EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Even if Hezbollah is responsible for the latest rocket attack on the Galilee, Hamas is culpable for the security deterioration in southern Lebanon due to its efforts to expand its terrorist activities to the territory of neighboring Arab states. Israel must establish a new equation in which lack of peace in the north is met in kind in the Gaza Strip.

After many years of calm, the Lebanese border is heating up. The latest barrage of rockets into the Galilee was carried out by Hezbollah in response to an extensive attack by the Israeli Air Force in southern Lebanon on August 5. That attack was itself a response to three incidents of rocket fire from Lebanon into the Galilee.

Even if the form of the Israeli response is right, it is neither conducted in the right arena nor directed against the right target. Those responsible for the rocket fire from Lebanon, which began during the May 2021 Gaza War, are Palestinian terror elements in southern Lebanon—specifically, Hamas squads.

This indicates a profound change in the organization’s terror strategy. For the first time since its establishment, Hamas is expanding its terrorist activities outside its local geographical domain and into the territory of neighboring Arab states. This is similar to PLO activities of the 1960s and 1970s.

There are two reasons for this shift. The first is operational. In the wake of the Gaza war, Hamas has had difficulty conducting terrorist activity against Israel from the Strip, as its use of incendiary balloons and rocket fire can expose it to harsh Israeli responses that could further degrade its capabilities.
The relocation of the battlefield to Lebanon gives Hamas a kind of “Iron Dome” protecting it from an Israeli response.

The second reason is strategic. Following the Gaza war, Hamas has sought to take the conflict out of its local context and broaden it into a regional confrontation in which it stands as the cornerstone of the entire Middle East’s “resistance” to Israel. Hamas is thus attempting to take on a leadership role as protector of supranational symbols and concepts like the “struggle for Jerusalem.”

This is a landmark development that indicates a change in the group’s definition of resistance. This is all the more serious in view of the disintegration of the Lebanese state and the weakness of the main power elements there. This reality makes Lebanon a chaotic arena similar to what Syria became about a decade ago, and creates conditions on the ground that allow Hamas to expand its operational and strategic activities beyond Gaza.

It is not clear to what extent Gaza officials are directing the Palestinian squads in Lebanon that are currently shooting at Israel. But regardless, it will be difficult for Israel to stop this front from heating up via political communication with Hezbollah and the Lebanese government.

The real address for management of these incidents is Hamas in Gaza, which pulls the strings behind the recent events in Lebanon. Israel must therefore establish a new equation in which lack of peace in the north is met by unrest in the Gaza Strip. That is where Hamas’s political, social, and operational nerve center lies.

Using ineffective retaliation inside Lebanese territory and sending unfocused “signals” to the wrong address is an assured recipe for transforming the Galilee into the next scene of confrontation.

*Dr. Doron Matza, a research associate at the BESA Center, has held senior positions in the Israeli intelligence system.*