**‘The Road to the Spider Web’: How did Hezbollah's conception of the resilience of Israeli society and the IDF develop during the 1990s?**

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On 26 May 2000, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah’s Secretary General, delivered a famous speech in which he declared “this Israel, that owns nuclear weapons and the strongest air force in this region, is more fragile than a spiderweb.” Nasrallah gave the victory speech as part of the celebrations for Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, in the town of Bint Jbeil, from which the IDF had left the day before. Nasrallah expressed his and his organization's basic conception of Israel: despite its military might, Israel lacks the social resilience and willpower necessary to fight and to defeat its enemies. This conception did not come to be in a single day, but rather gradually took shape over the years of Hizballah's existence, especially during the daily confrontations in the security zone in southern Lebanon during the 1990s.

 Over the course of that period, Israeli society’s belief in the justice of the IDF presence in southern Lebanon gradually eroded. On the one hand, the presence did not seem to have achieved its goal, namely to protect the settlements of northern Israel. Hezbollah managed to continue its activities and even improve its reative position in the region. On the other hand, the cost of this presence, first and foremost in the number of dead and wounded, but also its heavy economic toll, increased. Three major events in 1997 triggered a shift from public criticism to a broader movement calling for an exit from Lebanon: First, the helicopter disaster that killed 73 IDF personnel; second, the Saluki disaster that led to the burning of five IDF fighters during an operation, and finally, the failed Anssariya operation in which Hizballah killed 11 Shayetet 13 fighters. As a result, the "Four Mothers" organization, backed by some Knesset members, openly called for a withdrawal from Lebanon. This was even an official election promise of Ehud Barak, who was elected prime minister in 1999 and fulfilled his promise in May 2000.[[1]](#footnote-1) The manner of the withdrawal from Lebanon, which took place rapidly and abandoned Southern Lebanese Army (SLA) members who had been Israel's partners for years, was also interpreted by Hezbollah as an act of weakness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Hezbollah was aware of these processes and followed them closely. The organization identified these cracks in the eroding Israeli tolerance for warfare and acted to exacerbate them as much as possible. Hezbollah attempted to do so through a combination of military activity and psychological warfare. Hezbollah fighters carried out targeted and well-planned attacks on IDF outposts, exacting a heavy toll from their Israeli counterparts. These attacks were accompanied by a campaign of psychological warfare whose purpose was to eliminate Israel's desire to remain in the ‘Lebanese mud’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

 This research aims to examine how Hezbollah's conception of the resilience of Israeli society and the IDF developed during the 1990s. Three key aspects of Hezbollah’s analysis can be identified: First, Hizballah examined the willingness of both the Israeli leadership and the Israeli public to face prolonged fighting in southern Lebanon. Hizballah closely followed Israeli discourse regarding the confrontation in Southern Lebanon, whichincluded the influence of its activities and the harm on Israeli civilians and soldiers, the growing controversy among the political echelon in Israel regarding the continued presence in Lebanon, and the public protest in Israeli society in favor of withdrawal.

 The second aspect considered by Hezbollah is the motivation of IDF commanders and soldiers for fighting in Lebanon in light of Hezbollah's actions, the number of casualties, and the fact that the fighting remained controversial among the Israeli public. Among other things, Hezbollah was interested in the mental state of IDF fighters and the phenomenon of suicides related to the ongoing fighting, as well as manifestations of protest and fear.

 The third aspect is the resilience of the SLA and its relations with Israel and the IDF. As the SLA was the Israeli local proxy in Southern Lebanon, Hizballah was interested in assessing the SLA’s mood and willingness to fight, gaining information about the loyalty of SLA members to Israel, and the level of trust between the parties. Hizballah also monitored Israeli efforts to increase the SLA’s capabilities and improve its soldier’s professionalism, Israel's economic investment in what Hezbollah considered ‘mercenaries’ and ‘collaborators’, and Israeli reaction to the SLA after successful Hezbollah attacks that caused many casualties.

 As part of these efforts, Hezbollah gathered much information from the media, mainly Israeli sources but also from Arab and international media. The organization closely followed the statements of politicians, interviews with IDF commanders and soldiers, and even academic and professional reports. They paid special attention to responses to successful Hezbollah operations to examine their impact. This information was constantly collected and analyzed by Hizballah and played a significant role in the way Hezbollah analyzed the struggle in real time.

 This research is based on various sources, most of them in Arabic and some in Hebrew and English. This includes Hizballah’s publications from the 1990s, such as the book series “Ṣafaḥat ʻizz fi kitab al-ummah” published during the conflict, as well as interviews with and speeches by Hizballah officials. Secondary literature and journalistic sources provide necessary background and present an even more complete picture of the topic. The proposed research makes a significant contribution to understanding Hizballah and the history of its struggle against Israel. Furthermore, this research will make a unique contribution by exploring how a non-state actor formulates conceptions of the soft characteristics of its state enemy.

1. Dalia Dassa Kaye, “The Israeli Decision to Withdraw from Southern Lebanon: Political Leadership and Security Policy”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 117, No. 4, pp. 561-585; Yossi Beilin, *A Guide to an Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a detailed description of the decision-making process that led to the withdrawal, see Amos Gilboa, *'Morning Twilight': The True Story of the IDF Withdrawal from Lebanon*, May 2000 [Hebrew], The Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ron Schleifer, *Psychological Warfare in the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp.50-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)