

30 YEARS AFTER SABRA AND CHATILA, A TALE OF DUALITY AND DISASTER

By Amir Oren | Sep.15, 2012 Haaretz

A new IDF report reveals a substantial gap between the army's goals in the First Lebanon War and how they were carried out on the ground.

Thirty years ago today, on September 16, 1982, the massacre in Sabra and Chatila began. Like now, it was the week of Rosh Hashanah, and if Yom Kippur will forever be synonymous for some people with the war of October 1973, then Rosh Hashanah 1982 was the height of madness of the first Lebanon War.

The official history of that war has not yet been written. The government commission of inquiry into it, headed by then Supreme Court President Yitzhak Kahan, focused its attentions on Sabra and Chatila. Under its purview, the commission also investigated Israel's links with the Christian Phalange faction throughout the years leading up to the war, during the three months of battle and the critical days of that September, from the assassination of Bashir Gemeyal to the Israel Defense Force's entry into West Beirut, culminating in the massacre. The war as a whole, however, was not within the commission's mandate.

The majority of confidential archival material related to the Lebanon war still remains in the sealed vaults of the IDF, but decisions on what is or is not sensitive are usually not made by the army's history department. In this case, the heightened sensitivity does not stem from the confidentiality of sources of information or from the right to privacy. Here, the decision makers were politicians, mainly Ariel Sharon. That is why publication of the Israeli army's historical research on 1973 has been delayed so long.

Only now are we discerning the first show of courage by the IDF, in the form of a recent willingness to confront the problematic role played by Sharon in the Lebanon War. There has, for example, been no effort to suppress a little booklet of 50 pages, published in 2008 within the confines of the IDF, entitled "Objectives of the War and Their Attainment: Planning and Execution of the Peace for Galilee War, as a Model Case." The booklet, by Lieut. Col. (res.) Shimon Golan, who heads the army's strategic-level research branch, has been distributed to higher-ranking IDF officers and officers enrolled in the army's colleges, but not to the public. It describes from the IDF angle exactly how Defense Minister Ariel Sharon "spoiled" the war.

It seems that, past or present, the matter of relations between the political echelon (cabinet, ministerial committees, prime minister, defense minister) and the military echelon (chief of staff, Military Intelligence head, commanders of branches, regional command generals), is always germane. At this very moment, it hovers over the debates on Iran, over the state comptroller's report on relations between Defense Minister Ehud Barak and former Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi (and Barak's relations with the government in the abortive attempt to appoint Maj. Gen. Yoav Galant as chief of staff). But more than anything else this issue hovers over Barak's insistence on formulating a binding directive that will regulate those same relations – an "order of the supreme command," stipulating that the definitive authority over the army would be the defense minister alone,

acting on the basis of the General Staff's recommendation, and not the entire government of Israel, even though the law defines the latter as the supreme commander of the IDF.

The power of power

The power to exercise power is a principal asset of the state, in terms both of how it is used with respect to the outside world, and vis-a-vis citizens and organizations within it. But who exactly has the authority to exercise power? Several serious crises have sprung up in Israel precisely over this point. Back in 1954, Defense Minister Pinhas Lavon, Military Intelligence head Binyamin Gibli and their respective backers grappled over the question of "who will give the order," although there is no doubt whatsoever who did not give the order – Prime Minister Moshe Sharett – who, along with his ministers, had no idea what the defense minister, the MI head and the chief of staff, Moshe Dayan, were plotting behind his back.

Partly for this reason the study carried out by Dr. Golan is so important. Golan, who, as noted, heads the IDF's strategic-level research branch, studied the functioning of the army's supreme command in the Lebanon War. His efforts comprise yet another link in the chain of research he has already carried out on how the supreme command functioned in the Six-Day War (the public version of which, "A Three-Front War," was published in 2007) and in the Yom Kippur War (a three-volume history is scheduled to be published next year, marking the 40th anniversary of the war).

The short book "Objectives of the War and Their Attainment" offers a sampling of a more comprehensive study. As Prof. Alon Kadish, head of the army's history department, states in the foreword: "It is a test case that addresses the problem of congruence between objectives and planning, and execution and results." The executive summary of the booklet refers to "a lack of congruence, which derived from the manner in which the objectives were defined by the political rank and how they were translated for the military rank into missions."

The question in Lebanon was not, "who will give the order," but "who changed the order" given by the echelons authorized to do so – the cabinet on the one side and the General Staff on the other – in such a way that it disrupted the execution of the war, cost numerous lives and entangled the country in a complex morass.

Kadish: "Since the goals that needed to be met were not defined by the political echelon on the basis of an accurate and realistic analysis, and were not formulated concisely and clearly, the military missions that derived from them – even when they were attained – had highly limited value vis-a-vis the political and strategic situation faced by Israel."

The various schools of thought among the war's supporters differed on questions concerning the order of priorities when it came to contending with the PLO and with Syria, on the one hand, and establishing a friendly administration in Lebanon, on the other.

Two different missions

Ariel Sharon was appointed defense minister in Menachem Begin's second government, in the summer of 1981. In late October, seven months before the war began, Sharon defined to the IDF, as an initial and primary target for execution,

the destruction of the armed Palestinian organizations in Lebanon, “both their political and their military arms.” A second objective was gaining the withdrawal of Syrian forces from the southern Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, and from the region between Beirut and Zahle. Only at the bottom of the list did Sharon define the objective of “an absolute termination of attacks against settlements in Israel from Lebanese territory.”

According to the history department, Chief of Staff Rafael “Rafal” Eitan modified the priorities and the formulations the following month, when he translated these political objectives into military missions. For Eitan, the most important mission was “prevention of the shelling of northern Israeli settlements, and of hostile terrorist activity.” The military significance of that mission, the historians say, are obvious: “conquering and mopping up of the territory.” With respect to Israel’s mission against the Syrians, the chief of staff adopted “a vague, minimal definition; a formulation from which it is not possible to clearly deduce the requisite military steps that need to be taken, a vagueness that can give the impression that the objective may possibly be attained through maneuvers and threats against the Syrian army, without a frontal clash.”

The contradiction between the objectives of Ariel Sharon and the stated missions of Rafael Eitan created “two simultaneous or phased operations, in two regions that partially overlap. The primary target was the terrorists, yes, but the most serious threat was the Syrian army, which therefore required the allocation of more forces and resources.”

Sharon had another political objective: “The establishment of a legal government in Lebanon that would be part of the free world and would live in peace with Israel.” The (belated) criticism of the IDF: “This was an objective that was not possible to translate simply and clearly into a military mission, for which no fundamental and deep analysis of the political situation in Lebanon had been carried out in advance; nor had a complete plan of action been drafted that would have defined the requisite military moves that would have secured a political achievement.”

Although the analysis neither attributes this objective to superficial thinking or, alternative, to a cunning masking of true motives, it does assert that, “the lack of clarity in the order of priorities and in the definition of objectives by the political ranks created great confusion in the army, as reflected in a discussion held by IDF generals on May 13, 1982, at which, it emerged, each participant understood what was said differently than did the others.”

In a meeting between Sharon and army commanders in May, he explained that the intent was to destroy headquarters in Beirut, not occupy the city. Beirut was “mentioned as a secondary military target, pure and simple. This was also the case at the cabinet meeting on June 5, in which Sharon made it clear that Beirut was not a target in the operation. For his part, Begin described the city’s conquest as an open question that would be discussed if and when the need arose. In the absence of any references to the strategic, political and diplomatic significance of encircling Beirut and its access routes – in terms of the IDF, the city remained a solely military target, in which the considerations taken into account vis-a-vis its conquest were military ones.”

‘From a Good Family’

The IDF estimated that it would accomplish all of its missions within four to five days. Eitan's planners were thinking along these lines as early as the fall of 1979, when Ezer Weizman was defense minister, at which time the primary plan was called "From a Good Family."

In early 1980, in light of a different and expanded Syrian deployment in Lebanon, a new plan was drafted, called "Reciprocal Law." On the eve of the June 1981 election in Israel – against the background of heightened Israeli involvement in assisting the Christians against the Syrians, who wielded much power and influence in Lebanon, the feeling of impending escalation grew more palpable. War was considered certain. Only one small detail was unclear: "The defense establishment assumed that there would be no choice but military action in Lebanon; the only question was against whom," writes Shimon Golan.

In order to flesh out the possible candidates, a war game called "Summit Air" was held. The chief of staff, who reviewed the exercise, reportedly said: "The IDF's primary aim in Lebanon is to gain the freedom to act against the terrorists. The secondary objective is to reduce pressure on the Christians, without fighting on their behalf. If there is no intent to fight against the Syrians, then we cannot realistically consider removing them from Lebanon."

Despite his pugnacious image, Eitan aspired to defeat the PLO more than he wished to clash with Syria. His IDF ally, who like him had fought against the Syrians in the Golan in 1973, was the head of Northern Command, Avigdor "Yanush" Ben-Gal. Back in the 1981 election campaign, Begin had warned Syrian President Hafez Assad that "Rafal and Yanush are ready." However, after Sharon's arrival at the Ministry of Defense, Ben-Gal was reassigned from the north, so that another general – Amir Drori – would command the front or, as with the Southern Command before 1973, he would in effect become the operations officer for the "real" military leader, Sharon.

In November 1981, Drori suggested a new scheme: to move ahead with the planning of an operation code-named "Small Pines." On March 7, 1982, he presented the main points of the operational plan, to be implemented in the event of the IDF going to war on short notice – that is, in less than 24 hours, which was the amount of time needed to amass forces. In early May, the Northern Command explained that "Small Pines" was actually the first stage of "Pines" – a plan for silencing artillery fire targeting Israel's northern settlements by means of the forces deployed in the north, and subsequent continuation of the operation on the basis of the initial "Little Pines" scheme.

The objective of "Pines," as the General Staff saw it in April 1982, was "to destroy terrorists and infrastructures up to the Awali line within 24 hours, link up with the Christians in the Beirut region within 48 hours, conquer Beirut within 96 hours and be on the alert to destroy the Syrian army in the Bekaa."

The intent, per Drori: "The Northern Command would occupy South Lebanon up to the Awali River line, destroy terrorists and their infrastructure, prevent artillery fire at our settlements, and complete the 'Pines' operation, including the amassing of forces."

In parallel, the IDF planned an operation ("Citrus Fruits") to land its forces in the Christian region north of Beirut, but the Christians were opposed to the simultaneous execution of "Pines" and "Citrus Fruits." In the eastern sector, the

plan was altered in favor of an attacking line further to the rear, and the proposed landings were canceled, “out of a desire to avoid an early clash with the Syrians.” At a meeting with commanders in May, Sharon spoke of two main objectives, each of them with two parts: objectives for which Israel would go to war (stopping the shelling on Galilee settlements, and “liquidation of the terrorist problem”), and those for which Israel would not go to war due to expected condemnations, both from home and abroad (withdrawal of the Syrians from Lebanon, and formation of a Lebanese government that would live in peace with Israel). Nonetheless, Sharon went on to say that the IDF, in going to war to attain the first main objective, would also be asked to attain the other, for two reasons: “One, based on past experience, we don’t go to war that often, and if the IDF is already going to war, it has to achieve all of its objectives. Two, the problems are intertwined, and every action against the terrorists will also lead to warfare against the Syrians.”

To liquidate the terrorists, continued Sharon, we have to reach Beirut and destroy the command posts there, and if the IDF is in Beirut, then it will have “an opportunity to act in order to form a Lebanese administration that is well disposed to Israel.”

Out of the picture

In presenting the operational plan to the government – the name of which was eventually changed from “Pines” to “Peace for the Galilee” – Sharon said, according to the history department: “We are talking about an operation that will mean advancing about 40 kilometers inside [Lebanon].” According to the Golan booklet, in answer to the question “Where is Beirut in this operational picture?” Sharon responded that it was outside the picture. Based on what was authorized at that cabinet meeting, Operation Peace for the Galilee was not meant to conquer Beirut, only to push the terrorists beyond rocket and artillery range. Today, that means a range of 40 kilometers.” In the IDF study, these quotes are highlighted. The word “today” appears in boldface, in order to place greater emphasis on what Sharon was saying.

Begin promised that “the government will constantly keep its finger on the pulse. As of now, the intent is to push the terrorists beyond the 40-kilometer range. As for what happens next, the cabinet will convene and decide. The question of Beirut remains open; if there is a need to conquer it, then the cabinet will decide on it. Nothing will happen in and of itself.”

The next morning, Sharon told the division commanders that replacement of the regime in Lebanon and removal of the Syrians were not the objectives; these would be “side effects,” at best. The territorial depth to which the Israeli forces would advance would not be as had been declared, he reportedly said: “I want to speak openly here; after all, we are talking with people who will be fighting in another few hours. I do not believe that, once we arrive at the 40-kilometer line, the shooting will end there. I don’t believe that will happen.” Therefore, the forces would continue beyond that point.

The IDF, according to “Objectives of the War”, was embittered by the fact that the movement of, and the attacks by, the divisions of the Northern Command were planned in accordance with the official approach – of avoiding a clash with the Syrians – whereas Sharon’s directives reflected the opposite of this position,

to wit: “preparation of the operational and conscious background for warfare against Syrian forces in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley.”

The preparation at times leapfrogged over the divisions: Ben-Gal, the commander of the corps in the eastern sector, was not informed in advance of the intention to attack Syrian ground-to-air missiles. The IDF historians conclude: “As Sharon was aware of the cabinet’s concerns regarding a clash with the Syrians, he gradually ‘accustomed’ the ministers to the necessity of this clash.” He “held to the cabinet decision” that forbade the IDF to attack Syrian forces, “but a few hours later ordered that they be attacked, and persuaded the cabinet that there was no other choice than to do so.”

The IDF terms this double-talk “duality in defining the mission.” This same duality caused a delay in the movement of forces, affected the pace of the warfare in the eastern sector, and “created a need to set up improvised teams of forces, whose commanders had not previously planned the missions that were assigned to them.

In disregarding the high cost of the war and its hundreds of casualties (including several dozen men killed by friendly fire), the IDF study sought to examine – at three specific points in time – whether the objectives defined by Sharon had been attained: “The answer, in early September 1982, was positive: The settlements of the Galilee were now beyond striking range, Syrian forces had been withdrawn, the majority of terrorists, along with their headquarters, were banished from Lebanon, and a Lebanese government with links to Israel was about to form.”

Two weeks later, the picture had reversed itself in light of Gemeyal’s assassination, Sabra and Chatila, withdrawal, the Syrians’ return as a decisive factor, and the rise of Hezbollah, partly due to “Israel’s control of southern Lebanon.”

From the contemporary perspective, Hezbollah has usurped the PLO as the group that threatens Israel from within Lebanon, the Syrians are once again a decisive factor and the government of Lebanon does not live at peace with Israel. The study concludes: Although it was one of Israel’s most highly planned and drilled wars, and one that it initiated, there was in the Lebanon war a “substantial gap between the plan and the execution.” The main culprit for this was not the chief of staff, but the minister of defense.

“What is preventing us from carrying out now what we agreed to last night? The Syrians are moving and everyone is moving; the only ones capable of immediately [attaining their target] but who are not moving is us, only us,” grumbled Sharon in “a verbal exchange,” as the study describes it, that took place at the Northern Command early on June 7, the second day of the war.

“What has prevented the advance of our forces is authorization,” responded Drori, the head of the Northern Command. “What has held us back is the orders.”

Without consulting with the cabinet, Sharon replied, “So the first thing, then, is to give them an order to move.”