

The Next War with Hizbollah: Should Lebanon be the Target?

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Introduction

Hizbollah's massive force buildup since the end of the Second Lebanon War, which has occurred in part by virtue of the weakness of Security Council resolution 1701, has allowed the organization to amass more rockets and missiles with longer ranges than were in the 2006 arsenal it used against Israel. This situation and the increasing possibility of confrontation with Iran are two of the potential reasons for renewed combat with Hizbollah. Since as far as is known the IDF is not acquiring an active means of defense against these types of rocket and missiles, it is unlikely that in a confrontation in the foreseeable future a significant portion of the missiles and rockets will be intercepted. Therefore, Israel will have to adopt a different strategy to prevent or at least greatly reduce the fire.

More than once, including during the first days of the Second Lebanon War, the idea was raised of adopting an indirect strategy, whereby instead of focusing on a direct strike against Hizbollah, whose survival relies on a signature sufficiently low to allow concealment among the civilian population, Israel would focus its attacks in Lebanon on targets identified with the sovereign state. This, supporters of this approach claim, would help Israel find relevant targets. Israel would be able to demonstrate to Lebanon the cost of forfeiting its sovereignty and possibly prompt Lebanon to compel Hizbollah, through political pressure and/or the use of force, to cease the rocket and missile fire. It is even possible that this might be enough to enhance within Hizbollah

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the considerations in favor of stopping the fighting: the organization's Lebanese identity and its pretensions of being Lebanon's defender and protector oblige it to refrain from causing suffering and damage to Lebanon, and Hizbollah does not want to be accused of acting in foreign interests in a manner that endangers Lebanon.

Recent developments in Lebanon support this approach. The integration of Hizbollah in the Lebanese government, the backing by the Lebanese leadership of Hizbollah following the exchange of Samir Kuntar for the bodies of the Israeli soldiers, and the decision by the Lebanese government that Hizbollah has the right to act "for the liberation of Lebanese land" seemingly nullify the separation that existed until recently between the Lebanese state and Hizbollah, and demonstrate the responsibility of the Lebanese government for the organization's deeds. In the past, Hizbollah based its claim that it should be Lebanon's protector, even if unofficial, specifically on the idea that by entrusting it with the responsibility for contending with Israel the Lebanese state can escape the dangers involved in a direct confrontation with Israel in which Israel enjoys clear supremacy, and scale down the fighting to a level on which Hizbollah holds a relative advantage. Now that the organization has ostensibly become part of the state and its government, Israeli adherence to a strategy that enables the organization to realize its claim appears less justified, and arguments for adopting a new strategy are gaining strength.

Even so, the arguments against the strategy of attacking the Lebanese state as a principal objective in context of a confrontation with Hizbollah still hold much weight and eclipse the arguments in favor of this posture. At the same time, the approach adopted in the last war, which focused on attempting to attack Hizbollah with counter fire, particularly with airpower, is also not suitable. Therefore, a strategy should be adopted that centers on increased ground maneuvers alongside counter fire and strikes against infrastructures, including civilian infrastructures that directly serve Hizbollah's military operations. The strategy of making do with a limited response in order to limit the chance of escalation and weathering the developments is also worthy of examination.

Choosing the preferred strategy requires taking broad considerations into account. First and foremost, it must be clear what Israel's political and strategic objectives are in the event of renewed fighting with

Hizbollah, and which of the alternative strategies offers the best chance of achieving them. The ethical and moral aspects of the various strategies, and their legal, political, public appearance-related, economic, and of course military dimensions must also be examined. Clearly if any one of the strategies surpassed all the others in every way there would be no room for discussion. Yet as this is usually not the case, the question arises regarding the relative weight of the various considerations and to what degree the discrepancies between the various strategies are significant to the decision makers.

Escalation Scenarios and Objectives to be Achieved

Defining the strategic objectives of a future confrontation with Hizbollah naturally depends greatly on the context in which it emerges. This is beyond the objective common to all cases, which is to limit the attack on Israel's home front as much as possible. If the confrontation in question is isolated and results from Hizbollah's provocation based on tension within Lebanon, or as an act of revenge for the attack on Imad Mughniyah, which Hizbollah attributes to Israel, the Israeli goal might be to weaken Hizbollah and strengthen the moderate parties in Lebanon, while damaging the organization's ability to rehabilitate itself and continue controlling southern Lebanon and presenting itself as the defender of Lebanon, similar to Israel's strategic objectives in the Second Lebanon War (even if they were not explicitly defined as such). Other objectives in this context could be strengthening moderate elements in the regional system and increasing Israeli deterrence, in part to increase the chances of achieving a favorable peace treaty with Syria and to weaken the extremist elements in the Palestinian system.

If the confrontation with Hizbollah is a secondary arena in an outbreak of hostilities with Iran, as part of an attempt to block its acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability, Israel's strategic objective will likely be to limit damage to the home front as much as possible, and the other strategic issues will be less relevant. If the confrontation develops out of Hizbollah's efforts to support the Palestinians in light of an extensive

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Israeli operation against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Israel might not limit itself to containing damage to its home front and may try to inflict more substantial damage on the organization, as in the first scenario, albeit more gradually. This would also be true in the case of a Hizbollah initiative in context of trying to block a settlement between Israel and Syria.

In all these scenarios it is quite clear that inflicting damage on Lebanese infrastructures – civilian or military – will not directly help to achieve Israeli objectives and might even damage the chances of achieving them. This is assuming that the Republic of Lebanon, and particularly those elements that are connected to the West and support reforms, would not back Hizbollah and would likely even criticize its moves. Only in a scenario in which Hizbollah acts with the support of the Lebanese government in order to promote objectives presented as pan-Lebanese aims, such as “liberating” Shab’a Farms or preventing Israeli flights over Lebanon, are there clear and logical benefits to be gained from attacking Lebanese infrastructures as a means of achieving Israeli objectives, which might be to deter the enemy and prevent its ability to achieve the objectives it set for itself, while damaging its ability to rehabilitate its military strength. Today, the likelihood of this scenario seems small, though not nonexistent.

Legal and Moral Considerations

The ethical-moral considerations, which are also reflected in international laws of war accepted by Israel, have crucial importance in determining the strategy and its means of achievement. The idea of damaging civilian infrastructures, not as a direct part of the operations for achieving military objectives but as a means of increasing the cost exacted from the enemy, stands on shaky legal and moral ground because it clearly has an element of collective punishment. Exacting a price from a party that does not support the side that is confronted in order to spur it into action has an even thinner legal and moral basis. Proposals that involve harm to the uninvolved population are likewise unacceptable from a moral and ethical standpoint, and all the more so from a legal standpoint.

The principal Israeli argument against terror organizations shared by liberal democracies around the world is that the values these elements

are trying to promote as part of their attempt to change the world order are not humane and should be rejected outright. The clash between values such as the willingness to intentionally hurt innocent civilians, particularly those who hold different opinions or beliefs, for the purpose of advancing a political idea, or a willingness to make sacrifices and to suffer as a supreme value, and values such as the universal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is at the heart of the ideological struggle that accompanies the fight for the political world order. Therefore, unintentional adoption of values supported by the extremist elements implies legitimacy for their modes of operation, undermines part of Israel's ideological foundation, and suggests an abandoned cause. It is also clear that in this type of confrontation, Hizbollah, which has no inhibitions about attacking civilian targets and has thousands of long range rockets, will enjoy a significant advantage.

This is certainly how the situation will be presented in terms of propaganda. Israel will be portrayed as having despaired of finding a solution to its security problems in ways compatible with its values, and as a party that should be condemned for its mode of action. Since great importance in the war against terror is attached to the legitimization of modes of action – internally, internationally, and by the public where the extreme elements are active – such an operational approach is not only morally deficient but is also counterproductive in terms of legitimization. It is likely that even the United States would oppose such attacks, as it did in the last war, and that the entire international community would express concern over the damage liable to be caused in Lebanon, the expected weakening of the moderate elements there, and the damage in the Arab world to the image of the West in general and the United States in particular. Fortunately, Israel takes great pains in this area. Supreme efforts are made in every operation to ensure that the chances of injuring uninvolved parties are minimal, and thus far Israel has not been dragged into action designed to inflict collective punishment, not to mention conscious damage to parties that are not involved. Israel has proudly and determinedly rejected repeated accusations of this sort,

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and it must not in any way reduce the clarity of its determination to adhere to its values.¹

Those who support the operational approach that focuses on damaging Lebanese infrastructures would likely argue that the right to life should be enjoyed by Israeli civilians who are exposed to Hizbollah attacks, and as there is no way to prevent the firing by attacking Hizbollah members and their infrastructures, there is no alternative to adopting this approach as a necessity that should not be condemned. If this were the situation, it is likely that there would be justification for this mode of action under restricted conditions, as long as it was certain that it would achieve the desired result. In practice, there is no guarantee that this approach would yield the result, nor is it correct that there are no other ways to achieve better results. However, the more effective approaches are liable to risk the lives of IDF soldiers, and as has become evident in recent years, the value of the right to life has been skewed somewhat, so that Israel has become less ready to endanger the lives of its soldiers.² This is despite the fact that it is their job to protect the lives of the civilians and the country's other interests, including its sovereignty and security, even at the cost of endangering their lives if necessary, while making sure not to compromise the basic values of the country and the people. This risk aversion is apparently the main reason why Israel refrained from mobilizing reserve forces in the first stages of the Second Lebanon War and later hesitated in implementing the operational plan based on a ground maneuver. This is also the reason it preferred a ceasefire with Hamas over a military operation, and why Israel is wont to search for ideas whose moral standing is questionable, such as attacking Lebanese infrastructures or destroying Palestinian settlements in the Gaza Strip, in the hope that it would be able to fight without endangering its soldiers.

What Is the Benefit of Attacking Infrastructures?

Would attacking Lebanese infrastructures in fact spark the desired chain reaction and bring an end to Hizbollah fire? Even though damaging Lebanese infrastructures would clearly impinge on Hizbollah and challenge its claim that its actions serve Lebanon, the chances of this stopping Hizbollah fire are not great. Indeed, during the Second Lebanon War there was a similar discussion in the Lebanese

and Arab public, in light of the large number of casualties among the Lebanese and in view of the damage inflicted on the bridges and other infrastructures in Lebanon. While Hizbollah was clearly perturbed by the debate and tried to repudiate the blame for the damage, it did not change its policy.

Hizbollah's philosophy is based on the premise that Israel (and likewise the United States) is the embodiment of evil and its very existence poses an unwavering threat to Lebanon. As such, Israel, and not Hizbollah, is responsible for any problem that afflicts Lebanon. This a major component of the justification presented by Hizbollah for its continued existence as an armed organization. Therefore, Israeli attacks on Lebanon will be presented by Hizbollah as decisive proof of its claims and justification for its continued use of rocket fire. While today this argument holds little water, at least among Nasrallah's immediate target audience in the Shiite community and those who oppose reforms in Lebanon it will carry significant weight. In such a case there is a considerable chance that Hizbollah will succeed in fomenting rage towards Israel in additional groups within the Lebanese public and in forging greater Lebanese cohesiveness behind him and against Israeli "cruelty." He could even argue that by its actions, Israel has proven his claim that Hizbollah is an organization with a Lebanese identity and that in fact it and Lebanon are intertwined inextricably.

Moreover, suffering and sacrifice are central symbols and values of Hizbollah, so from its point of view there is no obstacle to continue invoking them, while mustering international and Arab public opinion for exerting pressure on Israel and while harnessing Iran once again to help fund the damage that would be caused in Lebanon. As a ceasefire in the sense of defeat is not a realistic option from its point of view, Hizbollah will have no other option but to continue firing as long as it can, and with the proposed mode of operation, it will be able to do so almost without limit while inflicting relatively heavy damage on Israel, including in economic terms. If the moderate elements in Lebanon were able to impose their opinion on Hizbollah they would persuade or force it to avoid starting the war in the first place, or they would even prevent its obtaining arms. The true

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degree of their influence on Hizbollah and their ability to confront it were clearly demonstrated in the last few months, as well as in their very acceptance of the wording of resolution 1701 that does not oblige the Lebanese government to close the border with Syria to the smuggling of arms to Hizbollah. If they dared not confront Hizbollah at that time, what are the chances of their venturing to do so now?

Conclusion

The problem presented by Hizbollah is one of many examples of an organization that resorts to terror and exploits the weaknesses of a failed state in order to operate from its territory. The case of Lebanon is a special one, as the weakness of the state is inherent and does not derive from the fact that the government intentionally harbors the terror organization (as was the case in Afghanistan or in the Palestinian Authority) but is due to the fragile relationship between the elements of power, most of which bear a clear ethnic identity. For many years, this system has been based on the need for preventing expression of the relative size of the community that is represented by the terror organization more than by anyone else, and on the fact that the organization enjoys full support and assistance from the two external elements that have the greatest impact on events in the country. This is also a special case because in practice, Hizbollah runs a state within a state; in other words, it is the essential ruler in the Shiite-populated areas and enjoys great influence in other areas, in view of the interest of the Lebanese in maintaining the existence of the country as a single state unit. Thus, any attempt to

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promote ideas of reform, namely, strengthening the sovereignty of the central government and renouncing terror without a change in the balance of power within the Shiite community and without genuine limitation of Syria's and Iran's ability to determine how Lebanon will act, has a very limited chance of succeeding.

In dealing with terror from uncontrolled areas in failed states, Western countries, including Israel, are faced with a difficult dilemma. Using standoff force, including against the sovereign party, does not solve the problem. A large scale ground operation is liable to require an extended and costly stay in

hostile territory. Refraining from action enables the terror organizations to demonstrate strength and enhance their capabilities. The solution that Western powers seek, whereby pragmatic local elements will enforce state sovereignty with Western support but without direct Western involvement and presence, is not feasible. Therefore the West is tempted to long for the convenient solution that appears to be emerging both in Lebanon and Gaza, in which the extreme element takes control of the country and turns the problem into a confrontation between states. This is a conflict for which the Western countries traditionally develop their military strength, and in which they enjoy a relative advantage. The trouble is that apparently even in such circumstances, the terror organizations continue to use force in a manner that suits them, shirk political responsibility, and maintain a very low military signature. Thus, there is ultimately no avoiding a large scale ground operation, usually after the Western party has suffered a substantial blow such as the attack on the Park Hotel or the 9/11 attacks. In the case of Hizbollah too, Israel waited until the provocation of the 2006 kidnapping, and as it avoided launching a ground operation, was forced to accept a partial achievement only.

If there is another round between Israel and Hizbollah, Israel will not be able to make do with standoff counter attacks on Lebanese targets, and will probably have to launch a large scale ground operation. While Hizbollah will be able to exact a not inconsiderable cost from Israel for such an operation, the IDF has the ability to take control of the organization's operational territories in southern Lebanon, including north of the Litani River, and if necessary, also in Beirut and the Bek'a valley. Such an operation, together with inflicting damage on infrastructures that serve Hizbollah, is the only one that will stop the firing, create a new reality in the field, and enable examination of the possibility of establishing a different arrangement with regard to relations between Israel and Lebanon in general and the Shiite community in particular. All this of course is contingent on the context within which the confrontation erupts and the positions of the various players, particularly Syria, Iran, the United States, and France. This will require the willingness to undertake a protracted and uncomfortable presence in Lebanon, but it seems that the attempts to find different kinds of solutions will not block the inevitable.

Notes

1. When Terje Larsen published an article in *Haaretz* after the events in Jenin during Operation Defensive Shield and claimed that Israel had lost the moral high ground in Jenin (and it is often noted how much some Europeans, and even some of their partners in the United States, such as former President Carter, eagerly await the day they can claim this), I explained to him that he evinced no understanding of the Israeli narrative, that Israel attaches the utmost importance to maintaining its moral advantage, that there is no chance it would endanger it, and therefore he should quickly apologize before the facts blow up in the face, lest he lose his ability to act as a mediator between the sides.
2. This clearly involves a calculated risk, and hence the military must prepare operational plans whose chances of success justify, from the IDF's point of view and from the point of view of the politicians, all the risks entailed in implementing those plans.