Arab–Israeli Wars from Chambers Dictionary of World History

Four wars (1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973) fought between Israel and the Arab states over the existence of the state of Israel and the rights of the Palestinians. The June 1967 war is known by supporters of Israel as the ‘Six-Day War’ and by others as ‘The June War.’ The 1973 war is called the ‘Yom Kippur War’ by Israelis, the ‘Ramadan War’ by Arabs, and the ‘October War’ by others. → Zionism

Summary Article: Arab—Israeli conflict
From The Encyclopedia of War

The Arab—Israeli conflict is usually seen as seven main wars: the 1948 war that followed Israel's independence; the Suez War of 1956; the June 1967 Six Day War; the Israeli—Egyptian War of Attrition from 1968 to 1970; the October 1973 Yom Kippur War; the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon; and finally the 2006 Second Lebanon War. There were also two major Palestinian insurgencies directed against the Israeli occupation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank from 1987 to 1993 which came to be known as the first intifada, and from 2000 to present which is called the second, or the Al-Aqsa intifada.

However, before all of these conflicts there was a bloody civil war between Arabs and Jews in Palestine, an area that was under British control from 1917 to 1948. What sparked it was the changing demography of Palestine brought about by the influx of Jewish immigrants who came to Palestine in search of shelter from pogroms and persecution in their native countries. While the number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine was quite limited until the 1930s, the rise of Nazism in Germany led to some two hundred thousand Jews immigrating to Palestine between 1932 and 1938. Jews, who comprised only 4 percent of the total Palestinian population in 1882, formed 13 percent in 1922, 28 percent in 1935, and about 30 percent in 1939. By 1947 there were 608,230 Jews in Palestine, compared with about 1,364,330 Arabs (Bregman 2000: 4–5). This demographic transformation was accompanied by a geographical change as the new arrivals purchased large tracts of Palestinian land. The demographic and geographical changes increased tensions between Jews and Arabs in Palestine and led to violent clashes.
To end the Jewish—Arab strife, on November 29, 1947 the United Nations proposed to partition Palestine between the two peoples, allowing each community to form its own independent state on some of the land; it offered the Jews 55 percent of Palestine and the Arabs (still the majority) 45 percent. The Jews accepted the offer, but the Arabs objected and threatened that any attempt to divide Palestine would lead to war. The UN proceeded anyway and passed the partition resolution; on the next day a civil war broke out in Palestine and went on until May 14, 1948.

The 1948 War

Friday, May 14, 1948 was the day the British departed Palestine and the Jews declared independence. Thus, the State of Israel was born and the Jews of Palestine became “Israelis.” In response to the Israeli declaration of independence, the Arab armies of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Transjordan, supported by units from Saudi Arabia and Yemen, invaded. Their aim was to destroy Israel, help Arab Palestinians, or perhaps, as some scholars claim, to grab some land for themselves in the absence of the “British policeman.” Thus, what started as a civil war between Jews and Arabs within Palestinian boundaries now became an all-out conventional war between the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and neighboring Arab armies. For the Israelis, this became their “War of Liberation,” or “War of Independence,” while for the Arab Palestinians, some 750,000 of whom became refugees as a result of the war, it became al Nakba, “The Catastrophe.”

The IDF managed to contain the Arab onslaught, counterattack, and seize some of the lands the UN had partitioned off to the Palestinians in 1947. Of the rest of this land allotted to the Palestinians, Egypt managed to capture the Gaza Strip and Transjordan took the West Bank. Thus, by the end of the first Arab-Israeli war, Palestine was indeed partitioned—not, however, between Jewish and Arab Palestinians as envisaged by the UN, but between Israelis, Jordanians, and Egyptians.

In terms of warfare, the 1948 war was quite a primitive encounter where the single soldier played a leading role while large formations—battalions, regiments, divisions, and so on—played little.
Sophisticated weapons, tanks, and aircraft were hardly used at all. Contrary to popular belief, this war was not one between the “few” Israelis and “many” Arabs, or, as it is often put, a clash between David (Israel) and Goliath (the Arabs). In fact, careful analysis shows that the number of Israeli troops committed to the battle on the eve of the Arab invasion was roughly equal to that of the invaders. As the war progressed, the number of Arab troops increased only slightly, while the number of Israelis grew steadily, and, by the end of the war, Israel’s fighting force was larger in absolute terms than that of the Arab armies put together. It was not a “miracle” as is often claimed, that led to Israeli victory, but numerical advantage, better organization, and sheer determination (Bregman 2000: 23–24).

The 1956 War

Unlike 1948, when war was imposed on Israel, in 1956 it was Israel, in collusion with Britain and France, who went on the offensive. On July 26, 1956, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal Company, of which France and Britain had been the majority shareholders. The two colonial powers resented Nasser’s unilateral decision, as they would lose control over an important international waterway through which vital supplies came to Europe. France and Britain began considering the use of force to regain control of the Suez Canal. Israel was secretly invited to join the coalition against Nasser, which provided an opportunity to achieve some of her own aims—mainly to gain control of the Straits of Tiran. The Straits, at the foot of the Gulf of Aqaba, were Israel’s primary trade route to East Africa and Asia, but had for several years been blockaded by Egypt. Now, Israel conditioned that if she was to join the planned war she should be allowed to move her troops south to the Straits and remove the blockade.

A simple plan emerged: Israel would provide a pretext for French and British intervention by attacking Egypt from the east, approaching the Suez Canal. The British and French governments, as if taken by surprise, would appeal to the governments of Israel and Egypt to stop the fighting. They would stipulate that Egypt should (a) halt all acts of war; (b) withdraw all troops 10 miles from the canal; and (c) accept temporary occupation by Britain and France of key positions on the canal. Israel (who of course would know the terms in advance) would be asked to (a) halt all acts of war and (b) withdraw all troops 10 miles to the east of the canal. Israel would then accept the terms, and it was hoped that Egypt would follow suit, allowing French and British troops to regain effective control of the canal without bloodshed. However, if Nasser were to refuse the terms, France and Britain would intervene militarily and forcibly regain control of the canal.

The IDF struck on the afternoon of October 29, 1956, with aircraft parachuting troops at the Israeli end of the Mitla Pass, some 30 miles east of the Suez Canal. Following this, Egypt moved forces to face the invaders, and on October 30, Britain and France issued their ultimatum. When Egypt rejected it, the Anglo-French coalition struck from the air the following day, October 31, and on November 5 sent in ground troops to seize key positions along the Suez Canal. In the meantime, as planned, the IDF moved south and removed the blockade at the Straits of Tiran. In the course of this operation, Israel occupied the entire Sinai Peninsula, destroying Egyptian forces and killing hundreds of enemy troops at a cost of 172 Israeli soldiers killed and seven hundred wounded.

There was international outrage, particularly from America, at this blatant action, which smacked of old-fashioned colonial arrogance. The Eisenhower administration forced France and Britain to halt operations, accept a ceasefire, withdraw their troops, and agree to UN monitors replacing them along the canal. In March 1957 the Israelis, also under international pressure, withdrew from the Sinai—not,
however, before issuing a stark warning that should Egypt ever again blockade the Straits of Tiran they would regard it as a *casus belli* and launch war on Egypt.

**The 1967 War**

Imposing a blockade on the Straits of Tiran to all Israel-bound ships was precisely what President Nasser did ten years later on May 23, 1967. The debate continues as to why Nasser took this action, knowing full well that it amounted to a declaration of war. Perhaps Nasser—a self-declared leader of the Arab world—did it in response to growing pressure on him to stand up to Israel, or maybe he felt it was too good an opportunity to miss as Israel's old premier and defense minister, Levi Eshkol, who lacked any military experience, might not respond to the challenge. Whatever the explanation, the blockade, along with other warlike actions such as removing UN observers from the Sinai, combined with bellicose rhetoric from Syria and Jordan, led to a significant escalation of tension in the Middle East. Feeling cornered, Israel decided to preempt any Arab attack and strike first.

Using almost all its aircraft, the Israeli air force (IAF), flying low to avoid Egyptian radar, came from behind Egyptian lines and in a massive three-hour attack destroyed almost the entire Egyptian air force (most of it still on the ground). It was a textbook strike, which can be compared to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. But wars are rarely won from the air alone and Israeli ground forces then invaded the Sinai Peninsula and engaged the Egyptian army. Lacking any air support, the Egyptians stood little chance and retreated in a most unorganized fashion, chased by Israeli tanks and attacked intensely from the air. The Israelis again seized the Sinai Peninsula, reaching the Suez Canal; they also took the Gaza Strip, which had been under Egypt’s control since 1948. The war quickly expanded to other fronts, where the IDF continued to inflict major defeats on Arab armies: from Jordan it occupied the West Bank and Arab east Jerusalem; and from Syria it captured the strategic Golan Heights. It was a short war that, as it is often put, changed the face of the Middle East.

**The 1968–1970 War of Attrition**

The Egyptian army, though badly beaten, had not been destroyed in the 1967 war, and reequipped by the Soviets with new arms, it attacked the IDF, which was now deployed along the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. The first major incident between Egypt and Israel after the June 1967 war took place on October 21, 1967, when an Egyptian destroyer torpedoed and sank the Israeli destroyer *Eilat* not far from Port Said. Israel retaliated by shelling Egyptian oil refineries close to the city of Suez and setting alight the adjoining oil storage tanks. Gradually, the situation along the Suez Canal escalated with more and more clashes. These, it is worth noting here, were not random incidents but rather part of a well-planned Egyptian military program which envisaged a total war against Israel in three main phases. The first of these was the “holding out” phase, or the steadfastness stage; the second was the “state of deterrence”; and the third was to be a total war of attrition against Israel. In a speech on January 21, 1969 President Nasser explained, “The first priority, the absolute priority in this battle, is the military front, for we must realize that the [Israeli] enemy will not withdraw [from land it occupied in 1967] unless we force him to withdraw through fighting” (*Al-Ahram*, January 21, 1969). As the fighting dragged on and the number of casualties mounted, the Israeli general staff was obliged to seek ways of protecting the troops along the Suez Canal. This led to the construction of a defensive line of fortifications named after the chief of staff, Haim Bar Lev. The line was a chain of 32 strong points stretching 180 km from Ras el-Aish in the north to Port Tawfik in the south. Each fort had firing positions, as well as a courtyard big enough to hold a few tanks and allow soldiers space to carry on...
with their daily lives and routines. A paved road linked the strongholds, and a sand ramp was built between it and the canal to prevent the Egyptians from observing the movements of troops inside the forts. The Bar Lev line was completed in March 1969. That month, after a relatively calm period, Egypt resumed the war and carried out massive barrages of the Bar Lev line, with 35,000 shells being fired between March 8 and 10. To this attack and those which followed, Israel's response was to send ground forces to carry out raids across the canal. But with Egyptian shelling of the Bar Lev line continuing, the Israelis devised a new strategy of deep penetration by the air force, aimed at bombing positions deep within Egypt, thus relieving pressure on Israeli troops along the canal. The IAF began its bombardment on January 7, 1970 by attacking Egyptian military camps and other targets near the cities of Ismailia, Cairo, Insha, and Hilwan, and between January 1 and April 18, 1970, the period of the bombing campaign, the IAF flew 3,300 sorties and dropped eight thousand tons of ammunition on Egyptian positions. The pressure on the Egyptians was such that they were forced to reduce resources along the canal in order to protect the Egyptian interior, which in turn eased pressure on the Israelis along the Bar Lev line and reduced casualties. But Israel also suffered heavily because the Egyptian anti-aircraft defense system, thirty times as powerful as it had been before the 1967 war, hit hard at the IAF. In August 1970 a ceasefire was agreed, and until the 1973 war the front was more or less calm.

The 1973 War

After the 1967 war, Israel made it clear that she was reluctant to return the captured lands. She embarked on a creeping annexation, building settlements on the seized territories and exploiting resources such as oil in the Sinai and water in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. This deeply upset the Arabs. What's more, it seemed that the superpowers of the time—the United States and the Soviet Union—were enjoying an unusual period of detente and were reluctant to have their Middle Eastern clients ruining the improved atmosphere. Both, therefore, seemed to accept the new status quo and ignore Israel's gradual annexation of the seized lands. To break the deadlock and prevent the annexation becoming permanent, Egypt and Syria decided to launch a military attack on Israel, to liberate at least some of their lost land and perhaps force Israel into diplomatic negotiations over withdrawal from the rest.

Egypt and Syria decided to attack on October 6, 1973, which was Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, thus catching Israel by surprise and unprepared. The Arab offensive started with a massive Egyptian—Syrian air bombardment on Israeli targets in the Sinai and Golan Heights. In the Sinai, soon after the air strike, Egyptian guns opened a tremendous bombardment along the Suez Canal and, in the first minute of the attack, 10,500 shells landed on Israeli positions—a rate of 175 shells per second. In the Golan, Syrian guns opened a similar barrage on Israeli positions. Back at the Suez Canal, at 1420 hours, the four thousand Egyptian troops of “Wave One” poured over the ramparts and slithered in disciplined lines down to the water's edge to begin crossing in small boats. Every fifteen minutes a wave of troops crossed, and in 24 hours the Egyptians had managed to land a hundred thousand men, a thousand tanks, and 13,500 vehicles on the Israeli side of the canal. Facing this invasion were a mere 505 Israeli troops, who could do little to stop the Egyptians. The Bar Lev line of defense, which the Israelis had built along the canal after the 1967 war, quickly crumbled. On the Golan Heights, in the meantime, a first wave of five hundred Syrian tanks, closely followed by a further three hundred, crashed through the Israeli lines along the entire front and penetrated deep into the Golan Heights.

It took the Israelis some time to mobilize their reserves—which form the main bulk of the IDF—and it was a number of hours before they began to get a grip on the situation. Their first priority was to
contain the Syrian invasion of the Golan, where there was no strategic depth and Jewish settlements were close to the frontline, unlike the Sinai where it would take Egyptian troops many hours before they came close to Jewish settlements or the Israeli border. They successfully halted the Syrian advance and began to push them back gradually, but it would take a week before it was the Syrians who were on the defensive as Israeli troops crossed east of the Golan toward Damascus.

Back in the Sinai, the IDF tried but failed to counterattack on October 8. Six days later, on October 14, they tried again and this time succeeded, inflicting heavy losses on the Egyptians, who made the mistake of moving away from their ground-to-air missile umbrella that so far had shielded them from the IAF. On the ground, General Ariel Sharon, a division commander, located a gap between the Egyptian 2nd and 3rd armies, through which he pushed his forces and approached the Suez Canal. He then crossed the canal to form a bridgehead on the Egyptian side of the water; by October 18 the IDF had a substantial force of three armored brigades and an infantry brigade on the western bank of the canal. Then, in a daring maneuver, Sharon completely cut off the 3rd Egyptian army from the rear, isolating about 45,000 Egyptian troops and 250 tanks from the rest of the Egyptian forces. By the end of the war, IDF forces were on proper Egyptian soil west of the canal and closer to Damascus than before the start of the war. It would not be wrong to say that, in military terms, the IDF’s performance in the 1973 war—the way it recovered from the initial surprise, mobilized, and counterattacked—was even more impressive than its performance in the 1967 war. But in most people’s minds in 1973 Egypt and Syria were the victors.

**The 1982 War in Lebanon**

Israel’s military hero in 1973 was General Ariel Sharon. By 1982 he was no longer a soldier but defense minister. From the day of his appointment, Sharon’s attention was firmly focused on Lebanon, where he identified two main problems. The first was the presence of Syrian troops and their ground-to-air missile system in the Beka’a Valley, which hindered the IAF’s freedom to fly over Lebanon; the second was the presence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), led by Yasser Arafat, whom Sharon suspected of wanting to take over Lebanon and turn it into a base to attack Israel. Sharon wished to strike at both the PLO and the Syrians in Lebanon.

The opportunity came on June 3, 1982 when gunmen of a dissident Palestinian faction led by Abu Nidal shot the Israeli ambassador to London and seriously injured him. There was no reason intrinsically why such an incident should necessitate a substantial Israeli invasion to wipe out the PLO in Lebanon, especially given that Abu Nidal was a sworn enemy of the PLO. But such was the mood in Israel following the attempt on the life of the ambassador that hardly anyone seemed to care that the assassins were from Abu Nidal’s group rather than Arafat’s and were willing to accept the view that Israel needed to attack the PLO.

At 3:15 p.m. on June 4, Israeli aircraft struck at nine PLO targets in Lebanon. The PLO hit back and for 24 hours shelled villages in northern Israel. On June 5 the Israeli cabinet convened and authorized an invasion of Lebanon, which it gave the name Operation Peace for Galilee; it would later come to be known as the War of Lebanon. It gave the IDF the mission of “freeing all the Galilee settlements from the range of fire of terrorists” and instructed that “the Syrian army [stationed in Lebanon] should not be attacked unless it attacks our forces.” Defense Minister Sharon made it clear that the operation’s objective was to remove the PLO from firing range of Israel’s northern border, “approximately 45 kilometers” (Resolution 676 of the Israeli cabinet).
On June 6, 1982 the IDF invaded Lebanon. In the western sector along the Lebanese coast, forces moved northward, but, rather than stopping 45 km from the international border as instructed by the cabinet, Sharon ordered them to proceed up to Lebanon's capital Beirut in order to hunt down PLO leader Yasser Arafat. By July 1, Beirut was encircled and under siege.

In the eastern sector, after crossing the international border into Lebanon, troops advanced in the direction of the Syrians without firing at them. The Syrians, however, faced with Israeli tanks and troops moving in their direction, opened fire. With his forces “under attack,” Sharon allowed them to return fire, sparking all-out war between Israeli and Syrian troops in Lebanon. Claiming that Syrian ground-to-air missiles in the Bekaa'a Valley hindered IAF efforts to support the ground forces, Sharon persuaded the cabinet to allow him to destroy the Syrian missiles. The attack was delivered on June 8 by F-15 and F-16 aircraft that knocked out seventeen of nineteen Syrian batteries and severely damaged the remaining two (they were finally destroyed the next day). The Syrian air force intervened and lost 96 Migs without a single Israeli plane lost.

In the meantime, an immense artillery and air bombardment against Beirut also produced results (and many casualties among civilians), forcing the Lebanese government to demand that the PLO and its leader Arafat leave the city. On August 22 the first contingent of 379 PLO men departed and, over the course of the next twelve days, 14,398 Palestinian guerrillas were evacuated to other countries, including Yasser Arafat who went to Tunis; 5,200 Syrian troops also left Beirut for Syria. With Israeli permission, a Lebanese Christian militia entered the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla between September 16 and 18 in order to remove the two thousand armed PLO fighters who, according to Israeli intelligence, remained in the camps after the Palestinian evacuation. The Christian militia found no armed Palestinians, only women, children, and the elderly—but they massacred hundreds of them anyway.

From a military point of view, the architect of the war, Defense Minister Sharon, did manage to achieve at least some of his aims: the IDF pushed the PLO and Syrian forces out of Beirut and the IAF destroyed the Syrian ground-to-air missiles in eastern Lebanon. But the price was high, as the war brought on Israel unprecedented international condemnation, particularly after the massacre in Sabra and Shatila. Israeli troops were to remain in Lebanon for eighteen years, under constant harassment. Here was a lesson that the Israelis should have learnt from the experience of others, notably from the Americans in Vietnam, that it is relatively easy to invade, but much more complicated to disengage. Armies can occupy territory in days, but getting out can take years.

**The 1987 Intifada**

Until 1987 the Arab—Israeli conflict had mainly been an encounter between conventional armies, but things were about to change when the IDF was confronted by an uprising in lands under its occupation. Like many other major events in history, notably World War I, the Palestinian uprising was sparked by a minor event—a car crash. On December 8, 1987 an Israeli vehicle collided with a Palestinian one, killing four Palestinians and wounding seven others. Rumors spread among the Palestinians that the car crash was somehow deliberate. At the victims’ funerals in the Jabalya refugee camp in Gaza, angry Palestinians hurled stones at nearby Israeli army units. A soldier opened fire and killed a Palestinian, which led to riots. These quickly spread from Jabalya to refugee camps throughout the Gaza Strip, and then engulfed the more secular and affluent West Bank. These events were the beginnings of the *intifada*, “shaking off” in Arabic, which saw the highly trained and well-equipped Israeli army come into
conflict with loose gangs of Palestinians, often no more than children, often armed only with rocks. This asymmetry was to prove a major problem for the Israelis. By avoiding a classic guerilla war, the Palestinians effectively neutralized Israel's vast military superiority. Faced by civilians wielding stones, bottles, iron bars, and burning tires, the best military in the Middle East was simply too powerful to apply its might.

The IDF was caught off guard by the riots and was initially slow to react. It had neither the appropriate gear nor the expertise to deal with what turned out to be an all-out civilian uprising, where women and children led demonstrations. The army was slow to send in reinforcements and was too selective in its use of the curfew—a standard means of restoring order by providing an opportunity to cool off. Thus, Palestinian demonstrations continued without respite and grew in size and vehemence. But the army soon got a grip on the situation and, by mid-January 1988, deployed two divisional commands to the West Bank and a third in the Gaza Strip, and started to use a variety of measures to put down the uprising. Unable to use its sophisticated arsenal against civilians with only primitive weapons, the IDF had to downgrade its weapons to suit, while retaining an advantage over the Palestinians. This would later lead to the invention of such “weapons” as a stone-hurling machine to counterattack youthful rock throwers, or vehicles equipped to fire canisters of hard rubber balls and small explosive propellants into crowds. The army made mass arrests which it conducted under curfews, deported activists, demolished houses of suspected terrorists, uprooted orchards to eliminate areas from which Palestinians could strike, and applied enormous pressure on the Palestinian population to submit.

By the end of 1988 the army was in fairly firm control of events in the occupied territories, but still they were just managing the situation rather than solving it. The uprising would continue for some six years, and it was to be a political deal between Israeli and Palestinian leaders in Oslo in September 1993 that ended it, rather than military might.

**The Second Intifada**

Seven years after the end of the first *intifada*, a new uprising erupted, which soon came to be known as the *Al-Aqsa intifada*, named after the mosque in Jerusalem’s Old City where riots first began. The perspective of history will probably identify this insurgency in the occupied territories, from 2000 to present, as the continuation of the first *intifada*, though there are significant differences between the two events. While the stone and the bottle were the symbols and indeed the main weapons of the Palestinians during the first *intifada*, in the second uprising they were superseded by rifles, pistols, hand grenades, mortars, and suicide bombs. And while in the first *intifada* clashes between Palestinian insurgents and Israeli security forces took place in the center of Palestinian towns and cities, by the time of the second *intifada* these urban areas were no longer routinely patrolled by Israeli forces—the Israelis having withdrawn from them as part of the 1993 deal—and as a result, clashes now took place on the edges of towns and cities.

The second *intifada* was sparked by a visit of the right-wing opposition leader Ariel Sharon on September 28, 2000 to Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, located in Jerusalem. On the ruins of the Jewish Temple stands a compound the Muslims call Haram Al-Sharif (“the Noble Sanctuary”), which Sharon planned to tour, and which contains a number of mosques, including Al-Aqsa, which is holy to Muslims. Palestinians therefore regarded Sharon’s visit as a deliberately provocative move. There were only limited disturbances during the visit, but for the remainder of the day there were sporadic outbreaks of Palestinian stone throwing at Israeli police on Temple Mount and its vicinity. These

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incidents, we know in hindsight, were the opening of the Al-Aqsa intifada. Violence intensified while international efforts to stop it failed, and, with suicide bombers blowing themselves up in Israeli towns and cities, the Israelis resorted to a variety of measures to stop the insurgency, including assassinations of Palestinian leaders.

The emergence of Ariel Sharon as Israel's prime minister in 2001 marked a new phase in the second intifada. Sharon ordered F-16s to fire rockets against Palestinian targets, intensified Israel's policy of assassinations and, following a suicide attack during Passover 2002, he ordered an all-out invasion of the West Bank—this was Operation Defensive Shield, which also included a siege on Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah.

In August 2005 Prime Minister Sharon withdrew Israeli forces and settlers from the Gaza Strip. Now, with no targets to attack in Gaza proper, Palestinians resorted to a new tactic: the firing of missiles and rockets from the Strip into Israeli territory. At the time of writing the Al-Aqsa intifada continues.

The Second Lebanon War

On July 12, 2006 at 9:03 a.m., Hezbollah guerillas attacked an IDF border patrol on the Israeli side of the border with Lebanon, killing three soldiers and capturing two others. Hezbollah planned to hold the two captives to ransom, wishing to exchange them for Lebanese held in Israeli prisons. The Israeli government decided to respond aggressively against Hezbollah in Lebanon, where it was harbored. Responding to an attack from across an intentionally recognized border was perhaps justified; however, the sheer scale of the Israeli military reaction was such that it led to an all-out war with Hezbollah. Indeed, when attacked, Hezbollah responded by launching 22 rockets against towns and villages in Galilee, northern Israel. This was not the first time Israel's populated areas had come under rocket or missile attack—in the 1991 Gulf War Saddam Hussein fired 39 Scud missiles into Israel—but here, in July—August 2006, sustained and continuous rocket and missile strikes against the Israeli home front turned into the backbone of Hezbollah's tactics.

On July 13 the IAF carried out a lightning 34-minute strike and in what came to be known as the Night of the Fajrs it destroyed almost all of Hezbollah's arsenal of 240mm Fajr-3 missiles, which were armed with a 45-kilogram warhead and had a range of 45km. In the coming days the IAF would also wipe out most of Hezbollah's 320 mm Fajrs-5, which had a range of more than 75km. Still, despite pulverizing air strikes Hezbollah continued to carry out rocket attacks; on July 13 it fired 125 rockets, some of which hit Haifa, Israel's third-largest city.

Sustained air strikes were aimed at depleting Hezbollah's military ranks and arsenals (including, vitally, their stocks of rockets and launchers), but also at damaging their morale. Israel also targeted Lebanon proper: its roads, bridges, power stations, and most notably Beirut International Airport, a transfer point for weapons and supplies to Hezbollah. The IDF's chief of staff, Dan Halutz, a former pilot and chief of the IAF who had learned the lessons of the air campaigns in Bosnia and Kosovo, strongly believed that air strikes alone would be sufficient to bring Hezbollah to its knees. But, while successful in eliminating Hezbollah's long- and medium-range missiles, the IAF failed to destroy Hezbollah's short-range rockets, which continued to land on Israel.

The only way for Israel to tackle this latter problem was to embark on a full-scale ground assault into southern Lebanon. Transferring war into the enemy's territory has always been one of the main tenets of the IDF doctrine of warfare. Moving the battle onto enemy territory ensured that the damage was
done far from home, and it forced the enemy to protect itself, thus leaving it little time to strike at Israel. However, there was little appetite in the Israeli political—military establishment to embark on such an operation at a time when it was still believed that decisive attacks from the air, coupled with other measures, would gradually degrade Hezbollah's military capabilities and motivation to prevail.

However, as it became apparent that a major ground operation was needed, on August 7 the military reported that preparations for an all-out invasion of southern Lebanon were complete. Its plan called for an invasion by a force composed of three divisions, whose task would be to reach the Litani River and then, over a period of three to four weeks, clear the area between the Litani and the international border, searching for and destroying Hezbollah's short-range rockets. On August 11, at 21:00, 9,800 Israeli troops moved across the border into Lebanon. But their advance was slower than expected and the diplomatic clock was ticking fast: on August 12 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1701, calling for a halt to hostilities in Lebanon. The Lebanese government accepted it and, on the next day, cracking under growing international pressure, the Israeli government accepted it too; the UN then announced that the ceasefire would come into effect on Monday, August 14 at 8 a.m. That day Hezbollah fired a barrage of 217 rockets into Israel to show that it was keeping up the bombardment right up until the end of the war and the Israelis, on the morning of August 14, just before the ceasefire came into effect, launched their last attack against Dahia, in southern Beirut.

In 34 days of battle, Israel lost 164 people of whom 109 were soldiers and 45 civilians; many more were wounded. Close to four thousand rockets landed on Israel's home front causing much damage and disrupting day-to-day life. More than a thousand Lebanese were killed during the war and scores more were wounded. Israel failed to achieve most of the goals it had set for itself at the onset of the war. The Winograd Commission, set up by the government to investigate both the political and military leadership of the war, concluded: "The IDF ... failed to fulfil its missions ... in most cases ... the IDF demonstrated ... powerlessness ... in its contest with Hezbollah."

SEE ALSO: Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO); Suez Crisis (1956).

References


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