is being done.

But the only way for something to be done is for the current leadership to be replaced. The only commission of inquiry that will be capable of clearing out the rot is general elections.

The only way we can remedy our operational and tactical woes is by having leaders who can understand, and are brave enough to correct our strategic mistakes.



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