

# The War of Fools

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**A** FEW DAYS AGO, Israeli TV Channel 10 broadcast an investigative story about the 2006 Israeli attack on Lebanon, known as “Lebanon War II”.

Though not very profound, it provided a good picture of what actually happened. The three main Israeli protagonists talked freely.

The picture was very disturbing, to say the least. One could say that it was alarming.

The main conclusion is that all our leaders at the time behaved with blatant irresponsibility, combined with stupidity.

TO RECAPITULATE: Lebanon II lasted 34 days, from July 7 to August 14, 2006.

It was provoked by a border incident: Hezbollah forces in South Lebanon crossed the border and attacked a routine Israel patrol. The aim was to capture Israeli soldiers in order to effect a prisoner exchange—the only way to get the Israeli government to release Arab prisoners.

In the attack, two Israeli soldiers were dragged to Lebanese territory. All the others were killed. We were told that the captives were assumed to be alive. The film shows that the army command knew immediately that at least one of the captives was dead, and the second was assumed to have died, too. In fact, both were killed in the action.

The usual reaction to such an incident is a retaliatory strike “to restore deterrence”, such as the bombing or shelling of a Hezbollah base or a Lebanese village. Not this time. The Israeli cabinet started a war.

Why?

The TV story does not provide a convincing answer. The decision was taken at once, after a minimum of deliberations. One gets the feeling that emotions and personal ambitions played a major role.

THE TV investigation consists almost exclusively of the testimonies of the three persons who actually took the decision and conducted the war.

The first was the Prime Minister. Ehud Olmert had arrived at his office only a few months earlier, almost by accident. He had been the Deputy Prime Minister under Ariel Sharon, who had given him this empty title as compensation for not giving him a serious ministry. When Sharon suddenly fell into a permanent coma, Olmert adroitly managed to succeed him.

Throughout his adult life, Olmert had been a political functionary, being loyal to nobody, jumping from party to party and from patron to patron, from the Knesset to the Jerusalem municipality and back, until he achieved his lifetime's ambition: the Prime Minister's office.

Throughout, he had not gathered any military experience at all. He had shirked real army service, and in the end he did some shortened service in the army's judicial department.

The Defense Minister, Amir Peretz, had even less military

experience. A labor activist by profession, the former Secretary General of the giant Histadrut trade union, he became the leader of the Labor Party. When his party joined Olmert's new government, Peretz could choose a ministry and took the most prestigious one: Defense.

This combination of two government leaders without any military qualifications is unusual in Israel, a country perpetually at war. The entire country laughed when Peretz was caught by a photographer at an army exercise following the action through binoculars with the lens caps still on.

The third person in the fateful trio, the Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, was supposed to make up for the military deficiencies of his two civilian superiors. He was a professional soldier, an officer in good standing. But, alas, he was an Air force general, a former combat pilot, who had never handled ground troops.

In Israel, all previous Chiefs of Staff had come from the land forces, had been experienced infantry or tank commanders. The appointment of Halutz to this post was highly unusual. Bad tongues insinuated that the former Defense Minister, a person of Jewish-Iranian origin, had preferred Halutz because his father was also an immigrant from Iran.

Be that as it may, the Chief of Staff, less than a year in office, had no qualifications for leading a force on the ground.

It thus happened that the three leaders of Lebanon War II were new in office, quite inexperienced in directing a ground war. Two of the three had no experience whatsoever in military matters.

The Chief of Staff had another misfortune. It appeared later that a few hours after the decision to go to war, and before the first shot was fired, he had instructed his broker to sell his shares. In the TV story he argued that he had meant to give the instruction some days earlier, when no one dreamed of a war, and that for some technical reason there had been a delay. But like Peretz' photo with the capped binoculars, Halutz' affair with the shares cast a shadow over both.

Olmert, of course, has in the meantime been convicted of taking bribes and diverse other crimes and sentenced to prison, pending appeal.

LEBANON WAR II was preceded 24 years earlier by Lebanon War I, which was led by Defense Minister Ariel Sharon under the auspices of Menachem Begin.

At the time, the purpose was to destroy the Palestinian bases in South Lebanon. There was a definite war aim, a clear operational plan and efficient, military and political leadership. It ended, of course, in disaster, when the Sabra-Shatila massacre shocked the world.

In the wake of the atrocity, a Commission of Inquiry was set up and Sharon was dismissed from the Ministry of Defense (but not from the government). Military commanders were punished.

In spite of this, in Israel the campaign was considered a

brilliant military achievement. Only a few realized that it was a military shambles: on the eastern front, opposite Syria, no Israeli unit reached its prescribed objective, while on the western front the Israeli troops reached Beirut only after the prescribed time, and only by breaking the UN-imposed cease-fire. (It was then that I met Yasser Arafat in the besieged western part of the city.)

Lebanon I had one unforeseen and, lasting effect. The Palestinian troops were indeed removed from the country and relocated in Tunis (where Arafat continued to conduct the fight until the Oslo agreement), but instead of the Palestinian threat another, much worse threat grew in Lebanon. The Shiite population, until then an ally of Israel, became a deadly and very efficient enemy. Hezbollah ("Party of Allah") grew into a potent political and military force, which eventually led to Lebanon War II.

YET LEBANON War I was a strategic masterpiece compared to Lebanon War II.

In Lebanon II there was no operational plan at all. Nor was there a clear war aim—a requisite for any successful military operation.

The war started with a massive bombardment of civilian as well as military targets, power stations, roads and villages, the fulfillment of an Air Force general's dream. Decision were taken and revoked, operations started and cancelled. Targets were bombed and destroyed without any purpose, except to terrorize the civilian population and "burn into their consciousness" the lesson that it was not worthwhile to provoke Israel.

Hezbollah reacted by terrorizing Israeli towns and villages with missiles. On both sides, casualties and destruction mounted. South and Central Lebanon suffered, of course, the most.

When Hezbollah did not capitulate, pressure in Israel mounted for a ground attack. It led next to nowhere. After the UN decreed a cease-fire, the Israeli leadership decided to make a last effort and launched a ground attack after the deadline. 34 Israeli soldiers were killed for nothing.

A large part of the operation was carried out by reserve soldiers, who were hastily called up. When the reservists arrived at their bases, they found the permanent emergency stores empty of many essential war materials. Being uniformed civilians, they complained loudly. Clearly, the army command had neglected

the stores for years. The same with training—many reserve troops had not been through their annual training exercises for years.

When the fire eventually stopped, the achievements of the Israeli army amounted to nothing. A few Lebanese villages right next to the border were conquered, and had to be left again.

THIS TIME, the failures could not be covered up. A civilian Commission of Inquiry was set up. It condemned the leadership. Peretz and Halutz had to resign, Olmert was indicted for corruption soon after and had to resign, too.

From the Israeli government's point of view, Lebanon II did yield some achievements.

Since then until now the Lebanon-Israel border has been comparatively quiet. If there had been any discernible war aim at all, it was to terrorize the Lebanese civilian population by widespread destruction and killing. This was indeed achieved. Hassan Nasrallah, the outstanding Hezbollah leader (who was appointed after his much less able predecessor was "eliminated" by the Israeli army in a "targeted killing") publicly admitted with unusual candor that he would not have ordered the prisoner-taking action if he had foreseen that it would result in a war.

However, listening to the three Israeli leaders in the TV stories, one is struck by the glaring incompetence of all three. They started a war in which hundreds of Israelis and Lebanese were killed and houses destroyed without a valid reason, conducted a war without a clear plan, took decisions without the necessary knowledge. Speaking on TV, they showed very little respect for each other.

An Israeli, listening to these testimonies, is compelled to ask himself or herself: is this true for all our wars, past and future? Has this only been covered up until now by censorship and silent agreement?

And the much larger question: has this not been true for most wars in history, from ancient Egypt and Greece until now? We know already that World War I, with its millions of victims, was ignited by political idiots and conducted by military incompetents.

Is humanity condemned to suffer this forever? Is this all that we Israelis can look forward to, another few wars conducted by the same kind of politicians and generals?