

## Hezbollah's Restrained Aggression

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**The clash on the Israel-Lebanon border on August 4-6, 2021 included unusual activity on both sides – the first Israeli air attack in Lebanon since 2013, following rocket fire against Israel, and 19 rockets fired at northern Israel by Hezbollah in response, in order to deter Israel from deviating from the balance of mutual deterrence. In effect, this clash was another link in a recent chain of hostilities between Israel and the "axis of resistance," led by Iran. This careful and measured aggression by Hezbollah was influenced by both the difficult situation in disintegrating Lebanon, including the growing criticism of Hezbollah, and by considerations concerning its commitment to the "axis," especially to Iranian interests. Israel must choose whether to play along with Hezbollah's desire to "close" the incident, while running the risk of turning the Lebanese border into a theater of active conflict, or taking action to change the rules of the game between it and Hezbollah in order to consolidate long-term quiet on the border, while running the risk of renewed escalation in the short term.**

Hezbollah's launch of 19 rockets at the Mount Dov area on August 6, 2021 in response to an airstrike by Israel in Lebanon, and after not responding to IDF artillery fire in southern Lebanon on the preceding day, was exceptional in scope. From Hezbollah's perspective, it was obligated to respond to the IDF airstrike on August 5 in Lebanon – which was also exceptional, given that Israel had not conducted overt attacks in Lebanon since 2013. Hezbollah perceived these attacks as Israel's attempt to change the balance of deterrence by taking advantage of the state of collapse in Lebanon. The organization's response reflected the importance that it attributes to maintaining the balance of deterrence with Israel, as emphasized in Nasrallah's speech on August 7 marking the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Lebanon War.

In this speech, which was scheduled in advanced and used to deliver his message following the rocket barrage, Nasrallah asserted that deterring Israel from attacks in Lebanon was a strategic and historic achievement for Hezbollah that resulted from its "divine victory" over the IDF in 2006. At the same time, his speech was clearly non-inflammatory. He explained that the rocket fire was necessary in order to maintain deterrence against Israel's aggression, and that rockets were a direct response and a

mirror image of the IDF attack in Lebanon: the IDF fired at open spaces, and Hezbollah therefore responded with carefully aimed, weighed, and measured fire at open spaces close to military positions, and restricted to the Shab'a Farms area (which Hezbollah regards as an area of dispute between the two countries), with the intention of avoiding human casualties.

At the same time, Nasrallah did not shy away from the familiar threats in his speeches designed to frighten Israeli civilians. He referred to Israel's weakness and fears about Hezbollah's military capabilities, particularly its precision missiles capable of hitting any location in Israel. Nasrallah emphasized that any future Israeli response would be answered accordingly, and that the organization would not be deterred from firing on populated areas, should Israel do so as well. He declared that although Hezbollah had no desire for war, it was prepared for it and would emerge victorious. Nasrallah's remarks confirmed the prevailing assessment in Israel that Hezbollah remained restrained and deterred, and that despite the unusual rocket fire, the organization had no interest in a major conflict. It is important for Hezbollah to "close" the current round, in the hope that Israel will also refrain from any further response, beyond its artillery fire in response to Hezbollah's rocket fire.

The voluntary restraint exercised by Hezbollah is also a result of the dire situation in disintegrating Lebanon, which affects the organization. Some hold that Hezbollah seeks to heat up the border now in order to consolidate its exclusive status as the "defender of Lebanon." As such, Hezbollah wants to divert attention from the severe domestic criticism of its role in institutionalized corruption and the collapse of Lebanon's economy and political system, as well as allegations that Hezbollah was responsible for the horrific Beirut Port explosion exactly a year ago. Others, however, believe that provocations against Israel are not in Hezbollah's interest, especially in view of the growing protests lest the organization drag Lebanon into a conflict with Israel that no one wants, except for Hezbollah's Iranian patron. The current exchange of fire supports this latter analysis; Hezbollah's critics dare to criticize it more openly than in the past. One concrete expression of this opposition was the incident in the Druze village of Chouya, whose residents angrily attacked Hezbollah members returning from launching the rockets against Israel on August 6. The villagers asserted that the barrage was fired from close to their village, and could have resulted in an Israeli attack against it. Publication of clips from the incident on the social media aroused angry responses against Hezbollah. At the same time, however, others hurried to defend the Lebanese "resistance" in order to calm the tension between Druze and Shiites. In his recent speech, Nasrallah, who is very anxious about damage to Hezbollah's image inside Lebanon, adopted a conciliatory tone, underscoring that the barrage was fired from an open and unpopulated area. He released a clip showing that the launch occurred from a place with dense shrubbery, not from within the village. At the same time, however, Hezbollah sent threatening messages to the Druze village

in order to deter its residents from similar action in the future, and to induce Druze leaders to calm the mood in their community.

The recent sporadic fire on the border by Palestinian factions is likewise a link in a chain of actions against Israel by the Iran-led "axis of resistance." The key role of Hezbollah in this axis is another major consideration in the organization's policy toward Israel. Cooperation in the Hezbollah-Iran-Hamas triangle (and Palestinian Islamic Jihad), which serves Hezbollah and fortifies its power, has recently been stepped up. One prominent example was the public announcement by Hezbollah leaders of a joint war room in Lebanon for coordination between these groups during Operation Guardian of the Walls. At this stage, there is no proof that Hezbollah was a participant in the two shooting incidents at Israel by Palestinians in southern Lebanon on July 20 and August 4, or that it turned a blind eye to them. It is unclear what Hezbollah will do in similar cases in the future, but it is clear that it has not used force to prevent them until now. The participation in the inauguration ceremony of incoming Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi by Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, who stated that his organization regarded itself as a partner in the axis of resistance; Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah; and Naim Qassem, Nasrallah's deputy, also reflects closer cooperation between these members of the axis nowadays.

Iran's involvement in heating up the Israeli-Lebanese border in recent weeks through the Palestinian factions appears obvious. Iran has been training its proxies – Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas (in addition to the Shiite militias in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen) – for many years, and is urging them to harass Israel and instill in it a sense of siege. This has most recently taken shape by trying to open another front against Israel in Lebanon, following the increased tension between Iran and Israel in Syria, cyberspace, and the naval theater.

For its part, Israel faces a twofold challenge:

- a. The weakness of the existing deterrence equation, in which every Israeli attack in Lebanon is met by a response action, as promised by Hezbollah. Israel's strict compliance with these rules of the game has consolidated the relative quiet on the Lebanese border over the past decade. At the same time, however, it has enabled Hezbollah to continue building its forces, which have become the primary conventional military threat to Israel and the forefront of the resistance axis, led by Iran.
- b. This resistance axis is attempting to turn the Israeli-Lebanese border into an active front in a way that will serve the interests of Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas without their being dragged into a full-scale military conflict. It appears that Nasrallah and Iran assume that Israel will avoid escapades in Lebanon in the current circumstances in order to prevent the outbreak of all-out war that would include fighting on multiple fronts.

In this situation (and assuming that none of the parties wants a full-scale war), Israel has a number of options for action in the military sphere:

- Continue the current policy, and respond with restraint to any attempt to attack its soldiers or civilians, while complying with the rules of the game against Hezbollah.
- In order to strengthen Israel's deterrence and prevent the development of an active front on the Lebanese border, Israel can respond to any action in Lebanon, but more aggressively than in the past (primarily through airstrikes that will destabilize the deterrence equation that Hezbollah is attempting to consolidate) – e.g., to another action by the Palestinian factions, or an attempt by Hezbollah to avenge the death of two Hezbollah members, as promised by Nasrallah (one was killed in an attack in Syria in July 2020 attributed to Israel, and the second during Operation Guardian of the Walls).
- Take advantage of Hezbollah's distress to initiate a surprise military action having a negative impact on the organization's capabilities (with an emphasis on the precision missile project). The aim will be to restore calm on the border after a short clash following this maneuver. In such a case, Israel should be prepared for an expected forceful response – an attack against the Israeli home front – by Hezbollah.

Israel should consider these options, and prepare for the possibility that its unusual response this time will not deter the axis of resistance,"which will continue to challenge the IDF with occasional rocket fire and/or other military action along the border. If this occurs, it will require a change in Israel's current policy of restraint on the Lebanese border, even at the cost of escalation in its activity against Hezbollah.

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