

# Israel: Between Hezbollah Provocations and Possible Negotiations with Lebanon

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A series of provocations by Hezbollah has caused rising tension along the border between Israel and Lebanon. The most severe recent incident involved the tents erected in the Mt. Dov area, which Israel considers to be within its territory. These provocations, along with the heightened threats by the organization, reflect Nasrallah's increasing confidence, or at least his readiness to take greater risks vis-à-vis Israel. This confidence is grounded in his belief that the internal crisis in Israel undermines IDF capabilities and the Israeli government's ability to decide on launching a military attack against Hezbollah in Lebanon. To Nasrallah, Israel's avoidance of any significant operational response so as not to cause the situation to deteriorate into war creates an opportunity for him to improve incrementally the balance of deterrence between Hezbollah and Israel. In tandem, Nasrallah seeks to bolster his weakening political position within Lebanon, where some voices have called for negotiations with Israel regarding the land border between the two countries. Israel should adopt a policy that combines political moves and military actions: agree to negotiations on the land border, while completing the barrier along the border, and at the same time, devise a variety of sophisticated military plans to deter Hezbollah and execute them as needed, while preparing for the possibility of an escalated armed conflict.

Joining IDF efforts to complete the barrier along the Israel-Lebanon border, recent months have seen a significant increase in the number of provocations carried out by Hezbollah along the border and beyond. These developments exacerbate the tension between the IDF and the organization and heighten the fear of an ensuing deterioration into war.

The provocations include mainly the increased presence of Hezbollah activists along the border, some of whom occupy the growing number of observation posts allegedly erected by the Green Without Borders organization; blatant attempts by Hezbollah activists and their supporters to cross the Blue Line (marked by the UN following Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000); and efforts to sabotage the Israeli barrier and/or interrupt the IDF's efforts to complete it. On July 6, 2023, anti-tank weapons were fired at the village of Ghajar – apparently by Palestinians who were not restrained by Hezbollah. In addition, in mid-June, the Israeli media revealed that two tents with armed Hezbollah operatives were erected in the vicinity of Mt. Dov, apparently already in April. The erection of the tents was regarded by Israel as a flagrant violation of the Blue Line, yet it was initially decided not to remove them by force, but rather to pursue diplomatic channels and approach the UN, the United States, and France, to persuade Lebanon to have them removed. These efforts have indeed led to the removal of one of the tents, yet Hezbollah – whose leadership apparently did not initiate the tent provocation – identified this as an opportunity for the organization and has refused to remove the second tent. Nasrallah has even gone one step further, and on July 12, in a speech on the occasion of the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, specifically threatened that any Israeli action to remove the tent would elicit a response by the organization. He also linked the dismantlement of the tent to Lebanon's demand for Israel's withdrawal from the part of Ghajar north of the Blue Line, with the aim of creating a new equation.

The friction initiated by Hezbollah along the border and the organization's increasing threats reflect its ongoing frustration over the construction of the Israeli barrier along the border. At the same time, this joins Hezbollah's enhanced confidence, evident since the threats by Nasrallah against the Karish gas platform, as well as following two other unusual events: a terrorist attack at the Meggido Junction by a bomber who infiltrated through the northern border (March 13) and the rocket fire from Lebanon on Passover (April 6), attributed to Palestinian activists. It seems that Nasrallah is willing to incur risks given his perception that the severe

internal crisis in Israel since the establishment of the current government signals Israeli weakness and military enfeeblement, and his estimation that the Israeli government has neither the interest nor the power to take an unusual decision to initiate military action against Hezbollah, let alone start a full-scale war. The increasing tension between Israel and the United States reinforces this perception and encourages his assessment that Israel will contain the provocations, now more than ever, in order to avoid war.

That said, Hezbollah itself is not interested in an escalation or a wide military campaign, although several battle days might serve its efforts to fortify its image as the “defender of Lebanon” and help reverse its weakening position within the country. This could be achieved without risking Israeli retaliation that might lead to war. Therefore, recent events have provided it with an opportunity to improve the image of its stamina, vis-à-vis both Israel and in the eyes of the Lebanese public. Toward Israel, Hezbollah has a twofold objective: on the strategic level, it wishes to adjust the balance of deterrence against Israel in its favor, as stressed by Nasrallah in his July 12 speech. This is part of his cognitive campaign against Israel, in which he boasts that since the Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah’s deterrence capability has increased, while Israel’s has eroded. On the ground level, Hezbollah is acting to strengthen its hold along the border, in part to create a better starting point, should it decide to activate its plans to infiltrate Israel using its Radwan Force – the organization’s commando unit. This scenario was demonstrated before a large group of journalists during a public exercise held by Hezbollah activists last May.

At the same time, Nasrallah wants to take advantage of what he regards as Israeli weakness in order to strengthen Hezbollah’s status as the “defender of Lebanon” against its local opponents, namely the opposition, as well as the general public. The organization has long faced increased criticism in Lebanon, due to both its role and responsibility in the severe economic crisis in the country, and its part in the political stalemate, insisting that its candidate for the presidency of Lebanon – Suleiman Antoine Frangieh – be elected, despite his lacking the required parliamentary support. For many in Lebanon, it is Nasrallah’s obstinacy that prevents the election of a new

president, who could promote moves for improving the country's situation. Another challenge faced by the organization are the increasing calls by its domestic critics to relinquish its position as a militia and disarm. Nasrallah referred to this issue in his speech on July 12 and claimed that the weapon of resistance was merely intended to defend Lebanon, and attacking the organization regarding its weapons possession would only serve the enemy.

During the talks with international bodies trying to resolve the issue of the Mt. Dov tent, the Lebanese claimed that Israel itself has encroached into Lebanon and committed several border violations that have to be remedied, emphasizing the main violation, or in their terms – the “occupation” – of the village of Ghajar, divided by the Blue Line. In this context, the Lebanese asserted the need for an official agreement on the demarcation of the land border between Israel and Lebanon, and even disclosed it publicly. Prime Minister Mikati declared (*Nidaa al-Watan* and *al-Quds al-Arabi*, July 11), that Lebanon informed the UN of its intention to promote full demarcation of the land border. The Lebanese Foreign Minister stated clearly that the proposal for the demarcation of the border was serious, although it did not mean normalization with Israel (*al-Nashra*, July 11). This joined reports of the arrival of the United States envoy, Amos Hochstein, who conducted the negotiations for the demarcation of the maritime border.

The opportunity to negotiate the demarcation of the land border creates a dilemma for Hezbollah. Opening negotiations with Israel runs decidedly counter to the organization's approach, as well as to that of its patron, Iran – toward Israel's existence, in general, and to negotiating with it, in particular. As a result, Nasrallah, who does not wish to be perceived as the recalcitrant party and reveal the gap between his position and that of the other decision makers in Lebanon, who prefer negotiation to an armed conflict, outwardly allows the promotion of the negotiations, while serving as a “guardian,” as he declared and acted regarding the gas rig. Yet Nasrallah emphatically links the removal of the remaining tent in the Mt. Dov area with a Lebanese demand for an Israeli withdrawal from Ghajar,

where the Israeli violation occurs out of consideration for the inhabitants of the village. In his July 12 speech, Nasrallah sought to underscore that the talks did not concern the demarcation of the border, since to Hezbollah the border was determined even prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, but that they rather constitute a move aimed at returning stolen lands to Lebanon. In any case, the chances for a successful completion of negotiations between Israel and Lebanon are slim in light of the grave differences between the parties regarding thirteen points along the border, and indeed, Hezbollah is capable of foiling contacts at any stage, should it desire to do so.

These circumstances have recreated a well-known dilemma from the past, for Israel as well: first and foremost, how can it stop the erosion of its deterrent image in the eyes of Hezbollah, while making clear to Nasrallah the price of the continued provocations and military activities along the Lebanese border and in Syria, and at the same time stabilize the security situation without deteriorating into a war.

Israel should adopt a policy that combines political moves with signs of readiness to take military actions. When attempting to solve the issue of the tents at Mt. Dov, Israel's decision to resort initially to diplomatic channels, in order to expose Hezbollah and gain international legitimacy, proved correct. Israel should continue to pursue international involvement to "quiet" Hezbollah and prevent a military conflict that could have devastating consequences for Lebanon, while inflicting severe damage on Israel as well. Hence, Israel should announce that it agrees to take part in political negotiations with Lebanon in order to resolve the disputes along the border and draw a permanent and agreed border. In parallel, Israel should complete the construction of the barrier along the border and not make do with the warning measures it has taken so far to signal that its patience is reaching its limit, such as the use of non-lethal weapons to deter Hezbollah activists who approached or even crossed the border fence (July 12 and 15, respectively). The IDF must devise a range of specific military responses (including non-public actions) to make it clear to Hezbollah that Israel is willing to intensify its response and that Nasrallah's

underestimating Israel's military power and its ability to exact a toll is a mistake. Such activity is not free from the risk of escalation, for which the IDF should be prepared.

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