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**Is Hezbollah More Ready to Engage in Conflict with Israel?**

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**There are signs that Hezbollah is more ready than in the past to take risks vis-à-vis Israel, though at this stage it is unclear whether the organization will further escalate the situation. No deliberate reversal is evident – Hezbollah is still interested in avoiding war – but it is making an effort to consolidate the deterrence equation with Israel. This approach represents a shift from the restraint the organization displayed in the final months of President Trump's tenure, in order to preclude any excessive response. Although the Biden administration has not yet formulated its policy vis-à-vis Lebanon and Hezbollah, the organization's leadership, like its patron Iran, believes there is a window of opportunity to advance interests with respect to Israel and the Lebanese arena. According to the Israeli intelligence estimate published recently, in the coming year Hezbollah may choose limited and short confrontations ("battle days"). The exchange of public messages between the organization and Israel supports this impression. If Hezbollah initiates an attack that will lead to a military confrontation, Israel will face a dilemma regarding if and how to respond: should Israel contain the incidents, or should it view them as a strategic threat and cause for widespread military action that would harm the organization's infrastructure. As for the Biden administration's policy toward Lebanon and Hezbollah, Israel should encourage the United States to continue its political and economic pressure on the organization, alongside ongoing involvement and assistance in Lebanon.**

Hezbollah has recently shown greater willingness to take risks regarding a possible military confrontation with Israel, which contrasts with the period of restraint the organization imposed on itself in the last months of the Trump administration. Since the new administration entered the White House, this has been reflected mainly in the realization of Hezbollah's threats to try and harm Israeli flights in Lebanese skies – after a long period (since October 2019) of avoiding such action – when on February 3, 2021 it launched an anti-aircraft missile against an Israeli drone; the missile failed to hit the drone. Spokesmen for the organization boasted of the action as evidence of their determination to prevent Israeli activity in Lebanese airspace and to preserve the deterrence equation with Israel.

Hezbollah's temerity seems to be coordinated with Iran and stems from the organization's assessment that Israel is preoccupied with its internal affairs in light of the ongoing pandemic and political crisis, and is therefore not in a place to conduct a risky military campaign. In addition, the organization perceives a window of opportunity created by the change of command in the United States. In the final months of the Trump administration, it was clear that the organization exercised caution in its operations along the Israel-Lebanon border, and had difficulty demonstrating the deterrence equation that Nasrallah promised to implement by force against the IDF. For example:

- a. After two failed attempts at revenge, Hezbollah refrained from the action against Israel it promised in response to the killing of one of its combatants in Syria (July 2020). The only achievement that Nasrallah could present in this context is the pressure imposed on the IDF following the ongoing tensions on the Lebanese border, which prompted reinforced deployment. Nasrallah attributed this deployment to Hezbollah's deterrent force and IDF concerns about its military strength.
- b. Hezbollah's lack of response to the widespread attacks attributed to Israel on its assets in Syria – attacks that were intended to thwart weapons transfers from Iran and damage Hezbollah's infrastructure in the Golan Heights.
- c. Hezbollah has also refrained from any action against Israel along the Lebanese border following the killing of Iranian nuclear scientist Fakhrizadeh (November 2020), attributed to Israel, arguing that the response should come from the side targeted, namely Iran. It seems that publicizing this position was designed to calm internal criticism in Lebanon that the organization is in the service of Iran.

In a speech delivered on February 16 (commemorating the anniversary of the death of his predecessor, Mousavi, who was killed by Israel), Nasrallah discussed the possibility of a confrontation with Israel. His reference was to the speech by IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi at the annual conference of the Institute for National Security Studies (January 26), and to the Israeli intelligence assessment published recently regarding the feasibility of "battle days," i.e., limited rounds of confrontation. His remarks underscored the importance he attaches to the deterrence equation vis-à-vis Israel and the organization's determination – even though he claimed he was not interested in war – to respond strongly to any Israeli move. Regarding Kochavi, who insisted on the legitimacy of a "moral and effective" attack by the IDF on Hezbollah's missile deposits hidden among the Lebanese civilian population, Nasrallah warned that if Israel harmed Lebanese civilians, Hezbollah would cause severe damage to the Israeli home front – the worst since 1948. He claimed that this too is justified, since all Israelis are military reservists. Regarding the assessment that Hezbollah is interested in "battle days" with the IDF, Nasrallah clarified that Israel is "playing with fire" when it thinks that exchanges of

blows between the parties will be limited and not lead to a broad campaign. He added that although it does not want a confrontation, his organization will fight back if it happens.

Although the Biden administration has not yet fully formulated its policy vis-à-vis the Lebanese theater, or specifically with regard to Hezbollah, it seems that the organization, like its patron Iran, identifies a window of opportunity to advance its interests in view of Biden's expected change in policy from the Trump stance toward the Shiite axis. The previous administration advocated "maximum pressure" on Hezbollah, in parallel with the pressure it exerted on Iran (expanding sanctions on its members and its supporters in the Lebanese system; demanding a reduction in Hezbollah's influence in the new Lebanese government, in contrast to France, which is willing to accept Hezbollah's political status in the Lebanese system; and pressuring Lebanon to compromise and move forward with negotiations with Israel on the maritime border). At the same time, Hezbollah has suffered a few blows in the international arena in the past year, reflected mainly by the wave of 13 new countries that now recognize it as a terrorist organization.

A policy paper was submitted recently to the Biden administration by the Washington International Crisis Group, headed by Robert Malley, until his recent appointment as Biden's envoy on the Iranian issue. The paper advised the administration to change the US perspective on Lebanon, and instead of promoting an effort to weaken Hezbollah, adopt a new approach aimed at strengthening the Lebanese state and preventing its collapse, by supporting the French initiative and forming a government with Hezbollah.

Even in the Lebanese domestic arena, despite claims that Hezbollah has benefited from the paralysis of the political system and continues to strengthen its power bases among the country's Shiite population, the dismal Lebanese reality has led to increased public criticism of the organization. This emerges from the [results of a public opinion poll](#) conducted in Lebanon (November 2020) by David Pollock of the Washington Institute, which indicated a clear decline in support for Hezbollah in recent years among the Lebanese public, including among the Shiite community. Hezbollah's extensive campaign, marking the anniversary of the killing of Qasem Soleimani (January 2020) and bordering on worship of his persona, also drew widespread criticism in Lebanon that Hezbollah was operating in the service of Iran.

Looking ahead, a possible change in US policy toward Iran (and in Hezbollah's view, perhaps toward the organization as well) concomitant with Lebanon's continued deterioration, as well as the organization's sense that Israel is preoccupied with its internal affairs, may increase Hezbollah's boldness vis-à-vis Israel. It may try again to carry out the promised revenge attack, which could create a round of conflict, in the spirit

of the military intelligence division's assessment. The organization's immediate goal is to consolidate its deterrence equation, but it seems that the renewed tension on the Israel-Lebanon border may, in its view, also serve to improve its image in the internal arena as the "defender of Lebanon" and perhaps even indirectly provide Iran with leverage with the new US administration – at least until a resumption of nuclear negotiations. However, following any resumption of negotiations between the United States and Iran, Hezbollah will presumably restrain its activities with Israel so as not to sabotage the dialogue, which is supposed to serve Iran.

Therefore, IDF vigilance on the northern border must be maintained, and in light of the possibility that Hezbollah will try to carry out its threats to increase tensions in the coming months, Israel's reaction must be re-examined to best serve Israeli interests. The two main options are ensuring an appropriate but measured response that will limit events and prevent degeneration into large-scale fighting, or exploiting the event in order to carry out extensive action to significantly impair Hezbollah's precision missile capability, which poses a strategic threat to Israel.

It is recommended that the Lebanon issue be raised as soon as possible in a dialogue between the Israel and the new US administration. The US should be encouraged to continue its involvement in Lebanon while formulating its policy toward it, which should include two parallel efforts: continued economic-political pressure on Hezbollah, and aid to the Lebanese state, which is on the verge of collapse.