

Middle East military briefing

Military briefing: Israel's 'victory doctrine' against Hizbollah



The Lebanese militant group fought Israel to a stalemate in 2006. Both sides tried to learn the lessons

Mehul Srivastava and **John Paul Rathbone** in London 7 HOURS AGO

In 2006, the last time Israel and Hezbollah went to war, the Israeli air force ran out of pre-vetted targets within the first week.

For the rest of the 34-day war, Israeli pilots flew the world's best warplanes but only struck Hezbollah positions exposed by the fighting, rather than strategic sites revealed by years of deep intelligence and careful research.

That war ended in what was, at best, a stalemate between Israel, the region's best resourced military, and Hezbollah, the Iran-backed militant group that has only grown stronger over the past 18 years.

Now, as large-scale Israeli air strikes in Lebanon push the bitter foes to the verge of another full-scale war, the military lessons learned — or not learned — by both sides from 2006 could reshape the region, and determine if victory can be had for either side.

“The most important lesson we learned from 2006 was to teach ourselves — which is almost impossible — to be more modest,” said Ehud Olmert, Israel's prime minister during the 2006 war. “A full-on conflict with Hezbollah, which could expand to a full-on conflict with Iran, is going to be very painful, very bloody,” he warned.





The lack of a conclusive victory in 2006 haunted the premiership of Ehud Olmert © David Furst/AFP via Getty Images

The lack of a conclusive victory in 2006 haunted Olmert's premiership. In the years that followed, the Israeli military studied its failures and drew other lessons from its intermittent wars against Hamas. The result is what Aviv Kochavi, previous chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, described in 2020 as the "victory doctrine".

At its heart lies a bank of thousands of vetted targets, according to several Israeli military officials, compared with the dozens at hand at the start of the 2006 war.

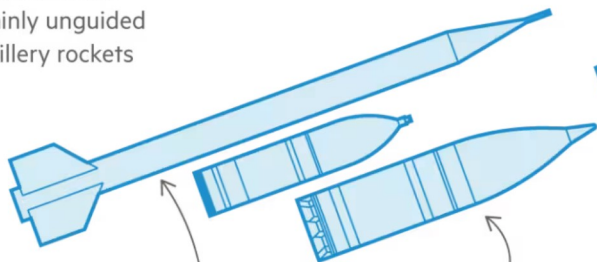
Built out with intelligence gleaned during small rounds of fighting with Hizbollah, dubbed by the IDF as "wars between wars", Israel's military intelligence continuously add and update targets to this vault, using satellites, drones and human intelligence from across the region.

The result, according to Shlomo Mofaz, former head of the counterterrorism arena at IDF intelligence, is a densely populated "intelligence picture" of Hizbollah's assets, from missile sites to command structures.

Examples of Hizbollah's military equipment

Missile forces

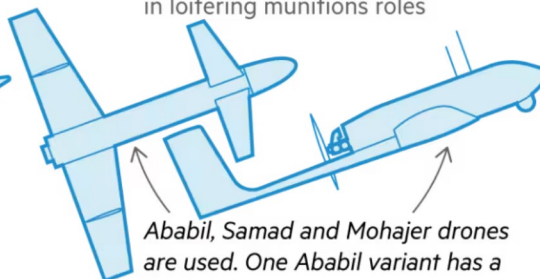
Mainly unguided artillery rockets



Examples include Katyusha with up to 40km range (10-20 kg warhead) and Falaq-1 (50kg warhead) and Falaq-2 (120kg warhead) with 10-11 km range, both sourced mainly from Iran

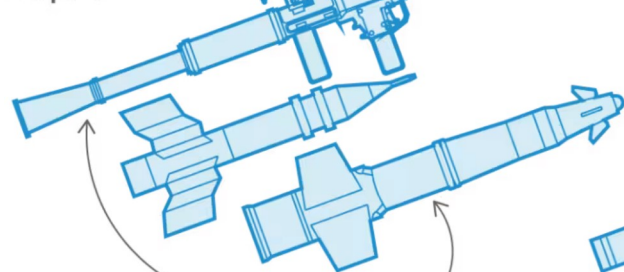
Drones

Used for ISR*, combat ISR and in loitering munitions roles



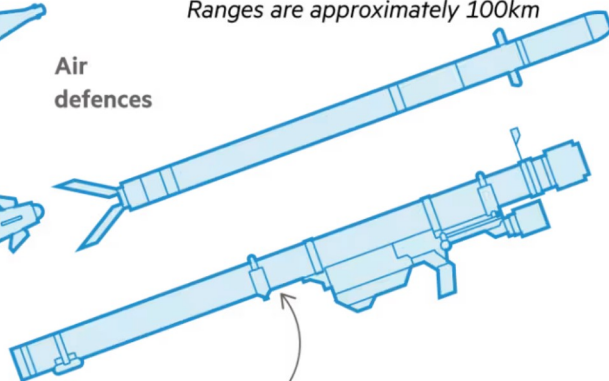
Ababil, Samad and Mohajer drones are used. One Ababil variant has a loitering and direct attack facility. Ranges are approximately 100km

Anti-tank weapons



Range from hand-held rocket-propelled grenade launchers to Soviet-era and later missiles

Air defences



Mainly Russian Manpads** with limited coverage obtained from Iran plus some anti-aircraft artillery. Some heavier surface-to-air missile systems may have been transferred by Syria

* Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance Weapons not to scale
 ** Man-portable air-defence systems

Sources: CSIS; IISS; FT research

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On Monday, as the Israeli air force started pounding Lebanon, its “victory doctrine” was on full display with dozens of warplanes and drones flying simultaneous sorties that hit 1,600 targets, striking fear and panic across Lebanon in the country’s deadliest day in decades. Firas Abiad, Lebanon’s health minister, said the bombing raid hit medical centres, ambulances, and fleeing civilians in a wave of “carnage”.

Israel’s bombardment, which it said was focused on weapon depots and other Hizbollah infrastructure, formed what was the second phase of a sequenced plan.

The first phase, Mofaz said, took aim at Hizbollah’s leadership, including the July 30 killing of Fuad Shukr, its highest-ranking commander, and last week’s elimination of a clutch of senior figures in the elite Radwan unit during a clandestine meeting in Beirut.

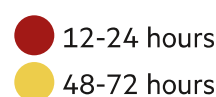
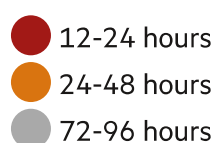
“You can already see from the targeted killings in the past few weeks the quality of the intelligence,” Mofaz said. Last week’s synchronised [detonation of thousands of Hizbollah pagers](#) also killed 37 in an attack carried out by Israel, according to people briefed on the operation.

The ultimate goal of the current Lebanon campaign, according to Israel’s premier Benjamin Netanyahu, is to degrade Hizbollah and force it to pull back its elite Radwan units far from Israel’s northern border.

But for that to succeed so must the “victory doctrine,” which seeks to destroy Hizbollah’s capabilities quickly before international outrage over civilian casualties forces Israel to stop. Israeli strikes killed more than 550 people since Monday, and wounded in excess of 2,000.

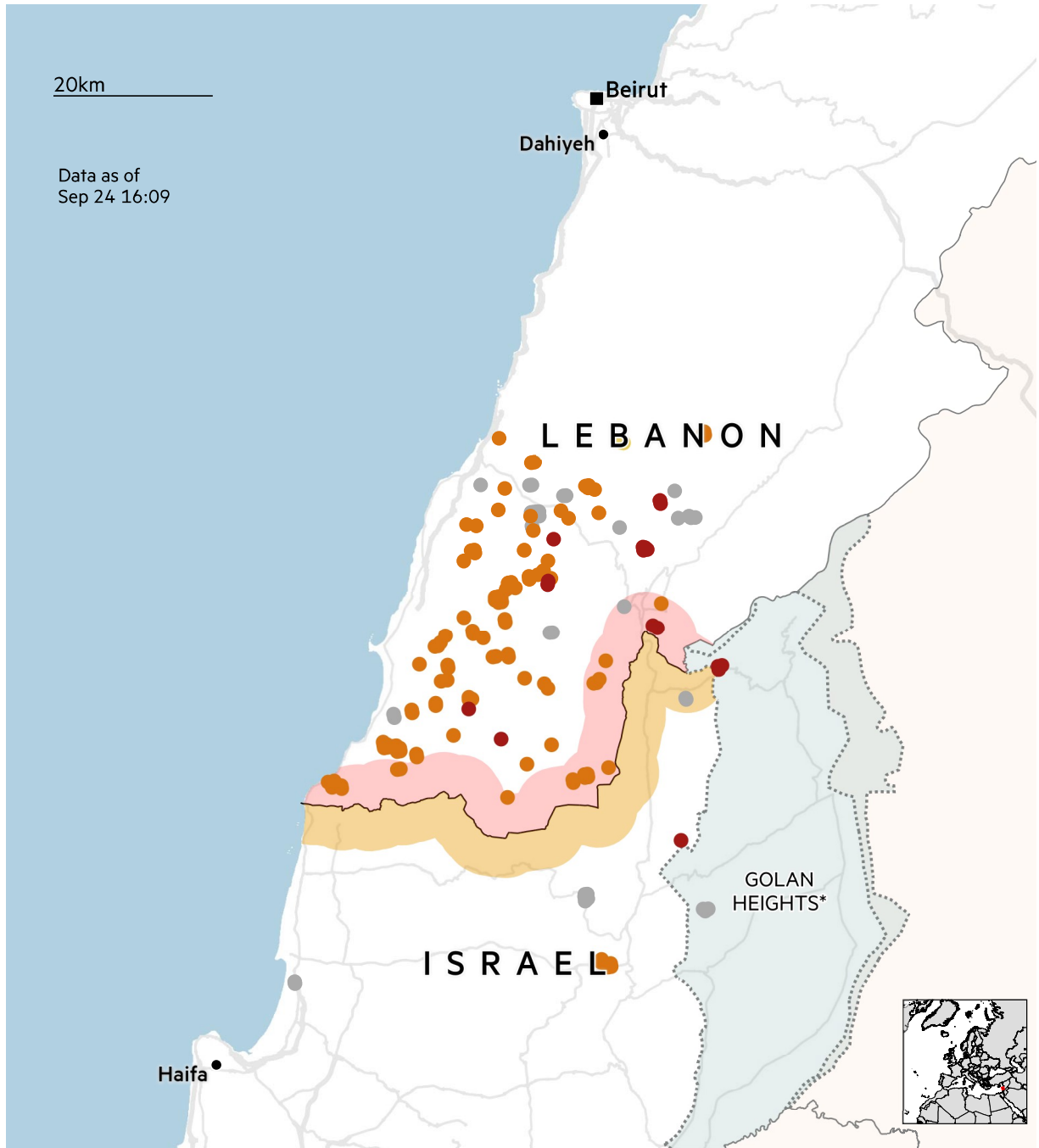
“Essentially, we are targeting combat infrastructure that Hizbollah has been building for the past 20 years,” IDF chief Herzi Halevi said after the first full day of bombardment. “This is significant — we are . . . preparing for the next phase.”

Fires detected in Lebanon and northern Israel as airstrikes escalate



Lebanon 5km evacuation zone

Israel 5km evacuation zone



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: Nasa • *Seized by Israel from Syria in 1967 and annexed in 1981 in a move not recognised by most of the international community

How Israel's campaign continues depends to a large extent on Netanyahu's political calculations — western diplomats point out that a diplomatic alternative to this campaign has existed for months. Hizbollah has said it would back off from its cross-

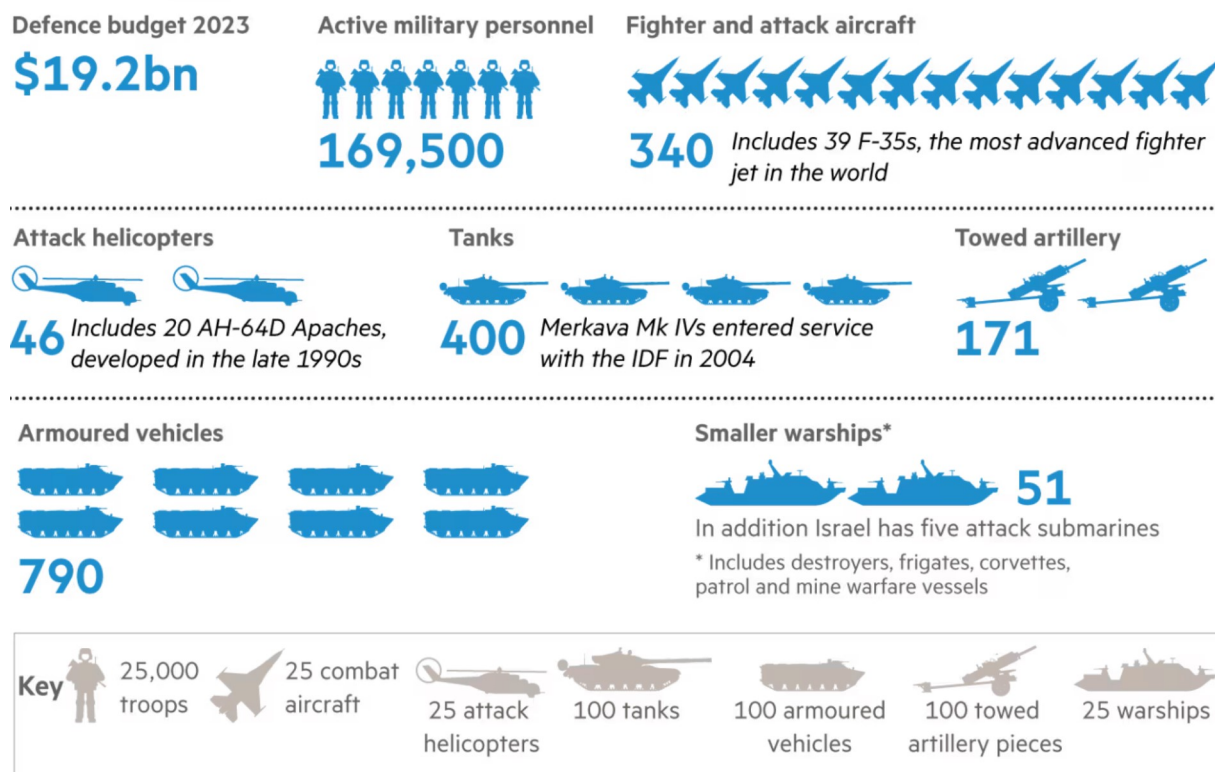
border assaults if Israel agreed a ceasefire with Hamas in Gaza.

It also depends on Netanyahu's definition of "total victory". In Gaza, where Hamas still holds over 100 hostages and refuses to surrender, it has entailed a year of war, resulting in 41,000 deaths, according to Palestinian health officials — but no sign of a victorious exit.

"[While] they've obviously failed to 'destroy' Hamas, they've done a huge amount of damage to their military capability," said Sir John Sawers, who headed the UK's foreign intelligence service MI6 until 2014. "If they could do something even vaguely comparable with Hizbollah, I think they'll feel they've secured themselves for a few years to come."

For now, Netanyahu has said the Lebanon campaign, which the IDF has named "Operation Northern Arrows", is limited to making northern Israel safe enough for 60,000 displaced citizens to return to their homes, a year after Hizbollah started shelling the border region in solidarity with Hamas.

Israel's sophisticated military hardware



Sources: IISS Military Balance, 2024; FT research • Visual journalism: Steven Bernard © FT

To do that, the Israeli military will need to achieve two main objectives, analysts said: reduce Hizbollah's estimated arsenal of as many as 200,000 rockets and short range ballistic missiles; and push Hizbollah's fighters north of the Litani river.

The first involves the air campaign already under way. The 1,600 targets hit by Israel on Monday were, by any measure, vast in scale. The intensity was double that in the [first two days](#) of Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza last year, and almost four times the average daily rate of 428 targets hit in Gaza over the next five weeks, according to [official figures](#).

It is also eight times the average 200 targets a day hit during the 2006 Lebanon war, when as many 70 Israeli aircraft operated at different altitudes — from Blackhawk helicopters near the ground, to Gulfstream G550 surveillance aircraft at high altitudes.

“For the Israelis, most of the military thinking after 2006 was . . . to emphasise the air campaign as a way to disrupt quickly and decisively Hezbollah's capabilities and leadership,” said Jean-Loup Samaan of the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute. “Hezbollah's . . . air defence is very limited and inefficient against the Israeli air strikes.”

Israel's air strikes in Lebanon and Gaza



Smoke billows over southern Lebanon following Israeli strikes on Monday

200

average targets per day in 2006 Lebanon war

428

average Gaza targets per day in first weeks of Israel-Hamas war

1,600

targets in Lebanon on Monday

Hizbollah has also drawn lessons from the 2006 war. It has imported Iranian missile and drone technology, trained up its cadres, and bored a [network of tunnels](#) thought to be larger than Hamas's in Gaza. Although dug through soft sandstone, Hamas's "[metro](#)" has proven hard to destroy, impervious to Israeli electronic surveillance, and an effective refuge for fighters and their weapons.

In addition, over the past year Hizbollah has mapped out potential Israeli targets and studied how Israel responds to its drone attacks, including several that slipped past air defences.

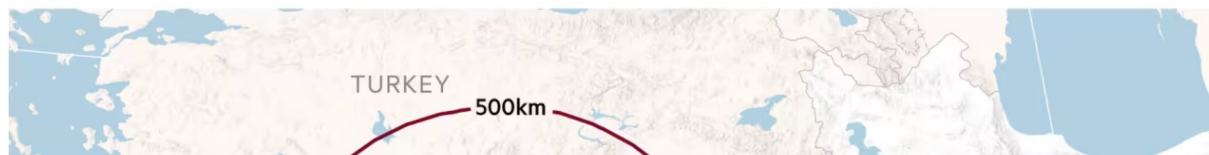
"They learned, and also we have learned," said Mofaz, who now heads Israel's [Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center](#).

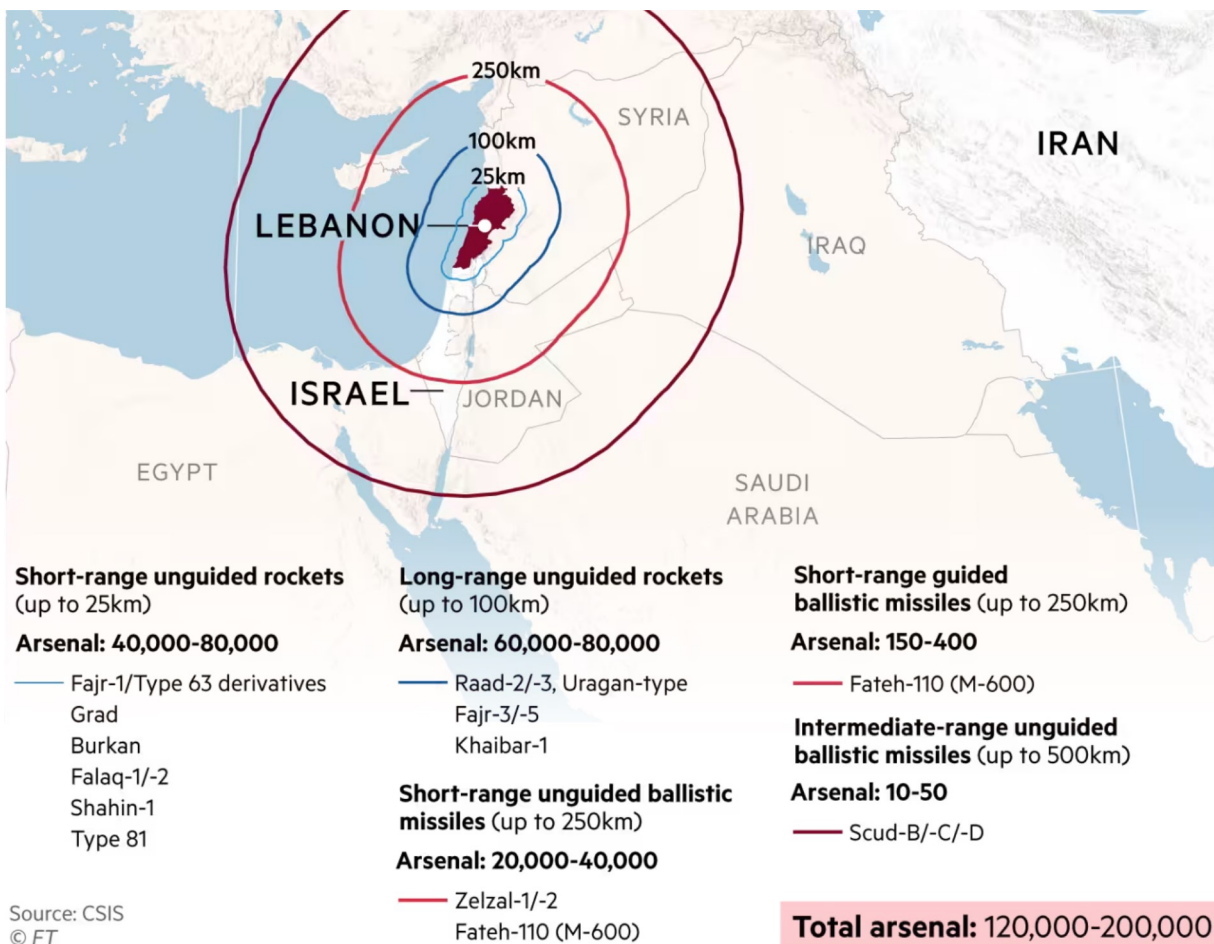
So far, Hizbollah has not unleashed any of its precision ballistic missiles, and its limited salvos have been largely intercepted.

But that could change. A [recent study by Reichman University](#) warned that Hizbollah could fire as many as 3,000 rockets and missiles a day, with dense barrages designed to overwhelm Israeli air defences by focusing on single targets, from military bases to cities.

"The next few days are crucial," said Mohanad Hage Ali, deputy director of research at the Carnegie Center in Beirut. If Hizbollah accepts a ceasefire with Israel without there being one in Gaza, "all the deaths so far will have been for nothing," he said. "But if the organisation can show that it can still strike back with force, it could make a huge difference . . . It would help restore morale and sustain the fight."

Hizbollah's rocket and missile ranges





It would also prompt another round of Israeli escalation, according to several Israeli officials familiar with the IDF's plans.

A Hizbollah missile strike on central Israel would see the IDF retaliating by hitting a wider range of targets in the militant group's stronghold in south Beirut, escalating from targeted killings to significant air strikes, said one official who asked not to be named.

In comparison to the air campaign, any subsequent land offensive would be far more complex and dangerous. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which aimed to establish a similar northern "security zone", is still viewed as the country's Vietnam. Furthermore, the Israeli army today is tired after a year of fighting Gaza.

Mofaz described a ground operation as "the last stage", and cautioned that it would not give Israel a big advantage. He pointed out that Israel has not called up reserves, and currently has only three divisions in the north — the same number as it deployed during the failed 2006 Lebanon war, and less than the four divisions that fought in Gaza. He reckons a ground attack is "not on the table for the next few days or even weeks".

But it may yet come. If it does, the ex-premier Olmert said there was no doubt who

would ultimately win — and the cost to both sides.

“At the end of the day Israel will survive and Hizbollah may suffer such a devastation that will destroy them, and leave large parts of Lebanon in rubble. But Israel will suffer a great deal also,” he said. “It will be the likes of which we have never suffered in all our wars with neighbours since 1948.”

Illustrations by Ian Bott and Steven Bernard. Cartography by Steven Bernard and Chris Cook.

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