

The Pitfalls of Machismo

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The second Lebanon War began with an impulsive spasm by the Israel Defense Forces - an overreaction that killed civilians and severely damaged civilian infrastructure. This move exacted, and will continue to exact, a heavy strategic price: It severely impaired the chances of freeing the Middle East of the threat of an Iranian revolution.

Since 1973, Israel has not succeeded in providing military solutions to geopolitical questions. The 1978 Litani Operation and 1982 invasion of Lebanon did not lead to security for the north. The Palestinians in the territories, despite the thousands of dead, the destruction and subjugation that two intifadas have brought upon them, have refused to reconcile themselves to the occupation, and are instead strengthening Hamas. The IDF is incapable of beating them.

However, this reality has not yet sunk into the consciousness of our generals, men of the old school who were educated in the spirit of the slogan that what cannot be done with force can be done with more force. The arrogant *idée fixe* of 1973, which held that the Arabs' defeat in 1967 had destroyed their desire to fight, did not disappear with the Agranat Report. It is still here, wrapped in modern phrases such as "searing their consciousness" and "restoring deterrence." Its prophets stubbornly ignore the fact that if anything has been seared into the Arabs' consciousness in any of these cases, it is only hatred for Israel and its addiction to force.

The parade of generals who recently trotted out their battered theories of consciousness-searing and deterrence looks like a pathetic, nostalgic outburst by elderly men longing for their youth, when they, and Israel, were young and just. In practice, only Egypt and Jordan, which received something in return for peace agreements, are not currently threatening Israel.

The zenith of Israel's intoxication with force - the late 1960s - corresponds with the period when IDF Chief of Staff Dan Halutz's generation was growing up. This is a generation that lives in constant fear that its achievements will not match those of the previous generation of generals. Instead of internalizing the limits of force, they have a tendency to give in to the macho impulse to compete with their parents' generation, thereby warping their judgment.

Granted, the fact that soldiers were killed and abducted pained the IDF. But perhaps a limited military response along the border would have been better? Hezbollah would apparently have responded by launching rockets, and then it would have been possible to attack the organization - but only it - in other areas of Lebanon. At the same time, a sensitive eye should have been kept on the decisive question over dealing with any popular movement: the level of public support it enjoys in its own country, its region and worldwide.

A sophisticated mixture of a lot of diplomacy with a little fighting could have led to Hezbollah's isolation. Instead, the IDF brass, followed by the government, chose to assume the role of the neighborhood madman and embark on a campaign of thuggish craziness whose damages are increasingly becoming clear.

As always in the Arab world, the party at which Israel directed the most force was the one that ultimately emerged the most strengthened. The enormous quantity of bombs that Israel dropped on Hezbollah turned its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and his deceptive ideology into icons of Arab unity and righteous resistance, and gave Iran important achievements in its struggle to undermine the legitimacy of moderate Arab regimes.

The IDF's overreaction in the first few days of the war will eventually be investigated, but whoever does this must not hesitate to analyze personal factors as well. Of all of Israel's generals, Dan Halutz appears the most skilled in one of the basic talents that Israeli men nurture from childhood: camouflaging the emotional and psychological elements of their actions. This humorless man, utterly lacking in nuance, who feels nothing when a bomb is released from the belly of his plane - and who even found time on the first day of the war to sell his stocks - recently said of himself that he is unaware of Israel's Lebanon trauma. The statements he made at the beginning of the war to cover his rear - that "the war's aims are defined by the political echelon" - succeeded in silencing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz for two critical weeks. The result was sweeping approval for a strategy of one-ton bombs that ignored the broader geopolitical picture that the general refused to see.

The campaign that Israel is waging against Hezbollah, as a forward outpost of Iran, is too important to leave to the generals. It has a chance only if Israel can succeed in building coalitions, both in the Middle East and beyond. And this will require a deep human understanding, free of ego and the intoxication of force.