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Does Hezbollah Want a War with Israel Now?

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Voices in the Arab media have recently suggested that war between Israel and Hezbollah may erupt this coming summer. This debate began even before the rise in tension between the United States and Iran in the Gulf, which once again brought to the fore the possibility of Iran using Hezbollah as a proxy against Israel. In recent speeches, however, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah acted quickly to calm the waters, while delivering messages designed to deter Israel from taking measures against Hezbollah. Nasrallah asserted that Hezbollah was capable of striking strategic sites on the Israeli home front and conquering parts of the Galilee. These statements indicate that as far as Hezbollah is concerned, the current circumstances are not convenient for a conflict with Israel, due to Hezbollah's continuing involvement in the war in Syria and a wish to avoid undermining Hezbollah's recent achievements in the Lebanese political system. Also important is Hezbollah's deepening economic plight, resulting in part from American sanctions against the organization and its patron, Iran, although these economic difficulties have not yet affected Hezbollah's continued investment in its military buildup and deployment for a future war with Israel. Nevertheless, even if Hezbollah has no interest in a large scale conflict with Israel at this time, escalation as a result of particular measures by Israel in Lebanon and the organization's response, or from Hezbollah's own actions against Israel aimed at serving Iranian interests, cannot be ruled out. Israel must therefore prepare in advance for the possibility of a military campaign in the north.

Discussion in the Arab media, particularly in the Gulf states, Syria, and Lebanon, of the possibility of another war between Hezbollah and Israel was prompted primarily by recent statements attributed to Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. On April 21, 2019, the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Rai* reported that at a closed meeting with Hezbollah commanders, Nasrallah allegedly stated that preparations should be made for a war against Israel this summer. Shortly after this report, Nasrallah denied making these remarks on a number of occasions, while at the same time delivering a cognitive-deterrent message to Israel. He emphasized Hezbollah's ability to cause severe harm to Israel, citing a Hezbollah plan to conquer the Galilee, despite Israel's discovery of tunnels dug by Hezbollah, and Israel's weakness and fear of an all-out war, as demonstrated recently by its behavior in face of rocket and missile fire from the Gaza Strip:

- In a speech (*al-Mayadeen*, April 22) at a ceremony marking the 34th anniversary of the founding of the Imam al-Mahdi scouts youth movement, Nasrallah denied the report in the Kuwaiti newspaper. He said that Israel would not begin a war against Lebanon because it knew that the Israeli home front was unprepared for war. Nasrallah mentioned the rocket fired at central Israel from the Gaza Strip, saying that it demonstrated Israel's vulnerability.
- In another speech (*al-Manar*, April 22) in memory of Mustafa Badr al-Din, who was assassinated in Syria three years ago, Nasrallah dismissed the likelihood that Israel would launch a war, arguing that Israel is afraid to enter the Gaza Strip, and thus even more fearful of entering southern Lebanon. He threatened that any Israeli forces entering Lebanon would be destroyed, declaring that it was important that everyone know this. Nasrallah also hinted at Hezbollah's ability to strike strategic targets in Israel, saying that he did not wish to talk about a possible strike against the ammonia tanks in Haifa, but about Hezbollah's land forces, which would enable him to invade the Galilee. This was a message to Israel that elimination of the tunnels dug by Hezbollah on the Israeli-Lebanese border would not affect Hezbollah's ability and intention to conquer targets in the Galilee.

Nasrallah's remarks reflect his belief that in the current conditions, it is not convenient for Hezbollah to start a war with Israel, and that he hopes to deter Israel from such an offensive. Over the past five years, Hezbollah was heavily involved in the civil war in Syria, devoting extensive attention and resources to this theater. The war in Syria has exacted a heavy price from Hezbollah – 1,800 of its combatants were killed and 8,000 wounded. The organization had to provide financial support for the families of those killed, and to invest in rehabilitation of the wounded. Nasrallah also wishes to avoid undermining Hezbollah's achievements in the internal Lebanese system, reflected in the results of the May 2018 elections and in the composition of the new government, where Hezbollah's weight increased and its camp accounted for a majority of the ministers. Hezbollah has veto power over the government's decisions and controls key ministries with large budgets. A military event is liable to jeopardize these achievements.

In addition, recent months have shown growing indication of Hezbollah's heightened distress in a number of aspects. Hezbollah's economic plight has forced the organization to cut salaries and benefits of those on its payroll. For example, a large cut in the salary of Hezbollah combatants was reported: married combatants are receiving only half of their salaries, and the salaries of unmarried combatants have been cut even more. Salaries of service providers on Hezbollah's behalf in communications, education, and medicine have also been cut, and it was reported that some of the employees in the organization's religious institutions have not received their salaries for several months. In addition,

Hezbollah has closed several hundred offices in order to cut rental costs and has stopped hiring new employees. Simultaneously, it has appealed to the general public to increase donations to the organization, with charity boxes being hung in public places.

Hezbollah's economic troubles are due primarily to an increase in its expenses, following its continued involvement in fighting in Syria (although its presence there has been reduced) and the need to care for the wounded and the families of those killed, while its sources of financing have dwindled. This loss of income is caused in part by Lebanon's problematic economic situation, which makes it difficult for Hezbollah to use state funds to strengthen its status among the population (the current attempts by Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri to institute a policy of "budget austerity" in order to reduce the country's huge deficit and promote reforms have aroused internal opposition and have yet to succeed). Another significant factor is the sanctions imposed on Hezbollah by the US administration and other American measures designed to stifle the organization economically, such as the recent call by the US Treasury Department offering a monetary reward for information about Hezbollah's financial personnel.

Hezbollah's difficulties have been exacerbated over the past year by the economic distress of its patron, Iran, which is subject to mounting heavy economic sanctions from the United States. Iran is the main contributor to Hezbollah's annual budget (estimates are that Iran gives Hezbollah approximately \$700 million a year out of the organization's total budget of \$1.1 billion). Iran's distress puts pressure on Hezbollah, although there is still no information about the size of the cut in this budget.

Pressure is also mounting against Hezbollah in the political arena, especially after Great Britain joined the countries categorizing the entire organization (including its non-military wings) as a terrorist organization (the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, and Israel). American recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights (March 2019) generates further pressure on Hezbollah because of the dispute (albeit still limited) about whether the Shab'a Farms area belongs to Lebanon or Syria. Lebanon's right to this area is central to Hezbollah's resistance narrative, which holds that it acts to liberate the area from Israel. In this context, the rare comment by Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt in an interview on Russian television on April 25 that the Shab'a Farms area is not Lebanese is notable, and was quickly contradicted by members of Hezbollah's Lebanese coalition.

Hezbollah's weak response so far to the severe blow it suffered from the IDF in the framework of Operation Northern Shield following Israel's discovery and destruction of Hezbollah's tunnels penetrating into Israeli territory also likely indicates a lack of interest in a conflict in the near future. Only recently, on April 25, UNIFIL announced that it

recognized that three of Hezbollah's tunnels had penetrated into Israel. UNIFIL called again for the demolishing of the tunnels in Lebanon, thereby legitimizing Israel's actions.

Nevertheless, these challenges facing Hezbollah do not obstruct its continued efforts to invest in its military buildup and deployment toward a possible war with Israel. The organization has diverse financial resources and large assets accumulated over the years that it can use for this purpose. Furthermore, although it seems that Hezbollah has no interest in a conflict with Israel at the current time, an outbreak resulting from individual measures taken by Israel leading to a response by the organization, or following an initiative by Hezbollah itself in the service of the Iranian interest cannot be ruled out. In view of the possibility of escalation into a large scale conflict, even if this runs counter to the current interests of both, Israel should prepare in advance for the possibility of a military campaign in the north.