

# And What If We Did Not Deter Hizbollah?

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The consensus in Israel is that Hizbollah was deterred as a result of the Second Lebanon War, that because of the damage sustained by the group and its supporters, it refrained from fighting against Israel, and that quiet that has reigned on the northern border was a result of the war. In fact, most of the arguments supposedly proving that Hizbollah was deterred are less clear-cut than they appear. The majority of Hizbollah's actions, both before and after the war, can be explained by other factors—domestic Lebanese and international—over which Israel has a very limited degree of control or influence. It is thus necessary to carefully examine the assumption of deterrence, and in particular, to avoid complacency based on this assumption.

**Key words:** Israel, Lebanon, Hizbollah, Nasrallah, deterrence, Syria, Iran

## Was Hizbollah Deterred?

On August 1, 2006, in the midst of the Second Lebanon War, then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated that

Those who fired the missiles will not hurry to create friction which will instigate confrontation, since they know the price paid by them, the country in which they reside, the population whose support is the source of their strength, and everything around them.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, Olmert's assertion was reinforced by his political supporters and opponents alike,<sup>2</sup> as well as army officials.<sup>3</sup> Another layer was provided by the "Dahiya Doctrine," which states, in the words of then-Commander of the Northern Command Gabi Eisenkot in 2008, "the possibility of harm

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to the population is the main restraint on Nasrallah and the reason for the quiet.”<sup>4</sup> Because the northern border has been quiet since 2006, Olmert called the Second Lebanon War, seven years after the fact, “the most successful” of Israel’s wars.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, there are different interpretations of Hizbollah’s behavior that do not rely on the assumption that it was deterred by the war. It can also be argued that the results of the war actually served the organization’s purposes and that since then it had refrained from a confrontation for internal or domestic Lebanese reasons, not because it was deterred by Israel. Such an interpretation indicates the possibility that the claim about deterrence is incorrect or that deterrence is not the only factor, although it does not prove the opposite, of course. Nevertheless, it requires that Israel examine its basic assumptions about Hizbollah and its behavior.

### A Few Words on Deterrence

There have been many theoretical discussions on the issue of deterrence; as one scholar puts it: “When it comes to deterrence, there are more questions than answers.”<sup>6</sup> Deterrence can be defined as a threat (explicit or implicit) to use force intended to avoid the need to use it. Otherwise, the threat can be made in order to create a situation in which it will be clear to the enemy that the benefit of using force will be outweighed by the damage it will suffer as a result. In Israel, the term is also employed for using force in a limited fashion (for example, retaliatory acts) in order to cause the enemy to refrain from using force.

Deterrence is not dichotomous; it is a broad spectrum of possibilities. One’s actions may deter the enemy from acting in a certain way, but not another. For example, Israel’s crushing victory in the Six Day War (1967) did not cause Egypt to refrain from launching the War of Attrition, and within a mere three weeks, firing was resumed along the Suez Canal. However, the victory did deter Egypt from attempting to engage in an all-out war. Even in the Yom Kippur War (1973), Egypt’s objectives were relatively limited.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the correct question is not “*did* Israel deter Egypt?” but “*from what* did Israel deter Egypt?”

Similarly, it is reasonable to assume that the quiet on the Golan Heights since 1975 indicates that Syria was deterred from launching an all-out war, even if it was deterred from targeting Israel through Lebanese elements. Another example is the behavior of the United States and the Soviet Union

during the Cold War: Each deterred the other from launching an all-out war, but this did not prevent them from attempting to harm each other in indirect ways, through wars by proxy such as in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

In Israel, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah's avoidance of public appearances since the Second Lebanon War is seen as proof of deterrence. Dan Haloutz, Chief of Staff during the war, stated in 2010 that killing senior terrorists provides "another layer of deterrence. There is a reason that Nasrallah is sitting in his bunker."<sup>8</sup> In 2011, in response to threats from Nasrallah, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu commented that "the man hiding in the bunker should stay in the bunker."<sup>9</sup> Yet Nasrallah's personal fear of assassination does not mean that Hizbollah as an organization has been deterred from acting against Israel. To give a different example, concern over the personal fate of Prime Ministers since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, reflected in a tremendous amount of security, has not prevented any of them from expressing willingness to make even more far-reaching political concessions than those which prompted Rabin's assassination.

Deterrence always depends on context and on cost-benefit considerations. It will cease working the moment the enemy thinks that the benefit of an attack exceeds the risk (or merely makes an error in calculation). For example, a lock that deters a burglar in a student apartment will not deter a break-in at the estate of a multimillionaire. When the benefit outweighs the risk, deterrence is weaker and requires more sophisticated means of protection.<sup>10</sup>

Successful deterrence is not necessarily a threat to exact the highest price. Thus, for example, it is a known fact that soldiers are more afraid of blindness or the loss of sexual potency than death, and therefore a German S-mine, which exploded at waist level, was a potent deterrent for even the bravest of soldiers.

Many theories of deterrence apply only to countries, and their relevance to groups such as Hizbollah, a non-state actor (even if it is integrated into one).<sup>11</sup> For example, an invasion is almost always a threat for states, but from the perspective of a non-state organization, an invasion could actually be an opportunity to draw the enemy into a conflict on favorable terms. However, since almost all organizations and movements have assets as well as a vested interest in self-preservation, the difference between states and non-state actors on the issue of deterrence is largely a practical one. The difficulty in finding *what* deters a non-state adversary does not mean

that *nothing* will deter it. Nevertheless, it is important not to assume that measures considered effective in deterring states will work against a non-state enemy.

### Who Will Deter Whom?

At the beginning of the Second Lebanon War, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated that "Israel will not agree to live in the shadow of the threat of missiles or rockets against its residents ... Israel will not be held hostage."<sup>12</sup> However, the threat of missiles has only increased since the war. In June 2007, after a volley of rockets was fired at Israel, associates of Olmert declared that the responsible party "is interested in dragging Israel into a response."<sup>13</sup> Following a rocket salvo fired at Kiryat Shmona in 2013, a senior officer in the Northern Command noted that the rockets were intended to draw Israel into a response against Hizbollah.<sup>14</sup>

Statements made by Hizbollah after the Second Lebanon War are often perceived as proof of deterrence, but in fact, the organization was making similar statements even before the war. After rockets were fired at Israel in 2007, Lebanon's Minister of Labor, who was Hizbollah's representative in the Lebanese government, declared that "we have no connection to this ... we refuse to accept the attempt by the enemy to take advantage of the attacks to turn the aggression against Lebanon."<sup>15</sup> Four years earlier, in June 2003, Hizbollah made a similar statement after rockets were fired at an Israeli ship: "we are opposed to this action, which is inexcusable and was not planned in advance."<sup>16</sup>

Israel did not believe that Hizbollah was responsible for either instance of rocket fire, but only in 2007 did it interpret the remark as an indication of deterrence. It should be noted that even in the most serious terrorist attack on the northern border before the war, near Kibbutz Metzuba in 2002, Hizbollah used Palestinians in order to conceal its involvement and avoided taking responsibility.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, perception of threats as indicative of deterrence goes both ways. If Nasrallah's threats and Hizbollah's statements reflect weakness and are a consequence of Israeli deterrence, as many Israelis tend to assume, then Israel's threats against the organization may indicate that Israel is weak and has been deterred by Hizbollah as well.<sup>18</sup>

## One Sentence, If at All

The assumption that Hizbollah was deterred in the Second Lebanon War relies largely on one quotation from Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, in an interview in August 2006, immediately after the end of the war. In the interview, Nasrallah claimed that “no one expected, not even a one percent chance” that Hizbollah’s abduction of Israeli soldiers would lead to war. “If I had known that the kidnapping would lead to such a result, we would never have carried it out.”<sup>19</sup>

It is very problematic to base a theory of deterrence on this one comment by Nasrallah. Hizbollah’s Secretary General is an expert propagandist who does not hesitate to lie when necessary.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, this sentence is only a small part of a long interview given to a Christian television station, intended to reassure the target audience, many of whom are traditionally among Hizbollah’s opponents. In the same interview, Nasrallah claimed that “anyone who says that the two abductees are the reason for the war is mistaken ... we surprised Israel with the timing ... Israel would have declared war at the end of September or beginning of October with or without a pretext.” In other words, Nasrallah claims that Hizbollah would not have carried out the abduction if it had believed that it would lead to war, though it would have broken out in any case, and that in retrospect, it was good that the kidnapping was carried out because it forced Israel to attack before it was ready.

Nasrallah’s logic is reminiscent of the story of the man who, when asked to return a pot he had borrowed from his neighbor, replied: “firstly, I already returned it to you in one piece. Secondly, when I borrowed it, it was broken. And thirdly, I never borrowed a pot from you.”

Nasrallah had no qualms about telling bald-faced lies in that interview, including claims that Hizbollah had never used weapons against Lebanese citizens and that it had never taken Lebanese hostages. Nor was he averse to making promises he had no intention of keeping, such as saying that the Lebanese army could disarm anyone who was armed in southern Lebanon. Therefore, it is by no means certain that the only sentence that can be interpreted as admission of error, which Nasrallah apparently iterated only once, actually represents his opinion. On the other hand, one month before that interview, Nasrallah made the claim that Israel had planned the war in advance and that the abduction had only helped Lebanon, and he also repeated this claim in the following years.<sup>21</sup>

During the Second Lebanon War, Nasrallah explained that just as—in his view—Hizbollah had defeated Israel during Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996, thereby preventing it from achieving its objectives, the same thing would happen this time as well: “when the resistance survives ... when Lebanon faces the cruelest military force [or the military superpower] with determination and does not agree to humiliating terms ... when we are not defeated militarily, that is victory.”<sup>22</sup> We should consider the possibility that Nasrallah *really* believes this claim, which he repeated a number of times after the war.<sup>23</sup>

### Between Hamas and Hizbollah

Hizbollah is not just Nasrallah, and we can assume that the organization is not terrified of Israel, as Israel would have wished. Even if Hizbollah was deterred in the Second Lebanon War, it is likely that the events in the Gaza Strip in recent years are eroding this deterrence. After Operations Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense; following the “trickle” of rockets fired from Gaza at Israeli communities and the limited IDF response to the rocket fire from Lebanon (for which Hizbollah did not claim responsibility); and even after the extensive but limited destruction in Operation Protective Edge, it is difficult to believe that Hizbollah still thinks that Israel would respond uncontrollably to any action it took when it has not done so in Gaza. Furthermore, in October 2012, a senior IDF officer expressed the opinion that a Hizbollah attack abroad would be a *casus belli*, yet the Hizbollah attack on Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria a few months prior to that statement did not elicit such a response.<sup>24</sup> Hence, Hizbollah can make an assessment, at least for now, that sporadic firing of rockets at Israel will not lead to a third Lebanon war, and that even if this war were to take place, it would be subject to all the restrictions on the use of force that were in effect in the Gaza Strip.

It is commonly believed that the Second Lebanon War harmed public support for Hizbollah, and in particular, the support of the Shiite community in Lebanon, which is the organization’s power base. These assumptions are strengthened by Shiite leaders’ statements.<sup>25</sup> For example, Subhi Tufayli, the first Secretary General of Hizbollah, stated in November 2006 that “Israel had no preliminary plan for a war in Lebanon... Iran had an interest in causing turmoil.” He even hinted that Nasrallah was interested in a civil war in Lebanon.<sup>26</sup> These were not necessarily new ideas. As early as 2003,

Tufayli stated that “the Iranian leadership was, and still is, responsible for all of Hizbollah’s decisions” and claimed that the organization was Israel’s “border patrol.”<sup>27</sup>

However, the assumption that the damage caused in the Second Lebanon War pushed the Shiite community to “understand” its results and pressure Hizbollah is problematic. Immediately after the war, some 70 percent of the Shiites in Lebanon believed that Hizbollah was the victor (compared to less than half of the Druze or Christians and about one-third of the Sunnis).<sup>28</sup> In public opinion polls in Lebanon during the four years following the war, Hizbollah won the support of an overwhelming majority of Shiites, generally more than 85 percent, and sometimes as high as 94 percent.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, in the 2009 Lebanese elections, although the bloc to which Hizbollah belonged was weakened, Hizbollah’s candidates won the election in every district in which a Hizbollah candidate participated, including in southern Lebanon, which had suffered grave damage during the war.<sup>30</sup>

If it was not deterrence that brought quiet to the Israeli-Lebanese border, how can we explain the fact that Hizbollah refrains from firing rockets? An answer can be found by comparing the organization’s method of operation between the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and the Second Lebanon War, and between the end of the war and the present.

### 2000-2006: The “Resistance” Seeks Direction

Hizbollah, in Nasrallah’s words, is an organization with many aspects: “political, jihadi, administrative, and social.”<sup>31</sup> His deputy, Sheikh Naim Qassem, declared that the group’s “primary objective is the struggle [jihad] against the Zionist enemy” but that “the clever and sagacious political jihad can and should be the buttress and pillar of this *jihadi* movement.”<sup>32</sup>

Though it is a Shiite organization, Hizbollah is also influenced by Lebanon’s domestic politics; for years Nasrallah was careful to emphasize that he is the defender of all Lebanese citizens, not seeking to impose his religious beliefs. In 1992, the organization even decided to participate in Lebanese politics (with the approval of Iran’s spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khamenei), and since then, it has collaborated with Christian leaders and made efforts to win the hearts of Christian Lebanese citizens.<sup>33</sup> This does not indicate a change in Hizbollah’s ideology, but rather, pragmatism in its actions and its path, and possibly also in its timetable and priorities.



Theoretically, Hizbollah's military strength contravenes the Taif Agreement of 1989, which ended Lebanon's civil war and provided for disarming all militias in the country. When the IDF was present in the security zone, Hizbollah (with the support of the Syrians, who at that time maintained *de facto* control of Lebanon, and the Lebanese government itself) justified the existence of its military wing by citing the need to oppose the Israeli occupation. An Israeli withdrawal, therefore, was supposed to lead to the disarming of Hizbollah. Sheikh Fadlallah, Hizbollah's spiritual leader, stated in 1995 that there would apparently be no place in Lebanon for the Islamic resistance once the land was liberated from the Israeli occupation.<sup>34</sup> In 1997, Nasrallah declared that "when the Zionist enemy withdraws from the occupied territories, we will not be responsible for security. We have a state and it will use its security forces in these territories."<sup>35</sup>

These commitments were tested after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000, when many Lebanese (including then-Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri) believed that Lebanon must direct its resources to internal reconstruction and that Hizbollah's military role had ended.<sup>36</sup> In April 2001, the editor of Hariri's newspaper claimed that the organization's actions were not helpful to Lebanon, and another Lebanese commentator called on Syria and Hizbollah not to fight their battle with Israel from Lebanese soil.<sup>37</sup>

Militating against this position was the clear fact that Hizbollah was the only Arab force to succeed in causing Israel to withdraw without an agreement and without receiving anything in return. The prestige this conferred on Hizbollah made it unlikely that the organization would be disarmed, even in the eyes of old adversaries such as Nabih Beri, head of the Shiite organization Amal.<sup>38</sup> However, an ongoing state of calm on the northern border could have convinced many Lebanese at that time that in fact, Hizbollah's role had ended. Contrary to the hopes of officials in Israel,<sup>39</sup> Hizbollah found other pretexts for continuing the fighting. It announced that it would continue until all Lebanese lands (that is, the Shab'a Farms) and Lebanese prisoners held by Israel are liberated.<sup>40</sup> In July 2001, Nasrallah even declared that "our struggle with the Zionist enemy is not a border conflict between two countries, but a confrontation with an entity whose aim is [the destruction of] our survival and future." While in the short term, there was little chance of achieving the "liberation of Palestine," this "requires neither nuclear weapons nor a strategic balance ... although there may be something of a dream here, there is also something



of reality.”<sup>41</sup> This reality requires maintaining Hizbollah’s power and continuing clashes with Israel as perpetual justification for preserving its military force. The past few years have emphasized this need, since the status of the Shiites in Lebanon, who were traditionally far from the centers of power and suffered from discrimination, had been largely based on Hizbollah’s weapons arsenal.<sup>42</sup>

Despite Syrian support<sup>43</sup> and considerable Lebanese support for Hizbollah on the issue of the Shab’a Farms, the expulsion of the Israeli occupying forces from an uninhabited area of twenty-five square kilometers was a rather weak justification for the existence of a private army. In fact, the Shab’a Farms issue is rather marginal for Hizbollah. Until 2002, the organization attacked IDF outposts on Har Dov almost every month.<sup>44</sup> However, after that, it slowed down the pace of attacks, and when it came under pressure on the issue within Lebanon, a conflict on that point was not enough to justify maintaining its military power.

In September 2004, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1559, which included a call to disarm all the militias in Lebanon. This resolution created pressure on both Syria (with growing calls for its withdrawal from Lebanon) and Hizbollah, which ultimately led to the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri shortly after his resignation from office. The murder proved to be a double-edged sword. It caused internal and external pressure that led to the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, in spite of demonstrations by Hizbollah supporters who supported the presence of Syrian forces and opposed disarming the organization. Many people in Lebanon, from Druze community leader Walid Jumblatt to Sunni Muslims, feared that Hizbollah was serving the interests of Iran and Syria rather than Lebanon, and that the weapons in its possession conferred dangerous power on the Shiite community and could lead to a new arms race. It was actually a pro-Syrian Lebanese commentator whose definition was quite precise: “Hizbollah’s rifle is ultimately Shiite.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Hizbollah supporters claimed that the desire to disarm the organization was “treason” that served “only the interests of Israel.” Elias Saba, a veteran Lebanese politician, claimed that “the role of the resistance ... is necessary [even] after the liberation of the land and the prisoners [... since] how can we ensure that Israel will not reconquer the land?” Nasrallah attempted to calm the heated atmosphere by stating that “no one will succeed in bringing this weapon into the domestic arena.”<sup>46</sup>

In July 2005, Hizbollah joined the Lebanese government for the first time. One of its representatives, Minister of Water and Energy Muhammad Fneish, stated that the Lebanese “have no reason to fear” Hizbollah’s weapons and that “if joining the government and the Parliament is a national duty, so is defending the country.”<sup>47</sup> The message was clear: Hizbollah would use its weapons only against Israel, but it would not consent to the demand to disarm. And in fact, in January 2006, then-Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Seniora promised that he would treat Hizbollah as a “national liberation group” and not as a “militia,” which removed the burden of resolution 1559 from Hizbollah.<sup>48</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that Hizbollah escalated its operations on the northern border in 2005 and 2006. Abducting Israelis in order to bring about the release of Lebanese prisoners held by Israel was within the Lebanese consensus. It showed that Hizbollah was acting for all of Lebanon; it strengthened its position, which had been harmed by internal Lebanese disputes; reduced the fear that it would turn its weapons inward; and decreased the pressure to disarm it.

Despite all this, many Israelis saw the situation in Lebanon as unprecedentedly quiet, or alternatively, as a balance of terror intended to prevent an Israeli attack. “Never has there been quiet on the northern border such as the quiet that has existed since IDF soldiers have been guarding on the eastern side of the border,” wrote Yigal Tzhor of the Labor Party and the Berl Katzenelson Foundation, on the fifth anniversary of the IDF withdrawal from the security zone.<sup>49</sup> One year earlier, journalist and researcher Daniel Sobelman wrote:

From the beginning of 2003, stability was maintained on the Israeli-Lebanese border despite several upheavals [...] such as the war in Iraq, the Israel Air Force (IAF) attack in Syria, military operations inside Lebanon that were attributed 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.<sup>50</sup>

Only one week before the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War, *Haaretz* correspondent Aluf Benn wrote that “a Nasrallah was needed in the Gaza Strip.” While he hates Israel, unlike the leaders of Hamas, who kidnapped Gilad Shalit and launch rockets, Nasrallah “has authority and responsibility, and therefore, his behavior is rational and reasonably predictable. In the

present conditions, this is the best that there is. Hizbollah is preserving quiet in the Galilee more than the pro-Israel South Lebanese Army did.”<sup>51</sup>

### **From 2006 Onward: Domestic Politics or Deterrence?**

One could argue that Hizbollah (almost) ceased to operate against Israel after the Second Lebanon War because it was no longer necessary and because it was dealing with other things which Israel had a very limited ability to influence. To many in Lebanon and even in the West,<sup>52</sup> the fact that the war took place is proof that it was deliberate; in other words, the fact that Israel invaded Lebanon proved that it had planned in advance to do so. This is not a new idea: as early as 1972, Fadlallah stated that Israel was interested in invading Lebanon irrespective of the actions of the Palestinian organizations. To many people, the fact that Israel remained in parts of Lebanon after Operation Peace for Galilee (1982) was confirmation of his claim.<sup>53</sup> In October 2006, 84 percent of the Lebanese believed that the war had been planned in advance by the United States and Israel in order to reshape the region, and 78 percent thought that it would have broken out regardless of Hizbollah’s actions.<sup>54</sup> The similarity between these statistics and the claims by Nasrallah reinforce the assumption that he was not going to voice his regret for the abduction of Israeli soldiers but rather he intended to claim that it was only an excuse for Israel to undertake a planned invasion of Lebanon.<sup>55</sup> After the war, Hizbollah needed to “maintain” an active conflict with Israel less than it had in the past. The war and the destruction left in its wake clearly demonstrated the danger from Israel and the need for Hizbollah to grow stronger in order to prevent a similar war in the future. In August 2013, Nasrallah even declared that because of Hizbollah’s great strength, “the era of Israeli tourism on the Lebanese border has ended forever.”<sup>56</sup>

Since the war, the denominational issue has continued to determine the attitudes of the various Lebanese groups to Hizbollah: the Shiites are enthusiastic supporters, the Sunnis have reservations, the Druze and Christians are suspicious and fearful.<sup>57</sup> However, a poll from October 2006 showed that only about one-fourth of the Lebanese wished to disarm Hizbollah, about one-half wished to incorporate it into the Lebanese army, and more than one-third (among them the vast majority of the Shiites) supported maintaining Hizbollah as an armed independent entity.<sup>58</sup> The non-Shiites apparently perceived Hizbollah as Lebanon’s most effective

protector, but they feared that it would use its armed power internally. Even at a low point in its popularity, in February 2007, only 20 percent supported forcibly disarming the organization, and 48.6 percent (among them, surprisingly, most of the Sunnis and Orthodox Christians) were in favor of allowing it to keep its arms, at least until the liberation of the Shebaa Farms or an Israeli-Lebanese agreement.<sup>59</sup>

It is possible that the protracted negotiations for the return of the bodies of abducted IDF soldiers Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser, which ended in mid-2008, also contributed to Hizbollah's lack of interest in heating up the sector again: the achievement of returning the Lebanese prisoners through diplomatic means was sufficient to justify avoidance of any action that could have harmed the deal.

At the same time, Hizbollah apparently believed that the war provided an opportunity to increase its political influence in Lebanon, and given the disparities in support for the group between the Shiites and other communities it may have estimated that the time was right for a more "Shiite" and less "Lebanese" line of politics. Hizbollah officials made increasingly blunt statements on this subject, to the point of explicitly supporting a Shiite country. Furthermore, in November 2006, all Shiite representatives resigned from the government, which caused paralysis (for constitutional reasons) following the proposal to establish an international tribunal to try Hariri's murderers and Hizbollah's desire to bring additional representatives into the government. A few days later, Shiite and pro-Syrian elements began a series of mass anti-government protests, and Nasrallah even declared (and in fact threatened) that Hizbollah's supporters should not fear "a new civil war."<sup>60</sup> The Lebanese police estimated that at the height of the demonstrations, Hizbollah brought some 800,000 people to the streets, about one-fifth of the country's population.<sup>61</sup> The group also worked to prevent the establishment of an anti-Syrian government, which could have acted to disarm it and perhaps even reached tacit agreements with Israel.<sup>62</sup> In addition, members of the March 14 Alliance, who opposed the Syrians and Hizbollah, continued to die under mysterious circumstances, including Minister of Industry Pierre Gemayal, whose funeral turned into a large-scale anti-Syrian (and implicitly, anti-Hizbollah) demonstration.

At the same time, Hizbollah continued its military buildup, even daring to demand that the Lebanese army return a truck of ammunition it had confiscated. (There was great support for the demand among the Shiites,

while the other ethnic groups, especially the Druze, took the opposite position.)<sup>63</sup> In November 2007, Hizbollah claimed it had held a large military exercise in southern Lebanon, thus making clear that it was in fact ignoring Security Council resolution 1701 and that there was no power in the country that could force it to disarm.<sup>64</sup> It continued to position itself as the defender of Lebanon against Israel, and as usual, employed various pretexts to maintain its military power.<sup>65</sup>

At the same time, Hizbollah continued to cross Lebanese political boundaries: In January 2008, seven people were killed in exchanges of fire between Hizbollah operatives and the Lebanese police. In May of that year, in a protest over the government's disabling of Hizbollah's communications network and the dismissal of the official in charge of security at the Beirut airport, who was close to Hizbollah, fighting broke out throughout Lebanon and the organization used artillery and rockets while the army stood by. The Doha Agreement, signed on May 21, 2008, stated that the opposition would receive eleven (out of thirty) minister positions in the Lebanese government, therefore awarding Hizbollah veto power. Its communications network continued to operate, and even the official in charge of security at the Beirut airport got his position back. Several days later, Chief of Staff General Michel Suleiman was appointed president of Lebanon, and almost immediately, he praised the "resistance" and took a pro-Syrian stance.<sup>66</sup>

"During the winter of 2007 and the spring of 2008," writes the American journalist and researcher Thanassis Cambanis, "it wasn't Israel but moderate Arabs who posed a serious existential threat to Hezbollah."<sup>67</sup> In other words, it may be that Hizbollah refrained from firing at Israel not because it had been deterred from doing so but because at that point, it had other more pressing matters to attend to. Israel's Prime Minister at the time, Ehud Olmert, claimed in July 2008 that since the Second Lebanon War, and because of its results, "Hizbollah is clearly reluctant to confront us militarily in the area of southern Lebanon. It is busy trying to rebuild its political position."<sup>68</sup> Given the events of spring 2008, it may be that it was not "clearly reluctant" but that it took advantage of its success, not to rebuild its position but to strengthen it.

Nasrallah's assurances that Hizbollah's weapons are "Lebanese" and that they would be directed only against Israel turned out to be empty. While the organization's position among the Shiites grew stronger, its political opponents and the other communities in Lebanon began to fear

and oppose it even more than they had prior to 2008.<sup>69</sup> If Hizbollah intended to strive toward an Islamic state in Lebanon,<sup>70</sup> the attempt was made too soon. Evidence of this came a year later, in the 2009 elections, when the strength of the Hizbollah camp was reduced, even if the organization itself won all the seats for which it ran candidates.<sup>71</sup> In a Hizbollah manifesto from November 2009, the call to establish an Islamic state, which was central to its previous platform in 1985, was omitted.<sup>72</sup> However, the group remained a member of the government, received veto power, and received the important position of Minister of Communications. The new Lebanese cabinet once again confirmed that Hizbollah was a “resistance” movement and not a militia that had to be disarmed.<sup>73</sup> The organization continued to enjoy tremendous support from the Shiites, and even among the general public, it had a small majority of supporters.<sup>74</sup> In southern Lebanon, control by the opposition in general and Hizbollah in particular remained absolute.<sup>75</sup> Some believed that Hizbollah was not interested in too large a victory in the elections because it was convenient to be a member of the government that could veto its actions, yet not be perceived as the responsible party.<sup>76</sup>

What has been written until this point is sufficient to show that Hizbollah’s actions were not influenced only or perhaps even primarily by fear of Israel. Its involvement in recent years in the civil war in Syria and the fighting against Sunni organizations demonstrates this well. There are those who argue that Hizbollah is nothing but a servant of Syria or Iran, that the question whether to act against Israel would be settled primarily by them and would not be dependent on deterrence in Lebanon.<sup>77</sup> According to Shimon Shapira, “one of the main reasons for the quiet on the northern border is that at this time, Iran has no interest in heating up the sector. Hizbollah’s missile force was intended to create deterrence against Israel in order to prevent an Israeli attack on Iran.”<sup>78</sup> In another context, Subhi Tufayli claimed that the only reason for Hizbollah’s intervention in Syria was that Iran forced it to intervene.<sup>79</sup>

### **Buildup and Deterrence**

After the Second Lebanon War, Hizbollah began to rebuild its strength and repair the damage sustained. Within two years, the organization had tripled its weapons stockpile to some 40,000 missiles and rockets, some of them heavier and with a longer range than those it previously possessed,<sup>80</sup> and turned villages into fortified compounds. In July 2010, Israel mapped

the ammunition storage facilities, fortifications, and headquarters built by Hizbollah in the town of al-Hiyam in southern Lebanon.<sup>81</sup> In September of that year, an ammunition storage facility belonging to the organization in al-Shahabiya in southern Lebanon exploded. The IDF spokesperson reported that documentation of the explosion was “a fact that embarrassed Hizbollah,”<sup>82</sup> but it turned out that the embarrassment was rather limited (if at all). When an explosion took place in Tair Harfa about two years later, Hizbollah members openly blocked off the area and, according to reports, even prevented UNIFIL personnel from approaching it.<sup>83</sup> Israel, for its part, did not openly attack Hizbollah for its renewed buildup, but rather approached the United Nations.<sup>84</sup>

Hizbollah’s reluctance to confront Israel during its rebuilding effort could be interpreted not as fear of Israel or as a result of deterrence but as a tactical measure intended not to disturb the buildup. While Hizbollah refrained from direct and open action against Israel until 2013, it is believed that the group was responsible for several incidents on the Israeli-Lebanese border during those years. In January 2009, during Operation Cast Lead, four Katyushas were shot at the Galilee (two of them fell in Israeli territory). Israel held Hizbollah responsible, but the organization denied involvement.<sup>85</sup> In July of that year, a group of unarmed civilians infiltrated an abandoned IDF outpost on Mount Dov and hung the flags of Hizbollah and Lebanon. The IDF responded with threats but decided not to take action because the civilians were unarmed.<sup>86</sup> In October 2012, Hizbollah sent a drone over Israeli territory, which was shot down in the area of the Yatir Forest,<sup>87</sup> and in April of the following year, Israel shot down a drone believed to have been sent by Hizbollah, although the organization denied responsibility.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, when four IDF soldiers were wounded near the border with Lebanon in August 2013, Hizbollah (for the first time since the Second Lebanon War) claimed responsibility and said that it had ambushed IDF soldiers operating in Lebanese territory.<sup>89</sup> In April 2014, Nasrallah claimed responsibility for an explosive device used against IDF soldiers on Mount Dov.<sup>90</sup>

After the Second Lebanon War, Hizbollah increasingly resumed its international terrorist operations. In this context, some claim the group has been operating in Iraq since 2006<sup>91</sup> and that it planned large-scale terrorist attacks, particularly against Israeli targets in Cyprus, Egypt, Thailand, and Europe, with a nearly total lack of success, until 2012, when it carried out



an attack in Burgas, Bulgaria that killed six people, including five Israelis.<sup>92</sup> This is reminiscent of the actions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) after the ceasefire in 1981, when it believed it could act against Israel abroad without a response in Lebanon.

Of course, one could argue that Hizbollah's attempts to operate against Israel from locations other than the Lebanese border were the result of successful deterrence. However, it is possible that they stemmed from considerations of convenience and not deterrence. Even if it they were, in fact, a result of Israeli deterrence, they show its limitations. Thus, for example, in the 1990s, Hizbollah operated almost exclusively in the security zone in southern Lebanon, and it generally did not attempt to infiltrate Israel (in contrast to the Palestinian organizations). This was not a reflection of Israeli deterrence but of an understanding that targeting Israel in the security zone was no less effective than infiltrating into Israel, and much more convenient. An army's choice to attack at one point does not indicate that it is deterred from attacking in other places, but that it is seeking a more convenient point, which holds true for a terrorist organization as well.

Nasrallah himself has recently raised his profile. Although for the first five years after the Second Lebanon War, he appeared in public only twice (in January 2008 and December 2011), in the past two years, he has appeared in public at least four times (September 2012, August 2013, November 2013, and July 2014). His threats have not become more moderate. In 2011, he announced an operational plan to conquer the Galilee. In August 2012, Hizbollah reported a large exercise<sup>93</sup> and as befits a modern terrorist organization, even published an interactive presentation in broken English, ostensibly showing the next war, including occupation of northern Israel up to the Haifa-Afula-Bet She'an line.<sup>94</sup> Nasrallah also threatened to "turn the lives of millions of Israelis into hell" if Israel attacked Iran;<sup>95</sup> declared that the destruction of Israel is a Lebanese, Arab, and Muslim interest, and not just a Palestinian one;<sup>96</sup> and threatened to assassinate Israeli officials in revenge for the assassination of Hizbollah official Imad Mughniyeh.<sup>97</sup> In addition, he promised that "Israel would be punished" for killing another Hizbollah official, Hassan al-Lakis, in December 2013, even though a Sunni organization took responsibility (and some claimed that Hizbollah itself was responsible).<sup>98</sup>

The conventional interpretation in Israel tends to be that Hizbollah's relative inaction against Israel is a result of deterrence. If this is in fact the

case, there are several questions: Why did Hizbollah send drones over Israeli territory? Why did Nasrallah, for the first time in several years, claim responsibility for attacking IDF soldiers, precisely when his organization had become deeply entangled in the civil war in Syria? And why is he appearing in public more frequently than in the past and making equally impassioned speeches?

In late 2013, Hizbollah claimed that its “presence in Syria is for defending Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and the resistance against all threats facing them.”<sup>99</sup> Following Operation Protective Edge (during which it made its regular threats), the organization explained that the call to intervene during the operation in support of Hamas was not serious and not official.<sup>100</sup> This shows that the absence of Hizbollah operations against Israel is not a result of Israeli deterrence but of different priorities, and that the most important thing for the group today is to fight in Syria. It appears that at this point, the extremist Sunni groups operating in Syria are more threatening to Hizbollah than Israel.<sup>101</sup> A car bomb that exploded recently in one of Hizbollah’s strongholds indicates that this hypothesis has a basis.<sup>102</sup> We should not conclude from the current situation that Hizbollah will not choose someday to defend Lebanon and the Palestinian cause more directly.

The Second Lebanon War serves as a vivid reminder that Lebanon needs Hizbollah in order to protect itself against Israel. The organization will maintain its hatred of Israel in the foreseeable future, but its priorities have changed since 2006, and not only because of the damage caused. If before the war, Hizbollah took advantage of clashes with Israel in order to gain support, today, it uses a supposed threat in order to achieve the same objective, but it does not see the need for extensive operations against Israel.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, after the war, Hizbollah became much more involved and influential in the Lebanese government than it had been previously.

We should take into account that Hizbollah’s increasing willingness to openly carry out (small) operations against Israel could mark its return to the concept that guided it before the Second Lebanon War. In any case, this appears to be on a slightly smaller and more careful scale—friction with Israel for the purpose of helping Hizbollah’s standing within Lebanon. This is a gamble, and Hizbollah may be wrong yet again.

## What about Mughniyeh?

The weak link in the assumption that Hizbollah has not been deterred is the fact that it has not responded directly to the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh or Hassan al-Lakis and did not come directly to the aid of Hamas in Operations Cast Lead or Protective Edge. However, Hizbollah actually did attempt to strike at Israeli targets in retaliation for Mughniyeh's killing. If the organization was planning large-scale reprisals, it is no wonder that it did not bother to fire rockets, and after those attempts failed, it is not surprising that it did not launch them: what type of organization shoots Katyushas in 2009 in response to a killing that took place in 2008?

The assumption of non-deterrence is undermined by Hizbollah's failure to launch missiles during Cast Lead and Protective Edge (in contrast to Operation Defensive Shield, when it fired hundreds of rockets and mortar shells and carried out a terrorist attack). If there is one thing that strengthens the theory of deterrence, this is it.<sup>104</sup> But in fact, even Hizbollah's behavior during Cast Lead and Protective Edge does not constitute definitive proof of deterrence, since its involvement in building up its strength and fighting in Syria, along with its meddling in Lebanese politics, may have made the timing of the two operations inconvenient: on the one hand, it had not yet completed preparations for another conflict, and on the other, it needed more time to correct the impression left by its use of weapons in the internal Lebanese arena.<sup>105</sup> If Hizbollah's buildup was also intended to deter Israel from acting against Iran, then perhaps from Iran's point of view, Cast Lead did not justify use of the organization. During Protective Edge, Hizbollah was entangled in Syria, more than at any time in the past.

## Summary and Conclusions

This author hopes that Israel did, in fact, deter Hizbollah. However, the organization's behavior can be explained even without resorting to an assumption that it was deterred. What protects the Israeli-Lebanese border today may be not only the IDF's strength, but also Hizbollah's problems, its additional goals, and its other affairs. The organization will not reconcile itself to or accept Israel's existence, and if it is deprived of the existing reasons to fight Israel, it will likely find or invent others. However, it should be understood that Israel is not always Hizbollah's most pressing issue.

The question whether Hizbollah was deterred by Israel in the Second Lebanon War is not only theoretical. Israeli operational plans (against

Hizbollah or against other adversaries) that are based on the assumption that the devastation Lebanon suffered during that war is what led to the quiet and deterred Hizbollah could fail if it becomes clear that this was not the case.<sup>106</sup> At the same time, if Hizbollah's failure to act against Israel is influenced primarily by factors over which Israel has no control, then a belligerent action by the group may be closer than is commonly thought. Suffice it to mention that in early 1967, the Israeli military intelligence assessment was that war was not to be expected since the Egyptian army was entangled in Yemen, and that several months later, because of a chain of events that were largely not under Israel's control, the Six Day War broke out.

Finally, excessive faith in the power of deterrence could lead to complacency. Three months before the Yom Kippur War, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan believed that a major war was not to be expected in the coming decade. On the face of it, he had a basis for this assessment: the Egyptians appeared to have been deterred. They had failed to achieve their goals in the War of Attrition, and despite the Egyptian rearmament, it was never quieter on the Suez Canal—until the afternoon of October 6, 1973.

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