

Hizbollah and the Next War with Israel: Experience from Syria and Gaza

Benedetta Berti and Yoram Schweitzer

Following the end of the hostilities in Gaza between Israel and Hamas in the summer of 2014, a debate arose over which of the parties was victorious and which was vanquished. Some argue that Hamas' military gains in the last war were greatly offset by significant losses to its arsenal, infrastructure, and military leadership and by the substantial damage inflicted on the population. At the same time, Hamas' political and financial position continues to be precarious, with the group facing growing regional isolation and ostensibly needing to allow Palestinian Authority security forces to be deployed at Gaza's borders in order to obtain any significant relaxation of the economic restrictions it has fought so vehemently. On the other hand, many have argued that despite these considerations, Hamas can still feel satisfied by its latest military performance: the group not only denied Israel a clear-cut victory, but de facto it was able to dictate the duration of the war by rejecting numerous ceasefire attempts, while demonstrating improved military and guerrilla skills over its performance in Operation Cast Lead. Hamas also managed to restore its position on the political map as a significant player and – at least according to a recent poll – enjoyed a short but significant popularity boost among the general Palestinian population.¹

The question of Hamas' and Israel's respective gains and losses in the last round of hostilities is not only significant for determining both future political developments in the Gaza Strip and the evolution of the complex relationship between the two parties. Rather, both the war-fighting and the war-termination phases of the 2014 Gaza war will be watched closely by one of Israel's main regional foes, the Lebanese Hizbollah, seeking to draw relevant lessons to be applied in its "next war" with Israel.

Dr. Benedetta Berti is a research fellow at INSS. Yoram Schweitzer is a senior research fellow at INSS.

The article begins by assessing Hizbollah's current domestic and regional status and analyzing its overall strategy. It then delves deeper into the question of a possible "next war" between the Lebanese-Shiite organization and Israel, highlighting relevant lessons the organization might draw from Israel's last war against Hamas as well as how it is affected by its ongoing involvement in Syria.

The Looming War? Hizbollah's Preparations since the "Divine Victory"

Over the past decades, the relationship and the patterns of confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah have evolved considerably. The first phase of hostilities occurred between 1982, when the group was initially formed, and 1990, in the context of the Lebanese civil war and following Israel's full scale military intervention in Lebanon. Hizbollah then relied on tactics that ranged from conventional attacks against the Israeli army to asymmetric warfare and classical terrorism in and out of Lebanon, including car bombings, suicide attacks, and kidnappings of Israelis and other foreigners. With the end of the civil war the rules of engagement between Israel and Hizbollah changed dramatically, with the battlefield restricted primarily to the "security zone," an area that constituted about 10 percent of Lebanon and was under the military control of both the IDF and the Southern Lebanese Army, a Christian militia that acted as an Israeli proxy. Despite two rounds of military escalations, in 1993 and 1996, the relationship became increasingly shaped by the logic of mutual restraint and reciprocity. The rules were even transcribed into a written, though unsigned, understanding that stipulated that the IDF would abstain from targeting civilians or civilian targets in exchange for Hizbollah's restraint from similar attacks in Israel proper.² Following Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon to the Blue Line in 2000, the direct confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah became even more restricted and was mostly confined to so-called disputed areas, such as Shab'a Farms, an area under Israeli control that Hizbollah and the Lebanese government claim as Lebanese (while the UN sees it as Syrian).

The rules of the game changed again dramatically in the summer of 2006, when a Hizbollah cross-border operation aimed at kidnapping IDF soldiers to exchange them for Lebanese prisoners in Israeli custody triggered the 34-day Second Lebanon War. Israel responded to what it perceived as an erosion of its deterrence (with respect to Hizbollah as well as more generally at the regional level) by raising the stakes and both increasing the level of the military response and extending the range of operations to

the north of the Litani River. The violent escalation was the direct result of Hizbollah's miscalculation of the Israeli reaction to its breaches of the rules of the games, as subsequently admitted by Hizbollah's Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah.

The 2006 war was a watershed in Israel-Hizbollah relations, and since then, both parties have undertaken serious "soul-searching," investing in identifying key vulnerabilities and meeting the challenges posed by their adversaries.

In the case of Hizbollah, that preparation has resulted in a military buildup, with the organization significantly expanding its ranks, upgrading its arsenal and infrastructure, and investing in improving its combat capabilities, with the direct assistance of Iran (and Syria). In the next war with Israel, Hizbollah would more than likely pursue the trend, noted already in July 2006, of its transition from the non-conventional militia it was in the 1980s to a hybrid army (or "army without a state").³ In 2006, this meant that Hizbollah effectively relied on a combination of sub-conventional and conventional tactics while also fortifying its small units engaged in guerrilla warfare tactics with standoff weapons normally associated with conventional military forces.⁴

Since then Hizbollah has invested in upgrading its conventional arsenal as well as in training and preparing for more conventional engagements, a process that has gone hand-in-hand with the group's efforts to rebuild and qualitatively and quantitatively improve its underground bunkers and tunnel infrastructure – to reduce its vulnerability to aerial strikes – while significantly upgrading its rocket and missiles arsenal.⁵ Investments in improving intelligence collection as well as counter-intelligence capabilities have also been part of Hizbollah's post-2006 activity, for example with the group focusing on maintaining and upgrading its communication systems, including its own fiber optic network, sponsored by Iran.⁶ In parallel, Hizbollah has focused on training for cross-border operations into Israel.

Military preparations have been matched by very clear political statements indicating Hizbollah's vision and strategy with respect to the next war with Israel. Indeed, while Nasrallah had referred to the July 2006 war as the "divine victory," he later described the next round of confrontation as the "decisive war,"⁷ indicating clearly the group's ambitious goals with respect to its future engagement with Israel. Similarly, Hizbollah's post-2006 military doctrine has centered on the notion of strategic parity and proportional retaliation, a concept Nasrallah described by asserting that the new power

equation would be “Tel Aviv for Beirut, and Ben Gurion International Airport for Rafiq Hariri International Airport.”⁸ The organization also stated that it would respond to any territorial invasion by the IDF with a territorial invasion of its own, sending its units to occupy the Galilee region.⁹ Although this declaration was likely intended for psychological warfare purposes, it indicates a drive to take the war into Israel’s territory.

At the same time, it is a mistake to assume that the extensive war preparations since 2006 (on both sides) should serve as an indication of the parties’ eagerness to engage in another round of war. Quite the contrary: since 2006 both Israel and Hizbollah have shown a common interest in preventing another war, resulting in a generally restrained attitude, motivated in turn by the mutually shared assumption that the next round of hostilities will be far more severe and intense than any previous confrontation between the parties. The system, based on mutual deterrence, has de facto been in place since 2006, resulting in an uneasy yet almost undisturbed calm across the Blue Line.¹⁰

However, the mutual restraint in perpetrating direct attacks has not been matched in the other areas; for example several attacks have been attributed to Israel, including the targeted killings of Hizbollah senior commanders such as Imad Mughniyeh in February 2008 and Hassan Lakis in 2014. Similarly, in the past three years there have been a number of attacks against convoys of sophisticated arms shipments in Syria that were intended for Hizbollah (and on at least one instance the strikes took place in Lebanon). Hizbollah has also been blamed for some sporadic small scale attacks against the IDF along the Lebanese and Syrian borders; while its operatives have allegedly been active in the international arena, where the group has sent its operatives to attack Israeli and Jewish targets in Turkey, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Thailand (among others).

In this context, it is especially important to assess if and how the Syrian civil war and its domestic impact in Lebanon has changed Hizbollah’s calculus with respect to the next war with Israel.

Enter Syria: Hizbollah’s Current Predicament and the Likelihood of Another War with Israel

The Syrian civil war has forced Hizbollah to focus its attention toward supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad, both politically and militarily. Hizbollah’s support for Assad is motivated by a number of strategic considerations, including Hizbollah’s interest in preserving its political

partnership with Syria as well as in maintaining the current domestic balance of power in Lebanon. Hizbollah's partnership with Iran and the role of Syria as both a member of Tehran's "axis of resistance" and the political and logistic link between Tehran and Hizbollah also contribute to understanding the depth of the Hizbollah commitment to Assad.

Hizbollah has therefore actively supported the Assad regime since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in early 2011, although its role has gradually evolved from offering political support and serving in an advisory capacity to providing both training as well as direct military support to conduct offensive and defensive operations.¹¹ Relying also on the post-2006 increased focus on conventional training, Hizbollah fighters have at times been able to provide key artillery support to the Syrian army, contributing substantively to a number of important victories; including the taking of al-Qusayr in the spring of 2013, a town in the west of Syria considered critical to securing a safe corridor between Syria and Lebanon and between Damascus and the Alawite areas in the northwestern coastal areas of the country. In March 2014, Hizbollah played an integral role in the taking of Yabroud, resulting in cutting a major rebel supply line as well as in ousting the opposition forces from their main remaining stronghold in the embattled Qalamoun region.

Not surprisingly, Hizbollah's campaign in Syria has forced the group to prioritize its "eastern front," resulting in another direct incentive for the group to avoid getting dragged into another war with Israel. This explains why Hizbollah's reactions to a series of unclaimed aerial strikes against Hizbollah assets in Syria over the past three years has not resulted in major retaliation from the group. Even following the February 24, 2014 reported attack on a Hizbollah target in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley,¹² Hizbollah's response (which likely included both a rocket attack along with explosive devices planted along the border with the Golan as well as in the Shab'a Farms area)¹³ also seemed to signal an interest in preventing further escalation.

At the same time, since the beginning of the civil war, Hizbollah has paid increasing attention to its own domestic situation in Lebanon. First, the civil war in Syria has exacerbated preexisting political-cum-sectarian cleavages within Lebanon, in turn raising the tones and animosity of the political debate. To add to the complexity of the current situation, the ongoing Syrian conflict has put additional pressure on Lebanon through the steady influx of Syrian refugees, numbering roughly 1.2 million by

August 2014 – more than 20 percent of Lebanon’s total population – and the number is expected to rise to 1.5 million by the end of the year.¹⁴

Second, Hizbollah’s investment in Syria and its support of the Bashar al-Assad regime has made both the organization as well as the Shiite community in Lebanon a target of violence perpetrated by Lebanese Salafi-jihadist groups. Indeed, in the past twelve months there have been a number of violent attacks against Hizbollah, including a string of suicide attacks against Iranian targets, such as the embassy in Beirut, and Hizbollah’s strongholds, such as Beirut’s southern Dahiya suburb.

In turn, this rising “takfiri threat,” as described by Secretary General Nasrallah, has been taken extremely seriously by the organization, which has both invested in boosting its own surveillance and protection of assets, personnel, and communities, as well as in increasing its cooperation with the Lebanese armed forces. Such assistance is meaningful from an operational standpoint as well as from a political one, as it is important to Hizbollah to make sure the attacks against them and their community are treated as a national terrorism threat and not as exclusively a Hizbollah problem. Containing the takfiri threat is thus especially important to Hizbollah for a number of reasons, including the group’s interest in preventing internal strife in Lebanon and its need to be seen as an effective security provider to the Lebanese Shiite community, which constitutes the backbone of Hizbollah’s support in Lebanon.

In this context of internal polarization and the rising threat by radical Sunni jihadist groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL, Hizbollah has turned its political capital and organizational resources inwards, while continuing its external campaign in Syria. Therefore, in the short term, this combination of domestic pressure and external involvement will likely help lower Hizbollah’s interest in confronting Israel even further. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility of a war breaking out, either as result of a gross miscalculation by Israel or by Hizbollah, or in response to a dramatic development on the Iranian-Israeli front.

In the long term, it is far from clear whether Hizbollah’s current involvement in Syria will help or hinder its future performance in a war with Israel. Hizbollah has been entangled in Syria, with an estimate of roughly 3,000-4,000 fighters involved in the hostilities,¹⁵ a high number for an organization whose force is believed to comprise roughly 5,000 full time fighters and between 15,000 and 20,000 part time/reserve officers.¹⁶ Also, the organization is suffering from significant losses in Syria, among

them important military commanders and an estimated number of at least 1000 fighters.¹⁷ Still, the bulk of the group's military structure and arsenal that would be used in the next war with Israel largely remains intact. Significantly, Hizbollah has continued to invest in upgrading and expanding its arsenal and ranks since the war in Syria began, while also trying to keep militants trained especially to fight Israel – for example anti-tank units – away from the Syrian battlefield.¹⁸ In addition, Syria is serving as an important learning opportunity for the group, and especially for its newer recruits, offering valuable lessons in both conventional fighting and complex offensive operations in unfamiliar terrain.

Looking Ahead: Lessons from the 2014 War in Gaza

Even though Hizbollah's current predicament should not represent an incentive for the group to pursue an all-out confrontation with Israel, this does not mean that the Lebanese-Shiite group has not been paying close attention to the recent round of escalation between Hamas and Israel and analyzing the lessons of July-August 2014. Indeed, Hizbollah is an especially sophisticated organization with a keen interest in fully studying and understanding its adversary, and as such Hizbollah is always closely watching Israeli behavior and activity, both on the battlefield as well as in the political arena. Hizbollah followed the summer 2014 war closely, expressing its solidarity with Gaza on numerous occasions, denouncing Israeli actions, and going as far as mentioning its intention to support the "resistance." Given its current predicament, Hizbollah clearly did not intend to translate any of these political statements into actions.

Looking at the recent war in Gaza, Hizbollah is likely to have drawn a number of lessons regarding both Israel's war-fighting capabilities as well as will.

First, the recent engagement between Hamas and Israel confirmed a lesson Hizbollah had already learned in 2006, namely the effectiveness of relying on short range rockets – easy to store, move, and fire – launched in a concentrated barrage and able to frighten the civilian population and disrupt Israel's sense of normalcy. Concentrated barrages of rockets on border towns may lead to mass evacuations, which in turn can be marketed effectively as a military achievement – much like Hamas has been doing in the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge – while also serving as a tool of psychological warfare and wielding leverage on the Israeli government. In the case of Hizbollah, short range rockets can be

backed by a far more sophisticated, accurate, and long range arsenal of medium and long range rockets.

In disrupting civilian life in Israel, lowering morale, and creating political leverage, the recent war between Hamas and Israel also highlighted especially apt choices of targets, led by Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport. In a future war with Israel, Hizbollah would likely rely on its considerably more sophisticated and precise weapons to target Israel's main civilian airport. This is very well in line with Nasrallah's post-2006 declarations hinting at the group's interest in targeting Israel's critical infrastructure, including power plants, gas depots, airports, and naval ports.

In parallel, a Hizbollah reading of the Israeli public's reactions to the foiled Hamas attempts to perpetrate cross-border operations via its underground tunnel networks can confirm to Hizbollah the potential effectiveness of both its impressive underground system as well as of its recent focus on training units to conduct cross-border operations into Israel. While Hizbollah would not be able to hold ground in Israel, still, a number of targeted incursions into Israel via underground tunnels would be an extremely effective tool of psychological warfare.

Second, Hizbollah is also likely to have observed Israel's resolve to fight in Gaza and drawn the conclusion that now more than ever, the country is extremely casualty-averse and reluctant to engage in sustained ground maneuvers. Some may even infer that Israel's reluctance to engage in an extensive ground operation in Gaza despite the ongoing rocket fire suggests a far more restrained approach than that implied by Jerusalem's declarations with respect to the next war with Hizbollah. Third, the Gaza war also underscored a lesson that had emerged clearly from the July 2006 confrontation, namely, that when the guns fall silent, Hizbollah will be able to market not losing as a victory, no matter the cost that its military apparatus or Lebanon may end up paying.

Of course, none of these lessons are entirely new or surprising, but they may contribute to refine Hizbollah's strategy and approach to the next conflict with Israel. At the same time, relying too much on analogies between Gaza and Lebanon may prove risky for Hizbollah.

Indeed, due to the dramatic differences, both qualitative and quantitative, between Hamas' and Hizbollah's arsenals, and considering the latter's far more precise and sophisticated rockets and missiles, Israel may choose to react from the initial stage of the fighting in a more extensive way in the context of a confrontation with Hizbollah, leading thus to an all-out

war resulting in greater civilian casualties (on both sides) and extensive damages to infrastructure. Similarly, Israel would likely not tolerate the closing of its aerial or maritime space and would presumably react to break the “siege” at almost any cost. A wrong translation of Israel’s relatively limited offensive policy in Gaza could be especially risky for Hizbollah if it were to lead to yet another miscalculation, which, much like in 2006, would cost Lebanon dearly, only this time in a much more lethal scope.

Looking Ahead at the Evolving Hizbollah-Israel Dynamic

Ever since the relatively abrupt ending to the July 2006 war between Hizbollah and Israel, the overall situation along the Blue Line has been calm. Indeed the parties’ mutual perception that the next round of war would be both extensive and incredibly damaging has led to a situation of uneasy calm regulated by de facto mutual deterrence. In this context, the beginning of the Syria civil war has further reinforced the status quo by focusing Hizbollah’s attention on its “eastern front.”

Looking ahead, and short of an unexpected development in the Syrian civil war, Hizbollah will continue its involvement in the fighting in order to secure the survival of the Assad regime. It will also continue to invest additional resources to defend its assets, infrastructure, and communities against takfiri treats within Lebanon. In this context, the group will likely try to avoid opening another front with Israel, while still remaining alert with respect to Israel’s plans and continuing to monitor Israeli activity and behavior. In this context, Hizbollah is also likely to have watched the last round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas closely, seeking to draw relevant lessons.

Thus while some insights can indeed be gained from the summer 2014 war, still the Israeli strategy in Gaza cannot serve as an exact model for future military campaigns in Lebanon.

Notes

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- 2 Israel-Lebanon Ceasefire Understanding, April 26, 1996, http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/il_ceasefire_1996.pdf.
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- 4 David E. Johnson, "Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and in Gaza," RAND, 2011, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1085.html>.
- 5 Richard Beeston and Nicholas Blanford, "Hizbollah Stockpiles 40,000 Rockets near Israel Border," *The Times*, August 5, 2009.
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- 8 See Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Speech (Arabic), February 16, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPtto7KnHCM>.
- 9 Dominic Evans, "Hizb'Allah Chief Threatens to Seize Control of Galilee," *National Post*, February 17, 2011; "Resistance Setting New Equations to Protect Lebanon," *al-Manar*, February 19, 2011.
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- 13 Gili Cohen and DPA, "IDF Fires on Hizbollah Position after Blast on Lebanon Border," *Haaretz*, March 14, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.579928>.
- 14 UN Refugee Agency, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>.
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- 16 Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Project 19, April 2014, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf.
- 17 "Infographic: Hezbollah Fighters Killed in Syria," *al-Akhbar*, March 31, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/19226>.
- 18 Nicholas Blanford, "Hezbollah lowers fighting age as it takes on Islamic State," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 18, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/0818/Hezbollah-lowers-fighting-age-as-it-takes-on-Islamic-State-video>.