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Daniel Sobelman. “Learning to Deter. Deterrence Failure and Success in the Israel-Hezbollah Conflict, 2006-16.” *International Security* 41:3 (Winter 2016/17): 151-196. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00259.

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In 2004, Daniel Sobelman wrote a monograph for the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies on the “new rules of the game” between Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Hezbollah¹. The book described how both organizations had adapted their military positions following the IDF withdrawal of 2000 to maintain the status quo. Two years later, this argument on the stability between the two sides was challenged by the summer war that saw Hezbollah and the IDF fighting for 34 days. But since then, the border between Israel and Lebanon has witnessed a rather stable environment—by Middle Eastern standards.

The enduring calm at the border went against several trends. The 2006 war between the IDF and Hezbollah was followed neither by a peace agreement nor by a mere diplomatic process. Both sides prepared their forces to wage the next war and additionally, were confronted with major changes in the distribution of power in the Middle East in the midst of the Syrian civil war starting in March 2011. Thus, was the 2006 war an exceptional event and did the previous “rules of the game” still apply?

Against that backdrop, Sobelman argues in his new article in *International Security*, this post-2006 stability is the result of mutual deterrence acknowledged by both the Israeli Defense Forces and the Party of God. This assertion leads to critical questions that the author addresses in detail in the article.

¹ Daniel Sobelman, *New Rules of the Game: Israel and Hizbollah after the Withdrawal from Lebanon* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2004).

First, if the game of deterrence stabilized the competition between both sides, how can we explain the past occurrence of war, in particular the conflict of 2006? Why is deterrence succeeding today when it failed yesterday? Sobelman tackles these questions carefully by explaining that both Israel and Hezbollah “learned to adopt a deterrence strategy that met the theoretical conditions for deterrence success” (151). As he explains in the first part of the article, this learning process started before the 34-day war “as a result of a shift in the balance of capabilities” (162). Sobelman describes how in the 1990s “rules of the game” emerged and “tacitly regulated the conflict” (163). This evolution of the stand-off was closely linked to Hezbollah’s introduction of Katyusha rockets as a means of coercion against the IDF during that period.

According to the author, these rules were misapplied in 2006 when Hezbollah broke them with the kidnapping of two IDF soldiers, which triggered the war. For Sobelman, the causes of this failure are to be found in the absence of a deterrence framework between the two adversaries following the IDF withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000. Despite or maybe because of the war, the learning process of mutual deterrence accelerated significantly afterwards.

The post-2006 military balance turned the competition into an equation where both sides faced a choice between a devastating new war of attrition and the deterrence status quo (161). Interestingly, Sobelman puts an emphasis on the role of communication and messaging to sustain this deterrence equilibrium. Whereas many of the current observers of the conflict defend the idea of deterrence by underlining the expanded military capabilities of Hezbollah, Sobelman considers the rhetoric of its leadership to have played a more significant role in deterring Israel². He argues that this—rather than the proliferation of missiles and rockets—is the most significant change from the pre-2006 context: “Hezbollah has augmented its deterrence posture by actively communicating its capabilities [...] Hezbollah’s postwar deterrence signals predate the acquisition of most of its stockpile [...] it indicates that the organization had assumed a deterrence mind-set prior to obtaining most of its current arsenal” (174). This point implies changes in the military postures of both competitors and relates to the idea that their learning process was indeed mutual.

In Sobelman’s words, the strategies of both actors are not static postures but rather the result of constant adaptation. The author emphasizes here the interactive dimension of this deterrence game. On the one hand, he analyzes the development of Israel’s “Dahiyah” doctrine initiated in 2008 by Gadi Eisenkot—the then Commander of the IDF Northern Command—which refocused the IDF planning on traditional high-intensity air-ground operations targeting Hezbollah’s positions in Lebanon.

On the other hand, he looks at Hezbollah’s subsequent adaptation to this “Dahiyah” doctrine. He analyses meticulously the so-called “equations” of Hassan Nasrallah, the Party’s Secretary General (185). According to the various speeches of Nasrallah, these “equations” designated Israel’s high-value assets as targets for Hezbollah in the case of an Israeli campaign in Lebanon. The author even goes as far as to qualify Nasrallah’s messages as ‘deterrence by denial’ when the latter challenged the Israeli ability to strike Hezbollah’s positions

² On the strategic significance of Hezbollah’s new arsenal, see among others: Jeffrey White, *A War Like No Other: Israel vs. Hezbollah in 2015* (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015); Gadi Eisenkot, “A Changed Threat? The Response on the Northern Arena,” *Military and Strategic Affairs* 2:1 (June 2010): 29-40; Bilal Saab, Nicholas Blanford, *The Next War: How Another Conflict Between Hizballah and Israel Could Look and How Both Sides Are Preparing For It* (Washington: Brookings, 2011); Jean-Loup Samaan, *From War to Deterrence? Israel-Hezbollah Conflict since 2006* (Carlisle: U.S. Army War College, 2014).

in Lebanon: “Nasrallah’s verbal endeavors to make Israel doubt its own intelligence, and by implication to question its ability to undermine Hezbollah’s military strategy, can be understood as part of Hezbollah’s attempts at deterrence by denial” (189).

The second central question with respect to Sobelman’s core argument relates to the asymmetrical nature of deterrence between Israel and Hezbollah. The author declares at the beginning of the article that “to deter a superior opponent, a weak actor needs to convince its adversary of its ability to render its own tactical capabilities strategic and the opponent’s strategic capabilities tactical” (151). Such a definition is similar to traditional views on deterrence, especially in the case of nuclear doctrines for states facing a superior enemy: countries like Pakistan or France do apply this approach with their nuclear arsenals. The article underlines several times how Hezbollah aims to offset Israel’s military superiority (171) and that its credibility vis-à-vis the deterrence game depends on its ability to inflict severe damages to the Israeli civilian and military infrastructures.

Although Sobelman describes in detail the strategic logic of this asymmetrical deterrence context, he remains rather elusive on the ‘state-vs-non-state nature of the confrontation. The article sometimes draws the picture of a mere competition between two opponents, leaving us to wonder about the role of outside players. Specifically, there is limited reflection in the piece on the role of Hezbollah’s two main sponsors, Syria and Iran, to enable its deterrence credibility.

The Lebanese organizations does have the ability to build and deploy its indigenous rocket inventory but it acquired the long-guided missiles it uses to coerce Israel through the support of the Iranian and Syrian regimes. Not only did both States provide capabilities but they shared their experience, their techniques, and their tactics. As a result, evaluating Hezbollah’s deterrence strategy without factoring the influence and, possibly, the direct implication in the decision-making of external players such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards misses one key aspect of the conflict. It disconnects the Lebanese movement from its patrons as if they had no role in the command and control structure of Hezbollah’s operations. This parameter challenges the argument of stability through the deterrence game depicted by Sobelman: how can we know if deterring Hezbollah is effective if we do not know precisely the target audience of the deterrence message?

This leads to the other significant caveat with Sobelman’s analysis. His argument of a stable deterrence relies primarily, and sometimes exclusively, on public declarations. He astutely combines statements from IDF officials with those of Hassan Nasrallah to build up the idea of a deterrence dialog. However, as the author himself acknowledges (152), this remains a construct: there is no official communication between both sides, no exchanges that could guarantee a sufficient level of mutual understanding on the strategy of the opponent. Therefore, the concept of stable deterrence remains speculative and requires a certain amount of belief from scholars and policymakers.

Moreover, Hezbollah being an extremely opaque organization with regards to its military structure, it is not clear how its public posturing translates into a military-planning process. If Israel’s “Dahiyah” doctrine was followed by significant changes in terms of capabilities, personnel, and concepts of operation within the IDF, we barely know how and if Hezbollah’s deterrence speeches are turned into operational positions. This uncertainty also relates to the exact role of external players such as the Iranian regime in the making of Hezbollah’s military strategy.

These points do not overrule Sobelman's main argument but they call for a certain level of caution regarding the stability of the current deterrence equilibrium. All these remaining unknowns underline the limitations of such competition in the Israel-Hezbollah context. This is not unique to the case studied by Sobelman: opacity over the communication of messages or over the command and control to operationalize a posture is a phenomenon frequently observed in the literature on deterrence. Overall, Daniel Sobelman's article provides a detailed and precious account of a critical conflict which is widely covered but too often misunderstood. It should also pave the way for new studies on the topic of deterrence against non-state actors.

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