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## Introduction

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From July 12 until August 14, 2006, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) waged a 34-day air and land campaign against Hezbollah, a well-armed Iranian forward proxy organization of radical Islamist terrorists based in Lebanon. That campaign was an escalated response to a long-planned Hezbollah incursion into northern Israel and the prompt abduction of two IDF soldiers, who were then spirited back into Lebanon as hostages to be used as leverage in a hoped-for trade for Islamist terrorists who had previously been incarcerated by Israeli forces.<sup>1</sup> At first called Operation Just Reward and soon thereafter renamed Operation Change of Direction, the campaign has since been widely regarded in both Israel and the West as the IDF's most inconclusive performance in its storied 60-year history of combat experience. Waged under the direction of Israel's prime minister, Ehud Olmert, and his minister of defense at the time, Amir Peretz, the campaign was dominated by precision standoff attacks by the Israel Air Force (IAF) and by IDF artil-

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<sup>1</sup> Hezbollah, which means "Party of God" in Arabic, is a virulently radical transnational Islamist movement with both political and military components. It established its initial roots in Lebanon in the early 1980s and 1990s and deepened them further in the aftermath of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 following the latter's occupation of that region for 18 years after the first Lebanon war of 1982. It is lavishly funded by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and has become a major presence in the legislature of the weak democratic government of Lebanon. It has infested southern Lebanon's predominantly Shiite population and is by far the dominant military presence on Lebanon's soil, overshadowing the Lebanese Army in discipline and combat capability. It also is devoted unswervingly to the destruction of the State of Israel. For the most accessible and up-to-date introduction to the subject, see Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007.

lery and battlefield rockets, with no significant commitment of conventional ground troops against Hezbollah until the last days of fighting before a United Nations (UN)–brokered ceasefire went into effect.<sup>2</sup>

What mostly accounted for the rampant frustration felt throughout Israel as the conflict unfolded was the fact that at no time during the 34 days of combat, from the campaign's unplanned start through its eventual halting endgame, were IDF forces able to stem the relentless barrage of short-range Katyusha rockets that Hezbollah militants fired into civilian population centers in northern Israel on a daily basis until the ceasefire finally brought that lethal harassment to an end. In this regard, the confrontation represented the first time that the Israeli homeland had been subjected to continuous enemy bombardment for so long.<sup>3</sup> Beyond that, the war's achievements fell considerably short of what Prime Minister Olmert had promised the Israeli people at the campaign's beginning, namely, a prompt return of the two abducted soldiers and a decisive crushing of Hezbollah as a viable fighting force. Not only did the IDF's lackluster performance adversely affect the long-standing image of Israeli invincibility in the eyes of the Arab world and the West, it reflected manifold and consequential failures in strategy choice at the highest levels of the Israeli government, both uniformed and civilian. Those failures, in turn, prompted a groundswell of postwar recriminations throughout Israeli society in search of culprits to blame. Those reverberations have persisted in Israel to this day, albeit with much-reduced intensity by now, thanks in large part to a considerably more successful subsequent IDF operation in late December 2008 and early January 2009, under different civilian and military leadership, against the terrorist organization Hamas in

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<sup>2</sup>In 2005, the IAF took control of Israel's military space operations, making it formally the Israel Air and Space Arm. In this book, however, it will be referred to for convenience throughout by its more common and familiar descriptor "Air Force" (*Chel Ha'avir* in Hebrew).

<sup>3</sup>The Katyusha, discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four, is an inaccurate unguided 107mm or 122mm rocket with an explosive front end and a range of between 12 and 20 miles. It is essentially the same weapon as that employed en masse by the Soviet Army against the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front during World War II. Hezbollah had an estimated 13,000 or more of them stockpiled in southern Lebanon when the war began.

the Gaza Strip adjacent to southern Israel in response to that organization's increasingly intolerable firing of rockets into Israeli population centers throughout the preceding months. In the judgment of Israeli public opinion, that operation went a long way toward restoring the credibility of Israel's deterrent and the image of its combat prowess that had been diminished by the IDF's less than stellar performance against Hezbollah in Lebanon two and a half years before.

The IDF's Chief of Staff at the time who largely determined the character and course of Israel's counteroffensive against Hezbollah, Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, had previously served as Commander of the IAF. When the crisis erupted, he was, by happenstance, the first airman in Israel's history to occupy the country's top military position.<sup>4</sup> Because his initial response was to rely almost entirely on precision standoff attacks for their hoped-for coercive effects rather than to opt for a concurrent large-scale commitment of IDF troops in close combat against Hezbollah on the ground, the campaign's halting progress and less than decisive outcome—despite a remarkable early success by the IAF against Hezbollah's medium- and long-range rockets—led many to conclude afterward, and in some cases even before the fighting had ended, that because the IDF's chief was an airman, he had naturally succumbed to an inherent belief that the use of air power by itself would somehow suffice in bringing about the war's declared goals.

Furthermore, in a widespread early inference that persists in many quarters to this day, those same observers adjudged that, because Halutz's initial choice of counteroffensive strategy forwent any significant use of ground forces from the campaign's start, the IDF's eventual disappointing performance in the second Lebanon war attested, at bottom, to a "failure of air power." That hasty and unfounded inference ignored the important fact that the IDF's counteroffensive, from its opening moments onward, entailed not only around-the-clock

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<sup>4</sup>To be fair to the facts, Halutz was only the second IAF commander to have been posted as IDF Chief of Staff. The first was Chaim Laskov, who had served as IAF commander from 1951 to 1953. However, Laskov never attended pilot training and was a ground officer by background and upbringing, having commanded Israel's first armored battalion during the War of Independence in 1948. After retiring as IAF commander in 1953, he was brought back into active service and appointed to the position of Chief of Staff in 1958.

strikes by IAF fighters and attack helicopters but also thousands of daily rounds of ground-force artillery and battlefield rockets fired into southern Lebanon against enemy targets, as well as covert hit-and-run raids by Israeli special operations teams into Hezbollah-infested territory. All the same, as a British Royal Air Force officer writing almost a year after the fighting ended observed in commenting on the range of public impressions of the campaign experience to date, the idea that the IDF's flawed performance reflected a simple "failure of air power" rather than an accumulation of larger Israeli leadership sins of omission and commission "appeared at the time to be the most general understanding of this particular campaign within the more thoughtful elements of the media."<sup>5</sup>

In this regard, in one of the first manifestations of that opinion as Israel's combat progress slowed after a week of fighting, a *New York Times* report commenting on the failure of the IDF's standoff attacks to end the continual barrage of incoming Katyusha fire reminded readers of how "recent combat history provides a chastening lesson that air power, regardless of its accuracy and punch, cannot defeat even a conventional adversary unless it is backed by ground forces"—as though any responsible leader of any modern air force the world over would suggest otherwise.<sup>6</sup> Shortly thereafter, another observer likewise cited what he called "the history of perennial overoptimism about air power" and added, in yet another assertion with which no responsible airman anywhere in the world would disagree, that "it is simply impossible to eliminate thousands of small, mobile, hidden, and easily resupplied rockets via an air campaign."<sup>7</sup>

Before long, ever more commentators not normally predisposed to belittle the combat capability of today's tools of air warfare began to be heard giving vent to this gathering refrain. For example, one Israeli

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<sup>5</sup>Group Captain Neville Parton, Royal Air Force (RAF), "Israel's 2006 Campaign in the Lebanon: A Failure of Air Power or a Failure of Doctrine?" *Royal Air Force Air Power Review*, Summer 2007, p. 81.

<sup>6</sup>Thom Shanker, "To Disarm Shadowy Guerrilla Army, Israeli Air Power May Not Be Enough," *New York Times*, July 20, 2006.

<sup>7</sup>Philip H. Gordon, "Air Power Won't Do It," *Washington Post*, July 25, 2006.

journalist opined that the IDF's fitful performance at the end of more than three weeks of fighting had "served to illustrate the limitations of air power" and proved that "air power alone cannot solve the crisis."<sup>8</sup> In a related vein, another Israeli writer declared soon thereafter that "technology has taken a blow in this war." He went on to predict that "the Israeli Air Force is going to come under tremendous criticism" for its failure to negate the Katyusha threat.<sup>9</sup>

This last prediction, which was later shown to have been completely erroneous once the smoke had cleared, was made in evident unawareness of the important fact, as will be documented in detail in the chapters to follow, that the IAF was never tasked in the first place by Israel's military and civilian leaders with the responsibility for countering Hezbollah's daily rocket fire. It was not so tasked because, by the candid admission of its own commander months before the crisis broke, Israel's air arm simply lacked the real-time target-location wherewithal to attack and eliminate small and hidden weapons like Hezbollah's Katyushas to any degree that would make a significant difference in affecting the campaign's outcome. More to the point, the above prediction was also put forward without any apparent awareness, as likewise will be documented in the ensuing chapters, that the Olmert government's most senior civilian and military leaders had entered into the campaign—in a fundamentally ill-advised strategic misjudgment, it turned out—having peremptorily dismissed Hezbollah's short-range rockets as a mere nuisance factor. For that reason, those leaders opted at the outset to forgo any serious attempt to negate them and only awakened to the realization once the campaign was well under way that the continuing rocket fire, in fact, represented a core strategic threat to northern Israel's civilian population and economy.

Notwithstanding all of that, as the IDF's counteroffensive dragged on with seemingly no end in sight, expressions of the ever-widening belief with respect to "failed air power" soon broadened to include outright finger-pointing by some retired Israeli ground-force generals who

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<sup>8</sup>Arie Egozi, "Israeli Air Power Falls Short," *Flight International*, August 1–7, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup>Hillel Frisch, quoted in Molly Moore, "Israelis Confront 'New Kind of War,'" *Washington Post*, August 9, 2006.

scored Halutz for “creating expectations that the air force alone could destroy Hezbollah in the beginning” and, in so doing, having wrongly applied in his choice of strategy the allegedly “narrow tactical mentality of the pilot he once was [and actually still was].”<sup>10</sup> During the first week after the UN-mandated ceasefire went into effect, the respected British weekly news magazine *The Economist* remarked in this vein that “the seductive idea that air power can provide swift victory with light casualties has been around almost as long as the airplane itself.” Yet it went on to declare that “in Lebanon, the Israeli Air Force found itself in the worst of both worlds, killing civilians without achieving military objectives.” In the last resort, it added, the Olmert government was forced to send in ground troops “precisely in order to create the conscious perception of tangible military victory that air power alone had failed to deliver.”<sup>11</sup> In close harmony with this increasingly prevalent view that was beginning to emerge from the campaign experience, an associate of the International Institute of Strategic Studies, in a brief overview of Israel's operations against Hezbollah, wrote that “for all the kerosene expended, air power is not the answer to the problem.” He went on to proclaim that “once again, the idea that air power can be a substitute for military skill on the ground . . . is proving beguiling but illusory.”<sup>12</sup>

To be sure, Israel's defense establishment did not help itself greatly in this respect, either during or after its counteroffensive in Lebanon, by its failure to provide a fuller accounting of the key facts and figures bearing on what was, in fact, a joint combat effort from the earliest moments of the IDF's response to Hezbollah's provocation. The Israeli defense community, most notably its uniformed component, has long been hypercautious by inclination when it comes to disclosing even the most basic facts about the capabilities, techniques, and operating practices of its forces—facts that would be regarded by most Western armed forces as in no way particularly sensitive. Indeed, the closed nature and consequent near-opacity of Israel's armed forces have, until

<sup>10</sup> “The Blame Game,” *The Economist*, August 19, 2006, p. 43.

<sup>11</sup> “An Enduring Illusion,” *The Economist*, August 26, 2006, pp. 20–21.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Brookes, “Air War over Lebanon,” *Air International*, September 2006, p. 23.

recent years, often appeared to rival that of the former Soviet Union. Today, with Israeli society more transparent than ever before, the once heavily shrouded IDF has begun to show increasing signs of opening itself up to outside scrutiny, at least at the margins. All the same, both during and after the campaign, the IDF divulged virtually no details about its force-employment activities that would allow outside observers to produce a reconstructed account of the fighting with any significant degree of operational richness or clear appreciation of what mix of force elements was actually in play at various stages of the fighting.

Nevertheless, a duly informed understanding of the campaign and its essence must recognize and acknowledge that the Olmert government's—and, in particular, General Halutz's—chosen opening move for responding to Hezbollah's provocation on July 12, 2006, was never simplistically an air-only gambit. Rather, it was a deliberate resort to precision standoff attacks that also included heavy IDF ground-force fires from the opening moments in a situation in which not just Halutz and his key subordinates in the General Headquarters, but also his civilian superiors in the Olmert government to a man, were not prepared at the outset to commit to a major push into southern Lebanon on the ground owing to the certainty of high Israeli combat casualties that any such move would inevitably produce. Without question, major errors in situation assessment and strategy choice were made by both Halutz and his civilian masters that were directly responsible for producing the campaign's less than satisfactory outcome for Israel. Those errors will be duly spotlighted in the chapters that follow. Yet what “failed” in this concatenation of poor leadership judgment calls was not Israeli air power. Rather, it was a consequential blend of misfounded military and civilian leadership decisions at the highest level of government with respect to the nature and aims of Israel's opponent, avowed campaign goals that were unachievable through *any* mix of military force that the Israeli people and the international community would likely countenance, the ultimate choice of alternatives for pursuing the campaign's objectives, and the management of public expectations as the counteroffensive unfolded.

The principal aim of this book is to develop and document the above proposition by marshaling the broadest range of evidence deriv-



able from the public record and from in-depth interviews with those IDF principals, from General Halutz on down, who figured most centrally in the planning of Israel's campaign against Hezbollah. Because of its unusually controversial nature, what the Olmert government only later dubbed the second Lebanon war has been the most studied episode in recent Israeli combat experience, and numerous creditable accounts now abound on various aspects of the campaign's conduct.<sup>13</sup> In light of the breadth and quality of that analysis and documentation, it would serve no useful purpose here to venture yet another all-encompassing survey of the war. However, since Israeli *air* operations and what they did or did not contribute to the war's outcome continue to be regarded in many quarters as the root cause of the IDF's less than phenomenal performance, they deserve closer attention than they have thus far received in published assessments of the experience.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Among these accounts, the richest in insider observations and insights is the collection of essays by an assortment of retired IDF generals and other Israeli military-affairs experts compiled in Shlomo Brom and Meir Elran, eds., *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives*, Tel Aviv: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2007. Other notably insightful and well-informed treatments include Major General Isaac Ben-Israel, IAF (Res.), *The First Israel-Hezbollah Missile War*, Tel Aviv: Program for Security Studies, College of Policy and Government, Tel Aviv University, May 2007 (available in Hebrew only); Uri Bar-Joseph, "Israel's Military Intelligence Performance in the Second Lebanon War," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, October 2007; Avi Kober, "The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War: Why the Poor Performance?" *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, February 2008; and David Makovsky and Jeffrey White, *Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizballah War: A Preliminary Assessment*, Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 60, October 2006. Without question the most informed, comprehensive, and thorough reconstruction thus far of both high-level Israeli government decisionmaking and the actual conduct of the war may be found in Amos Har'el and Avi Issacharoff, *34 Days: Israel, Hezbollah, and the War in Lebanon*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

<sup>14</sup>William M. Arkin, *Divining Victory: Air Power in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War*, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air University Press, 2007, is the sole assessment of any significant heft to date that specifically considers the IAF's contribution to the 2006 campaign. That study, however, was an early look that relied mainly on media accounts and on-site inspection of targeted structures in Lebanon, and it dwelled far more on the destructive effects achieved by the IAF's bombing than on the diverse strategic and operational aspects of the war's planning and conduct. It also is uninformed by any input from senior IAF and IDF officers who actually played a first-hand part in the planning and execution of the campaign.

In providing that needed illumination, this book will remain grounded throughout on the premise that the various intimations noted above with respect to how the admitted shortcomings of the initial campaign plan pursued by General Halutz somehow “proved” yet again that air power “cannot win wars by itself” have emanated from a fundamental misunderstanding of modern air doctrine and the beliefs of its most expert practitioners worldwide. As Colin Gray pointed out well over a decade ago, “whether or not air forces can win wars by their own largely unaided action is beside the point. . . . To be recognized as an essential player in conflict, air power does not have to demonstrate that it is able to win wars independently.” On the contrary, he further observed, any suggestion that air power (or, for that matter, *any* other force element) should be “capable of winning wars on its own” entails the application of an “absurd standard that is not useful.”<sup>15</sup> More recently, Gray expanded on this important reminder by declaring categorically that “the debate over air power versus land power is long past its sell-by date.” Rightly calling that increasingly tiresome yet seemingly unending contretemps a “dysfunctional disagreement,” he noted that strategic worldviews that privilege either air power *or* land power merely lend “fuel to a controversy that should be dead and buried. The truth is that the more sophisticated advocates of air power and the more balanced theorists for land power are both correct. The relative importance of air and ground must depend on the situation.”<sup>16</sup>

More to the point as it bears on Israel’s inconclusive counteroffensive against Hezbollah in 2006, Gray also rightly insisted a year after the campaign ended that for air power “to secure strategic results of value, it must serve a national and . . . overall military strategy that are feasible, coherent, and politically sensible. If these basic requirements are not met,” as was demonstrably the case with the manner in which Halutz and his civilian superiors collectively entered into the

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<sup>15</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1996, pp. 58–59.

<sup>16</sup> Colin S. Gray, *The Air Power Advantage in Future Warfare: The Need for Strategy*, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air Force Research Institute, Research Paper 2007-2, December 2007, pp. 2, 5.

IDF's response to Hezbollah's provocation of July 12, 2006, "[then] air power, no matter how impeccably applied tactically and operationally, will be employed as a waste of life, taxes, and, frankly, trust between the sharp end of [a nation's] spear and its shaft. . . . There is a constant danger that much more will be asked and expected of it than it can deliver." More than that, Gray went on to observe, a nation's campaign strategy can be so dysfunctional that it "cannot be rescued from defeat by a dominant air power, no matter how that air power is employed."<sup>17</sup> That dictum is wholly applicable to the IDF's use of air power in conjunction with all of its other force elements that ultimately figured in Operation Change of Direction.

It is not the purpose of this book to chronicle the many circumstances that led to Israel's second Lebanon war to begin with, to review the IDF's campaign in all aspects of its planning and conduct, or to attempt to adjudicate, let alone apportion credit or blame for, the ultimate rights and wrongs of the many decisions that were made, for better and for worse, by Israel's most senior civilian and military leaders. Instead, the book simply seeks to present a fact-based account of the intended role of Israel's air arm in the campaign, with a view toward clarifying how it did and did not figure in the many identifiable shortcomings in the ultimate planning and conduct of Operation Change of Direction. Toward that end, the ensuing assessment first reviews the IAF's actual combat performance throughout the 34-day counteroffensive. It then considers, in the fullest possible detail, what successes it registered and what problems it encountered from the campaign's start to end. After that largely descriptive parsing of Israeli air operations during the campaign, the book then turns to a synopsis of the main findings arrived at by the Winograd Commission that was convened by Prime Minister Olmert in the early aftermath of the campaign to determine what lay at the heart of its disappointing results.<sup>18</sup> It next offers a less comprehensive but still thorough operational overview of the more successful 23-day campaign by the IDF against

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<sup>17</sup> Gray, *The Air Power Advantage in Future Warfare*, pp. 15, 18, 20.

<sup>18</sup> The Winograd Commission was named for its appointed chairman, Judge Eliahu Winograd, a retired president of the Tel Aviv District Court.

Hamas in the Gaza Strip in late December 2008 and early January 2009 that reflected the many lessons that the IDF learned and assimilated to improve its combat repertoire following its after-action assessment of the many problems encountered during its earlier experience in Lebanon. Finally, the book clarifies what assurances were offered with respect to what the IAF could usefully contribute to the joint conduct of Operation Change of Direction, what precautionary notes were aired before the campaign's start with respect to what the IAF could *not* be expected to deliver by way of desired results, what larger considerations ultimately lay at the root of the IDF's flawed performance in Israel's second Lebanon war, and how one should now understand that experience in light of all that has transpired in Israel's security situation during the ensuing years.

