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THE REAL REASON THAT THE IDF WAS UNPREPARED

There were two defining moments in the war with Hizbullah. One was the fact that Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Dan Halutz was surprised to learn that there was a war to be fought. Indeed a day or two earlier he was booking hotel accommodations for a family summer vacation.

The other defining point was Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's observation that the war would facilitate his plan to withdraw from most of Judea and Samaria and expel the Jews living there. Many of those inhabitants were at that moment on the front line of the war.

The current criticisms of the government are unprecedented, but so are the blunders and misconceptions that precipitated them.

The government failed utterly in its oversight of the strategy of the IDF command. With its experience of Israel's continued inability to overcome the short-range Kassam rockets in the South, it nevertheless acquiesced, with evident equanimity, in Halutz's decision to send the air force alone to crush Hizbullah's similar Katyushas from Lebanon.

It is amazing that the IDF command acted as if it were unaware that the Katyusha launcher is a comparatively light weapon, easily concealed - in a house, under a bundle of hay, in a farmyard or in a hole dug for it. Detecting Katyushas from the air is just about impossible, and they are, moreover, easily mobile. They can only be extricated on the ground - until defensive measures are developed that can shoot down short-range missiles in flight.

IT WAS ONLY when this truth was absorbed that the government mobilized the infantry reserves. But then, when they were at last called up, they were left twiddling their thumbs for days while the prime minister waited for a decision at the United Nations!

Though the army fought hard, the objectives set - at least to reach the Litani River - could not be achieved before that UN decision for a cease-fire, and so the war ended in a 'draw'; far from a defeat, but not nearly near enough for a victory.

Meanwhile, a miracle had taken place on the civilian front.

The government had done nothing to cope with the tremendous evacuation of about a million souls from the towns in the North, despite Olmert's warning to ministers that Hizbullah would not take our initial counterattack lying down. Subjected to merciless pounding which reached southward as far as Haifa and Afula and eastward as far as Safed and Tiberias, the people that evacuated needed immediate shelter, food, medicines and to provide for all the special needs of their children, not excluding toys.

Then the miracle happened. A tremendous spontaneous wave of volunteerism throughout the country burst out. Local councils, hundreds of private businesses, thousands of homeowners threw themselves, as though by a single command, into the task. Within two days even a 'tent city' was built, conceived and paid for by a great-hearted Israeli millionaire. Without such civic resourcefulness, there would have been chaos and a national disaster.

ALL THIS manifestly adds up to the reality that the people's crisis of confidence in its leaders lies in the government's total unpreparedness for war.

But that sounds impossible. How could we be unprepared? Israel, the one country under constant threat since the moment of its creation. Are not Arab children taught from an early age of the glory of martyrdom in the name of Israel's destruction?

It is not true that the threat to destroy Israel comes only from Iran. What even so many Jews, in Israel and outside, pretend to forget is that the motivation for all the campaigns of the Arabs has been their unabashed intention to destroy Israel.

Ever since 1947, by war, by persistent terror, by bloodletting and by a worldwide propaganda campaign the Arabs have succeeded in mobilizing the Muslim world - with Iran now its most prominent and most dangerous exponent - to achieve this end. In recent years they have even succeeded in gaining substantial support among Europeans - who feel no unease in discussing it at their dinner tables.

But perhaps the worst blow to Israel's security was the notion that giving the Arabs chunks of territory - and that unilaterally - would be a large step forward on the way to peace. That notion was exemplified by the abandonment of the Gaza Strip. This prospect was at once embraced by our media, which preached the defeatists' slogan of 'Land for Peace.'

As if to prove the provenance of peace, Ariel Sharon invited Egypt - in a careless breach of its peace treaty with Israel - to send troops into Sinai and thence to the border with Gaza, the so-called Philadelphi corridor.

The reliance on Egypt to look after us has resulted in the swift transfer of large quantities of arms into Gaza. Tunnels into the Negev will also soon be available. How Israeli leaders could have perpetrated such a monstrous life-and-death blunder needs a psychological enquiry.

YET ISRAELIS are not the only people who could be manipulated into believing in some cranky fantasy. A weird similarity exists today between Israel's state of mind, to that of Britain after Munich.

Though the British knew enough about the monster named Hitler, a large segment of the population was overjoyed when prime minister Neville Chamberlain came back from Munich with a paper in which that promised 'peace in our time.' (I arrived in London, as it happens, the day Chamberlain came back and experienced the noisy acclamations in the streets.)

Just 15 months ago, Olmert gave his own 'peace in our time' speech to a left-wing audience in New York. After telling them of the wonderful future in store as a result of abandoning Gaza etc., he went on: 'We all desperately need it. We are tired of fighting. We are tired of being courageous. We are tired of winning. We are tired of defeating our enemies' We want [the Palestinians] to be our friends, our partners, our good neighbors.' It was in that spirit that Olmert thought the war would facilitate his withdrawal plan and sent our soldiers into battle.

WHATEVER committee is appointed to investigate the war, it will not have fulfilled the vital obligation to examine the pre-war laxity and self-satisfaction in the behavior of its public servants - and the dangerous delusions the leaders, egged on by the media, disseminated among the people.

That, however, is as far an inquiry committee can go. For taking the obviously tough decisions about the nation's future, the people must gird its political loins.