

Is Israel's Deterrence vis-à-vis Hizbollah Diminishing?

Written by Zaki Shalom

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ZAKI SHALOM, OCT 29 2012

In a speech broadcast on Lebanese television on October 13, 2012, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah made much of the launch of an unmanned aerial vehicle into Israeli airspace. Nasrallah called the penetration into Israeli territory "a unique event in the history of Lebanon and the region as a whole." Nasrallah further stressed the following main points: a) his organization takes responsibility for the event; b) the UAV cruised hundreds of kilometers along the Mediterranean coastline, finally penetrating into Israel proper while photographing very important sites; c) the UAV was detected by the Israeli Air Force only at a very late stage; d) the UAV was not Russian-made but manufactured in Iran and assembled in Lebanon; e) the UAV came very near the atomic reactor in Dimona; f) Israel's claim that it identified the UAV while it was still cruising over the sea and intercepted later is inaccurate; g) the success of the operation lies in the fact that the UAV succeeded in cruising over Israeli, American and UNIFIL anti-aircraft systems; the interception of the vehicle was to be expected, and obviously doesn't indicate that the operation was a failure; h) Hizbollah isn't worried that Israel will have an opportunity to inspect the UAV as the organization will from time to time reveal some of its capabilities while concealing many others.[1]

Israel, Nasrallah noted, has been sending thousands of UAVs into Lebanon for years. The Lebanese government has done nothing about it and the international community keeps mum. Under such circumstances, it is only Hizbollah's natural right to launch UAVs into Israel whenever it feels like it. This is neither the first nor the last time, Nasrallah insisted. The organization can reach any target in Israel it wants. The United States provides Israel with sophisticated weaponry, but the organization is poised to improve its own capabilities. [2]

The arrogant and provocative speech by the Hizbollah leader stands in contradiction to his cautious, even fearful, conduct with regard to Israel since the end of the Second Lebanon War. In the years since the war, Hizbollah has consistently taken a guarded, moderate line designed to deny Israel any pretext for taking military action against the organization. Through all this time Hizbollah has almost completely avoided firing at Israel and, to the best of our knowledge, has at time also tried to keep other organizations from doing so. This time, Nasrallah is behaving differently: he is confrontational, even daring. Not only does he launch a UAV deep into Israel above sensitive strategic targets, he also announces it publicly, not seeming at all worried about claiming responsibility.[3]

It is hard to understand where Hizbollah's flamboyant self-confidence is coming from at this time. The organization's patrons in Damascus and Tehran are in what seems like unprecedented trouble. Assad is literally fighting for his survival in a brutal civil war, severely damaging to Syria's power and isolating it on the international arena. The regime in Tehran, Hizbollah's major supporter, is also coming under sharp international attack, causing severe damage to Iran's economy. The Iranian regime must consider the possibility that Israel and the United States are close to an understanding about the red lines that would justify a military attack on the country.

Turkey is engaged in a fight to the death against Syria, thereby also marking Hizbollah as its enemy. This represents a serious threat to the organization. Domestically, too, the voices opposing Hizbollah's violent path against Israel are growing louder. Former Lebanese Prime Minister Sa'ad Hariri and other Lebanese leaders have harshly criticized Hizbollah's provocation against Israel.[4]

Under these circumstances, we feel that Hizbollah had several goals in launching the UAV and its public claiming of responsibility. First, Hizbollah wants to create the image of symmetry with Israel, i.e., if Israel is allowed to launch

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UAVs over Lebanon then Nasrallah's outfit can launch UAVs over Israel. While this wasn't the first time Hizbollah has launched a UAV into Israel, its conduct in this case is different: it is showing a marked desire to change the rules of the game between the organization and Israel in place since the Second Lebanon War.

The UAV launch and the statement that the vehicle was manufactured in Iran may have been meant to stress Hizbollah's resolve to stand by Iran if, or when, it comes under Israeli and/or American attack. In the past, Nasrallah has made a point of saying that his organization would attack Israel if Israel attacks Iran. Nasrallah's speech was perhaps meant to send a message to Israel and the United States, as well as political elements in Lebanon, that Hizbollah would act to the full extent of its ability in response to a military attack on Iran, fully knowing the severe ramifications this would have for Lebanon in general and the organization in particular.

By launching the UAV, Hizbollah wanted to send Israel a clear message that it has the technological and operational capabilities at its disposal to cause heavy damage to Israel's infrastructures. A Hizbollah UAV cruising hundreds of kilometers along the Mediterranean coastline, penetrating Israel, and photographing sensitive sites such as the reactor in Dimona, could easily have been carrying explosives capable of damaging economic infrastructures, military bases and Israel's natural gas facilities on the coast. There is no doubt that Hizbollah wanted to send Israel a message of deterrence to prevent Israel from taking action against Iran.

In this context, it is important to stress that Hizbollah is well aware of the voices in Israel expressing deep concern about an attack against Iran. These voices emphasize the fact that Iran's major means of responding is via Hizbollah. Israeli military sources emphasize that, while Iran's capability of responding directly from its own territory is limited, Israel must consider the fact that tens of thousands of Iranian rockets are already in Hizbollah hands and can cause the country major damage. Hizbollah is thus seeking to exploit this concern to enhance its and Iran's image of deterrence.[5]

It may very well be that Hizbollah has concluded that Israel's hands are tied until after the American elections and perhaps even until after the Israeli elections on January 22, 2013. It will therefore not respond with any force liable to escalate into war, especially given the American administration's – and senior Israeli security leaders' – firm opposition, past and apparently current, to a strike in the immediate future. The launch of the UAV into Israel and the public provocation against Israel thus give Hizbollah, Iran and Syria much prestige without risking any significant retaliation, at least in the short-term.

This assessment as a matter of necessity raises the question if Israel's image of deterrence with regard to Hizbollah, created after the Second Lebanon War, has eroded to an extent we have difficulty estimating. If this is the case, we may be sure that Hizbollah will continue to test the limits of Israel's patience over and over again. The launch of the UAV should set off a warning light for Israel. The security services will have to see how Israel can restore its deterrence vis-à-vis Hizbollah and prevent the organization from changing the rules of the game now in place without leading the region to a major confrontation, whose consequences could hardly be predicted.

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[1] . Al Bawaba News, Hezbollah Leader Nasrallah Vows To Send More Drones To Israel, October 13, 2012, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/13102012-hezbollah-leader-nasrallah-vows-to-send-more-drones-to-israel/>

[2] . Al Bawaba News, Hezbollah Leader Nasrallah Vows To Send More Drones To Israel, October 13, 2012, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/13102012-hezbollah-leader-nasrallah-vows-to-send-more-drones-to-israel/>

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[3] . On the difficulties relating to the deterrence of hizbulla see: Shalom, Zaki and Hendel, Yoaz, Conceptual Flaws on the Road to the Second Lebanon War, *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 10, No. 1, June 2007.

[4] . David Blair, Syria and Turkey are on the brink of all-out war, The Telegraph, October 11th, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>

[5] . Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff, Iran, Hezbollah answer escalating Israeli rhetoric with even cruder threat, Haaretz, Aug.19, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/east-side-story/iran-hezbollah-answer-escalating-israeli-rhetoric-with-even-cruder-threats-1.459104>

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