

Hizbollah Two Years after the Withdrawal: A Compromise between Ideology, Interests, and Exigencies

Daniel Sobelman

In developing its anti-Israel strategy, which factors does the Lebanese Hizbollah organization take into consideration? What are the Shiite group's guidelines as it determines its *modus operandi*?

Hizbollah's heightened activity against Israel's northern border between late March and mid-April 2002 should be used as a mini-model or test case by Israeli intelligence experts and analysts for an updated look at these questions, and for a reappraisal of several basic assumptions. The outcome of this escalation may lead us to reassess the approach of the IDF's Intelligence branch (Aman) in the period preceding Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the "security zone." Aman, it may be recalled, was opposed to this form of pull-out, and warned that Hizbollah would continue its hostilities against Israel even after the withdrawal, which would probably have far-reaching, negative implications on regional stability. However, reality since

then has turned out to be much more complicated, and Hizbollah

The rise in rhetorical volume by Nasrallah could be seen as a form of psychological introduction to a major guerilla act.

has shown itself to be in no rush to realize its ideological aspirations or its vision of "liberating Jerusalem." In addition, Israel's tactics and responses to unfolding situations have themselves had a powerful impact in determining the course of events in the region, and indeed, Hizbollah has no interest whatsoever in being seen as the cause for a massive Israeli retaliation in Lebanon.

Following the withdrawal of the IDF and the SLA from South Lebanon on May 24, 2000, the Shiite organization kept a low

profile, letting several weeks pass between each hostile act. All of its operations were confined to the narrow area known as the Shab'a Farms on the slopes of Mt. Dov – originally a Syrian area that has acquired the status of a "contested zone" because of formal demands made for it by the Lebanese Government. In the aftermath of the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 and the changed atmosphere in the world, along with the reevaluation of previously held basic assumptions – first and foremost in the United States – Hizbollah has been forced to proceed with extreme caution in its military operations against Israel. In recent months, since understanding its operational limitations, it has started firing anti-aircraft weapons at IDF warplanes, a relatively "symbolic" act, although sometimes shell fragments fall on Israeli soil and leave an uncomfortable feeling in the Galilee. Nevertheless, Hizbollah may defend these attacks as a form of "an eye for an eye" response to the frequent IDF reconnaissance flights over Lebanese airspace.

* International Arab Affairs
Correspondent, *Ha'aretz*

The Escalation in Late March

Towards the end of March 2002, various indicators and intelligence data in Israeli hands pointed to Hizbollah's intention to aggravate the situation, forcing the security establishment to enter into a state of high alert. The fear was that the leaders of the organization were planning to stage an action that would compel Israel to respond and perhaps "be dragged" into opening a second front, on top of the ongoing Palestinian conflict. On March 27 occurred what was seen as the "opening shot" in an escalation: a pair of Katyusha rockets fell in an open area in the Upper Galilee, the first Katyusha shooting into Israel since the withdrawal from South Lebanon. The organization responsible for the rocket attack remained anonymous. Three days later, however, Hizbollah fighters launched a massive mortar and Katyusha barrage in the Shab'a Farms area, this time taking full responsibility for the deed. During the next two weeks IDF positions on Mt. Dov came under intense shelling, far heavier than anything experienced since May 2000. No casualties were inflicted on the Israelis, but for the first time a number of Hizbollah rockets fell on the Golan Heights. The renewal and intensification of Hizbollah activity paralleled the undisguised rhetorical escalation on the part of the organization's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, who, since March 8, had been calling on neighboring countries to allow the passage of military supplies to the Palestinians

in their struggle against Israel. On a number of occasions Nasrallah stressed that the hour had come "for action and not just words." The rise in rhetorical volume by Nasrallah could be seen as a form of psychological introduction to a major guerilla act.

Why did Hizbollah initiate the escalation? In early May 2002, Nasrallah was interviewed by an Italian journal and offered two

Alongside its
maximalist rhetoric,
Hizbollah knows how
and is willing to put its
radical ideology on
the back burner.

reasons: first, to demonstrate his organization's solidarity with the Palestinian struggle; second, to make it clear to Israel that Hizbollah was capable of acting against it "whenever necessary." Statements made in early April by the head of Hizbollah's political council, Ibrahim Amin a-Sayyid, hinted at one of the organization's main considerations: "We know exactly what the Arab street expects of us, and what is expected from the resistance movement in Lebanon." And indeed, since the eruption of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, public opinion throughout the Arab world has been in a state of

glaring anger at Israel. For the last few months, the Arab street, especially the Palestinian street, has regarded the leaders and governments in the Arab world as cowards for failing to take concerted action against Israel as a means of helping the Palestinians. The theme of aid to the Palestinians is a central thread in Nasrallah's latest speeches that touched on Arab hopes that his organization would "deliver the goods." Against the backdrop of "helplessness" attributed to the Arab governments, Hizbollah portrayed itself as the only body lending genuine assistance to the Intifada.

To what extent does the organization actually aid the Palestinian struggle? The answer to this question is open to many interpretations. But without doubt Hizbollah operations against Israel have until now served the interests of Hizbollah itself, granting it a renewed status in place of the old one that began to disintegrate immediately upon Israeli withdrawal from the security zone. At the same time, the organization has been careful to outline in clear terms the limits of its activity, and to declare that its operations remain concentrated on the Shab'a Farms. In a speech made in Beirut on April 8, Nasrallah referred to the populist "expectations" of his organization: "If we ask what [Arabs] want from Hizbollah at this moment, they would say that Hizbollah should open a front from the sea to Mt. Hermon. The resistance needs to launch an all-out attack, and Hizbollah should employ its missiles and Katyushas in order to smite

northern Palestine.” Significantly, however, Nasrallah rejected this aspiration. In his speech he only went so far as to envision a provocation that would force his organization to demonstrate its operational capability: “The worst-case scenario would be mass transfer. We must preserve all our weapons in the event of such a danger.” According to Nasrallah, the “strategic” weapon in his organization’s possession – thousands of rockets, including long-range missiles – is designated for repelling strategic threats against Lebanon, including the mass deportation of Palestinians to Lebanon, which would present a concrete challenge to Lebanon’s internal stability and national security.

It is also possible, though, that the reason for Nasrallah’s relative moderation lies in his need to “justify” the minimal use of his organization’s operational potential and the fact that Hizbollah’s actions against Israel failed to prevent the IDF from pulverizing the Palestinian Authority in Operation “Defensive Shield.” Nasrallah even admitted this when he declared that no military act emanating out of Lebanon had the power to stop the Israeli invasion of the West Bank cities.

Who Controls Hizbollah?

The circumstances in which Hizbollah decided to sheathe its arsenal on April 13, 2002 stemmed from two unexpected developments that apparently exerted a restraining influence on the organization: first, the visit to Lebanon and Syria by the

Iranian foreign minister, Kamal Kharazi, on April 12. In his Beirut stopover, described as previously unplanned, Kharazi met with the Lebanese leadership and Hizbollah Secretary-General Nasrallah, and called on them to display prudence and self-restraint in order to prevent Israel from finding a pretext for attacking its neighbor. The second development occurred three days

A comprehensive picture of Hizbollah’s decision making process is more complex than a “command” issued by any one particular foreign element.

later when US Secretary of State Colin Powell, after visiting Israel, proceeded to Beirut and Damascus. Powell asked the leaders of the two countries to curb Hizbollah at once, and handed them a warning from Israel that its policy of restraint was coming to an end.

Also, within the internal Lebanese arena, the chorus of opposition to the continuation of Hizbollah operations that had begun already upon the Israeli withdrawal grew in the period of the escalation, expressing dissatisfaction and genuine fear that the country would suffer a disastrous Israeli retaliatory strike due to Hizbollah’s aggression. The feeling in

Lebanon was that matters were liable to spiral out of control because, in addition to increased Hizbollah activity, albeit measured and gradual, various Palestinian elements had also begun operating against Israel in a manner deemed “irresponsible.” Palestinian activity along the border and to the west of the Shab’a Farms included firing a number of Katyusha and Grad rockets into Israel and using light weapons. In response, Lebanese security units that had been patrolling the border and maintaining a low profile since the end of 2001 were now reinforced.

Furthermore, Lebanon announced the arrest of Palestinian activists who had carried out or were about to carry out shooting attacks in the direction of Israel. Published reports from Lebanon reveal that Hizbollah fighters deployed in the south assisted Lebanon in blocking a number of independent acts by Palestinian groups. This is an event of no small consequence: it implies that when necessary, alongside its maximalist rhetoric, Hizbollah knows how and is willing to put its radical ideology on the back burner for the sake of Lebanon’s national interest and for the sake of guaranteeing its own limited operations.

Lebanon: Hizbollah Tests the Limits of Consensus

One of the basic assumptions about Hizbollah is that Iran and Syria act as the organization’s “patrons.” Another claim, embedded as a basic assumption, is that Iran, which assumed a main role in the

organization's creation in 1982 and continues to be a source of ideological authority, still stands behind Hizbollah activity. Reliable information in the hands of Israel's security establishment points to the fact that Iranian elements encouraged the organization to move against Israel at the end of March, but since the reduction in the latest escalation it has become clear that a comprehensive picture of Hizbollah's decision making process is more complex than a "command" issued by any one particular foreign element. There is little doubt that if Hizbollah wanted to push Israel into launching a non-routine military assault against Lebanese or Syrian targets, it could achieve this with relative ease. An official Hizbollah policy causing sustained injury to human life in Israel would most likely incur an Israeli response.

Hizbollah, however, has circumscribed and is circumscribing its activity – its overt activity, at least – to a restricted arena and is acting within well-defined parameters. During the escalation in early April the organization extended these parameters to their limit and proved its ability and willingness to embark upon a policy of cautious brinkmanship, acting in a way that would not compel an Israeli response. Hizbollah presumably takes into account certain elements of power when deciding whether to act, the most prominent of them being Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. The organization plans its activity in coordination with the interests of each

of the three sides; a significant factor, perhaps a decisive one, in Hizbollah's final decision of whether or not to launch an operation is its assessment of Israel's reaction.

A further analysis of the elements involved indicates that Hizbollah also places its own interests at the center of its considerations. Indeed, during the twenty years of its existence, and as a result of its continued

Throughout the years of fighting between Hizbollah and Israel in South Lebanon, Hizbollah was accustomed to go to within one step of the brink, but no further, towards executing a mega-strike against Israel.

confrontation with Israel, Hizbollah's position has grown and been strengthened in the internal arena vis-à-vis its rival Amal, which boasts a stronger position in the Lebanese parliament. It is Lebanon that is the focus of Hizbollah power and activity, and therefore the organization is perfectly aware that it must always take the country's interests into consideration. Lebanon's official position maintains that the region of the Shab'a Farms is occupied territory that justifies acts of "resistance" in order to remove Israel's presence. Yet Lebanon also has a major interest in preventing an intensification of the confrontation that would bring in its

wake, almost of necessity, further destruction to the country and a worsening of its already stricken economy. The past year witnessed increased opposition in Lebanon's internal arena to Hizbollah military activity, and on occasion even to its existence as an armed organization. Reservations about Hizbollah came especially from the heads of the Christian camp although other political elements too, headed foremost by the prime minister, Rafiq al-Hariri, expressed concern about the organization's *modus operandi*.

Regarding Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, any analysis of the influence these countries wield must take into account the various internal power groups that pressure different directions of activity.

Iran: The Internal Debate over Hizbollah Activity

A graphic example of these intertwining connections is the open and animated debate that occurred in Iran following the Iranian foreign minister's pressure on Beirut to display prudence and restraint. Concerned lest Kharazi's dictum be misunderstood as an expression of loss of faith in Hizbollah, the Iranian embassy in Lebanon took care to publish a list of clarifications restating Kharazi's specific intention. The statement explained that Kharazi's visit took place because of "the dangerous situation and precipitation of events," and Iran's "need to exchange ideas and engage in consultations" with Syria and Lebanon. The limits of Hizbollah

activity, from Kharazi's point of view, were summed up in the announcement's following sentence: "In their talks, the Iranians, Syrians, and Lebanese recognized the Lebanese right to resist and engage in [guerilla] operations in order to liberate all of Lebanon's land from occupation." Yet in a report from Beirut, a top Hizbollah official (Samir Qassir, *Al Mustaqbal*, May 5, 2002) acknowledged that Kharazi's statements sowed "confusion" in his organization. The public-media debate that enveloped Iran following Kharazi's announcement also included articles bitterly critical of him in the conservative press, considered close to the nation's spiritual leader, Ali Khaman'i.

Against the conservative power centers, considered the dominant force in Iran today, there are other elements that regard Hizbollah's latest activity as endangering Iranian interests. The editors of the reformist daily *Bunian*, for example, praised Kharazi's speech in an editorial, concluded that his statements reflected Iran's "national interest," and went on to say that Iranian interests should take precedence over "ideological interests." The chairman of the council for defining Iran's interests, Hashemi Rafsanjani, also noted that during Israel's invasion of Lebanon certain circles had demanded the dispatch of Iranian forces to assist the Lebanese. Rafsanjani recalled the response of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, spiritual leader at the time: "Iranian interests must also be taken into

account." Articles in this vein were published in various newspapers as well.

One school of thought in Israel today claims that regional tension suits Iran's interests because Iran has consistently preferred to dissociate itself from the political process. However, from within Iran itself there are indicators that challenge this view. In past years, it is true, there were

The coming
months will shape
the style, scope, and
timing of Hizbollah
activity against Israel.

visible signs of concern in Tehran over the likelihood of a peace agreement between its ally Syria and Israel; however, would the complete opposite of this - a total security breakdown on the northern border leading to a military confrontation between Israel and Syria - serve Iran's general interest? There is little doubt that the reformist camp in Iran, several of whose leaders dared to criticize Iranian policy on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, does not wish for this. As for the conservative "power centers" through whom Hizbollah was armed with thousands of Katyusha rockets and whom

Hizbollah heeds, specifically the spiritual leader Khaman'i and the Revolutionary Guards, it should be recalled that throughout the years of fighting between Hizbollah and Israel in South Lebanon, Hizbollah was accustomed to go to within one step of the brink, but no further, towards executing a mega-strike against Israel - one that would cause Israel to unleash excessive force against the organization.

If "the export of the Islamic revolution" has been among the central political goals of Iran since 1979, it would seem that the establishment of Hizbollah in Lebanon and its transformation into a force to be reckoned with in the local and regional arenas may be the greatest success of this policy. In the case of heightened escalation, Hizbollah - Iran's successful initiative in Lebanon and its foothold within the Shiite population - would probably suffer a powerful Israeli blow. Moreover, Iran would find itself in danger for having instigated a military escalation in the post-September 11 era, and a responsibility of this nature could have tremendous negative repercussions.

Syria: Bashar Controls Hizbollah Less than his Father Did

A war with Israel does not serve Syria's current interests. In early April 2002, while Hizbollah was active in the north, official sources in Syria made certain to publish in two of the Arab world's leading newspapers (*Al-Hayat* and *Asharq al-Awsat*) the

statement that neither Lebanon nor Syria had called up its reserves. Syrian sources let it be known that Damascus was deeply involved in its own internal matters, such as a major reform program. Another report, attributed to official sources in Damascus, announced that Syrian authorities were preventing Palestinians from approaching the Golan Heights.

These press leaks corresponded with messages that envoys of various international bodies had received regarding Syrian efforts to restrain Hizbollah, namely, that Syria has no interest in escalation and confrontation with Israel. A strike against Lebanon runs counter to Syrian interests for economic and political reasons. Today Lebanon is the source of livelihood for hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers. In addition, this year Syria embarked upon a series of reforms in its relations with Lebanon that are designed to mollify and silence a growing demand in Lebanon for an end to the 26-year Syrian military presence in the country.

Nevertheless, cautious activity by Hizbollah can serve the Syrian interest in two ways: one, as a telling reminder that Syria did not surrender its demand for regaining the Golan Heights from Israel; two, presenting President Bashar al-Assad as a figure unafraid of challenging Israel and assisting the Palestinians. Significantly, however, Syria's control of Hizbollah is not absolute, and seems to have diminished since the death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000

and the accession of his son Bashar. Naturally the degree of authority and control of the young, recently instated leader cannot be compared to that of his father, an autocratic ruler who dominated the country for three decades. It seems that the leadership change in Damascus has allowed Hizbollah to reexamine its range of operations, and it is definitely possible that a feeling of greater independence

Although Hizbollah has not ceased guerilla activity over the last two years, it has revealed itself, inter alia, to be a relatively disciplined and responsible organization.

than in the past has taken root among the organization's leaders.

Forecast

The coming months will shape the style, scope, and timing of Hizbollah activity against Israel, while the organization maintains a close watch on developments in the region and in the internal Lebanese domain. Hizbollah was totally inactive from the Israeli withdrawal at the end of May 2000 until the outbreak of Palestinian violence in September 2000. Approximately four months after the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon, Hizbollah began to

enjoy the advantage of operating "under the umbrella" of the Palestinian confrontation. From Hizbollah's point of view, conflict resolution in the Palestinian arena – even if not absolute – would be a new and far from ideal situation.

One should not attribute absolute control of the organization to any element – Iran, Syria, or Lebanon. Even during Hafez al-Assad's rule, Hizbollah had no qualms about acting against Syrian interests. In late December 1999, for example, on the eve of a summit meeting in the United States between the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, and the Syrian foreign minister, Farouk al-Shara, the organization carried out a car-bomb suicide attack, the first of its kind in several years. Miraculously, the explosion failed to kill any IDF soldiers, but had it been "successful" one can imagine the immediate implications it would have had on Israeli-Syrian negotiations. Later too, at the end of December 2001, when al-Shara stated that "the resistance cannot stage challenges indefinitely – there are periods of calm and quiet," Hizbollah did not cease its activity. In fact, the leaders of the organization reiterated at every opportunity that they would not lay down their arms as long as "one inch" of Lebanese soil remained in Israeli hands, and as Nasrallah pointed out at the end of May, as long as "danger threatened this nation and this people."

Nevertheless, in the last two years Hizbollah has proven it is in no hurry to realize its avowed ideological goals, such as liberating Jerusalem. Why in

fact have Aman's fears of a total collapse in the north following Israel's unilateral withdrawal not been realized? The answer lies in the indication that although Hizbollah has not ceased guerilla activity over the last two years, it has revealed itself, inter alia, to be a relatively disciplined and responsible organization, aware of its operational limitations and sensitive to the environment that sustains and shelters it. Recently, Nasrallah himself attested as much, and declared in a speech on May 25, the anniversary of Mustafa Dirani's abduction by Israel: "Once, in a discussion of resistance operations, I told certain officials that 'we are concerned about the nation, the state, and the future more than you think.' Why is this so? Because when, Heaven forbid, the country is menaced by security, military, and political dangers or economic collapse, then those people who have capital, bankrolls, companies, children, luxury homes, and houses abroad, flee. They have a second citizenship. It is very simple. They collect the rest of their family and leave the country. [However] our houses, graves, life, death, honor, and mortification – they are all here. Where else can we go?"

According to another explanation, Israel not only reacts, but initiates and shapes events as well; that is, regional developments also result from the nature of Israeli tactics. In a clarification of an intelligence estimate regarding Hizbollah's interest in dragging Israel into a massive response that would open a second

front, senior IDF officials explained that the Shiite organization does not wish to be depicted as the factor initiating the decline, but prefers to cause Israel to be seen as such. A senior IDF officer even stated that in the middle of April the organization was surprised as to why Israel did not respond to a Hizbollah provocation, and in his view Israel had upset the organization's bellicose plans. Thus

Nasrallah:
A mass deportation
of Palestinians by
Israel would warrant
the activation of
Hizbollah's strategic
capabilities.

one may assume that even in the case of a heavier "exchange of blows" between Israel and Hizbollah, the escalation process will be conducted via a series of intermediary stages rather than by an accelerated process whereby both sides demonstrate their ultimate capabilities at the outset. Nevertheless, it is obvious that under certain circumstances the two parties may be caught up in an overcharged cycle of violence, for example, if one side suffers an outrageously disproportionate number of casualties.

Hizbollah has not ceased its operations since the May 2000 withdrawal, but the two years since

then have unfolded totally differently than the preceding ones. Internal and regional conditions do not work to Israel's advantage as long as it is involved in a bloody confrontation with the Palestinians and mired in a stalemated political process, but they do work to the benefit of Hizbollah.

Hizbollah is likely to interpret the sharp escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian struggle as a convenient opportunity to mount operations, and probably feels it is obligated to do this from an ideological and ethical perspective. For all practical purposes, since October 2000 Hizbollah has enjoyed advantageous circumstances because of the events on the Palestinian scene: Israel is bogged down in a conflict with the Palestinians, and the mass demonstrations in the Arab world against Israel, during Operation "Defensive Shield," for example, created a favorable atmosphere for the organization and made it difficult for Arab rulers to criticize it. Furthermore, there is no ignoring Nasrallah's declaration that a mass deportation of Palestinians by Israel would warrant the activation of the organization's strategic capabilities. We may assume that even a limited and selective deportation of Palestinians by Israel (especially if they were sent to Lebanon) would trigger a Hizbollah response.

Lebanon's demand for an Israeli withdrawal from the Shab'a Farms has won pan-Arab support, and is often cited in Arab League decisions and in summit meetings of Arab leaders. After the escalation of late

March-early April, greater emphasis was placed by Lebanon (coinciding with Iran's point of view, judging by Kharazi's statement) on the need to restrict Hizbollah's activity to the Shab'a Farms area. Nasrallah explicitly declared that he would respect the "blue line" that demarcated the Israeli-Lebanese border and that was recognized by the United Nations. Deviation by Hizbollah beyond the Shab'a Farms area would be interpreted as a violation of the Lebanese consensus and of the organization's "sanctioned" operational

turf. From Israel's point of view, this development could have positive implications if Jerusalem decides to evacuate the Shab'a Farms, although

If Israel decides to evacuate the Shab'a Farms, then Hizbollah's raison d'être as a legitimate "resistance" organization will be weakened but not entirely upset.

Hizbollah might well seek new areas of friction, for example, the abducted Lebanese held by Israel or certain border corrections (perhaps the seven Lebanese villages that no official source in Lebanon has mentioned in

the last two years). A ploy of this kind, however, could cause considerable difficulties to Hizbollah in its endeavor to establish legitimacy for its activity, all the more so if it attempted to carry out military operations against Israel of the type that could jeopardize Lebanon's security, economy, and political stability. In any case, it seems that if Israel decides to evacuate the Shab'a Farms, then Hizbollah's raison d'être as a legitimate "resistance" organization will be weakened but not entirely upset.