

## **A Response to Andrew Exum's "Hizbollah at War: A Military Assessment"**

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By Nicholas Noe<sup>1</sup>

Despite its strong pro-Israel leanings, one usually expects fairly well argued, well researched pieces from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP). Unfortunately, the think tank's latest effort, an assessment of the 2006 Israeli-Hizbullah war authored by former US Army Ranger Andrew Exum, fails to measure up on both accounts. In doing so, it unfortunately reproduces precisely the shortcomings of analysis (and indeed imagination) that has so mired the US, in particular, in an increasingly dire and costly series of conflicts in the Middle East.

Although the structural omissions, contradictions, and general lack of academic rigor are perhaps the most disturbing aspects of Exum's narrative (Policy Focus #63 downloadable at [www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus63.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus63.pdf)), one is immediately struck by three more basic faults: a lack of originality in analysis, a number of factual and stylistic errors and a tone of self-assuredness that should disturb any reader familiar with the highly complex and, to a certain extent, still uncertain factual accounting of the latest conflict in Lebanon.

On the first score, Exum's narrative appears mostly as a rehash of the analyses provided by the Jaffee Center's November 2006 series of assessments, Nicholas Blanford's work in *Janes Intelligence Review* and elsewhere, as well as published reports overwhelmingly selected from only a narrow slice of the Israeli press (or at least that is what his footnotes strongly suggest). Although he spent two weeks in Israel and Lebanon for the piece, Exum provides little in the way of substantive indications as to the political affiliations of who he actually interviewed in either country. As far as Lebanon is concerned, this is particularly problematic given the distinct interest pro-government forces (as well as anti-government forces) have in pushing a certain analysis and factual recounting of the war (not to mention its aftermath). Although one could easily preserve anonymity while still signaling whether the person is a neutral observer or otherwise biased, Exum chooses instead the far less helpful "Interview by author, Beirut."

Incredibly, one of the few quotes sourced directly to a Lebanese political figure is Interior Minister Ahmed Fatfat's statement to the Saudi owned Asharq Al Awsat that Hizbullah officials told Premier Fouad Siniora early on in the war the Israeli response would be light. Whether or not one believes Fatfat, this single quote does little in the way of providing convincing evidence for Exum's "clear" claim that Hizbullah did not expect the ferocity of the assault and that it "doubted the intelligence of the attack. Exum predictably refers, as his only other piece of evidence, to Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah's later "admission" on New TV, but remarkably accepts it without ambiguity, despite the significant and ongoing debate over precisely this matter. But more than this, the fact that Fatfat has a distinct interest in this particular line of argument is never raised by Exum as

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a potential complication for his assumption; which makes the careful reader wonder further about exactly who he spoke to on *both* sides of the border.

Indeed, in another troubling turn, Exum admits that he approached Hizbullah, but then mysteriously states that its participations was "limited." Did Exum speak to random "fighters" in the South, or was access in fact denied – as is most likely the case for a former US soldier? Either way he obfuscates the importance of this point by stating flatly that he interviewed "*combatants and politicians on both sides*" [my emphasis] – despite the previous suggestion. In any case: one wonders which politicians and combatants, even as a general matter, were interviewed by Exum? At the very least an indication whether or not he wholly relied on anti-Hizbullah Lebanese politicians and/or analysts for his anonymous sourcing or, as seems most likely, if he relied mainly on Israeli figures, needs to be clearly expressed.

But this points to a deeper problem in Exum's narrative – mainly the tone of certainty that pervades the piece, buttressed by copious phrases such as "of course" and "obviously," that make it seem as though he really did talk to a range of knowledgeable sources on all sides and really does know what transpired on the ground (one may say despite the fact that evidence increasingly available suggests both the US and Israel still do not *themselves* know answers to basic *military* questions: 1) if they in fact destroyed Hizbullah's long range rocket capability – a point discussed further below; 2) how Hizbullah communicated; 3) where its leadership positions were, etc). To take this tone throughout, having apparently not had meaningful access to the actual combatants on the Lebanese side is baffling especially given the well-known pitfall for Western analysts and journalists (not to mention US officials) who write about or understand Lebanon based on almost purely Israeli or pro-Israeli/pro-US sources.

Nevertheless, one might not necessarily have as much of a problem with the apparent lack of the other side's direct insight and involvement had Exum made that lack readily apparent and, at the same time, simply drawn on the three assessments provided by the Conflict Forum's Alistair Crooke and Mark Penn (available at [www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HJ12Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HJ12Ak01.html)); for these three interwoven pieces, among other similar types of recent analyses, *do* weigh information provided by Hizbullah and other sources close to the party alongside a far wider range of Israeli and US sourced material. The mere fact that Exum *does not even refer* to these assessments – especially since their military/tactical analyses at the very least greatly complicate and in places contradict Exum's supposedly pure military narrative – is baffling since they were all published by the *Asia Times* in October, or *several weeks before the Jaffee Center assessments were released*.

Further troubling are a number of assorted factual and stylistic errors and inconsistencies – small items in some cases, but nevertheless worrisome since it is the WINEP which is effectively speaking and not some graduate student (or in my case and Exum's case a recent graduate student) whose stylistic and historical rigor have little bearing on the actions and opinions of Washington decision-makers who sometimes simply don't know any better (the new chairman of the House Intelligence committee is a perfect case in point: we can only hope he does not use this particular report as his first introduction to Hizbullah's tactics or capabilities, much less its purposes, structure and history).

For example, in several places Exum inexplicably switches between "We" and "this observer" with little indication of who exactly his mystery collaborator(s) are. Somewhat differently, suddenly on page 14 the footnotes go out of sync for that section (there is a missing number three that provides for a moment of confusion when it appears as though a speech by Premier Ehud Olmert is the source for the claim that Hizbullah thought the Israeli response would be light – confusion since Olmert *actually did make this claim* in an attempt to claw back some of his beleaguered reputation). More troubling though, footnote two of the first section suggests the only territorial dispute after the Israeli withdrawal of May 2000 involved the Shebba Farms –thus leaving out the ongoing dispute over the so called "seven villages." A small point, but important nevertheless – especially when it comes to evaluating whether a policy of containment might be more successful in dealing with Hizbullah since further territorial claims beyond Shebba are used by both US and Israeli officials and ex-officials as evidence that Hizbullah would never give up on inventing its own territorial legitimacy.

Elsewhere, in his brief treatment of the historico-political facts undergirding the Israeli-Hizbullah conflict, Exum asserts that the 1989 Taif Accord "enshrined" Hizbullah's right to maintain their arms – when in fact, Hizbullah rejected Taif explicitly for several years thereafter, not least because Taif called for the Party's disarmament like other militias. Moreover, it was the 1991 Damascus-Tehran agreement that effectively exempted Hizbullah from Taif, but this exemption was itself grounded significantly (though by no means exclusively) on the ongoing, stubborn, ill conceived and illegal Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. (It should be noted further that Exum claims Tyre is south Lebanon's "only major city" when in fact its population of approximately 130,000 persons is only 30,000 more than the city of Nabatiyeh, another major city in the area, and one of particular strategic, historical and ideological value).

Finally, Exum asserts that Israeli "responses" to Hezbollah "attacks" since 1996's Operation Grapes of Wrath – a major military conflict that Exum essentially omits from his narrative, despite its significant bearing on the politico-military aspects of the 2006 conflict - have been "measured and largely confined to the border area," even though the decade after Grapes of Wrath were laced with a number of deep Israeli strikes and assassinations, especially through 1999-2000 when, among other targets, a power station in the mainly Christian Achrafieh district was struck in yet another counterproductive attempt by Israel to try to divide Lebanon along sectarian lines against the Party.

Exum further suggests that Hizbullah launched rockets on Israel proper repeatedly after the Israeli withdrawal, suggesting a kind of clear cut immorality and indeed irrationality on the part of Hizbullah outside of the well known "rules of the game" which, as Israeli scholar Daniel Sobelman has long pointed out, is a crucial element of analysis in unpacking how a very rational, defined and indeed containable military conflict played out along the border.

In all this, however, the main problem raised by Exum's historical errors and omissions is not so much the carelessness as such, but rather that this carelessness provides the basis for a weak *political* understanding which Exum then quickly sublimates in his quest for a supposedly pure military-tactical narrative. While he acknowledges the difficulty of such an endeavor in two throwaway lines, he nevertheless inexplicably plows right ahead on this course.

The move is particularly dangerous when applied to Hizbullah as both a politico-military organization, a social movement and an ideological force in its conflict with Israel and the US. Indeed, as underscored by Crooke's interwoven three-point analysis – 1) intelligence war, 2) ground war, 3) political war – an analyst makes such separations only at his or her own peril. In fact, this is arguably what Israel and the US had to learn this summer for at least the fourth time in Lebanon. As a number of analysts have asserted – again views apparently not considered by Exum – Tel Aviv and Washington's original sin in the latest conflict was that both believed they could defeat Hizbullah militarily, perhaps even within a few days.

Rather than, as a but one alternative, using the historico-political logic embedded and activated by *Hizbullah itself* in the April 1996 Understanding (a critical foreign policy document in US history not referred to by Exum despite its immediate bearing on the structure of *military conflict* over the years in Lebanon), and using it against the Party by *slowly and carefully* ratcheting up the military and diplomatic-economic pressures on Lebanon, Israel instead pursued targeting – *military tactics* intimately connected to the political Understanding – without regard to the significance of how the latter might have been effectively used to its advantage.

The point is not to suggest that such an alternative strategy would have been more successful from the US-Israeli point of view, although I tend to believe it would have been, but instead that Hizbullah's tactics in the field, most notably rocket launchings against Israel proper, were a part of a carefully calibrated political strategy that Israel apparently failed to understand or, more than this, to manipulate in its favor especially at the outset (the sad hilarity of Nasrallah calling for a return to the April Understanding as a means to limit the immediate conflict to non civilian areas followed almost immediately by US Ambassador John Bolton's comment that he failed to see how a terrorist organization could stop *itself* from launching rockets is but one small indication of the poverty of the joint US-Israeli political understanding that carried the day).

Exum unfortunately adds fuel to this fire, casting away his own anemic warning and stoking the hope that somehow if the US and Israel adapted their military tactics, understood what transpired and more accurately predicted what was to come in the next conflict, the outcome would surely be far better. To support this, at one point he even states flatly, and as usual without sourcing, that "Hizbullah had spent the years from 2000 until 2006 thinking about the coming war in *tactical terms*" (with the emphasis added by Exum to underscore the point), despite the fact that there is much evidence to suggest that Hizbullah thought about the coming war both in tactical and strategic terms – military and political terms – *as dialectically intertwined*. That this connection may not be simply dispensed with – that such a move might indeed lie at the heart of the Israeli military failure on the field – is nevertheless simply dispensed with by Exum, as it was apparently by the US and Israeli "combatants," leaving the reader to wonder if Exum's overall narrative is of much better use.

Here though another critique immanent to the narrative's own stated purpose must be submitted. If we read Exum only on his own terms, we understand his goal is to reveal "the kind of fighting force Hizbullah has developed into." But even on this score, he fails to deliver new insight, much less an accurate rehash of the by now standard reading of Hizbullah – it does not act like the old Arab armies, it reproduces a range of Israeli tactics and its units are essentially self-sufficient, well trained and well dug in.

Incredibly, Exum fails to mention anything related to Hizbullah's use of intelligence, and especially signals intelligence, throughout the war – its ability, according to published Israeli reports, to hack into IDF communications systems for example and use the information to ambush Israeli commando raids. Nor does he deal at all with Hizbullah's use of rocket attacks on Israeli *military* targets – thus apparently buying hook, line and sinker the Israeli leaderships claim that the Katyusha was merely, in Exum's words, a "psychological" weapon of terror wielded randomly on innocent civilians. The well reported strikes on the intelligence facility at Meron in Northern Israel is thus omitted completely from discussion, as is Hizbullah's reported use of drones in its own targeting. Left out of the narrative as well is the issue of Hizbullah's ability to target chemical facilities in Haifa – and their apparent choice, again arguably, not to (why was this decision made, if indeed it was, from a military point of view, not to mention the political and strategic point of view?).

Incredibly, in his treatment of the "rocket battle," Exum also suggests that since Hizbullah did not strike beyond Haifa as promised (although he is just flat wrong: targets beyond Haifa were in fact hit like Afula and Hadera), then the *initial* Israeli claims that the IAF succeeded in knocking out – or better yet smashing – the Party's long and medium range capabilities is correct. No other evidence is cited apart from Israel's own claims (although one particularly fantastical quote of the IAF's complete triumph in the first half hour of the conflict is wholly unsourced). Moreover, recent Israeli reports that Hizbullah now has *fully replenished its long and medium range missile stocks* is left out of the discussion by Exum altogether, even though such anonymously sourced reports strongly leads one to believe that the Israeli leadership is now (classically) covering its tail for the fact that it still *does not know* how many such missiles Hizbullah possessed before the war and how many it took out. Given this, it would seem as though Exum failed to meaningfully interrogate his Israeli interviewees or press them particularly hard on the contradictory information that has been available for some time now in the public realm. After all, how is one to account for his confident conclusion, in a switch back to the sublimated political narrative, that "although this paper endeavors to remain focused on the tactical battle and not the strategic aims of any of the combatants, it must be said that Hizbullah's rocket attacks against Israel in the July War [sic] were at once a tactical success and a strategic failure."

Why is this so? Because Exum states, again without any cited evidence, 1) that the rocket attacks failed in "breaking the will" of the people of Northern Israeli – despite a raft of contradictory information on just this narrow issue widely reported and polled for in the Israeli media; and 2) that somehow Iran and Hizbullah fatally showed their hands, perhaps prematurely. However, this rests on the dubious assumptions that all of Hizbullah's capabilities were in fact revealed, that, as previously, Israel succeeded in its targeting of the longer range missiles despite its other glaring intelligence failures on this *very issue of missile counting*, and that Hizbullah, especially, will not further shift its tactics in the future even as Israel and the US do the same. One can add to this Exum's complete disregard for discussing Hizbullah's reported possession of anti-aircraft/helicopter weaponry, an omission made despite the fact that it was widely reported (including by Blanford) that Israeli helicopter activity was extremely limited during the conflict *for some reason*. Again, the fact that Hizbullah did not show its entire hand in a short time span serves as structural evidence throughout Exum's narrative that

the Party did not and do not have certain capabilities. Not surprisingly then, Exum leads the reader to believe that in the next stage of conflict, Hizbullah's only upgrade would be its possession and presumed use of anti-aircraft missiles – an unsatisfying prediction (given Exum's opening promises of unmasking Hizbullah) that, again, leaves out much public evidence suggesting Hizbullah possessed but did not use a range of weaponry and tactics. Sadly, this kind of confident, short selling is precisely the same logic that led to the destruction of the Israeli warship off of Lebanon in the first days of the war – not to mention a range of other military failures – when the Israeli navy was so arrogant in its view of Hizbullah's capabilities, so confident it knew its enemy, that it felt no need to even turn on its vessels' anti-ship missile systems.

All of which leads to a final shortcoming in Exum's attempt at a purely tactical analysis – an analysis where, in the end, Hizbullah stands as some kind of "static," "isolated" and purely "defensive" actor (despite the limited proactiveness displayed by the frontline units, which Exum cites in one line). For he asserts that it is "certainly true" Hizbullah front line units did not have communication links with their sister units or with upper leadership and therefore were unable to coordinate counterattacks and other tactical maneuvers like retreats and reinforcing – "There was no question of units retreating or moving forward to support another unit" – despite a range of evidence to the contrary, especially that which concerns Hizbullah's use of real time intelligence to interdict Israeli operations and movements. Although Exum mentions *in a footnote* that "obviously" the rocket teams somehow coordinated with the higher leadership, this significant (if buried) admission fails to complicate or stymie his overall claim. In fact, it is literally shuttled to the margins as a part of the facile metanarrative: Hizbullah's "mission was [simply] survival." As in his sourcing for the dubious rocket destruction claim, Exum fails to even discuss published reports that Hizbullah *never felt the need to call up its reinforcements* and therefore further coordinate such movements with frontline troops. As Crooke points out, it may well have been that the entire war was fought by one Hezbollah brigade – the Nasr brigade - of 3,000 troops, and no more. Whether or not this assertion bears out, it is a part of the public record unexplored by Exum, even though it clearly complicates his claim that Hizbullah's frontline units were somehow disadvantaged vis-à-vis IDF small units by their supposed (and "obviously") extreme form of autonomy.

In all these points, Exum's analysis is extremely troubling, again not least because it was published under the imprint of the WINEP and may yet carry the US and Israeli government down yet another costly and treacherous path. Although Exum at one point says Hizbullah should be taken seriously as a fighting force in its own right – a welcome admission that should undoubtedly be explored more widely and with far greater professionalism – his narrative does a great disservice to that important assertion from the outset, thus violating, as Crooke puts it, "the first principle of war – [showing] contempt for [one's] enemy."

Indeed, that such by-now familiar contempt could be laced with throw away lines of humility, and then authoritatively promulgated in the disgraced corridors of power which now yearn for just a teaspoon dose of "realism," should deeply trouble us all, especially those who call the Middle East their home.

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