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## ESMT Case Study

# Aharai: Leading in front of the lines

Jan Hagen

### Introduction<sup>a</sup>

On July 12, 2006, two Israeli military vehicles were ambushed while on a patrol on the Israeli border to Lebanon. Three soldiers were killed, three others wounded, and two were abducted by Hezbollah. In an effort to free the two kidnapped soldiers, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) immediately deployed tanks across the Lebanese border. Soon thereafter, one tank was struck by a massive roadside bomb, killing all four crew members. Another soldier subsequently died in a fire exchange with Hezbollah soldiers. With eight dead soldiers, this was the highest death toll in a single day since the fight against Hezbollah had begun in 1997.

The Israeli government swiftly declared the abduction an act of war by Lebanon and ordered massive air strikes throughout Lebanon to achieve the release of the two kidnapped soldiers, even though the Lebanese government had no control over Hezbollah and its activities in southern Lebanon. Meanwhile, Hezbollah started to fire rockets and missiles from multiple positions in southern Lebanon into Israel. Soon, civil casualties began to mount on both sides of the border. Whereas the Israeli Air Force operated without any problems in Lebanese air space, the initial Israeli ground operations proved much more difficult than expected. The Hezbollah

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*Aharai* is Hebrew and means "follow me."

<sup>a</sup> Please note that the introduction only provides the historical context for the case. The case is not concerned with combat situations. The introduction is based on a US Government report prepared by Glenn, R.W. (2012). *All glory is fleeting: Insights from the Second Lebanon War*. RAND National Defense Research Institute. MG-708-1-JFCOM.

This case study was prepared by Jan Hagen of ESMT European School of Management and Technology. Sole responsibility for the content rests with the author. It is intended to be used as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. This case was made possible by the co-operation of an organization that wishes to remain anonymous. All names in the case have been changed by the author to protect the individuals, but they are known to the author.

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fighters were well prepared for ground attacks and operated in a much more coordinated way than anticipated by the IDF, who had relied on asymmetric and decentralized guerrilla tactics.

After two weeks of heavy air bombardment, Hezbollah was still able to continuously fire rockets into northern Israel. Therefore, the Israeli government decided to start a major ground offensive into southern Lebanon to engage Hezbollah directly and clear the area of rocket launch sites. Between July 28 and July 31, 2006, approximately 15,000 IDF reservists were mobilized to take and control the area from the Israeli border up to the Litani River (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The area of southern Lebanon up to the Litani River



Source: United States. Central Intelligence Agency (1986). *Southern Lebanon border area*. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C. 20540-4650 USA dcu.

## The mobilization

On August 7, 2006, Cpt. Nir Levy, 28 years old, received the order to report to his unit. Levy had left the army as an active officer in 2000 after having served since 1996. He had studied to become a teacher but still served in the IDF as a reservist, just like most Israeli citizens. Within his brigade, Levy commanded a special services platoon consisting of 16 soldiers who - like him - were reservists. They had very different professional backgrounds, among which were lawyer,

musician, policeman, entrepreneur as well as several students. The oldest was 38 years old and the youngest 22 years old. They knew each other quite well, as most of them had trained as a unit for many years. After having been briefed by his commanding officer, Levy prepared his men for crossing the Lebanese border and the hostile environment they would have to face.

## **The adversary**

Hezbollah, a Shiite political and military organization in Lebanon, was strongly supported both by Iran and Syria. One of its stated goals was the destruction of the state of Israel. Under its charismatic leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah followed a dual strategy. As a political party, it was part of the Lebanese parliament. However, its military wing operated outside of the government and controlled almost the entire southern area of Lebanon. Its soldiers were well trained and armed. Before the incidents in 2006, they occasionally launched raids as well as rocket attacks against Israel. Hezbollah expected military reactions from Israel in response to its provocations and prepared for these with stockpiles of ammunition and explosives that were planted along southern Lebanese roads leading north.<sup>b</sup>

## **The mission**

On August 11, Cpt. Levy received the order to lead one of three platoons into southern Lebanon to open up a path for the brigade that would follow them and secure the area. In the evening, he briefed his platoon and prepared for moving across the border the following day. However, two of his soldiers were obviously too unfit to take part in the mission: one was physically weak and the other too nervous to proceed with necessary caution and skill. Levy decided to leave both men in Israel and continue with the smaller group. As a result, they had to shoulder the equipment from the two discharged soldiers in addition to their own heavy fighting gear, weapons, ammunition, and radios.

During the next days, along with other IDF units, Levy's platoon entered Lebanon. Despite having just 14 soldiers, they cleared the path for their brigade by identifying Hezbollah positions and detecting improvised explosive devices (referred to as IEDs) as planned. On their way forward, Levy was given additional missions such as collecting information, checking for new routes, and securing the area for the approach of the Israeli brigade with their tanks and armored vehicles. Most of the time, he and his platoon moved only at night. During the day, they went into ground observation points and tried to rest. Their main objective was to advance undetected, but they did experience occasional exchanges of gunfire with Hezbollah soldiers.

On the night of August 15, after several days in Lebanon, Levy's platoon established a ground observation point very close to a known Hezbollah base. The distance between the two was approximately 700 meters if measured in a straight line, but because of the hilly terrain, they

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<sup>b</sup> (2006). The accidental war. *The Economist*, July 22.

were hidden from each other. Once the platoon was settled, Levy reported his exact position to his commander and waited for orders.

The next morning at around 11:30 a.m., Levy received the order to prepare the platoon for a new mission. At that time, a large part of the brigade was moving north exchanging fire with the Hezbollah base. Levy and his men saw at least one of the Israeli tanks on fire - obviously hit by a rocket. His platoon was not directly involved in these skirmishes, but it could not assist anyway, as the orders were to remain in position to prevent the Hezbollah units from coming out of their bases and attacking the approaching Israeli forces.

Around 12:30 p.m., Levy received a radio call from his unit headquarters in Israel. His commanding officer, Maj. Cohen, had a new order. "Levy, you take your platoon and move toward the Hezbollah base to attract fire." For a moment, Levy froze, as he knew that this meant he and his soldiers would have to move out of their hidden position in broad daylight. He asked for a confirmation of the command. Cohen was more precise. "You take your platoon and move toward the Hezbollah base to attract fire. They will see you and come out of hiding. Then we can hit them."

Levy realized how risky this would be. Thoughts started rushing through his mind. He knew he could not just ignore the order, as this could mean the loss of his officer rank or even a court-martial - let alone the social stigma back home. He thought about his task as the leader of his platoon. How could they move out of their position without being killed on the spot? Should all of them go, and, if not, who should go and who should stay? Was there even a slight chance of success? He knew how tough it was to draw Hezbollah soldiers out of their hiding. And how should he explain the order to his soldiers, who would become easy targets for their opponents? How could they prepare themselves for this dangerous mission? Was a preparation even possible, given the risk they were taking? What should he do?