



## Will Hamas and Hezbollah Try Again to Tear the Israeli Spiderweb?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** From their earliest days, Hezbollah and Hamas have seen immense value in closely monitoring Israel's media. However, their reliance on open source information has proven a double-edged sword, as both groups have been misled into making poor strategic decisions. Either Hezbollah or Hamas is likely to identify the current crisis in Israel over the new government's proposed reform of Israel's judiciary as an opportunity to act against it. They might be surprised, however, by Israel's response.

For the past few months, Israel's political system and civil society have been wracked by a heated constitutional and political debate triggered by the new government's proposed reform of Israel's judiciary. The echoes of this internal crisis are inevitably reverberating beyond the country's borders. Enemies of Israel, including Hamas and Hezbollah, are watching the crisis with close interest, and one or both is likely to view it as an opportunity to take hostile action.

In the modern era, information is transmitted throughout the world instantly, allowing anyone with any degree of interest in Israel to remain up-to-date and consume details of whatever crisis the country might be experiencing in real time. In the case of the current widespread public uproar regarding the government's proposed reform of Israel's judiciary, this information includes visual data, such as images of clashes between protesters and police; confrontations in the Knesset and its committees; and, of course, incessant quarrels among elected officials and the public on social media.

It is hardly surprising that Hezbollah and Hamas are focused on these events. From their earliest days, both organizations have understood the immense value of closely monitoring Israel's media. Israel's open press, which is based on the principles of free speech and the public's right to know, offers these organizations access to a great deal of high-value information. As this information is both open and inexpensive to access, these entities can close information gaps they could not close in other ways.

As Hezbollah and Hamas lack other sources for strategic assessment, they have come to rely on open sources as their most important means of information with which to analyze Israel and assess its condition. This includes evaluating the Israeli public's fighting spirit and the leadership's willingness to enter into large-scale military operations or respond forcefully to acts of terrorism. In view of what they are seeing on open sources, either Hezbollah or Hamas is likely to perceive Israel's current crisis as an opportunity to take action against it.

### **Misconceptions of Israel's likely response**

In the history of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah/Hamas, the latter groups' misconceptions or erroneous situation assessments have often led them to make poor decisions, many of which had disastrous consequences for them.

Throughout the years of fighting in the security zone in South Lebanon, especially in the 1990s, Hezbollah closely followed the Israeli debate about the presence of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the South Lebanon Army (SLA) in that area, and monitored Israeli public focus on casualties and deaths among IDF soldiers. Hezbollah identified public disagreement in Israel as a sign of weakness and crisis, which gave it the impetus to continue its activity against the IDF. The fact that Israel withdrew from the security zone in May 2000, along with the way the withdrawal was carried out – hastily, in a manner that was largely perceived as a “flight” – was viewed by Hezbollah as proof positive of its thesis of Israeli weakness.

This view was famously articulated by Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. In a speech delivered on May 26, 2000, Nasrallah declared: “This Israel, which has nuclear weapons and the strongest air force in the region, is more fragile than a spiderweb.” Since then, the “spiderweb” metaphor has become a code term for the gap between Israel's military capabilities and its fighting spirit.

This perception was further reinforced by Israel's weak response to Hezbollah's abduction of three IDF soldiers just a few months after the withdrawal.

Hezbollah drew the conclusion that Israel's response to more soldier abductions would be similarly weak. After several failed attempts, Hezbollah attacked an IDF patrol along the border fence on July 12, 2006, killing several Israeli soldiers and abducting two more. In response, Israel embarked on the Second Lebanon War, which – despite the failures it revealed – came as a complete surprise to Hezbollah. Nasrallah even publicly conceded that had he known Israel would react the way it did, he would not have ordered the abductions. Some argue, with a certain measure of justification, that the deterrence created by the force of Israel's response continues to this day.

Toward the end of 2008, Hamas found itself in a similar situation. After several months of escalating tensions in the Gaza Strip because of Israel's attempts to destroy its cross-border tunnels, which are designed for staging surprise attacks inside Israel, Hamas estimated that Jerusalem would refrain from undertaking a large-scale operation in the Gaza Strip. Despite other information it was receiving, Hamas thought the upcoming Israeli Knesset elections scheduled for February 2009 would stop the government from launching any significant military action. The organization also believed its continued detention of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in Gaza would serve as a decisive deterrent, stopping Israel from starting a campaign that might place Shalit's life in danger.

Hamas found further support for its assessment that Israel would take no extraordinary action in Israel's behavior in 2007 and 2008. During that period, several incidents prompted talk of war in Israel, but none developed into a large-scale operation. Hamas was also encouraged by the flaws in the Israeli military that had been exposed by the Second Lebanon War, as well as by the expectation that Israel would lack international support for any military operation. This assessment was reinforced by a belief that Israel feared getting dragged into a confrontation on multiple fronts, given possible escalation in Lebanon and the West Bank.

Israel's deceptive tactic of deliberately projecting a business-as-usual atmosphere in the media helped catch Hamas by surprise. In December 2008, during the opening aerial attack of Operation Cast Lead, Hamas personnel were in their offices, contrary to the organization's normal procedure of moving command centers and offices underground whenever an Israeli offensive was seen as

imminent. Even Ismail Haniyeh was at his bureau. The al-Saraya complex, where Hamas government ministries are located, was fully staffed. The clearest evidence of surprise was that at the time of the attack, the graduation ceremony of a police officer training course was being held on the parade grounds in the center of Gaza City. The parade grounds were hit and some 90 Hamas members died, including Chief of Police Tawfiq al-Jabari.

### **Hamas and Hezbollah are monitoring current events in Israel and identifying weaknesses**

Today, as ever, Hamas and Hezbollah are closely following what is happening in Israel by accessing open media. All progress in the judicial reform program and all counter-protests are carefully reviewed in great detail. All statements by individuals on either side of the debate are translated and given prominence, with an emphasis on expressions suggesting discord and rifts in Israeli society.

Thus, an infographic produced on March 1, 2023, in *Al-Ahed*, a website identified with Hezbollah, quotes senior Israeli officials on the struggle within Israeli society and reports on signs suggesting that that society is as fragile as a spiderweb, as suggested by the infographic's heading. Responding to Israeli unrest, former Internal Security Minister Omer Bar-Lev is quoted as declaring, "Refusal to serve in the reserves will happen if the revolution in the judiciary is approved"; Defense Minister Yoav Gallant is quoted as saying, "The call to refuse army service is damaging to Israel's defense"; former Shin Bet Director Yuval Diskin is reported to have said, "Within weeks, we'll be in a civil war"; and Unit 8200 reserve officers are cited as warning of real worry for national security.

Similar thoughts were echoed in an interview that Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General Na'im Qassem gave to the *Al-Akhabar* website on February 23, 2023. He claimed that given what is happening in Israel right now, Nasrallah's "spiderweb speech" is being given more and more credence every day. According to Qassem, the crises in Israel are building up and are liable to explode. Similarly, on March 2, 2023, the Shaeb news agency in Gaza, which is identified with Hamas, published an article with a headline speculating, "Will the IDF fall apart due to Netanyahu's reforms?" The article reports on declarations of refusal to serve in various reserve units (including the Israel Air Force, special operations forces, and others) once legislation affecting the judiciary is completed. It also cites warnings coming from within Israel that disputes and rifts in the reserves will weaken the IDF, which depends on its reservists to operate effectively in wartime. The article calls on the

Palestinians to unite and exploit the crisis in Israel to achieve gains for Palestinian resistance and the “liberation” of Palestine.

### **Will Hamas and Hezbollah make the same mistakes again?**

To Hamas and Hezbollah, the crisis over Israeli judicial reform, the protests against it, and the arguments about it within Israeli society all lead to a single conclusion: Israel is internally weak. This perception has served in the past as the foundation for mistaken situation assessments by both organizations. They have taken previous internal strife as an opportunity to attack Israel on the mistaken assumption that internal weakness leads inevitably to military weakness.

Today’s situation may prove similar. In the Palestinian context, the area is far from calm. Terrorist attacks against Israel, some deadly, are frequent, while Israel’s security services are engaged in intensive activity to both thwart attacks before they happen and apprehend those responsible for attacks already carried out. The month of Ramadan, which begins on March 23, is always fraught with contention. The motivation to attack during this year’s Ramadan observance might be especially high given what the Palestinians have identified as weakness on Israel’s part.

For Hezbollah, this is a complicated time. The dire economic situation in Lebanon and the political winds blowing there might prod the organization, which has a long list of scores to settle with Israel given several assassinations of its members in recent years, to strike Israeli targets. Israel’s weakness might also be giving the Iranians, who are similarly following events in Israeli society with close attention, a “tailwind” to strike, whether directly or via Hezbollah, not only to harm Israel but also to divert attention from Iran’s progress toward military nuclear capability.

Past misjudgments indicate that Hezbollah and Hamas should be cautious when making strategic assessments about Israel. In their analyses of Israeli society and its political system, they rely almost exclusively on open source media. Consequently, their strategic situation assessments about a possible Israeli attack, whether proactive or in response to an attack on their part, has not worked out very well for them in the past. The reality in Israel is much more complex than that reflected by the media, which focuses on extremes for the sake of headlines and ratings. Despite the great turmoil Israeli society is now experiencing,

Hezbollah and Hamas might discover once again that the Israeli spiderweb might appear thin and fragile, but its strength is considerable.

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