

100 Days of Fighting Against Hezbollah: An Interim Assessment

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Israel has been fighting against Hezbollah along the northern border since October 8. The combat escalation in recent weeks, after the IDF intensified its operations, has included targeted assassinations, and there is concern that the situation could deteriorate into all-out war. An interim assessment of the situation suggests that Hezbollah, which seeks to maintain the operational equation against the IDF, has fewer achievements than it hoped for. Its most significant achievement was the result of the Israeli decision to evacuate residents from communities adjacent to the border to protect them from possible cross-border raids, which has created an ad hoc “security zone” inside Israeli territory. Hezbollah also succeeded in forcing the IDF to deploy large numbers of troops along the northern border. However, Hezbollah activity and statements by its leaders strengthen the impression that it is not interested in all-out war but will continue to attack Israel as long as the war in Gaza continues. Given the slim chances of reaching a ceasefire agreement through political channels alone, and until a ceasefire is reached, the IDF must engage in intensified military operations and heavily attack Hezbollah’s infrastructure and fighters in southern Lebanon – but below the level of all-out war. The goal is to create a new reality along the border, which will assist efforts toward implementation of Resolution 1701, and at the same time, leave Israel with the power to decide if and when to launch a widescale military operation.

The limited war between the IDF and Hezbollah on the Lebanese border has been ongoing since October 8, apart from the six-day hiatus in fighting that Hezbollah initiated, parallel to the suspension of fighting in the Gaza Strip, between November 24-30. Hezbollah, which was the first side to open fire, is managing the campaign, while at the same time overseeing and instructing attacks by its partners on the “resistance front” in a number of theaters. At the same time, it allows other terror elements, mainly Hamas, to operate from Lebanese soil. For the past three months, there have been daily exchanges of fire between the sides, as part of “ongoing combat days.” Hezbollah always takes responsibility for its

attacks and issues a daily update on social media about the number of attacks it launched. According to the organization, it only targets Israeli military facilities, apart from cases when it responds to civilian casualties as a result of an Israeli attack in Lebanon.

An analysis of Hezbollah's modus operandi indicates that it seeks to limit the boundaries of the combat, with exceptions caused by the dynamics of mutual escalation. The fighting is underway in a limited geographical area – a few kilometers from the border and along its entire length. The targets are for the most part the same, and the attacks involve the use of short-range munitions. At the same time, there are mutual exceptions when attacks are launched deeper into the other side's territory. Hezbollah has not tapped the entire arsenal at its disposal and its attacks primarily use anti-tank missiles, short-range mortar shells and rockets, and unmanned aerial vehicles (which in many cases failed to reach their designated targets). Most of the damage that Israel has sustained has been caused by guided anti-tank missiles and Burkan rockets, which carry a relatively large explosive payload. Hezbollah takes care not to deviate from the response equation in its dealings with the IDF, in the hope that it can continue to control the intensity of the flames. At the same time, the organization placed great importance on demonstrating that it is conducting a significant campaign against Israel and is inflicting heavy casualties on Israel, often exaggerating the scale of its actual achievements. In his speech of January 14, Nasrallah claimed that Israel was concealing the truth from its citizens about the extent of its casualties. Earlier this month (January 3), Nasrallah spoke about the nature of the fighting against Israel, saying that his organization was operating in a highly calculated manner but that, if the enemy wanted war, Hezbollah would respond with determination and would utilize the full extent of its military capabilities.

Notwithstanding the relatively limited operations by Hezbollah and the caution evident in Israel's responses, at least during the first two months of the fighting, since the organization resumed its attacks following the Gaza ceasefire there has been a trend toward escalation in the extent and nature of the conflict, as a result of the dynamic developing between the sides in recent weeks. This is mainly due to the IDF's decision to intensify its operations. Israel progressed gradually from reactive measures and responses to increasingly offensive activity, while deviating from the rules of engagement as determined by Nasrallah.

The most prominent of these attacks were deep into southern Lebanon and saw the destruction of strategic infrastructure and quality Hezbollah targets a significant distance from the border with Israel. Moreover, on January 2 the IDF

attacked in the Dahiya quarter, the organization's stronghold in Beirut, killing Saleh al-Arouri – who served as deputy to the head of Hamas's political wing, Ismail Haniyeh – along with six other Hamas operatives. In so doing, Israel challenged the rules of engagement that existed before and during the war, despite Nasrallah's threats to attack anyone who dared attack targets inside Lebanon, including the leaders of organizations who are hosted by the Lebanese. In his January 3 speech, after Arouri was killed, Nasrallah vowed that his organization would respond to the attack in Beirut, and indeed, four days later, on January 6, Hezbollah launched a targeted and intensive strike on the IAF air control base on Mount Meron. According to Hezbollah, the attack included 62 missiles (40 rockets and 22 anti-tank missiles) fired at the facility, causing heavy damage but no injuries – despite Nasrallah's claim that 18 of the anti-tank missiles hit the target. Further escalation came following the Israeli response, which included attacks deep into Lebanese territory and the killing of leaders of Hezbollah's Rawdan Force, primarily the January 8 strike on Wissam al-Tawil, the acting commander of the force. That was followed the next day by the killing of Ali Hussein Barji, the southern commander of the organization's aerial force, responsible for launching dozens of drone attacks against Israel. Hezbollah, for its part, denies that this was Barji's role.

An interim assessment of the outcome of the combat thus far indicates that both sides have sustained significant damage to property and infrastructure, but it appears that the damage to Hezbollah's military infrastructure exceeds what Israel has sustained. The IDF destroyed all the organization's observation points along the border, as well as its command posts, ammunition storage sites, and other Hezbollah strategic targets. On January 7, in his daily update, the IDF Spokesperson said that IDF attacks led to the dismantlement of Hezbollah's anti-aircraft defenses and that the Israeli air force operates with complete freedom in Lebanese airspace. He also claimed that Radwan Force operatives were distanced from the border, making it much harder for them to attack Israel. On December 30, for example, the IDF Spokesperson's Unit reported that 80 percent of the missiles fired from Lebanon the previous day fell inside Lebanese territory. Hezbollah has also sustained many casualties. Thus far, it has officially been reported that more than 160 of its members have been killed (although the actual number is likely higher), compared to nine IDF casualties. In contrast, most of Hezbollah's achievements have been on the civilian front – the most obvious being the formal evacuation of some 60,000 Israelis from their homes in northern Israel at a very early stage of the fighting and the subsequent voluntary evacuation of thousands more people. This joins the massive damage to the towns and

communities adjacent to the border – Metula and Manara, for example – as well as the harm to the Israeli economy. On the Lebanese side, officials say that around 80,000 residents of the villages close to the border have been displaced and that daily life has been hugely disrupted.

It appears that despite the heavy price that Hezbollah has already paid for the ongoing conflict, it still views this as reasonable, since it promotes its strategic goals and those of the Iran-headed axis – goals that motivated it to launch hostilities on the northern front:

1. In the Palestinian context: Apart from expressing solidarity with the Palestinians, the fighting is designed to ensure that IDF forces are deployed on an additional front and prevent Israel from toppling the Hamas regime in Gaza – or, at the very least, to limit Israeli achievements during the war.
2. In the conflict with the IDF: Maintaining or improving the balance of power and deterrence in Hezbollah's favor on "the day after" the war.
3. In service of Iran: Contributing to the Iranian interest in attacking and undermining Israel, especially given Iran's limited willingness to respond directly to any Israeli operations against its assets.
4. For the "resistance front": To advance the strategy of a "unified front" in the battle against Israel, which Nasrallah helped forge with Iranian cooperation, and is a key player in its implementation.

The main unanswered question now is how Israel can best promote its interests, translate capabilities into significant damage to Hezbollah, force the organization to pay a heavy price, and distance Hezbollah fighters from the border without sparking an all-out war on the northern front. This question becomes even more acute given the urgent need to allow Israel's northern population to return to their homes, while ensuring the safety and the sense of security, both severely undermined by the events of October 7.

At the current time, the fighting on the northern front is waged at high intensity, and in effect is a mutual war of attrition; although it is not yet an all-out war, it certainly has the potential to become one. However, both sides are under pressure, domestic and international, to maintain a moderate course. Most of the pressure comes from the United States, which is trying to influence both sides, but especially Israel and apparently also Iran, to prevent an all-out regional war. At the same time, Washington seeks to advance a political solution that would lead to the end of hostilities. Judging by the nature of its fighting and by Nasrallah's speeches, it does not appear that Hezbollah is interested in all-out war at this stage, even

though it explicitly states that if such a war were to erupt, it would show no restraint and would use all the resources at its disposal, with no rules and no limits. For its part, Israel regards the northern front as secondary to the campaign in the Gaza Strip, which requires massive investment, at a time when the IDF is transitioning to the third stage of the campaign, giving it greater freedom of operation in the north.

Despite efforts by the United States and France to advance a political solution, it appears that they still have only limited political leverage over Hezbollah and that the proposals that US envoy Amos Hochstein has placed on the table thus far are not enough to entice or force the organization to end hostilities and agree to a significant reduction of its forces on the border – certainly as long as the fighting in Gaza continues. In any case, at this stage it appears that the government of Lebanon has adopted Hezbollah's line; it is demanding an end to the fighting in Gaza and taking a tougher line on negotiations with Israel over demarcation of the land border between the two countries.

Therefore, as long as the fighting along the northern border continues, Israel must maintain and even intensify its military operations – systematically and with determination – in order to severely damage Hezbollah and Radwan Force infrastructure. This would highlight to the organization the heavy price it and Lebanon as a whole will pay for continued provocations against Israel and for attacks on Israeli communities close to the border. This is an opportunity for Israel to make new rules that serve its interests – rules that depart from those that Nasrallah tried to dictate until October 8. This kind of military action could create a new reality along the border that, at the first stage, will allow residents of northern Israel to return to their homes and create an agreed-upon basis for future political moves – that is, a long term agreement over the situation on the Israel-Lebanon border – and, at the same time, leave Israel with the power to decide if and when to launch a widescale military operation to remove the Hezbollah threat once and for all.

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