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Back to the Scene of the Crime

WHEN THE Israeli government decided, in the space of a few hours, to start the Second Lebanon War, it did not have any plan.

When the Chief-of-Staff urged the cabinet to start the war, he did not submit any plan.

This was disclosed this week by a military investigation committee.

That is shocking.

A plan is not an optional extra, something nice you can do without. A war without a plan is like a human body without a spinal column. Would anyone think of building a house without a plan? To put up a bridge? To produce a car? To hold a conference? After all, unlike a house, a bridge, a car or a conference, a war is supposed to kill people. Its very essence is killing and destroying.

Almost in every case, to initiate a war is a crime. To start such a war without a plan and proper preparation is totally irresponsible - heaping crime upon crime.

WHEN A STATE starts a war, the sequence is - in simplistic terms - as follows:

(1) The government adopts a clear political aim.

(2) The government deliberates whether this aim can be achieved by war - after it comes to the conclusion that it cannot be achieved by other means.

From this point on, the emphasis moves from the political to the military leadership. Its duty is:

(3) To draw up a strategic plan for attaining the aim decided upon by the government.

(4) To translate the strategic plan into a tactical plan. Among others: to decide what forces are needed, which forces will be employed, what is the target of each force and within which time it must achieve it, as well as to foresee possible moves by the other side.

(5) To prepare the forces for their tasks, in accordance with their training and equipment.

A wise government will also think about the situation it would like to have after the war, and will instruct the military to take this into consideration while planning their operations.

Now it appears that nothing of this sort happened. There was no clearly defined war aim, there was no political or military plan, there were no clear objectives for the troops and they were not prepared for the tasks they were given. Without a central plan, nothing of these was even possible.

A war without a plan is no war at all, but an adventure. A government that starts a war without a plan is no government at all, but a bunch of politicians. A General Staff that goes to war without a plan is no General Staff at all, but a group of generals.

THE WAY events developed, according to the inquiry committees, was like this: the government decided on the war in a hurry, within a few hours, without defining any aim.

In the following days, several war aims were thrown around. They followed each other in quick succession and contradicted each other in many ways. That by itself is a recipe for disaster: every aim demands its own methods and means, which may be quite different from those demanded by another.

Among the aims that were announced: the release of the two captured soldiers, the destruction of Hizbullah, the elimination of the arsenal of missiles in South Lebanon, the pushing of Hizbullah away from the border, and more. Beyond that there was a general desire to have a Lebanese government that was completely subservient to American and Israeli interests.

If competent army officers had been instructed to draw up a plan for each of these aims, they would soon have arrived at the conclusion that all of them were unattainable by military means, certainly not under the circumstances.

The idea that the two prisoners could be liberated by war is manifestly ridiculous. Like going after a mosquito with a sledgehammer. The proper means is diplomacy. Perhaps somebody would have suggested capturing some Hizbullah commanders in order to facilitate an exchange of prisoners. Anything - except a war.

The destruction of Hizbullah by a necessarily limited war was impossible, as should have been clear from the beginning. This is a guerilla force that is part of a political movement which is deeply rooted in Lebanese reality (as can be seen these days on any television screen). No guerilla movement can be destroyed by a regular army, and certainly not in one single stroke and within days or weeks.

The elimination of the missile arsenal? If the army command had sat down to elaborate a military plan, they would have realized that aerial bombardment can achieve this only in part. A complete destruction would have demanded

the occupation of all of South Lebanon, well beyond the Litani River. During that time, a large part of Israel would have been exposed to the missiles, without the population being prepared for it. If that conclusion had been presented to the government, would it have taken the decision it took?

The pushing of Hizbullah from the border by a few kilometers north is not a proper war aim. Starting a war for that purpose, leading to the killing of masses of people and destroying whole neighborhoods and villages, would have meant frivolity where serious deliberation was required .

But the government did not have to go into such deliberations. Since It did not define any clear aim, it did not demand nor receive any military plan.

IF THE recklessness of the political leadership was scandalous, the recklessness of the military leadership was doubly so.

The army command went to war without any clearly defined aim and without any plan. There were some plans that had been prepared and exercised beforehand, without any specific political aim in mind, but they were ignored and abandoned as the war started. After all, who needs a plan? Since when do Israelis plan? Israelis improvise, and are proud of it.

So they improvised. The Chief-of-Staff, an Air Force general, decided that it was sufficient to bomb: if enough civilians were killed and enough houses, roads and bridges destroyed, the Lebanese people would go down on its knees and do whatever the Israeli government commanded.

When this failed (as should have been foreseen) and most Lebanese of all communities rallied behind Hizbullah, The C-o-C realized that there was no avoiding ground operations. Since there was no plan, he did without. Troops were sent into Lebanon in a haphazard way, without clear objectives, without time-tables. The same locations were occupied time and again. The end result: the forces bit off small pieces of land on the edges of Hizbullah territory, without any real achievement, but with heavy losses.

It cannot be said that the war aims were not attained. Simply, there was no war aim.

THE WORST part was not the lack of a plan. The worst part was that the generals did not even notice its absence.

The investigators of the State Comptroller disclosed last week a startling fact of utmost importance: most members of the General Staff have never attended any of the high command courses which are the Israeli equivalent of a military academy.

This means that they never learned military history and the principles of strategy. They are military technicians, equivalent to engineering technicians or bookkeepers. I assume that they are well versed in the technical side of the profession: how to move forces, how to activate weapon systems, and such. But they have not read books about military theory and the art of war, have not studied how the leaders of armies conducted their wars throughout the centuries, have not become acquainted with the thoughts of the great military thinkers.

A military leader needs intuition. Certainly. But intuition grows from by experience - his own experience, the experience of his army and the accumulated experience of centuries of warfare.

For example: if they had read the books of Basil Liddell Hart, perhaps the most authoritative military commentator of the last century, they would have learned that the battle of David and Goliath was not a confrontation between a boy with a primitive sling and a heavily armed and protected giant, as it is usually presented, but quite on the contrary, a battle between a sophisticated fighter with a modern weapon that could kill from a distance and a cumbersome combatant equipped with obsolescent arms.

In the Lebanon war, the role of David was played by Hizbullah, a mobile and resourceful force, while the Israeli army was Goliath, heavy, routine-bound, with inappropriate weapons.

ANYBODY WHO reads this column regularly knows that we blew the whistle well before the war. But our criticism then was suspect because of our opposition to the war itself, which we considered immoral, superfluous and senseless.

Now we have several military inquiry committees, appointed by the chief-of-Staff himself (about 40 of them!), and they, one after another, confirm our criticism almost word for word. Not only confirm, but add a wealth of details that paint an even darker picture.

It is a picture of utter confusion: improvised operations, an anarchic command structure, misunderstanding of orders, orders that were issued, cancelled and issued again, General Staff officers giving orders directly to subordinate commanders bypassing the chain of command.

An army that was once one of the best in the world, an object of study for officers in many countries, has become an inefficient and incompetent body.

The committees do not answer a basic question: how did this happen?

EXCEPT FOR a few hints here and there, the committees do not say how we got here. What has happened to the Israeli army?

This, too, we have said many times: the army is the victim of the occupation.

Next June, the occupation of the Palestinian territories will "celebrate" its 40th anniversary. There is no precedent for such a long military occupation regime. A military occupation is by its very nature a short-term instrument. In the course of a war, the army conquers enemy territory, administers it until the end of the war, when its fate is decided by a peace agreement.

No army is happy with the role of an occupying force, knowing that this destroys it, corrupts it from inside, damages it physically and mentally, diverts it from its most important function and imposes on it methods that have nothing to do with its real mission - to defend the state in war.

With us, the occupation became, almost from the beginning, a political instrument for the attainment of objectives that are foreign to the function of "Defense Forces". In theory, it is a military regime, but in practice it is a colonial subjugation, in which the Israeli army mainly fulfills the shameful task of an oppressive police force.

In today's army, there is no officer on active service who remembers the Israel Defense Forces from before the occupation, the army that grew up in the "small" Israel within the Green Line, that defeated five Arab armies in six days, commanded by the brilliant General Staff under Yitzhak Rabin. All the commanders of the Second Lebanon War started their career when it was already an occupation army. The last military success of the Israeli army was achieved early in the occupation period, a generation ago, in the Yom Kippur war,

An army whose job is to uphold the occupation - "targeted killings" (approved this week by the Supreme Court in a shameful decision), demolition of homes, mistreating helpless civilians, hunting stone-throwing children, humiliating people at innumerable roadblocks and the hundred and one other daily doings of an occupation army - has shown that it is not fitted for real war, even against a small guerilla force.

THE CORRUPTION of the Israeli army and the rot that has set in, exposed in all their ugliness by the investigations of the war, are a danger for the State of Israel.

It is not enough to remove the Chief-of-Staff (whose clinging to his post is another scandal added to the scandals of the war), nor is it enough to change the whole high command. There is a need for reform from the top to the bottom, a change of the army in all sectors and all grades. But as long as the occupation lasts, there is no point in even starting.

We have always said: the occupation corrupts. Now it has to be said with a clear voice: the occupation is endangering the security of Israel.