

Hizbollah and the Palestinians: From Defensive Shield to Cast Lead

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In late March 2002, following a wave of Palestinian suicide attacks, Israel embarked on Operation Defensive Shield, which ended with the IDF in control of the Palestinian cities on the West Bank. In response to the operation, Hizbollah directed artillery fire against IDF positions in the Mount Dov area. The organization kept up its bombardment for two weeks, ceasing its fire only after a visit by then-Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Kamal Harazi to Beirut, and following Israeli warnings to Beirut and Damascus delivered through Secretary of State Colin Powell. In an interview shortly afterward, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah stated that his organization had initiated the escalation, first in order to demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, and second to show Israel his organization's ability to act against it "in case of need." Ibrahim Amin a-Sayyid, the head of Hizbollah's political council added, "We know exactly what the Arab street expects from us, and what is expected from the resistance movement in Lebanon."¹

The Hizbollah response to Operation Defensive Shield stands in sharp contrast to its response to Operation Cast Lead. Ostensibly, the organization's current response should have been more resolute and aggressive. The IDF was engaged in a war in the Gaza Strip against Hamas, Hizbollah's partner in the resistance camp and an important Iranian project in its own right. Furthermore, given the large number of Palestinian civilians killed and the destruction in the Gaza Strip, the unrest in the Arab and Muslim world was also more prolonged and intense than in the past. There is no doubt that Hizbollah

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again understood exactly what popular opinion expected from it. Nevertheless, the organization's response was low keyed.

Nasrallah commented on the operation in a number of speeches, but in contrast to the past, called for others to take action: he demanded that Egypt open the Rafah border crossing in order to supply Hamas with the equipment to continue fighting,² and that the Lebanese president labor to convene an Arab summit; he called on Arab heads of state to find a solution to the crisis; and he called on the Arab and Islamic public to embark on uprisings ("intifadas") on behalf of Palestine.³ On the ground, single rockets were fired at Israel from Lebanon on two occasions (January 8 and January 14) by Palestinian factions supported and approved by Hizbollah.⁴ At the same time, the organization's official spokesmen hurried to deny any involvement in the rocket fire.

Hizbollah's response to Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip was thus indeed materially different from its response to Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank. Instead of the activism and initiatives that for years were the pride of the organization, the Hizbollah leadership now chose a middle way – "do little, and do it through others."

The question arises what has changed, and the almost obvious answer was the Second Lebanon War. Following the war and the severe blow suffered by Hizbollah, there is no doubt that the organization is more cautious, both in its behavior and its assessments of Israel's response. Its self-confidence was shaken. From this perspective, there is indeed truth to the claim that the war in Lebanon strengthened Israeli deterrence against Hizbollah. At the same time, an analysis of the organization's response to Operation Cast Lead from this perspective only would to a great extent be lacking. Other factors relating to the internal Lebanese arena, Hizbollah's domestic standing, and future development as expected by the organization are important to the equation.

Hizbollah acts on a number of planes. The first and most basic is the ideological level, stemming from its founding in the early 1980s as an extremist ideological movement reflecting the values of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Hizbollah aspires to establish an Islamic republic in Lebanon and to conduct an unceasing jihad against Israel until Palestinian soil and Jerusalem are "liberated." A second plane is the Shiite community, from which Hizbollah derives its power and a large

part of the legitimacy for its activity as a Lebanese political organization. Prompted by the ideological and Shiite imperatives, Hizbollah has also steadily expanded its activity in the Lebanese political arena. Since the October 1989 Ta'if agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war, Hizbollah has begun to take part in the political system, and since 1992 has also operated as a political party with representation in parliament. Since June 2005, its representatives have even taken part in the government. As such, Hizbollah wishes to regard itself as a national Lebanese faction representing the interests of the general public, not an organization representing an ethnic group or a narrow ideology.⁵

Hizbollah's image among the Lebanese public at large is therefore important to the organization. Since the Israeli withdrawal from the security zone in southern Lebanon in 2000, Hizbollah has labeled itself as Lebanon's defender against Israel. Indeed, large sections of the Lebanese public regard its armed presence in southern Lebanon and its maintenance of an independent military force as legitimate. This image was damaged in the summer of 2006. Many Lebanese saw the war as an Iranian war – part of its effort to attain Shiite regional hegemony. Hizbollah's image as the defender of Lebanon and a responsible national movement suffered a serious public blow. The events of May 2008 further strengthened this process. Following a dispute between Hizbollah and the Lebanese government over the laying of independent communications lines by Hizbollah, Hizbollah fighters conducted street warfare against their political opponents. Although Hizbollah and its supporters got the better of the fighting, its negative image was reinforced. For the first time, the weapon of resistance, which Hizbollah asserted was so necessary in order to protect Lebanon against Israel, was directed inward. Therefore, another round of escalation with Israel that smacks of Iranian involvement and brings unforeseeable results would do further damage to Hizbollah's public standing and the willingness of various factions in the Lebanese system to accept its armed presence. While in the short term there is probably no political element strong enough to eliminate Hizbollah, it is certainly possible

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that another round of fighting would undermine the delicate balance between Lebanon's ethnic groups. At this point in time, Hizbollah is decidedly not interested in that happening.

Another likely factor underlying Hizbollah's underplayed response to Operation Cast Lead is the Lebanese parliamentary elections scheduled for spring 2009. It is in Hizbollah's interest that these elections be held as scheduled, since the party of Michel Aoun, Hizbollah's main ally among the Lebanese Christians, is expected to strengthen its electoral power. Based on the Doha agreement reached after the events of May 2008, the electoral districts in Lebanon were redistributed in a way that Hizbollah and its allies believe will increase the number of representatives Aoun's faction will earn. The composition of the government will therefore be more comfortable for Hizbollah and the pro-Syrian camp in general, which will of course confer many advantages on the organization.

There is no doubt that the Hizbollah leadership, particularly Nasrallah, regards its popular image among the Arabs and Palestinians as important. At the same time, as the organization's response to Operation Cast Lead showed, even jihad on behalf of the Palestinians can wait when Hizbollah's political interests in the Lebanese theater are at stake.

Notes

- 1 Quoted by Daniel Sobelman, "Hizbollah Two Years After the IDF Withdrawal," *Strategic Assessment* 5, no. 2 (2002): 15.
- 2 Al-Manar, December 29, 2008.
- 3 Al-Manar, December 29, 2008.
- 4 Amos Harel and Yossi Melman, "Hizbollah Behind Lebanon Rocket Strikes in North," *Haaretz*, January 18, 2009.
- 5 For an analysis of the organization's different aspects, see Dani Berkovich, *Can the Hydra be Beheaded? The Campaign to Weaken Hizbollah*, Memorandum No. 92, Institute for National Security Studies, December 2007, pp. 37-48.