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Ready For Suicide Bombers, Not Ready for Iran

BY JOSHUA MITNICK

TEL AVIV—In the upcoming weeks, myriad Israeli committees and panels will begin deconstructing the Israeli army's performance against Hezbollah over the summer.

But even before the investigators begin their work, a chorus of politicians and experts have started to debate whether Israel's fight against Palestinian suicide bombers over the last six years has distracted the military from preparing for more powerful foes like Hezbollah and its Iranian patron.

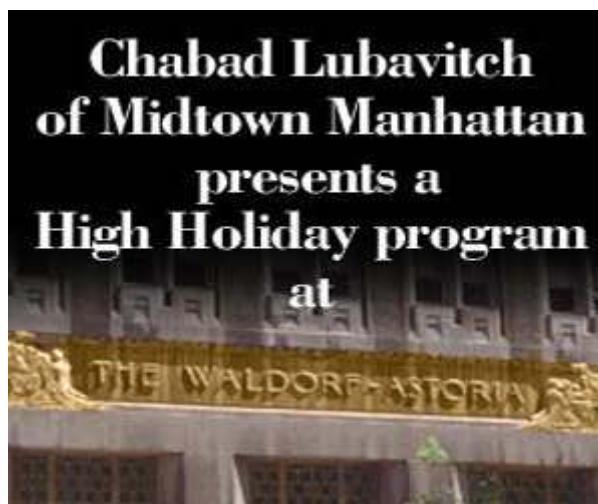
"This is going to be the first and most sensitive issue that's going to be investigated," said Ran Cohen, a member of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee from the left-wing Meretz party. "There is no shadow of a doubt that the most influential factor in the Israel Defense Forces' unsuccessful performance against Hezbollah is that, over the last 10 years, the army is more like a police force rather than a combat army."

The discussion could show the costs of Israel's four-decade occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip—where the recent withdrawal of Israeli troops has led to a situation bordering on chaos—to be even direr than the public has previously realized.

Over the last six years, Israelis have come to accept the inevitability of a Palestinian state, but the justification for it has been framed mainly in terms of a demographic danger—that is, the peril of retaining control over a rapidly

expanding population of four million Arabs by a state with a majority of five million Jews.

And even though former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon cited security as a second justification for withdrawing from the Gaza Strip unilaterally, the price of Israel's occupation has never been framed so bluntly in terms of a zero-sum trade-off against threats from outside the country.



“Israel’s national security at this point has three theaters that are a constant source of concern and in need of resources: the Iranian nuclear threat, the northern border with Lebanon and Syria, and the Palestinian one,” said Gidi Grinstein, the president of the Reut Institute, a Tel Aviv think tank. “The blanket is short, and it’s a matter of priorities. Israel’s effort to end its control over the Palestinian population has lagged, at a huge cost to national security. From the perspective of the military, the presence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is a given because of the demand of the political leadership.”

During the course of the month-long war in Lebanon, there were countless stories from Israeli soldiers about how Hezbollah’s guerrillas—with sophisticated arms and training from Iran—posed a far more difficult challenge than they were used to in the West Bank. The common theme was that younger soldiers whose only combat experience came in the West Bank or Gaza didn’t perform as well as reservists who had previously served in Lebanon.

Now, military experts are actually starting to worry for the first time about whether the I.D.F. is ready to face Iran or Syria in battle.

Writing in the Haaretz newspaper, veteran Israeli military journalist Ze’ev Schiff suggested that Israel must redefine Iran—a nuclear power in the making—as its top security concern rather than the Palestinians. By focusing on road checkpoints and protecting Jewish settlers in the West Bank, the military’s capabilities have eroded relative to its state of preparedness in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the 1982 Lebanon War.

“We are in need of a strategic revolution. We have to determine that the first and primary front is the battle to prevent the existential threat. This means the Palestinian front and everything related to it must be the second front. The most recent military confrontation in Lebanon demonstrated that being overly preoccupied with the Palestinian front caused us to neglect the threat posed by Hezbollah.”

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert recently shelved his controversial plan for a unilateral withdrawal from major portions of the West Bank as his government struggles for political survival in the wake of the Lebanon war. At the same time, three ministers recently called for Israel to renew peace talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

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