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Operation Guardian of the Walls: Where Was Hezbollah?

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Operation Guardian of the Walls provided Jerusalem an opportunity to examine Hezbollah's policy while Israel was engaged in a military confrontation with Hamas. It was also a testing ground for Iran and Hezbollah. During the campaign, Hezbollah refrained from any direct military action against Israel and contented itself with emphasizing its support for Hamas's struggle for Jerusalem as part of the "axis of resistance." It encouraged solidarity demonstrations with Palestinians throughout Lebanon and along the border with Israel; these included damage to the border fence and attempts by protestors to infiltrate into Israeli territory, which were thwarted by the IDF. At the same time, rockets were launched from Lebanon at Israel on three occasions and one UAV was launched from Syria under Iranian supervision. The rocket fire was attributed to Palestinian organizations, and it is still unclear whether Hezbollah was a partner to the decision to launch these rockets or merely allowed it to happen by turning a blind eye while it emphasized its lack of responsibility for the incident. These occurrences support the assessment that Hezbollah is still deterred and reluctant to engage in a widespread military confrontation with the IDF at this time, and is unwilling to sacrifice all its resources in favor of the Palestinian cause. The IDF's strength and destructive power, demonstrated during the operation in the Gaza Strip, preserves the deterrence equation between Hezbollah and Israel, but the IDF must continue to deal with the primary threat facing the northern front from the Shiite axis in general and Hezbollah in particular.

During Operation Guardian of the Walls, which began on May 10, 2021, it became clear that Hezbollah was not interested in opening another front in the north, and refrained from joining the military campaign against Israel. This inactivity stemmed primarily from its desire to control the timing and circumstances of a military confrontation with Israel, in accordance with its own considerations and interests: namely, that they are internal-Lebanese or external-Iranian and regional interests, and not episodes dictated by the Palestinian interest. Among the several reasons the current time is not convenient for Hezbollah for a confrontation: the plight of the collapsing Lebanese state and the growing internal criticism of the organization; the Iranian patron's lack of interest in disrupting advanced negotiations over the United States' return to the nuclear deal; and Iran's desire

to maintain the Lebanese military force it has built for many years for a future confrontation with Israel.

Throughout the operation, Hezbollah maintained a relatively low profile and contented itself with public manifestations of support and solidarity for Hamas's struggle for Jerusalem. Alongside Palestinian factions, it encouraged demonstrations throughout Lebanon and especially along the border with Israel, which also involved acts of violence, including damage to the border fence and technological equipment, as well as attempts by "enraged civilians" to infiltrate Israeli territory that were thwarted by the IDF. Naim Qassem, Nasrallah's deputy, even admitted in an interview with Radio a-Nur that his organization supported and encouraged the protests at the border. Hezbollah also organized the funeral of an operative of the organization who was killed on May 14 when the IDF fired to keep protesters away from the border, and was buried wrapped in a Hezbollah flag. But Hezbollah did not threaten to avenge his death, and contented itself with filing a complaint with the Security Council on behalf of the Lebanese government.

More serious were the three rocket launches from Lebanon to Israel:

- On May 13, three rockets were launched from Kafr Kila and landed in the sea. The Lebanese army was quick to show its presence on the ground and clarify that a Palestinian actor was responsible, and that the Lebanese army even prevented the launching of additional rockets and apprehended the suspects.
- On the night of May 17, six rockets were launched from the area of the village of Shuba and landed in Lebanese territory. The IDF responded with artillery fire to the area and caused damage to the water pipes, but no human injuries. The Lebanese army once again located the launch site as well as an additional rocket that was not launched, and announced the opening of an investigation.
- On May 19, four rockets were launched from Seddiqine in the Tyre area, this time penetrating Israeli territory: one rocket was intercepted, one fell in an open area in Shfaram, and two fell into the sea. The Lebanese army located a fifth rocket that was not launched, and this time too the IDF responded with limited artillery fire in the direction of the launching.

In all the rocket fire incidents, Lebanese security officials were quick to clarify that those responsible were Palestinian factions, but so far there is no clear identification which Palestinian factions were involved. Hezbollah hastened to absolve itself of responsibility and Naim Qassem even explicitly denied any Hezbollah connection to the incidents, while insisting that Hezbollah was not in charge of Israel's border security. Nevertheless, it is highly probable that as Hezbollah is the dominant military element in Lebanon, it could have prevented the rocket fire had it wanted to, or at least made it clear to those who independently launched the rockets that they were not allowed to do so, lest it drag

Lebanon and Hezbollah into a military conflict that could ignite a broader war. The organization may have chosen to look the other way and probably even assisted in the shooting, ensuring that it remain limited and symbolic in order to show solidarity with the Palestinians – given the criticism it received for refraining from joining the Palestinian struggle – while preventing escalation. Hezbollah's blind eye to the shooting indicates that the organization is willing to take risks, as has it has in the past, despite the high price it might pay, and certainly should a military confrontation with Israel ensue. This follows a number of terrorist attacks carried out by Hezbollah last year against IDF troops, in retaliation for the killing a Hezbollah operative in Syria in July last year, after which the organization threatened to avenge his death.

Another serious action took place on May 14 at the Syrian border, where an armed UAV was launched and later shot down by the IDF. According to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the launch was initiated by Iran from Iraq or Syria. If so, it is possible that Iran was a partner in the rocket fire and even ordered it, so as to create the impression that it is a partner in the Palestinian effort, and at a relatively low price. Apart from the launch of the lone UAV from Syria, the Revolutionary Guards and Shiite militias in Iraq and Yemen were careful to make do with statements of support for the Palestinian struggle against the occupation without actually intervening in the fighting.

From Hezbollah's perspective, the course of action it chose during the operation underscores the importance that it, and not foreign elements, including Palestinian partners, determine the circumstances and timing of the confrontation with Israel. The organization continues to focus on its military buildup and establishment of an expanded "deterrence equation" vis-à-vis Israel, to include Israel's refraining from harming its operatives in Syria and Lebanon. In this context, the emphasis by the organization's spokesmen on the achievements of Hamas is poignant, as they claim Hamas won the entire battle and ostensibly succeeded in creating a new deterrence equation by linking between an Israeli attack on the Temple Mount and East Jerusalem, and rocket fire from the Gaza Strip at Israel.

The battle between Israel and Hamas provided Hezbollah, as well as its patron Iran, with an opportunity to examine Israel's strategy during a military confrontation and learn about its strengths as well as its weaknesses. It is likely that the results of this confrontation will be studied and taken into account in their future decisions regarding a possible confrontation with Israel in the northern arena. A key lesson for them is the strength of the IDF, with an emphasis on the destructive power of the Israeli Air Force, albeit not fully operated, and the intensity of its performance, and willingness to cause widespread destruction, including to infrastructure and civilians, in response to attacks on Israeli cities and citizens. The campaign in Gaza likely signaled to the organization that

the Dahiya Doctrine from the Second Lebanon War was not a one-time event, and that when Israel is attacked and fights in its defense, it acts out of the legal legitimacy to harm military targets in a civilian environment. In the case of Lebanon, an Israeli response of this magnitude may lead to a severe destruction in the country, which is already in dire straits.

On the other hand, exposing the IDF's capabilities should encourage Hezbollah to formulate a solution to deal with this challenge and invest effort in developing capabilities such as improving the accuracy of its missiles, building an umbrella for defense against Israel's air force, or developing a capability to disrupt its activities early. Exposure of weaknesses in the readiness of the Israeli home front, which is also reflected in the extensive shortcomings in the availability of shelters in both the south and the north of Israel, certainly did not go unnoticed by all parties in the northern arena. Neither did the undermining of the fabric of relations between Israel's Arab citizens and the Jewish population in mixed cities, which could encourage Hezbollah to call on the Arab public in Israel to resort to violence during a military confrontation, especially in a multi-arena war scenario that includes firing from the Gaza Strip.

As far as Israel is concerned, although at present Hezbollah seems deterred, the end of the operation in Gaza allows and even obliges the IDF to return to deal with the main threat posed to it on the northern front by Hezbollah and the Shiite axis. The IDF must be prepared and vigilant in this arena, and in doing so set a new date for the lengthy multi-arm exercise (called Chariots of Fire) that was postponed due to the events in the Palestinian arena. Regarding the events in Israel's various conflict arenas, it is not clear at this stage whether the conclusions that Hezbollah and Iran have drawn from the brief campaign between Israel and Hamas will encourage the Lebanese organization to try and challenge Israel by carrying out threats of retaliation, thus risking a confrontation that could escalate, as demonstrated by Israel in response to Hamas rocket fire into the Jerusalem area, or rather weaken its willingness to risk a powerful response to a local incident.