

# Between Lebanon and Gaza: Hizbollah in Operation Cast Lead

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At the end of the Second Lebanon War, many claimed that the State of Israel had not succeeded in strengthening Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis Hizbollah. An examination of the organization's response to Operation Cast Lead and a comparison with its response to Operation Defensive Shield demonstrate that Israel's actions in the Second Lebanon War did in fact result in considerably stronger Israeli deterrence.

After the end of the Second Lebanon War, various elements commented on Israel's relative success or lack thereof in restoring its deterrence vis-à-vis Hizbollah. Many critics claimed that the fact that the organization maintained its capability of firing until the moment the war was over was proof of the IDF's lack of success in the war. Others held that the attempt to act against the intentions of the enemy with a widespread, powerful, and surprising attack on its military and civilian seats of government ("indirect influence") was ineffective, and that Israel should concentrate its efforts against Hizbollah's capabilities ("direct influence").

In the Second Lebanon War, the Israeli military used a variety of means against selected centers of gravity of the organization. On the one hand, the IDF operated against Hizbollah's capabilities, led by its high trajectory fire capability. Damage to its launching capabilities occurred in an initial strike against Hizbollah's array of rockets, in the hunt for launchers, and in the ground maneuvers directed at firing sites. On the other hand, the IDF attacked many structures in Beirut's Dahiya quarter, the center of Hizbollah's civilian and military leadership. The

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Dahiya attack was an example of an action intended to impact on the enemy's intentions and demonstrate the cost to be paid by Lebanon and its population in the event of a future war. This attack, like attacks on other villages and towns where the organization operated in a civilian environment, earned the name of "the Dahiya effect."

Those who criticize the extent of the effect of actions against the enemy's intentions claim that the enemy may act irrationally and make decisions that differ radically from what was intended by strikes on infrastructures and government and financial centers. Others claim that according to basic principles, a military is supposed to act first and foremost against the enemy's capabilities, and only thereafter against its intentions. Indeed, this is true, and every military action should strive towards this end.

Nonetheless, the way in which Hizbollah reacted in extreme cases after the Second Lebanon War proves that a disproportionate action against the enemy's intentions had a significant effect on strengthening Israel's deterrence and the way in which the organization operates. A short analysis of some events since the war shows that the Lebanese people and the leaders of the terrorist organization have heard the echoes of the explosions in the Dahiya quarter loud and clear.

This essay does not deal with the central event that took place in the period since the end of the Second Lebanon War, the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, the deputy secretary general of the organization for military matters, an assassination attributed by Hizbollah to Israel. Those wishing to examine the thesis of this essay with regard to this event may compare the organization's response in the first months after Mughniyeh's death to the organization's response after the assassination of its previous secretary general, Sheikh Abbas al-Musawi, in 1992.

Rather, this essay concentrates on the organization's response to the IDF's activity in the Gaza Strip during Operation Cast Lead, which ended in mid January 2009. A brief comparison of the response to this operation with the organization's response in Operation Defensive Shield demonstrates clearly that Israel's disproportionate activity in the Second Lebanon War was internalized and understood. Thus, Israel's deterrence with regard to Hizbollah is stronger than ever.

## Hizbollah's Response in Operation Defensive Shield

Following the September 2000 outbreak of the violent confrontation with the Palestinians, March 2002 was the deadliest month, with civilians and soldiers killed in seventeen suicide bombings in Israel and dozens of shooting attacks and infiltrations into settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. The suicide attack at the Park Hotel in Netanya on March 27, 2002, in which 29 civilians were killed during the Passover seder, was the last straw that convinced the Israeli government to embark on Operation Defensive Shield.

The operation began on March 29 with taking control of Arafat's offices in Ramallah, and lasted until Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's announcement of the end of the operation on April 21.<sup>1</sup> In the course of the operation, the Israeli army took over the cities in the West Bank (with the exception of Jericho and Hebron) as well as most of the rural areas, and operated for the first time in many years in the refugee camps in Nablus and Jenin. Thirty-four Israeli soldiers and 260 Palestinians were killed in the operation.

Operation Defensive Shield aroused a wave of anti-Israeli events around the globe, including demonstrations of support for the Palestinians, terrorist attacks against Jewish targets, sharply worded declarations on the part of Western leaders, and an emergency session of the United Nations Security Council. Most Arab states denounced Israel in the strongest possible terms, and acted to ensure a quick end to the operation, but only Hassan Nasrallah's organization acted militarily to assist the Palestinians.

As early as the first day of the operation, Hizbollah began firing artillery and anti-tank missiles at Israeli army outposts on the northern border. These events, called Northern Defensive Shield, were the organization's attempt to open a second fighting front and thus make it more difficult for the IDF to focus its activities on Judea and Samaria and the Gaza Strip. In claiming responsibility for the first firing event on March 30, the organization announced: "In addition to fulfilling the duty to liberate Lebanese territory, the resistance is warning the Zionist enemy not to continue its escalation against the Palestinian people."<sup>2</sup>

During the twenty-four days of the operation, Hizbollah fired more than 100 anti-tank missiles and over 500 mortar bombs and rockets.<sup>3</sup> The organization also infiltrated Israel to plant an explosive charge and

attempt an attack on the Gladiola outpost. In these events, nine soldiers were injured (five of them moderately).<sup>4</sup> Alongside attempts to harm IDF soldiers, the organization also fired at Israeli Air Force planes operating in Lebanon. Some of the bombs fired fell in Israeli territory and lightly injured civilians.

At the time the organization was carrying out attacks along the northern border, many of its senior officials issued announcements in support of the Palestinians and noted that the organization's activities were meant to help them in their struggle against Israel. In his speech on April 2, 2002, Hizbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah said: "At this stage, we are experiencing fateful, historic days; it is possible that what is happening now is not so different from what happened in 1948. Every Lebanese who carries out an act in defense of Palestine is above all working in defense of Lebanon. We will fulfill our responsibility without fear."<sup>5</sup> He explicitly called for opening all the fronts – political, economic, and military – against Israel, as the only way to remove the siege of the Palestinian people.<sup>6</sup> As part of this stance, the organization took open responsibility for every anti-Israel action during the course of the operation.

### **Hizbollah's Response in Operation Cast Lead**

At midday on Saturday, December 27, 2009, after years of rocket fire at the settlements near the Gaza Strip and the western part of the Negev, the IDF embarked on Operation Cast Lead. The operation started with a surprise widespread aerial attack on dozens of terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip, and ended 23 days later with a unilateral ceasefire declared by the Israeli government. In the operation, Israeli forces operated against terrorist targets throughout the Gaza Strip, while the ground maneuvers were carried out primarily in its northern parts. Ten IDF soldiers and three Israeli civilians died in the operation. The Palestinians reported more than 1,200 dead.

The Palestinian demand that Hizbollah assist them by opening a second combat front in the north was uttered virtually every day, but senior organization officials, led by Hassan Nasrallah, chose instead to respond with a long litany of complaints against the Arab states, saying the Arab states "must not allow this aggression to attain even a single one of its aims....Here the responsibility rests on the governments of the

Arab and Islamic world and the nations. The governments aren't lifting a finger – their people have to make them act.”<sup>7</sup> The secretary general gave a televised speech from his hiding place every night of the operation. Calling on the states of the region to take to the streets and demonstrate, he cast the responsibility for the operation on Egypt, announced a day of mourning, identified with the Palestinians, and even served as a military commentator on Israel's activity in the Gaza Strip and the extent of its effectiveness, but he was careful not to threaten Israel.

Moreover, Nasrallah expressed great concern that the operation in Gaza would be exploited for the purpose of an offensive move against his organization: “It is possible that the enemy will turn to doing something in Lebanon, will use this opportunity....All the words of reassurance that Israel will not fight on two fronts are irrelevant; Israel has already fought on four fronts.”<sup>8</sup> These statements were made by a man who six years earlier, in Operation Defensive Shield, had called on forcefully opening another front against Israel, and did so in practice.

During Operation Cast Lead, one terrorist attack against Israel (on January 8) was carried out from Lebanese territory: two rockets were fired, falling in the Nahariya area. In a second event (on January 14), another attempt was made to shoot at Israel; that time, two rockets fell on Lebanese territory and the Lebanese army and UN forces found three other rockets ready for launching. Hizbollah did not claim responsibility for these events, and the widespread assessment is that the fire was carried out by Palestinian organizations in support of the Palestinian struggle in the Gaza Strip. Even if this is not the case and the attacks were carried out with the authorization or assistance of Hizbollah, this time – unlike Operation Defensive Shield – senior organization officials chose to hide the fact and even issue vehement denials. For example, immediately after the shooting at the Galilee panhandle, Muhammed Fneish, the Lebanese minister of labor and a Hizbollah representative, stated “We [Hizbollah] do not know who launched these rockets. We are in no way connected.”<sup>9</sup>

In the two shooting incidents from Lebanon during Operation Cast Lead, Israel responded with artillery fire towards the sources of the shooting. In the past, Hizbollah would respond to such incidents by returning fire and presenting the Israeli action as clear examples of the infringement of Lebanese sovereignty. During Operation Cast Lead,

not only did the organization not respond; it also expressed its concern that Israel would take advantage of the shooting to launch an offensive against it. The minister of labor said: "We refuse to accept the enemy's attempt to take advantage of the attacks in order to turn its aggression towards Lebanon."<sup>10</sup>

The number of Palestinian fatalities in the two operations further strengthens the assessment that Hizbollah's considerations have changed and that it has no desire to respond violently against the State of Israel. Despite the data that from its perspective indicates the Palestinian hardship resulting from Operation Cast Lead and the number of casualties, the organization chose not to respond.

**Table 1. Hizbollah Responses: Defensive Shield and Cast Lead**

	Duration of operation	Number of Palestinian dead	Attacks from the Lebanese border	Mortar bombs and rockets on Israel	Casualties in attacks from the Lebanese border
<b>Defensive Shield</b>	24 days	~250	19	Over 500	9
<b>Cast Lead</b>	23 days	~1,200	1	2	0

### Conclusion

The hundreds of rockets fired by Hizbollah during Operation Defensive Shield were exchanged during Operation Cast Lead for a series of speeches and general declarations by senior organization officials on the need for the Arab world to assist the Palestinians. Unprecedented public pressure from the Palestinian and Lebanese street forced the organizations in Lebanon to react during Operation Cast Lead. The first and quite muted response came only on January 8, 2009, almost two weeks after the beginning of the operation, and seemed like a forced, mechanical response. This essay has sketched the essential difference between it and the response during Operation Defensive Shield, when the organization responded as early as the first day. The decision not to respond after Israel returned artillery fire and the avoidance of explicit threats against Israel bring this difference into even sharper relief.

Hizbollah's decision not to respond to Operation Cast Lead and to refrain in every possible way from opening another front may

be attributed to a broad range of reasons (including the Lebanese parliamentary elections). There is no doubt that some of them played a role in the situation assessments made by senior organization officials during the days of fighting in Gaza. The results of the Second Lebanon War, such as UN Resolution 1701 and the deployment of Lebanese army soldiers and UNIFIL forces in southern Lebanon, also had a certain effect, but the organization's lack of response, its focus on talk instead of action, and the lack of practical help extended to the Palestinians in Gaza all point first and foremost to the effect of the Second Lebanon War on the organization's leadership.

Because the war's ground maneuver left a relatively slight imprint and the organization's capabilities were largely reconstructed, it is possible to attribute Hizbollah's inaction to Israel's disproportionate response. Despite skepticism in Israel, to this day the streets of Dahiya and the homes of Ita a-Shaab are a reminder of this response, capable of convincing at least the Lebanese and their leaders. As Saad Hariri, the head of the Future Movement in the Lebanese parliament, said during Operation Cast Lead: "I am sure that as a lesson of the Second Lebanon War, Hizbollah will not act against Israel's border."<sup>11</sup>

Israel's actions in the Gaza Strip during Operation Cast Lead also served as a reminder to Hizbollah that the State of Israel continues to respond with force to terrorist attacks carried out against it. Nevertheless, the analysis presented here by no means guarantees that the situation will hold indefinitely. It is quite possible that under certain circumstances, because of a situation assessment in the organization or because of a change in Lebanon's internal situation (after the 2009 elections or because of the conclusion of the work by the team investigating the assassination of former prime minister Hariri), the organization might choose to carry out a terrorist attack against the State of Israel on the northern border or abroad. Should the organization decide to do so, the response of the IDF will be the key to maintaining Israel's deterrent capability.

## Notes

- 1 The IDF announced the official end of the operation on April 25, 2002.
- 2 Radio Noor, March 30, 2002
- 3 The data is from an internal Israeli army document.

- 4 Between April 14 and 23, 2002, the organization did not carry out any terrorist attacks because of widespread international pressure on the Lebanese government.
- 5 Al-Manar, April 2, 2002.
- 6 *Al-Siasa*, March 31, 2002.
- 7 Roi Nahmias, "Nasrallah: Egypt a Partner to Crime and Disaster," Ynet, December 28, 2008.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Reuters, "Hizbollah: Not Involved in Katyusha Fire," Ynet, January 15, 2009.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Amir Bouhbout and Jacky Hogi, "Don't Lose the North," *Maariv*, January 7, 2009.