

Four Years after the Withdrawal from Lebanon: Refining the Rules of the Game

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The exchange of fire that takes place every few months on the northern border between Israel and Hizbollah evokes time and again extreme comments in the Israeli political scene, such as calls “to put the lights out in Beirut” or to attack Syria, and other demands for sweeping strategic retaliation against Hizbollah’s tactics. In practice, Israel adopts a far more moderate approach to the complex situation along the Lebanese border. The caution employed by Israel and Hizbollah – each in its own initiated moves and responses to the other – contributes to the relative stability maintained along the Israeli-Lebanese border.

The period that has elapsed since the withdrawal from southern Lebanon permits a “higher resolution” analysis of the situation in the north than in the past. The rules of the game that took shape between Israel and Hizbollah following Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 have continued to evolve and have become clearer and stronger over time, even when tried by increasingly severe events. This article focuses on the state of affairs and the developments along Israel’s northern border, particularly

since the eve of the war in Iraq in early 2003.

In the second half of the period since the withdrawal, Hizbollah emerges as an organization wishing to preserve the status quo in the north, and it seems that Israel has up to now recognized the rules created by Hizbollah. From the beginning of 2003 stability was maintained on the Israeli-Lebanese border despite the several major shockwaves that could have threatened it, such as the war in Iraq, the Israel Air Force (IAF) attack on Syria, military operations inside Lebanon ascribed to Israeli intelligence, destruction of Hizbollah anti-aircraft batteries by Israel, and the killing of Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin and his successor Abd al-Aziz Rantisi. None of these events caused the deterioration of the situation along the northern border that the IDF and the Israeli defense establishment had feared on the eve of the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Hizbollah’s behavior reflects the organizational, Lebanese, regional, and international constraints under which it operates. By adjusting its policy to the reality of its host environment, the organization markets itself as a deterrent force that is mainly

defensive in nature. Hizbollah has justified most of its activities of the last two years as retaliation against Israeli activities on the border. Hizbollah has also invested significant efforts to distinguish itself from al-Qaeda in terms of both organization and image, and this trend is important when trying to understand the pattern of Hizbollah’s activities against Israel.

In contrast to the relative stability in the north is Hizbollah’s engagement in the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. The defense establishment reports increasing Hizbollah involvement in the financing, training, and direction of Palestinian cells and in the recruitment of Israeli citizens. Assistance takes the form of transferring money to the cells, contacts by phone and through the internet, and dispatching agents to the territories. According to Major General Benny Ganz, GOC Northern Command, Hizbollah is “involved up to its neck in terrorist activities in the territories.”¹

Hizbollah’s involvement in the Palestinian arena, if it is in fact of the scale claimed by the defense establishment, is liable in time to prove decisive in determining Israel’s overall policy towards the Lebanese organi-

zation. The continuation of this trend may well lead to deterioration of the situation, which is currently more stable and quiet than what Israel has known for several decades along its northern border.

Respecting Existing Parameters in the North

After the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon, Hizbollah turned the Shab'a Farms area on the slopes of Mount Dov into its major, nearly exclusive theater of operations against Israel. Hizbollah, Syria, and Lebanon all justified the activity, claiming that Israel's military retention of this area indicated an incomplete IDF withdrawal. Starting with the kidnapping of IDF soldiers on Mount Dov in October 2000, Hizbollah initiated attacks against IDF positions in the sector at a frequency of about once a month until the middle of 2002. Since then the number of incidents on Mount Dov has decreased significantly, and several months elapsed between attacks.

Despite the ongoing demand that Israel withdraw from the disputed area in Mount Dov, Hizbollah today is to a large extent an organization that preserves the existing rules of the game on the Israeli-Lebanese border, which are regulated primarily by the principle of "measure for measure." The leaders of the organization frequently praise what they call their success in developing a deterrent force, which prevents Israel from attacking Lebanon. Behind the scenes the organization steadily increases its military strength, and currently, ac-

cording to IDF estimates, possesses about 13,000 Katyusha missiles and rockets. Hizbollah continues to construct infrastructures in southern Lebanon for a state of emergency, including routes for weapons transport and private telephone communications, and is also acquiring technological devices such as radar and monitoring cameras.

Ali Hussein Khalil, the political advisor to the secretary-general of

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Hizbollah, explained the organization's policy in May 2003, after four months of quiet: "The response is currently dependent on the extent of the violations by the Israeli enemy. Consequently, if it increases the scale of its attacks, Hizbollah and the Islamic resistance will increase the extent of the response and the defense of this homeland."² In November 2003 Na'im Qasim, the secretary-general's deputy, repeated this stand, saying that Hizbollah's courses of action change "in accordance with the extent to which Israel carries out its aggression."³ A senior official in the organization, Nawaf Musawi, in charge of

external relations, even went so far as to define the organization's relations with Israel as a "cold war."⁴ In December 2003 the Hizbollah commander for the southern region, Sheikh Nabil Qawuq, defined the situation in southern Lebanon as the best "in more than fifty years," in his opinion because of "the continuation of resistance and making the Zionist enemy subject to equations."⁵

Qawuq's diagnosis was based in part on the fact that Lebanese tourism has in recent years enjoyed prosperity unmatched in the Middle East in recent years. After a break of thirty years, 2003 was recorded as the first year in which more than a million tourists visited Lebanon. In the first quarter of 2004 there was an increase of 33 percent in the number of tourists compared to the corresponding period the previous year.⁶ A review of the first half of 2004 indicates a 45 percent increase in the number of tourists in Lebanon over the previous year.⁷ The ongoing increase in the level of tourism realizes part of Lebanon's hope of extricating itself from the tremendous external debt it has accumulated, another fact that Hizbollah must take into account.⁸

From Hizbollah's point of view, the more the organization is regarded as a "deterrent force," the stronger the legitimacy it strives to retain since losing its major theater of operations against Israel and in the new reality existing since September 11, 2001. In addition, when Hizbollah presents itself as a force designed primarily to deter Israel from attacking, a note of apology can be detected, intended to

provide an explanation for the long months of quiet that separated its activities – activities that in any case were presented as reprisals against Israeli provocations. For example, Hizbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah explained in July 2003, after six months of absolute quiet in the north, that even when his organization doesn't open fire, "its very existence and readiness in the region of the confrontation prevents Israeli aggression."⁹

Since January 2003 the north has enjoyed the longest periods of quiet that the region has known in several decades, and particularly since the withdrawal. Between January and August 2003 the organization did not act at all, apart from anti-aircraft fire in response to continued IAF flights in Lebanese airspace; between September 2003 and May 2004 Hizbollah did not use anti-aircraft fire along the northern border; between October 2003 and May 2004 Hizbollah was active only once on Mount Dov. Two incidents in which IDF soldiers were killed by Hizbollah occurred after IDF forces crossed the border fence. Another shooting incident, in which an IDF soldier was killed and the perpetrators have remained unidentified, occurred at the beginning of October 2003 after an IAF attack against Syria.

An example of the importance attached by Hizbollah to the existing "equations" is the comment by Secretary-General Nasrallah after Israel's exceptional attack on Syria in October 2003. This attack was carried out in retaliation for a multi-victim suicide bombing at the Maxim Restaurant in Haifa, retaliation regarded by the or-

ganization as a "crazy" crossing of a traditional red line. The Hizbollah secretary-general warned that Israel should not "go crazy," and hinted that his organization would retaliate with "similar insanity and craziness."¹⁰ Following the incident Hizbollah emphasized the common objectives it shares with Syria, hinting that it was possible that the results of a future Israeli attack on Syria would be felt along the northern border. The organization also warned that an Israeli attack on Lebanon, Syria, or Iran would lead to retaliation deep inside Israel.

Another example of Hizbollah's measured steps occurred this past June 7, when several rockets were fired against an Israeli naval vessel – apparently by Palestinian activists. IDF officers believed that this was the first time that rockets had been aimed at an Israeli navy vessel lying in Israeli territorial waters. A few hours later, Israel retaliated with the first bombing attack of its kind since the IDF withdrawal. The target was the general headquarters of the Popular Front in al-Na'ama in the suburbs of Beirut. Hizbollah's response came the very next day in the usual "ballpark," i.e., in the form of shelling of Mount Dov outposts.

If, after the rocket attack the previous day, IDF sources were quoted as estimating that Hizbollah was trying to drag Israel into a confrontation, the message that the organization tried to send through its spokesmen and media was precisely the opposite. The deputy secretary-general of Hizbollah declared, "We are opposed to this action, which is uncalled for,

and which was not thought out in advance [regarding its implications]." He explained the Hizbollah response by saying that it was made "in order to explain to the Israeli that he cannot decide the rules of the game unilaterally. Next time the response may assume a different form."¹¹

The organization's weekly quoted Lebanese officials as saying: "In its response the resistance reemphasized the stability of the existing equations," and "the recent escalation has remained within boundaries... The existing equations and the given regional and international situation do not permit Israel the option of a broad explosion."¹² Even more striking was the front page headline of the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Nahar*, which explained that Hizbollah attacked because the IAF strike on al-Na'ama "broke the accepted rules of the game, and the organization cannot remain unaffected by this and allow Israel to bypass the rules of the game."¹³ When referring to the possibility of continued escalation Hizbollah's spokesman, Hassan Ez El-Din, declared that "the ball is now in the Israeli court."¹⁴ Accordingly, Israel allowed Hizbollah to have the last word in this round, even if the organization's response was less intensive than Israel's.

These remarks are indicative of Hizbollah's limited response, which embodies careful delineation of the confrontation's boundaries. The recent blatant use of the expression "rules of the game" reflects Hizbollah's perception of its confrontation with Israel, a perception that is contradictory to the declared ideology of Hizbollah

that calls for the destruction of Israel. While the rules of the game have largely been in effect since Israel's withdrawal, the latter period reveals a greater self-consciousness and more formal, public acknowledgment within Hizbollah of these same parameters.

Perhaps therefore the Shiite organization currently enjoys a somewhat narrower range of maneuver than immediately after the IDF withdrawal regarding the initiating of attacks and their ideological justification as continued resistance to Israel. The operational context of the organization, which extends to Syria and Lebanon, is primarily one of restraint. Although Lebanon has not deployed its army in the southern part of the country, its internal security forces are present there, with varying degrees of visibility, at all times. The Lebanese government has not hesitated at times of tension to order these forces to replace their civilian clothes with uniforms and carry out patrols with media coverage along the border with Israel. In many cases these forces have blocked attempts at infiltration into Israel and even terrorist attacks.

In conclusion, most of Hizbollah's recent activities on the northern border were the result of what Hizbollah can present as Israeli provocation, such as IDF crossing of the Lebanese border or other violations of the rules of the game. Indeed, the July 20, 2004 fatal attack on two IDF soldiers who were fixing a military outpost antenna came one day after the assassination of Hizbollah leader Ghalib Awali, which Nasrallah had promised would be avenged by Hizbollah.

From Air Deterrence to Ground Deterrence

Hizbollah anti-aircraft fire over the last year is a telling indicator of organizational policy and how the rules of the game between Israel and Hizbollah have continued to assume a more consistent, reciprocal posture. During this period there was a near-total cessation of Hizbollah anti-aircraft fire in the north. This may be explained by two developments: the

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Israeli success in controlling the rules of the game, whereby the Hizbollah anti-aircraft positions became easy targets of the IAF; and a consequent reduction in the number of airspace violations by Israel.

Hizbollah began firing anti-aircraft shells in the north in the middle of 2002 in retaliation for IAF flights in Lebanese airspace, which ceased with the withdrawal and resumed in October 2000 following the abduction of three Israeli soldiers. This was simultaneously an attempt to extend the organization's range of maneuver against Israel and to improve its image with little effort. Senior officers in

IDF Military Intelligence interpreted the fire as Hizbollah's drive to maintain its jihadic character, but examination of the data reveals a direct relationship between the IDF airspace violations and the anti-aircraft fire. This is therefore a clear-cut issue of provocation and response, since even jihad ideology would not have prompted the anti-aircraft fire without the IAF flights over Lebanon. Furthermore, Hizbollah took care to ensure, particularly at a certain stage, that the anti-aircraft fire would not be launched before it was clear that IAF aircraft had in fact penetrated Lebanese airspace.

The policymakers in Israel preferred to treat the anti-aircraft fire as if it was launched by Hizbollah rather than officially by Lebanon, without considering the fact that the organization receives full Lebanese backing for its responses to IAF violations. For example, Major General Aharon Ze'evi (Farkash), head of IDF Military Intelligence, said:

On the assumption that Lebanon is a sovereign country, why is Hizbollah firing at us? Have they delegated the defense of the country's airspace to a terrorist organization? ... What European country would agree to allow a private organization, and not its army or air force, to defend its airspace? If Lebanon thinks it has a problem it should ask Israel to solve it, send the Lebanese army to the south and observe the agreements – and Israel won't fly. If Hizbollah doesn't threaten Is-

rael, if its rockets are dismantled, and the Revolutionary Guards leave Lebanon, there will be no justification for Israel to fly in Lebanon.¹⁵

Yet in contrast to what is implied by these remarks, the anti-aircraft fire enjoyed broad understanding and support among the Lebanese public and government. This support is broader than the limited support given to Hizbollah's initiated activities in Shab'a Farms – as opposed to retaliatory activities – after the Israeli withdrawal (certainly those that caused the killing of Israeli soldiers and the exposure of Lebanon and Syria to the danger of Israeli punitive action). Furthermore, one should recall the trend charted in an intelligence report that for some time there has been an appreciable increase in the cooperation and coordination between Hizbollah and the armies of Syria and Lebanon. Recently Lebanon's chief-of-staff quite poignantly referred to Hizbollah as Lebanon's "smart weapon" against Israel's "warplanes and smart weapons."¹⁶

In the period April-August 2003 Hizbollah attempted to maximize the potential it saw as latent in the anti-aircraft fire. In retaliation for the increased number of IAF flights, Nasrallah announced that his organization intended to find a new method of deterring Israel. A gradual lowering of the elevation of the guns resulted in Israeli injuries and damaged property in settlements in the north. The turning point in anti-aircraft fire use came in August 2003, after a shell

aimed directly at the northwest Galilee city Shlomi killed Haviv Dadon, aged 16.

Apart from the death of a child, Israel emerged from this tension as the party with the upper hand in formulating the rules of the game. A few hours after Dadon was killed the IAF destroyed the anti-aircraft position from which Hizbollah fired at Shlomi. Another anti-aircraft position was destroyed on September 3 following additional firing from northern Lebanese airspace. A few days later, on September 9, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said "We have decided on a policy by which every gun that fires in order to attack citizens in the north will be destroyed by us. Period."¹⁷

After the destruction of its positions, Hizbollah withdrew its anti-aircraft launching sites from the border region, having understood that they represented a vulnerable point easily exploited by Israel. Israel likewise adopted a new policy: the IAF stopped flying regularly in Lebanese airspace. This policy shift may be regarded as a limited achievement by Hizbollah: instead of daily flights, the IAF switched (though not entirely) to flights once every few weeks. This was referred to in the IAF as a "beat" – a specific day on which all reconnaissance flights essential for photography and intelligence gathering were concentrated.

In the few cases where anti-aircraft guns opened fire after September 2003, this occurred to the north of the border (so that shrapnel would not fall in Israeli territory), sometimes by the Lebanese army and not by Hizbollah.

Hizbollah did not retaliate after the two attacks by the IAF against its anti-aircraft positions. Furthermore, in the past Hizbollah made announcements regarding Israeli violations of airspace, but in recent months this has been done by the Lebanese Army.

According to IAF Northern Command data, the anti-aircraft fire in September 2003, following which the positions were destroyed, was the last airspace incident close to the northern border up to May 5, 2004. The eight months in which anti-aircraft fire did not disturb civilian life in the north or endanger civilians earned no particular notice. Even the reason for renewed fire on the date mentioned did not receive particular attention in Israel, but was explained by the UN representative in Lebanon, Stefan de Mistura. He emphasized that after several weeks of no airspace violations, Israel renewed its flights – twenty-seven violations on the same day, accompanied by supersonic booms. In other words, this was the day on which the IAF decided to "walk the beat."

The virtually total cessation of anti-aircraft fire by Hizbollah, however, did not signify the end of the struggle for setting the rules of the game in the north. Following the destruction of Hizbollah's anti-aircraft positions in the western sector of the border, which entailed Israel's crossing of the UN blue line, the Shiite organization seized this opportunity to change its range of maneuver. This Hizbollah initiative was even mentioned and interpreted in the Beirut newspaper *Al-Mustaqbal*.¹⁸ Ever since

the withdrawal, Hizbollah consistently published or leaked to the Lebanese press incidents in which Israel had violated Lebanese sovereignty. Even cases in which Israeli soldiers had been observed crossing the (imaginary) border line between the Israeli and Lebanese sides of the Alawi village of Ghajar were mentioned in the Lebanese media. Some people in Israel realized the direction that the organization's thinking was taking; Colonel Y., the intelligence officer of Northern Command following these developments, estimated that there now existed a danger that Hizbollah would attempt to lay explosive charges on roads in northern Israel.¹⁹

And indeed, the curbing of the anti-aircraft tactic spawned a new measure: Hizbollah did not lay explosive charges on roads in northern Israel, but from the beginning of November 2003 the IDF began discovering areas with explosive charges at various points along the northern side of the security system fence, including on routes used by the IDF. The first area of explosives exposed was to the northeast of Kibbutz Ma'ayan Baruch.²⁰ About a month later a series of explosive charges laid by Hizbollah was discovered to the west of Moshav Zar'it, on the northern side of the security system fence, even though it was claimed that because the security system fence and the international border do not coincide in this area, the charges were laid in Israeli territory.²¹

Additional explosives were located and neutralized, but on January 19, 2004 an IDF armored bulldozer crossed the security system fence in

order to dispose of charges laid to the west of Zar'it. A missile launched at the bulldozer by Hizbollah scored a direct hit and killed the driver, Staff Sergeant Yan Rotzenski. After the incident, to which the IDF reacted in a specifically moderate and nominal manner, a senior officer in Northern Command said: "This is an intolerable situation. When they lay explosive charges near the movement routes of our forces, we have to neutralize

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them. This is a clear-cut defense step."²²

The limited nature of the incident was expressed clearly by the deputy secretary-general of Hizbollah, who said: "The organization designated the Israeli bulldozer as a target solely because it crossed the border, and that will be the end of the matter, unless there is aggressive action requiring a response."²³ Israeli defense officials announced that Israel's response would be "relevant and proportionate" in order to avoid igniting the border²⁴ – or, in other words, Israel's recognition of the principle of "measure for measure." Lebanon too ex-

pressed its recognition of this principle when President Emile Lahoud, in a cabinet meeting held three days after the incident, said: "We don't wish to attack and we don't wish to violate the blue line, but we shall not permit Israel to establish a new equation of attack and lack of deterrence [by Lebanon]. Consequently, after the attack took place there came suitable deterrence to the action taken by Israel."²⁵ The secretary-general of Hizbollah turned Lahoud's words into a standing order: "An Israeli soldier whose foot treads on Lebanese soil will bear the responsibility for his action. We are free to kill, injure, or take him prisoner... Any crossing of the international border or of the blue line in the direction of Lebanese land justifies the resistance confronting this violation on a defensive basis... There are ways liable to be used by the Zionist soldiers to violate Lebanese sovereignty; there are places they have become accustomed to cross. I say publicly: we have the right to lay explosive charges there, and we have the right to set up ambushes there."²⁶

The implementation of this policy came on May 7, 2004, when a force of the IDF Egoz unit penetrated Lebanese territory from Mount Dov in order to remove equipment left behind by Hizbollah fighters the previous day, during an attack on the Gladiola outpost. A Hizbollah ambush that identified the force activated an explosive charge and opened fire. In the action Staff Sergeant Dennis Laminov was killed. This operation, like the one against the Israeli bulldozer, received Lebanese backing.

In the light of Hizbollah's new policy, which enjoys official Lebanese support and according to which violation of territorial sovereignty is a qualitative – as opposed to a quantitative – issue, with a consequent clear response, the IDF is faced by a dilemma: should it or shouldn't it take action to neutralize the explosive charges? After all, the very laying of the charges near the security system fence and the movement routes of the forces represents a problematic risk. Hizbollah is not expected to initiate the operation of explosive devices against Israeli forces except in retaliation for an Israeli operation – much like the pattern of the operation in December 2002, when less than two days after the killing in southern Lebanon of Ramzi Nabra, a Lebanese drug peddler associated with Hizbollah, an explosive device was activated against an IDF patrol. Even so, this constricts the methods of operation of the IDF in Lebanon in the future. The dilemma is intensified because the explosives are placed in the immediate vicinity of the fence, but Israel must take into account the fact that the fate of Israeli soldiers who cross into Lebanese territory is liable to be the same as that of an armed Lebanese who tries to cross into Israeli territory.

Differentiating Itself from al-Qaeda

In the research and intelligence debate regarding Hizbollah it is customary to assume that the behavior of the Shiite organization is limited by the constraints on its allies, headed by Syria,

Iran, and the Lebanese government. The argument that Hizbollah acts because of its desire to maintain its jihad nature has become commonplace in security circles in Israel, headed by IDF Military Intelligence. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, various groups, including Israel, attempted to create a linkage between Hizbollah and al-Qaeda, an attempt whose validity was at best tenuous, if not outright incorrect.

The post-September 11 reality forced Hizbollah to define more clearly the organization's standpoint, in order to prevent its being positioned on the map of potential targets of the US military. Hizbollah's restrained behavior in southern Lebanon and its drive to be regarded as a deterrent force can also be seen in the efforts the organization has made to distinguish itself in the aspects of religion, style, and methods of operation from extremist Islamic organizations, headed by al-Qaeda, that in Hizbollah's opinion have adopted a policy that is extremist, damaging, and non-Islamic. The global war against terrorism led by the US – which last year was also connected to the overthrow of the regime in Iraq – has accentuated this important trend, which is virtually absent in the research, media, and defense debate regarding Hizbollah.

An exceptionally public example of the internal arguments regarding Hizbollah's image can be seen in the affair that led to the resignation of Nayef Krayem in May 2003, who among other roles, was responsible for Hizbollah's media coverage and

was a member of the political council. Krayem aroused the anger of the extremist wing of Hizbollah by an article that he published about two months earlier in the editorial page of *Al-Safir*, in which he defended the heritage of the Shiite imam Murtada Mutahhari, who wished to tone down the extremist expressions of mourning of Shiites, accompanied by self-flagellation, on the day of Ashura. Referring to the opinions of Mutahhari, Krayem hinted at the need for ideological-religious moderation in Hizbollah and its separation from extremist Islam, as he wrote explicitly in his subsequent letter of resignation. He emphasized that in his resignation he "prays to Allah to guard [Hizbollah] against the salafiyah [the extremist Islamic movements that aspire to restoring former glory] and against the American-Zionist offensive, and that He should aid its leadership to continue its political progressiveness and its place in the forefront of the struggle and cultural openness and progress."²⁷

Krayem was forced to flee from his opponents, but the line he attempted to propound matches the views of the leadership. Proof of this can be found in the calls of Hassan Nasrallah to the Islamic organizations to moderate the extremist rhetoric, according to which the West represents "Crusaders" and "infidels." In one of his speeches Nasrallah explained that "not every war is a jihad . . . and not every fatality is a shahid. . . . It is not sufficient that the battle is fundamentally legal." According to the secretary-general, over the years of fighting against Is-

rael in southern Lebanon "the roots of the jihad were legal, but this does not mean that all is permitted and that we can do whatever we like, while abandoning the blood, money, and property of the people, and perpetrate serious crimes under the banner of jihad and war against the enemy. This is not compatible with the Quran and with the way of life of the Prophet."²⁸ Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, a supreme religious authority of Hizbollah, has several times criticized the terrorist attacks, rhetoric, methods of operation, and style of al-Qaeda and other extremist Islamic organizations that in his opinion have deviated from the straight Islamic path. In this context one should consider the announcement published by Hizbollah in May 2004 that contained a sweeping condemnation of the decapitation in Iraq of the American citizen Nicholas Berg, attributed to al-Qaeda members. It was emphasized in the announcement that the "despicable" act caused "grave damage to Islam and the Muslims" as well as to the image of Islam.²⁹

The Palestinian Motive

How therefore is it possible to reconcile the conflict between the restrained behavior of Hizbollah on the northern border as well as its attempts to be distinguished from al-Qaeda, and its subversive activities on the Palestinian front – activities liable in the end to push Israel towards taking extensive action against the organization? It seems that primarily this activity contains a far smaller risk than that latent in other patterns of action.

Without doubt the Palestinian struggle is regarded as legitimate by many countries throughout the world, and consequently providing aid for the Palestinian struggle does not incur the dangers of armed activities in Lebanon or other countries. Thus far the international community has been more tolerant of activities in the territories than of international terrorism.

According to intelligence reports, in the past Hizbollah had succeeded

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in resisting Iranian bodies that urged it to act against Israel, based on the organization's estimate that to do so would not serve its interests. Inside Lebanon, Hizbollah's policy of restraint in southern Lebanon has caused it to sustain criticism during the current year from more extreme circles. The criticism is led by Subhi Tufayli, one of the founders of the organization, who was expelled from its ranks in 1998 because of his support for an extremist ideology that was also directed at Lebanon itself. In interviews and statements made by Tufayli he claimed that Hizbollah had become Israel's "border police."

Consequently Hizbollah's involvement in the Palestinian arena may be regarded as a safety valve for more activist elements in the ranks of the organization. In the past the leaders of the organization tried to "market" the aid to the Palestinians in Lebanon by explaining that apart from ideological and religious considerations, the more Israel was preoccupied on the Palestinian front, the more restricted it would be in its abilities regarding Lebanon. From Hizbollah's point of view this is also of help in building the organization's regional image and prestige.

Lebanon's lack of tolerance towards Palestinian elements in the country is certain. The Lebanese authorities continue to prevent Palestinian residents from approaching the border region with Israel and thwart all their intentions of acting against Israel. On the other hand, no significant public or establishment protests have been voiced in Lebanon against the aid provided by Hizbollah for the Palestinians in the territories. After the exchange of prisoners between Israel and Hizbollah at the end of January 2004, Lebanese President Emile Lahoud did not hesitate to be photographed together with several organizational operatives who had traveled to Israel and to the territories to train the Palestinian organizations and had been caught by the GSS.

That Hizbollah has begun understanding the danger that lies in Israel's accusations against it regarding involvement in the Palestinian struggle can be seen in Nasrallah's words at the end of May: "Every day there is

The confrontation with Hizbollah on the Palestinian front may lead to a change on the northern border.

a threat against Lebanon. Our brothers in Palestine carry out an operation in Ashdod, and fight in the Zaytun neighborhood, and the enemy says: Hizbollah. This isn't true. These are acts carried out by the Palestinians themselves. This is their jihad and their resistance, with its different splinter groups. . . Why are the accusations directed at Hizbollah? Is this in order to frighten Syria and Lebanon? We are not afraid and shall never be afraid."³⁰ At the same time, upon Awali's assassination in July 2004, Nasrallah acknowledged that Awali had been involved in a Hizbollah task force that assisted the brethren in Palestine.

Conclusion

This article depicts the deterrent aspect of Hizbollah and its observance of the rules of the game in which it competes against Israel. These rules dictate adhering to relatively restricted parameters in the confrontation between the sides. Described here are the dynamics between Israel and Hizbollah in Lebanon, including the forms of action and response of the two sides, as derived from their overall interests. What is especially prominent since the American preparations for the war in Iraq is the formal, pub-

lic recognition of these dynamics, labeled specifically as rules of the game. Both Israel and Hizbollah knew in this period how to reject calls for a more forceful policy voiced by powers within or near them.

Since the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, Israel has generally made sure to keep its responses and actions in Lebanon within the existing rules of the game, and sometimes even exercised self-restraint after terrorist attacks (especially in the first months after the withdrawal) in order to avoid opening another front of confrontation on top of the Palestinian one. Hizbollah took care in its declarations to attribute a limited and fundamentally retaliatory character to its activities in the north. Over the last year the struggle between Israel and Hizbollah has assumed new parameters: instead of anti-aircraft fire, which was significantly reduced after Israel adopted a policy of destroying every anti-aircraft gun that fired in the north, the organization began laying explosive charges next to the border with Israel.

Considering that relations between Israel and Lebanon are defined as a state of war (or hostilities) and are influenced by the state of war existing between Israel and Syria – and in any case both countries have territorial demands of Israel – Israel's northern border is relatively stable and peaceful and displays signs of economic prosperity.³¹ For the sake of comparison it should be recalled that in recent years even on the Israeli-Egyptian and Israeli-Jordanian borders there were shooting incidents,

smuggling of arms, fatalities, and Israeli accusations that Egypt was not doing enough to guard the border. Obviously Israeli-Lebanese relations are different, for example in that Israel is not obligated by an official agreement between the two countries.

Preservation of the relative quiet on the northern border in the long term will obligate Israel as well as Lebanon and Hizbollah to continue to act in a measured manner, avoiding disproportionate responses. The experience of the recent past indicates that both sides have at their disposal a certain range of maneuver and the capability of trying to formulate the rules of the game in accordance with their own interests. However, it is likely that the day is approaching when restraint by both sides on the northern border will not be enough to preserve the stability, either because of an Israeli initiative to attack Hizbollah or because of a response to provocation attributed to the organization in the Palestinian context. It is consequently possible that in fact the confrontation with Hizbollah on the Palestinian front will lead to a change in reality on the northern border.

Notes

1. Interview in "Meet the Press" with Shelly Yehimovitz, on Channel 2, May 29, 2004.
2. *Al-Mustaqbal*, May 20, 2003.
3. *Al-Nahar*, November 6, 2003.
4. *Al-Mustaqbal*, August 1, 2003.
5. *Al-Mustaqbal*, December 2, 2003.
6. *Daily Star*, April 19, 2004.
7. *Daily Star*, July 12, 2004.
8. *Al-Safir*, May 31, 2004. The newspaper published an economic report indicat-