
General Disarray

Ofer Shelah and Yoav Limor

**Captives in Lebanon: The Truth
About the Second Lebanon War**

Yediot Books, 2007,

437 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Yagil Henkin

A year has passed since the end of the Second Lebanon War, and the upheaval it set off within Israel has yet to subside. Most Israelis see the military campaign that took place in southern Lebanon during July and August 2006 as, in no uncertain terms, a bitter failure. The efforts of Israel's military and political leaders, headed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, to portray the war as an impressive security accomplishment as well as their claims that Israel in fact "won on points," as former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff Dan Halutz claims, have not been accepted by the general public. Israelis have learned the hard way that, at least as far as the Second Lebanon War is concerned, Henry Kissinger was right when he said: "The guerilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional

army loses if it does not win." The gap between the public's expectations and what actually took place has left everyone asking the same disturbing question: How could this happen?

Ofer Shelah, an industrious journalist whose work has touched on everything from sports to statesmanship, and Yoav Limor, military correspondent for Israeli television's Channel 1, have set out to answer this question in their recently published book *Captives in Lebanon*. In the introduction, they declare that "despite the fact that this war received the most media coverage in the history of Israel, despite the open airwaves and special radio reports, and despite the IDF's openness, it was clear to us that there was much more to uncover. It was the rough, gut feeling of people who covered the war, each from his own position, and came to understand that something had gone profoundly wrong, the roots of which must be investigated." Shelah's and Limor's journey into this difficult territory has apparently yielded the hoped-for results; the book's subtitle, *The Truth About the Second Lebanon War*, indicates the authors' belief that

they have achieved the ambitious objective they set for themselves.

One must admit that this belief is not entirely baseless. *Captives in Lebanon* is an impressive journalistic feat. Only a few months after the end of the fighting, Shelah and Limor succeeded in publishing a coherent and comprehensive analysis of the military operation, partially based on documents they acquired but mostly derived from scores of interviews they conducted with high-ranking military, security, and government officials. Thanks to the wealth of information the book presents and the authors' skillful prose, *Captives in Lebanon* offers a fascinating, if depressing, reading experience.

Shelah and Limor attempt to penetrate what they call the "heart of darkness of Israeli decision making." According to the authors, the outcome of the war was not the result of Israel's isolated powerlessness, but rather the result of an extensive series of failures stemming from "a long-term dysfunctional relationship between the political and military echelons; the harsh effects of the IDF's ongoing operations in the territories; and the deficiencies of the Israeli government," in addition to the numerous failures of "leaders who have disproportionately blundered."

The list of those responsible for these failures is topped, naturally, by

Olmert, former defense minister Amir Peretz, and Halutz. According to the authors, the prime minister and the defense minister blindly followed an arrogant chief of staff, ignored the advice of experienced professionals, set unrealistic goals, and hurried into a war without considering the weakness of the available forces or the resources and determination of the enemy. Regarding Olmert, the authors write that "in practice, the unhealthy atmosphere he fostered, combined with his inexperience, haphazardness, and desire to reach a decision at any cost led him to a series of flawed decisions, many of them contrary to his original stance." Peretz was a defense minister "without professional knowledge," suspicious and hesitant, who functioned more as a "committee representative" of the defense establishment than as its leader. Finally, Halutz "treated the position of IDF chief of staff as 'chairman of the board of directors of the army' and "managed the general staff—many major-generals felt—as if looking upon events with an Olympian detachment." Halutz's hubris and his obstinate refusal to admit his mistakes only increased the destructive consequences of his most serious weakness, namely his adherence to bad ideas about the function and future of the army.

These concepts, stress Shelah and Limor, did not spring fully formed out of Halutz's fevered mind. They

took root in the IDF psyche well before his time, as a result of “the ongoing consequences of twenty years in which the army was primarily occupied with the West Bank, especially the six years of the second Intifada.” This continuing state of low-level conflict has resulted in a critical lack of training and left the reserve component of the IDF badly neglected.

In the years preceding the Second Lebanon War, the deterioration of the army was evident in the increasing debasement of its language. New combat doctrines, presented in publications issued by various strategic forums, were characterized by a “new jargon, which to foreign ears—and to others as well—sounded like a heap of idioms attempting, with difficulty, to form a sentence.” This neologistic lexicon managed to confound the thinking of the commanding ranks of the IDF and contributed to confusion and embarrassment on the battlefield. No wonder that one of the main lessons learned from the war was the need to return to a clear and simple military language—and as soon as possible.

Under these circumstances, the authors claim, with the absence of political wisdom on one hand and a deterioration of military capabilities on the other, failure was almost unavoidable.

Captives in Lebanon succeeds in presenting a comprehensive description of the war, weaving the small and

disturbing details into a larger, highly disturbing picture. Nevertheless, *Captives in Lebanon* suffers from several serious flaws. Among them is Shelah’s and Limor’s eagerness to accuse and convict certain personalities who have, so it seems, been selected in advance. At times, the book reads like more of a crusade than an attempt to illuminate the truth, and to such an extent, in fact, that it may disconcert even those who passionately believe in the incompetence of the politicians and commanders who led the military campaign last summer.

This kind of bias is evident, for example, in the portrayal of Amir Peretz. The book recreates conversations between Peretz and various ministers and Knesset members, such as Shaul Mofaz and Ami Ayalon, in order to show Peretz as amateurish and at times ridiculous. But without Peretz’s version of these events, the reader cannot feel particularly confident in the accuracy of the portrayal. In contrast, the authors portray Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni as a fortress of wisdom and good judgment, a depiction that also appears to depend on one-sided and self-interested sources. After all, Livni’s own testimony to the Winograd Commission reveals a different, less flattering picture of her conduct.

No less problematic is Shelah and Limor’s insistence on blaming military activity in the West Bank

for the army's weakness. There is no doubt that the Lebanon War revealed serious problems in the military, but it is misleading to locate the origin of these failures in the IDF's operations in the West Bank. In fact, the deterioration of the IDF reserves began prior to the second Intifada. A good example of this can be found as early as 1999, when the army refused to distribute a combat doctrine manual issued by the headquarters of infantry and paratroops command. According to Colonel (res.) Geva Rapp, who was responsible for the book, one of the motives behind the ban was its "exaggerated" emphasis on "traditional" methods of fighting, which do not suit the army in times of peace.

Despite the many important revelations it presents, the follies of *Captives in Lebanon* prevent it from being, as its authors hope, "the truth about the Second Lebanon War." Yet, to its credit, the work does give us—if unintentionally—an insider's view into something no less disturbing: How the Israeli political and defense hierarchy behaves after a military failure; how the members of this hierarchy sink into recriminations, denial of accountability, and personal grudges and paybacks; how, without doubt or hesitation, they are willing to leak operational orders,

confidential military documents, and records of government meetings, all for the sole purpose of clearing themselves of responsibility, even if such disclosures ultimately benefit Israel's enemies.

Obviously, one cannot address such complaints towards Shelah and Limor, who have for the most part conducted their task faithfully and whose book has been approved by military censorship. But the mere fact that they managed to put their hands on such an abundance of information, with the cooperation of so many sources, testifies to the fact that the political leadership and the military command's gradual corruption can be understood not only through their conduct prior to and during the war, but also through their behavior after the war. It must be regretfully admitted: If *Captives in Lebanon* holds a mirror up to Israel's leaders, the reflected image should worry us all.

Yağil Henkin is a graduate research fellow at the Shalem Center and a doctoral student in military history at Bar-Ilan University. He is the author of Un-Guerilla Warfare: The History of the First Chechen War, 1994-1996, published by the Ministry of Defense in 2007 [Hebrew]. His last contribution to AZURE was "How Great Nations Can Win Small Wars" (AZURE 24, Spring 2006).