

The Next War against Hezbollah: Strategic and Operational Considerations

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The IDF does not hide the fact that it is preparing for war in Lebanon. These preparations take the form of learning and applying the lessons of the Second Lebanon War while incorporating the modifications required in light of changes in the region's strategic reality, especially in Israel's northern theater. *The IDF Strategy*, published in 2015, which serves as the compass for military force buildup and operation, notes that a war in Lebanon is one of the reference scenarios in IDF preparations. As defined, the IDF required achievement in such war must be a decisive outcome against Hezbollah forces at the operational level while causing significant damage to its capabilities, and a victory at the strategic level, i.e., attaining the political objectives to be determined by the political echelon and the ability to compel the enemy to accept Israel's conditions for a ceasefire or a political arrangement. The operational approach in the northern sector is based on combining strong defensive measures designed to protect the civilian front and maintain its resilience, with a massive offensive of precision strike and a rapid multi-formation ground maneuver to access and damage Hezbollah's centers of gravity.

Hezbollah: The Principal Threat in IDF Preparations

The Israeli government's strategic situation assessment identifies Hezbollah as the executive arm of the Shiite axis led by Iran and the principal military threat to Israel. As such, the IDF must prepare for the possibility of a war on

the northern theater. Over the past decade, senior IDF officers have indicated that another confrontation with Hezbollah is only a matter of time.¹

As the Syrian civil war has led to a weakening, if not breakdown, of the Syrian military, the primary military threat to Israel in the north comes from Hezbollah. Since the Second Lebanon War, the organization, which for all intents and purposes is the strongest political and military force in Lebanon, has armed itself with thousands of rockets and missiles covering the whole of Israel. This arsenal, which affords Hezbollah enhanced military capabilities, includes Iranian and Syrian supplies of more accurate surface-to-surface missiles than before, attack UAVs, coast-to-sea missiles, and advanced air defense systems. At the same time, Hezbollah fighters have gained operational experience from fighting in Syria alongside Bashar Assad's army against the rebels and the Islamic State. There are also signs that the organization has improved its guerrilla fighting tactics. Furthermore, Hezbollah has developed special operations capabilities, and prepared to penetrate Israel and seize control of villages or critical installations.

The principal direct military threat to Israel at the present time, therefore, stems from Hezbollah (and its Iranian backing). Israel must be prepared for scenarios of escalation on the northern front despite the fact that Hezbollah is enmeshed in the fighting in Syria. Indeed, a deterioration to war between Israel and Hezbollah could result from a range of scenarios linked to the instability characterizing the northern arena, both in Syria and in Lebanon. One concrete scenario in this context is an extreme Hezbollah reaction to an Israeli attack on advanced weapons transported from Syria to Lebanon. Over the years of the civil war in Syria, certain "rules" have developed de facto in Israeli-Hezbollah relations, whereby Israel does not intervene in events in Syria, other than foiling concrete threats and transfers of advanced weapons to Hezbollah. One of these rules is that an Israeli attack on convoys in Syria ferrying arms to Hezbollah does not generate a Hezbollah counterattack on Israeli targets. However, should Israel attack such a convoy on Lebanese territory, Hezbollah might feel obligated to respond, if only to prevent the IDF from expanding its freedom of action and changing the rules. A second scenario might develop as a result of an Iranian-backed Hezbollah decision to try to establish a terrorist infrastructure against Israel in the Golan Heights. Israel has already made it clear that it will not accept such a development or deployment of Iranian and Hezbollah forces near the border on the Golan Heights and, should it occur, will be forced to respond.²

Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah apparently believes that Israel has no solid, orderly strategy for facing his organization. He formulated Hezbollah's operational doctrine and strategy based on the following principles: creation of a balance of deterrence vis-à-vis Israel with the capability to attack Israel's civilian and strategic depth with tens of thousands of accurate missiles, rockets, and UAVs to inflict direct damage on strategic installations;³ high organizational survivability and redundancy of capabilities to be obtained by maintaining secrecy and a low signature, dispersing its fighting forces, hiding weapons in the battlefield areas, assimilating into the civilian surroundings (hundreds of pre-loaded missile launchers are already located in homes), and digging into underground infrastructures;⁴ the support of Iran, a regional superpower, which gives the organization breathing room, as does the maintenance of a strategic rear and open supply line outside of Lebanon – in Iran, Iraq, and Syria; and reliance on intra-Lebanese legitimacy. For years, Hezbollah has been a key player in Lebanon's political and governing systems. The organization enjoys a special status as the only entity capable of effectively defending the country against the Salafist jihadist threat, spearheaded by the Islamic State. At the same time, this support is not guaranteed if Hezbollah initiates an escalation vis-à-vis Israel, causing Lebanon a great deal of damage.

The Political Directive

Israel's political echelon has made a clear choice in recent years to preserve the existing security status quo, primarily through perception shaping measures. The fact that Israel does not strive to expand its territorial reach and is experiencing relative prosperity, leads to its preferring the current situation over other options that might involve high risk and uncertainty. Military operations seeking to preserve the status quo necessarily focus on the defensive, because they do not aim to substantially change the strategic situation. Therefore, the reasons for embarking on a military action would primarily address the need to respond to hostile actions aimed at Israel, presumably after Israel's deterrence eroded, especially when the political echelon identifies a public desire to use military force.

When the enemy is a sub-state entity such as Hezbollah and is not governed by the international rules and standards that apply to states, it is difficult to translate operational success into political achievement, and the direct military-political link in this type of asymmetrical confrontation tends to

be blurred. In addition, when the strategic objective is to preserve the status quo, any event that challenges it – rocket fire, the abduction of a soldier, penetration of an Israeli town or village to carry out a terrorist attack, takes on heightened importance far beyond its strategic significance or actual impact. Moreover, when one seeks to preserve the status quo, it is quite natural to neglect to seek political opportunities, perhaps finding it difficult even to see them when they exist.

Under such circumstances, Israel's political echelon finds it difficult to define for the IDF thoroughly and clearly its expectations of the outcome of the next war against Hezbollah, other than the basic assumption that the results should be clear and unequivocal on the ground and impervious to Nasrallah's manipulations, unlike those of the Second Lebanon War. To improve the way Israel handles the next round of fighting – before its outbreak and as it unfolds – it is necessary to look at two fundamental questions in the government's decision making process.

First, what is required at any given time to prevent the outbreak of the next war? At no time should the possibility a "preemptive war" be ruled out. Realizing such an option would be grounded on the assessment that war is certain and that the balance of power represents an opportunity for Israel to harm Hezbollah severely and consequently change the balance of power in Lebanon and Syria, especially when the organization's forces are stretched over Syria and Lebanon, and Hezbollah is suffering from losses and attrition because of the years of fighting in the Syrian civil war. Second, it is necessary to examine the probability that war will develop from a process of miscalculation, escalation, and deterioration. Due to considerations of legitimacy, Israel would prefer a situation of deterioration toward war that could be blamed on Hezbollah.

Israel's political echelon appears to be avoiding a thorough examination of these basic questions. Instead, its thinking seems to revolve around two axes: one relates to the perceptions versus the physical dimension (especially in relation to the damage expected to the civilian front), and the other relates to the scope ranging from preserving the status quo to a change in Israel's strategic situation. These axes are meant to affect the choice of the operational design appropriate to the nation's political goals. Clearly, the discourse between the political and military echelons touches on the question of what kind of perceived military achievement is required for leverage into a political achievement. The effectiveness of military power is mostly

focused on the physical dimension; the Israeli security establishment has yet to adjust to the use of military force as one element among many efforts involved in a multidisciplinary action, especially as the senior political echelon is image-oriented and does not believe it is possible to generate a fundamental change in the strategic situation.

Formulating an Operational Plan under Vague Political Directives

The conclusions of the various commissions of inquiry, including the Winograd Commission, have taught the political echelon that it better formulate vague policies and directives that will make it difficult to examine and judge it after a war, allowing it to elude the question of whether or not the political and security objectives determined by the government were achieved.⁵ Given the government's vague, ambiguous directives, the IDF prepares for the same scenarios it knows from the past – in this case, the Second Lebanon War – while trying to fix the errors of the previous engagement. If the IDF is not instructed to generate a strategic change but only to preserve the calm, strengthen deterrence, and restore the situation to what it was before the fighting, the operational possibilities it will plan and offer will necessarily be limited. This is also affected by the nature of the confrontations, the weakness of the Lebanese state (which increases the concern over instability and chaos in extreme scenarios), and the constraints of being mired for a long time in a hostile populated terrain without being able to pass the baton to another responsible party. These difficulties greatly reduce the potential operational benefit of gaining a decisive outcome against the enemy or conquering areas in which it operates.

On the operational level, confrontations with sub-state entities, especially Hezbollah, require the consideration of two alternative concepts of operation: the first is the systemic dismemberment of the enemy, combining military measures with economic, psychological, legal, social, and other efforts, and the second is bringing about a rapid termination of the fighting while strengthening deterrence, and stressing the ability to cause serious damage to the enemy from the outset and knowing full well when to end the move before the enemy has time to adjust to the newly created situation, yet at the same time leaving the enemy an honorable way out of the battle.

If the IDF chooses to systemically dismember Hezbollah, the following questions arise:

- a. Can the IDF significantly reduce the launch capabilities of Hezbollah and its supporters in Lebanon and Syria? While the IDF has powerful precision offensive capabilities based on high quality intelligence, and well developed rocket and missile interception capabilities (Iron Dome and David's Sling), these are insufficient to totally neutralize Hezbollah's ability to strike Israel's rear.
- b. Similarly, is a ground maneuver into Lebanese territory necessary to distance Hezbollah strongholds from the Israeli border and clear the area of launch capabilities and other threats against Israel?
- c. Given constraints as to collateral damage, what is the policy of damaging urban and other populated zones where Hezbollah embeds its launch capabilities?
- d. Does the IDF have a "target bank" that would help it damage Hezbollah's command, control, and logistics systems effectively?
- e. What is the likelihood of harm to UNIFIL forces in southern Lebanon, and what are the possible ramifications of this in terms of international pressure on stopping the fighting before Israel has attained its military goals?
- f. Should responsibility for what happens in its sovereign territory be placed on Lebanon, given Hezbollah's centrality to the Lebanese political system and its forces being Lebanon's de facto army? Should the IDF inflict heavy damage on state infrastructures in Lebanon in response to Hezbollah damaging Israel's civilian front? Alternately, should Israel consider attacking Lebanese infrastructures, especially as retribution for and/or deterrence against attacks on Israeli infrastructures?

Should the political echelon require the IDF to bring about a rapid end to the fighting and strengthen deterrence, it will have to examine different questions, namely:

- a. How does Israel bridge its desire to control the escalation in order to prevent deterioration into full war with the need to strike early to damage most of Hezbollah's capabilities threatening the country before they are turned against Israel in a way that has the potential to lead to rapid escalation?
- b. Does the IDF have a quality intelligence assessment that gives it a high quality "target bank" that, if attacked early in the war, will surprise and shock Hezbollah, demonstrating that the cost of continuing the fighting is greater than ending it immediately?

- c. Will an attack on Lebanese state infrastructures bring about a rapid end to the fighting? On a similar note, the IDF must take into consideration that there will be external pressure on Israel to end the fighting before it has had an opportunity to cause massive damage to Lebanon.
- d. Is there any point to an indirect approach of attacking targets of critical importance to Iran in Syria and Lebanon so that Iran instructs Hezbollah to end the fighting?
- e. Is the IDF prepared to prevent the infiltration of terrorist groups attacking Israeli population centers or abducting soldiers and/or civilians?

In any scenario, it is necessary to prepare an exit strategy already at the beginning of the fighting. This will help enable choosing the right time to conclude the confrontation. Despite the desire to maximize both military achievements and political achievements, it is necessary to avoid trying to adjust the operational clock, which ticks very fast, to the political clock, which moves more slowly. Experience shows that synchronizing the two clocks reduces operational outputs. Given the limitations of the international mechanisms and peacekeeping forces, and the inherent weakness of the whole subject of enforcement, it would be unwise to extend the fighting in an attempt to gain “stronger” resolutions in the UN Security Council.

Failure to implement these rationales will help the enemy adapt to the situation of war and flip the equation between the benefit of continuing to fight and the cost of losing. This is liable to give rise to mutual attrition, which leads to combat lasting longer than planned. Therefore, Israel should prefer to set clear operational facts on the ground, and later, leverage them into political gain. The primary shaper of the post-war reality will be the balance of costs to both sides and the balance of power that will develop, rather than the particular wording of the UN Security Council resolution at the fighting’s end.

The IDF’s Operational Doctrine

In the rounds of fighting in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip, Israel prioritized using the IDF’s massive firepower, while taking advantage of precision intelligence and operational capabilities, while preventing collateral damage and reducing harm to its own soldiers. The reliance on firepower, both precise and massive, led to an approach that preferred eroding the enemy by means of standoff fire. Therefore, the ground maneuver was postponed to as late a stage as possible. In practice, the ground maneuver was almost the last

move, used only if the IDF failed to attain the necessary achievements by firepower and if it was deemed essential to an image of victory whereby the IDF operated in and even controlled enemy territory and cleared it of military and terrorist threats and infrastructures.

If the “dismemberment of the enemy system approach” is applied to Hezbollah, a rapid maneuver is needed soon after the start of the campaign in order to reduce and suppress the launches and fire from the area conquered, and reach the centers of gravity – the organization’s critical nodes – such as command and control centers, the units operating the launch arrays, and long range surface-to-surface missiles and surface-to-surface rockets, most of which are embedded in urban, populated areas. These tasks raise the question whether they necessarily require the operation of a heavy masse of multi-divisional ORBAT, or whether flexibility, mobility, and speed, attained through the deployment of combined, small scale forces, are preferable.

Should the “rapid termination approach” be selected, there is great importance in executing a surprise opening move, designed to inflict a severely painful blow on Hezbollah (including at the tactical, operational level), based on intelligence superiority and operational opportunities. When taking this approach, it is necessary to avoid automatic employment of aerial capabilities, based on the approach of “maximize strike volume,” and instead focus on precise attacks against targets representing Hezbollah’s centers of gravity. At the same time, it is important to deploy smart power, i.e., a concentration of multidisciplinary efforts that are not only kinetic. Such a policy is designed to foil Hezbollah’s goals and strengthen Israel’s deterrence, while at the same time strengthen actors in the Lebanese system whose interests are congruent with Israel’s, actors that can bolster the opposition to Hezbollah in Lebanese society once fighting abates.

In whatever approach is taken to the use of power, defense plays a central role. The ability to intercept surface-to-surface missiles and rockets allows defense of strategic sites and areas, which gives the IDF and the strategic rear breathing room and functional continuity. At the same time, particular attention must be paid to the civilian front, especially encouraging the population to accept a reality in which they must remain in protected areas for extended periods of time in order to reduce the number of casualties. The outcome of a war is also measured in the number of civilian casualties, the mood, and the resilience of the society during and after the war.

In current frameworks, it is difficult to reach a point of strategic decisive outcome against an enemy such as Hezbollah. Nevertheless, tactical decision capabilities are still needed in every encounter with Hezbollah forces on the battlefield. The military echelon must make it clear to the political echelon that there is no point in using force for the sole purpose of creating the image of victory. Israel must bring its various powers to bear in order to attain actual strategic advantages, which may open up new options and create the possibility of shaping a more convenient environment after the war and for a long time to come.

The need to formulate a multidisciplinary operational doctrine incorporating many various efforts – military, diplomatic, economic, civil, humanitarian, legal, media, and infrastructural – within an organizing framework of smart power is critical before, during, and after the war. Such a doctrine is shaped by means of a systematic, ongoing process of learning, likewise taking place during the war itself, as a relevant response to a specific threat or combination of threats. In the context of such a process, it is necessary to consider stability and governance, reduce the distress experienced by civilians, limit terrorist recruitment and radicalization pools, and strengthen actors with the potential of sharing interests with Israel. A multidisciplinary approach requires a coordinated effort to formulate a proactive policy designed to improve Israel’s standing in the region and the world, starting with the political level and ending with the synchronization of all the operative entities required to act, based on shared understanding and uniform goals.

Ramifications of the Regional Strategic Situation

The changes in Israel’s strategic situation since the Second Lebanon War are dramatic: the renewed presence of Russia in Syria represents a possible constraint on Israel’s aerial freedom of action in this theater in a future conflict, and at the very least requires coordination. Russia is also likely to intervene in some way, in particular to prevent the current Syrian regime from collapsing, and accordingly, to bring about a rapid end to a war between Israel and Hezbollah.

The hostile stance of the Sunni states toward Hezbollah and Iran increases the potential of their support for weakening Iran and for the IDF damaging Hezbollah and Lebanon, the state they identify as the “state of Hezbollah.” Hezbollah’s widespread presence in Syria increases the chances it will fight Israel from that direction as well. In addition, the deepening partnership

with Hezbollah heightens the probability that the Lebanese army too will fight against the IDF, in a way that will require Israel to damage it severely. The relatively widespread presence of international forces operating as part of UNIFIL will result in early and increased involvement of the UN and donor nations to end the fighting. Another probability is a disruption of the dynamic equilibrium in the multi-actor war in Syria, as radical Sunni factors exploit Hezbollah's aiming its main effort against Israel to ramp up the pressure to topple Assad's regime and allow them to spread throughout Syria and perhaps also into Lebanon. Given this possibility, Iran is liable to dispatch its own troops to the northern theater in numbers exceeding those it has sent to date.

Israel should assume that reconstruction after the war will proceed more slowly than in the past decade, because of the widespread destruction of the Middle East, the refugee problem (in Lebanon there are already more than one million Sunni refugees from Syria), and changes in the priorities on the international agenda. A war could generate more profound instability in Lebanon, and perhaps even accelerate the collapse of Syria as a state, especially because Hezbollah is currently a key stabilizing factor on both sides of the Syrian-Lebanese border. Stabilizing the border area after the war will depend on the Lebanese army's ability and desire to do so and the international community's willingness to continue to invest efforts in an environment where the risk level is on the rise.

Assessment

More than a decade since the Second Lebanon War, the contrast between the unprecedented years of calm on Israel's border and Hezbollah's force buildup, leaving it the major direct military threat against Israel, is starker than ever. As a professional military, the IDF builds its force and preparedness for a war scenario against Hezbollah in Lebanon while adapting the operational plans to the organization's current capabilities on the one hand, and the IDF's own capabilities on the other. In recent years, both have improved and grown significantly.

The major differences between the Second Lebanon War and the possible future confrontation with Hezbollah lie not in changes in the balance of power but in the dramatic changes in the strategic environment, first and foremost a regional, multi-actor war, centered on Syria and Iraq, whose outcomes spell extensive destruction, mass death, and floods of refugees,

more sharply defined enmity and hostility between Shia and Sunni camps, the Islamic State phenomenon, and the active presence of superpower and regional militaries in the area.

Israel's minimum objective in a future war with Hezbollah is to reduce the scope of damage to Israel during the fighting and its direct and indirect costs, deter Hezbollah from attacking Israel in the future, and prevent a destabilization of the borders on the northern theater, also on the part of other entities. At the end of such a war, Israel would strive to preserve freedom of action for its military, such as aerial freedom over Lebanon and Syria. Beyond this level, Israel may strive for changes in the security situation in the northern theater by means of a significant reduction in Hezbollah's strength and Iran's influence. Such a change would have to entail heavy damage to the organization and a tipping of the balance of power in Lebanon and the region to its detriment over the long haul.

In the current strategic reality, the likelihood that Iran and Hezbollah will initiate an escalation of the situation against Israel is low. Iran has no desire to encourage a military confrontation against Israel, especially as Iran is already over-extended in regional fighting and conflict arenas, and in light of the reduced overt tension between Iran and Israel, resulting from the nuclear agreement between Iran and the international community concluded in July 2015. For its part, Hezbollah, which is up to its neck in the Syrian civil war, will find it difficult to fight in the long run on two fronts, where one of the fronts involves fighting with an enemy such as Israel, while worrying about the implications of such a war for its standing in Lebanon.

The Israeli government, which has opted for a policy of non-intervention in the regional turbulence, is also not interested in escalation in the northern arena in general and the Lebanese front in particular, especially after a decade of unprecedented calm. Nonetheless, two scenarios are liable to disrupt the balance of deterrence and affect the mutual desire to avoid war at present: one is the dynamics of escalation, which could develop from a sequence of events in which each side feels compelled to respond to an act of the other side, because both sides need to preserve their deterrence and both sides worry about breaking the accepted rules of the game. This is reminiscent of the mistake made in the Second Lebanon War: deterioration into war at a time with neither side wanting to be drawn into it. The second scenario stems from a sense on the Israeli side, liable to result in an uncontrollable dynamic: an assessment that the next confrontation with Hezbollah is inevitable and

only a matter of time, and when it erupts will present an opportunity to fix the flaws revealed by the Second Lebanon War. However, Israel's government is endowed with the understanding, power, and tools to strengthen Israel's deterrence and reduce the effect of factors of escalation in order to push off the next round of fighting with Hezbollah to the extent possible.

Notes

- 1 See Gadi Eisenkot's statement when he served as GOC Northern Command, in Alex Fishman and Ariella Ringel-Hoffman, "I Have Tremendous Force, I'll Have nNo Excuses," *Yediot Ahronot*, October 3, 2008; also see statement by Deputy Chief of Staff Yair Golan in Yohai Ofer, "Deputy Chief of Staff: 'In the next war, dozens of missiles will blow up in the country's center,'" *NRG*, June 27, 2016, <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/792/352.html>.
- 2 Yoav Zeitun, Itamar Eichner, Ahiya Ra'avad, and Roi Kais, "The IDF Attacks 14 Targets in Syria: 'The Iranian Quds Force is Responsible for the Shooting,'" *Ynet*, August 21, 2015, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4692993,00.html>.
- 3 Amos Harel, "Nasrallah's Ammonia Speech: Old Threat in New Packaging," *Haaretz*, February 17, 2016, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2854685>.
- 4 Gadi Eisenkot, "A Changed Threat? The Response in the Northern Arena," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 2, no. 1 (2010): 29-40, [www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/MASA%202-1Eng%20\(5\)_Eisenkot.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/MASA%202-1Eng%20(5)_Eisenkot.pdf).
- 5 For more about the process of determining the political objectives of a confrontation, see Udi Dekel and Shlomo Brom, "'Reconstruction for Demilitarization': Lifting the Economic Siege and Tightening the Security Siege around the Gaza Strip," *INSS Insight* No. 580, July 28, 2014, <http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/No.%20580%20-%20Udi%20and%20Shlomo%20for%20web.pdf>.