**‘The Road to the Spider Web’: How did Hizballah's perception of Israel's identity, regime and society develop during the 1990s and the years before Harb Tamuz (summer 2006)?**

**Research proposal – Netanel (Nati) Flamer**

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 spider web.” 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.

Generally, Hizballah's perception of Israel is based on three main aspects. The first is the ideological worldview of Hizballah as a Shi’ite-Islamic movement confronting a Democratic-Jewish-Western state. As Israel is supported by and a close ally of the United States, Hizballah sees the state as an imperialist and occupying Zionist project willing to destroy Arab and Islamic civilization. From its point of view, Israeli society is a fundamentally infidel and hedonist society and therefore cannot persist and will eventually surrender to Islam. The second aspect is Hizballah's observation of Israeli society over the years of struggle, especially during the Nasrallah era . Over the years, Hizballah collected information from various sources, most of which are open source materials, dealing with 'soft' characteristics of Israel. These include the Israeli political system, trends in Israeli society, and Israeli public opinion, to name a few The third aspect stems from the previous two, specifically Hizballah’s analysis of Israeli society and politics.. In order to assess Israeli capabilities and intentions, Hizballah interpreted the details it developed through the first two aspects and combined them into an assessment of what Israel can and will do.

Over the course of the 1990s, 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. Hizballah managed to continue its activities and even improve its relative 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 in which five IDF soldiers were burned to death, 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 Hizballah as an act of weakness.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Hizballah was aware of the evolving public discourse in Israel regarding the military presence in southern Lebanon and followed it closely. The organization identified these cracks in the Israeli tolerance for warfare and acted to exacerbate them as much as possible. Hizballah attempted to do so through a combination of military activity and psychological warfare. Hizballah 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)

Only five months after the Israeli withdrawal, Hizballah kidnapped three IDF soldiers, testing the Israeli Israel leaders' declarations of "We will shake the land of Lebanon if Hizballah will act”. From Hizballah’s point of view, Israel failed. Up to its neck dealing with the Second Intifada, the Israeli response was very limited. A week after the kidnapping, Nasrallah announced on the additional capture of Colonel (Res.) Elhanan Tenenbaum and the Israeli response was again very weak. These occasions were important milestones for shaping Hizballah's perception of Israel, especially as Hizballah supported Palestinian terror organizations’ efforts to conduct operations against Israel.

After September 11, 2001 and the beginning of the United States’ extensive military campaign in the Middle East, which included two major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Hizballah, together with its patron Iran, watched this activity closely and analyzed Israel actions in light of United States’ fight against the 'Axis of Evil' in the Middle East. The Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in summer 2005also bolstered Hizballah's perception of Israeli weakness. All of these developments were the background of Hizballah's decision to kidnap Israeli soldiers. After several unsuccessful attempts, Hizballah finally achieved its goal and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers on 12 July 2006, an operation that caused thirty-three days of war, known as Harb Tamuz.

My research aims to examine how Hizballah's perception of Israeli identity, the Israeli regime, and Israeli society developed during the 1990s and the first years of the 2000s. The study will explore how Hizballah examined the willingness of both the Israeli leadership and the Israeli public to face prolonged fighting in southern Lebanon and to fight in Lebanon after the withdrawal. Hizballah closely followed Israeli discourse regarding the confrontation in Southern Lebanon, which included 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 a withdrawal. Hizballah also considered the motivation of IDF commanders and soldiers to fight in Lebanon in light of Hizballah's actions, the number of casualties, and the fact that the fighting remained controversial among the Israeli public. Among other things, Hizballah 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 research will also focuses on the way Hizballah assessed Israeli struggles against Palestinian organizations and the tangible and psychological damage that Palestinian resistance caused to Israeli society that led to Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, it will explore how Iran and Hizballah assessed American operations in the Middle East and the repercussions this had on the probability of a large scale Israeli offensive in Lebanon. All of this will be followed by an examination of Hizballah's view of the political and international affairs of Israeli leaders. This was the infrastructure of the organization's assessment of the Israeli response to the kidnapping operation took place in July 2006.

As part of these efforts, Hizballah 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 Hizballah operations to examine their impact. This information was constantly collected and analyzed by Hizballah, and played a significant role in the way Hizballah 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, such as the book series “Ṣafaḥat ʻizz fi kitab al-ummah” published annually during the conflict, as well as interviews with and speeches by Hizballah officials and media produced by the organization itself. Secondary literature and journalistic sources provide necessary background and present an even more complete picture of the topic. The proposed research would make a significant contribution to the understanding of Hizballah and the history of its actions against Israel, the repercussions of which continue today. Furthermore, this research will make a unique contribution to our understanding of how non-state actors formulate conceptions of the social aspects of a state adversary.

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)