

# Hizballah Operations: Past Patterns, Future Prospects

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## Brief Analysis

**A**n attack by Hizballah on an outpost of the South Lebanon Army last week underscores both the positive and negative outcomes of the written "understanding" negotiated by Secretary of State Warren Christopher -- namely, while northern Israel and Lebanese civilian targets should be spared further attacks, armed conflict between Israel (and its SLA allies) and Hizballah will continue in Israel's southern Lebanon "security zone." Hizballah emerged from Operation Grapes of Wrath relatively intact and with newfound popularity in Lebanon, but it will have to balance conflicting pressures for continued activism from Iran and greater restraint from the local civilian population in determining the scope, nature, and timing of renewed operations; the position of Syria, which generally supports operations against the security zone, remains a key unknown. However, the possibility that Hizballah will undertake a major terrorist spectacular against an Israeli or Jewish target outside the Middle East in the coming weeks must be taken seriously.

Background to Conflict: Since 1990, Hizballah has dramatically increased the tempo of military operations against Israeli and SLA units operating in the "security zone". By these operations, Hizballah seeks to force a unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the zone, while improving its standing among Lebanon's Shiites at the expense of its main rival, Amal. Hizballah carried out 19 attacks on Israel and SLA personnel in the zone in 1990, 52 attacks in 1991 (eclipsing Amal in the process), 63 attacks in 1992, 158 attacks in 1993 (not including Operation Accountability), 187 attacks in 1994, and 344 attacks in 1995. Thus, hardly a day went by last year in which Hizballah did not attack Israeli and SLA personnel. And of the 344 attacks in 1995, there were 270 incidents of artillery fire (usually involving long-range small arms, mortar, katyusha, and antitank missile fire), 64 roadside bombings (both suicide and remotely controlled), and two infantry assaults. Hizballah has also conducted terrorist operations against Israeli targets abroad; in March 1992, for example, a Hizballah car bomb blew up the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires (killing 30) in retaliation for the assassination of Hizballah leader Abbas Musawi several weeks earlier.

These actions exacted a mounting toll on IDF and SLA personnel. Attacks on the security zone resulted in 13 Israeli killed in 1992, 12 in 1993, 21 in 1994, 23 in 1995, and 7 for the first quarter of 1996 (SLA losses were roughly twice these). Moreover, the exchange ratio between the two sides grew increasingly unfavorable for Israel and the SLA. The ratio of Hizballah to Israeli dead was 5:1 in 1990; 2:1 in 1991; 1.7:1 in 1992; and it has more or less hovered around

1.5:1 or so since then. It is worth noting that Hizballah is not the only organization launching attacks on the security zone. The Lebanese Shiite Amal organization, led by the speaker of Lebanon's parliament, Nabih Berri, as well as Palestinian rejectionist groups allied to Hizballah (such as the PFLP-GC) are responsible for about half of all attacks on the security zone. However, Hizballah is the most active of these organizations and its operations show evidence of more thorough planning and greater sophistication than those of the others.

With U.S. mediation, Operation Accountability in July 1993 led to the creation of informal ground rules wherein both sides would restrict fighting to the security zone and avoid targeting civilians. However, because Hizballah activists live and operate among the civilian population, Israeli and SLA retaliation for Hizballah operations sometimes led to civilian casualties, giving Hizballah a pretext for launching katyushas into northern Israel. The number of katyushas landing in northern Israel rose from 93 in 1994, 121 in 1995, to 68 in just the first three months of 1996 -- prior to the 600 fired in Grapes of Wrath (the pre-operation rate equated to some 275 for the year).

Parallel to these developments, the Lebanese government -- at Syrian prompting -- had played on the fears of residents of the security zone and SLA fighters that Israel would abandon them in the context of an eventual peace treaty. Starting in 1995, local residents were routinely harassed at Lebanese Army checkpoints, and in early 1996 the Beirut government announced its intention of trying several score SLA personnel it accused of treason for working with Israel. At the same time, Beirut dramatically increased investment in infrastructure in the zone in order to send a message to its residents that their future lies with Lebanon, not Israel. These considerations have had an impact on SLA morale and cohesion; because they believe that peace may be imminent, SLA fighters are less willing to take risks. As a result, they no longer actively patrol their sectors and have hunkered down in their check points, observation posts and bunkers. And although desertions from the SLA have not increased dramatically (94 in 1994, 106 in 1995), many SLA fighters are reportedly hedging their bets on the future by providing information to Hizballah and Amal which is used to plan attacks in the security zone. The cumulative impact of these developments was to raise concerns among senior Israeli defense officials about the long-term viability of the security zone.

These concerns were compounded by the dramatic increase in Hizballah attacks in the zone and rocket firings into northern Israel during the first quarter of 1996, seizing on any pretext to scuttle the peace process and influence Israeli elections. Thus, when Israeli helicopter gunships accidentally killed two civilians in the village of Yater on March 30 (prompting a public apology from Prime Minister Peres) rockets rained down on northern Israel (wounding one). Following this incident, Israel gave U.S. diplomacy a chance to defuse the situation before responding. On April 8, however, a 16-year old boy was killed by a mine in the village of Braasheet (in an area the Israeli military denied operating in) and Hizballah responded with katyushas into northern Israel that wounded 36. Then on April 10, an Israeli soldier was killed in a mortar attack in the security zone. These events sparked Operation Grapes of Wrath.

Conclusions: While it is not yet clear whether the operation will jumpstart Israeli-Syrian negotiations -- as envisioned in the "understanding" negotiated by Secretary Christopher -- its impact on Hizballah is more straightforward. Despite its claims of "victory," Hizballah remains constrained by various cross-pressures that will prevent it from extracting any major advantage from Grapes of Wrath and that will compel it to act with caution in the coming days. Undoubtedly, it would like to resume daily operations in the security zone to demonstrate that it retains its powers of resistance, as the attack on the SLA outpost indicates. Almost certainly, Iran will push it in this direction. However, Hizballah is surely being asked to act with restraint by the thousands of refugees streaming back into southern Lebanon, so as not to bring additional harm to one of its main constituencies. Most importantly, the dominant power in Lebanon -- Syria -- may also be urging a temporary respite, although Damascus is likely to see advantages in permitting operations to resume before Israeli-Syrian negotiations reconvene.

Moreover, the groundswell of popular support for the organization across confessional lines, which has reportedly led to an influx of cash contributions and sympathy, is likely to be short-lived and of limited significance. Most

Lebanese do not share Hizballah's vision or goals, and this places objective limits on Hizballah's potential as a mass organization. Moreover, Hizballah itself will need lots of money to repair the war-damaged infrastructure in southern Lebanon and help its supporters repair homes and businesses that were damaged in the fighting. It will thus have to balance its desire to continue active resistance against Israel, against the risk of sparking a backlash that could harm its short-term fundraising efforts if it is perceived to be responsible for a new round of fighting.

In short, because the "understanding" ending Grapes of Wrath essentially resurrects the 1993 rules of engagement, it is only a matter of time before Hizballah resumes frequent attacks on the "security zone" to demonstrate its presence, although it is likely to do so in a way that reduces (but not eliminates) the risk to Lebanese civilians. Thus, it is likely to make greater use of delay-fused katyushas launched from unpopulated areas, roadside bombs, and perhaps terrorist operations against Israeli and/or Jewish targets overseas (although it will try to conceal its role in such acts in order to avoid retribution). Lebanon and Syria are likewise likely to once again ratchet up the psychological pressure on residents of the security zone and the SLA. However, Israel's tough response last month, which indicated that there were limits to Israel's patience, and the anticipated resumption of negotiations between Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, make it likely that the next phase of fighting in southern Lebanon will remain more or less within the boundaries established by the "understanding," even if the possibility of Hizballah terror abroad remains an ever-present threat.

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