

Political and Military Contours of the Next Conflict with Hezbollah

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The purpose of this article is to analyze the political and military contours of the next conflict with Hezbollah. The article addresses the following principal points:

- a. The weight to be given to the distinct context of the hostilities, against reliance on “generic” insights and “automatic” activation of contingency plans.
- b. The question whether to set objectives for the conflict of a political and “positive” nature (that is, an attempt to shape political reality by means of military conflict), or, based on considerations of realism and limitations of power, to set objectives merely of a military and “negative” nature (such as limiting Hezbollah’s force buildup and deployment).
- c. Three new elements that to a certain degree shape the contemporary arena: Hezbollah’s buildup of precision weapons capability; the deepening military presence of Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, and the blurred borders between Lebanon, Syria, and Iran; and the entry of Russia into Syria.
- d. The contemporary arena is marked by a heightened challenge to Israel by Iran and Hezbollah, including by way of Iran’s military buildup on Syrian soil and the construction of facilities for the production of precision weapons on Lebanese soil. The picture can be seen as an attempt by Iran and Hezbollah to reach a strategic balance with Israel, or even to gain the capability to launch a strike that will cause significant damage to critical (military and civilian) systems in Israel.

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These processes increase the probability of a spiraling escalation, leading ultimately to war. Israel is exceptionally vulnerable to attack by precision weapons, as on the one hand it is an advanced Western country dependent on sophisticated technologies, and on the other it is small, with very concentrated infrastructures and very little redundancy. Thus Israel must define red lines, including Hezbollah's acquisition of precision weapons, and particularly the manufacture of precision missiles on Lebanese soil, as well as the future deployment to Syria of high impact Iranian weapon systems (such as advanced surface-to-air missiles, coast-to-sea/coast missiles, and precision surface-to-surface missiles), and be prepared to move forward in an escalation process – as much as is necessary – to foil these buildups.

- e. According to the current operational concept and force structure of both Israel and Hezbollah, there is strong linkage between the extent of the damage that will be caused to Hezbollah and the price to be paid by Israel for causing that damage. In fact, there is a kind of symmetrical equation between the depth of damage to both sides in the event of hostilities. This ratio is a consideration for preferring a “limited” conflict (setting limited objectives to be achieved at limited costs) over a “full” all-out conflict. Yet it also means that the IDF must develop the capability to weaken the linkage between the extent of damage to Hezbollah and the price paid by Israel for inflicting the damage, in areas such as operational concepts, force buildup, and intelligence.

Fundamental Analysis vs. the Particular (Unknown) Context of the Future Conflict

All military conflicts can be analyzed at two levels: the “fundamental” level – basic underlying characteristics of the relevant system, where the rate of change is slow; and the distinct context in which a conflict breaks out (who started it, what are they trying to achieve, under what circumstances), which is dynamic and changes rapidly. The context of the next conflict with Hezbollah is currently unknown, so the analysis is by definition limited. However, one can discuss the system's fundamental characteristics and a range (although partial) of possible contexts of future hostilities, and the role and method of ascertaining the distinct context when fighting actually breaks out. Of course it is possible to argue that until the context is ascertained there is no point in a “generic” analysis of the fundamental level. However, the “generic” analysis is indeed important, as it involves

learning and creates shared knowledge and language between the various military ranks, and between the political and military levels. To paraphrase Eisenhower, a plan based only on the fundamental level is not sufficient, but the planning process provides valuable shared understanding.

The differences between Operations Pillar of Defense and Protective Edge illustrate the importance of identifying the distinct context of each event – though both were against the same opponent, occurred in the same theater, and took place within less than two years. During Operation Pillar of Defense Egypt was led by the Muslim Brotherhood and during Operation Protective Edge by the el-Sisi regime; the former operation focused around shaping the rules of the game for the ensuing “routine” period and around fairly secondary economic issues (such as fishing and farming land close to the border), while Protective Edge was characterized by the extreme isolation of Hamas and the question of its economic survival. The significance of the isolation and economic distress of Hamas gradually became clearer toward spring-summer 2014, and it is possible that an analysis conducted long before would have been unable to disclose the distinct context of Operation Protective Edge. This is one example of the importance of changing contexts, and the need to highlight the distinct context before making decisions that shape the conflict.

It is impossible to assess the distinct context of the next conflict with Hezbollah, but a look at the recent past reveals the rapid changes in the contexts with potential for escalation: from Hezbollah’s force buildup by means of supply lines passing through Syria, to its force buildup on Lebanese soil (including the manufacture of high quality weapons), to efforts by Hezbollah and Iran to expand their force deployments in Syria. There are changes in context as to Russian indifference vs. reservations about actions attributed to Israel, and apathy vs. aggressiveness by the Syrian regime toward reports of breaches of Syrian sovereignty by Israel. The context is affected by the changes in the self confidence and boldness of members of the “axis” (Iran, Hezbollah, and their allies), and the degree to which the axis is invested in other fronts and is not interested, or for that matter, free to seek, an additional front with Israel. It is also affected by changes in the international legitimacy of the Alawite

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regime, Hezbollah, and Iran, inter alia as a result of the unfolding of Syria's civil war and developments regarding the Iranian nuclear project.

Hezbollah is an organization with a complex identity – part Iranian proxy and part independent grassroots representative of the Lebanese Shiites. In some contexts it should be seen as an arm of Iran, and in others as an important shareholder in Lebanon. The specific context is also derived from its degree of self confidence or the extent to which it is challenged within the internal Lebanese political system. A conflict could break out due to a miscalculation, a failure in strategic communication, or uncontrolled escalation. The future conflict could also break out in a different distinct context, which cannot yet be predicted – but it will be essential to define it in real time.

In every distinct context the parties will compete to achieve objectives and end states derived to a large extent from that context. Consequently, all policy planning as well as military strategy and campaign planning must be adjusted to the context (rather than making decisions based on a “generic” fundamental analysis or “automatically” activating contingency plans).

The Contemporary Context

The distinct context changes continually, and identifying it is one of the most important tasks once the fighting starts. At the time of this writing, three issues shape the dynamics in the theater, although clearly they will not necessarily determine the distinct context of the next conflict.

The first issue is Hezbollah's buildup of improved-precision and precise weaponry.¹ A Kuwaiti newspaper, which interviewed an aid to the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps,² noted that Iran has erected factories for the manufacture of high quality weapons on Lebanese soil. The head of Israel's Military Intelligence directorate also confirmed that Iran is setting up the infrastructure for the production of precision weapons in Lebanon.³ Precision weapons represent a new level of high quality threat because of their ability to disrupt and even shut down certain civilian and military systems for lengthy periods of time, and to cause billions of dollars of damage. This is not just “more of the same” vis-à-vis the statistical weapons, and it could lead to an unacceptable threat for Israel. Israel is developing offensive and defensive countermeasures to the precision weapons threat, but such a response is not hermetic, and a certain percentage of precision missiles may still reach their targets.

In certain senses Israel is unusual in its vulnerability to precision weapons, as on the one hand it is a Western country with advanced critical infrastructure, and on the other hand, it is a small country with concentrated critical infrastructures and little redundancy. Regarding electricity generation in Israel, for example, out of a capacity to generate about 17,600 MW of electricity, 28 percent is installed in only two sites (with 10 cumulative production units – turbines, for example). The six largest electricity generating sites in Israel (including private ones) account for 51 percent of the national capacity for electricity generation (using only 26 production units).⁴ Thus the threat represented by even a small number of precision missiles that breach Israel's countermeasures and strike critical systems, such as electricity generation, could be unprecedented. The picture is similar with regard to other critical systems, such as national electricity management; natural gas infrastructure; sea water desalination (only five facilities⁵ supply about half of Israel's drinking water); and many other examples from civilian and military fields.

The transfer of precision weapons to Hezbollah via Syria is operationally complex, and according to foreign publications, Israel has managed to reduce such transfers significantly. Under the current rules of the game, however, Israel refrains from attacking in Lebanon, and attacking production facilities of precision weapons on Lebanese soil allegedly contradicts these rules. Yet for Israel, such production may represent a dangerous loophole in the rules. Therefore, Israel must define a red line regarding Hezbollah's precision weapon capability, with the emphasis on its production in Lebanon, and be ready to move forward on an escalation process – as much as necessary – to prevent Hezbollah from acquiring such capability. Due to the underlying characteristics of the political and military environment, it is possible that Hezbollah and Iran will accept the new Israeli red line after mutual escalation but before reaching the threshold of war, but nevertheless due to the unique nature of the precision weapon threat, Israel must be prepared to escalate even as far as full war in order to thwart Hezbollah's precision capability buildup. The significance of this threat must be highlighted in the public arena and in discussions with relevant governments, and thus legitimize Israel's preventive efforts.

Hezbollah's existing capabilities in the field of improved-precision weapons are already creating a new level of threat, and alongside its proven capability for waging a campaign of attrition, the organization could now also inflict a qualitative blow. Dealing with Hezbollah's high

quality firepower could become the main characteristic of the next conflict in three ways – before (as the “casus belli”), during (as a defining operational characteristic), and after (the strategic objective and as a matter for post-conflict understanding) – and reinforce the existing drive to shorten hostilities as far as is practically possible.

The second issue that characterizes the contemporary context is the entry of Iranian forces to Syria. Deployment of military systems with Iranian personnel on Syrian soil (particularly the possibility of future deployment of high performance systems, for example, advanced air defense systems such as the S-300, coast-to-sea/coast missiles, and precision missiles) could create a new qualitative level of threat and increase the asymmetry in the reciprocal strategic and operational accessibility between Iran and Israel. Therefore, Israel must examine whether to define a red line of Iranian military buildup in Syria, and if so, be prepared to advance in escalation as far as is necessary in order to prevent such buildup.

Growing Iranian military presence in Syria could force Israel to look at the Syrian and Lebanese theaters as one whole. Israel will have to consider whether to continue accepting Iranian activity via its proxies and covert forces, and operate against these proxies – or to act directly against Iran.

These military buildups by Iran and Hezbollah – in Syria, and the production of high quality weapons in Lebanon – could mark the start of a new era as to the degree the axis challenges Israel, and could be seen as an attempt by Iran and Hezbollah to create a symmetrical strategic equation with Israel, if not more than that, i.e., achieving the capability to inflict significant damage to critical military and civilian systems in Israel. Indeed, it is possible that the temporary and partial suspension of the Iranian nuclear program is incentivizing what looks like an attempt to reach a strategic balance against Israel in other spheres (to some extent as compensation for suspension of the nuclear program), resulting in a dynamic of escalation. These processes could very well put the regional system at a crossroads, and raise the probability of war.

If Israel refrains from foiling these processes of force buildup, in a future conflict it might face high quality Iranian weapons on Syrian soil and precision weapons held by Hezbollah. That would be a turning point in the underlying, fundamental characteristics of the system and a change of basic assumptions regarding the conflict.

The third issue that could affect the distinct context is the military involvement of Russia in Syria⁶ and its complex relations with the Alawite

regime, Iran,⁷ and Hezbollah. This is significant because any hostilities on Israel's northern border could include or spill over into Syria for a range of reasons. Iran and Hezbollah are positioning military assets in Syria, and those could turn against Israel in the event of a conflict in Lebanon. Israel itself could initiate action against the Iranian forces or Hezbollah in Syria, in the context of shaping the rules of the game to limit the deployment of such forces (for example, preventing an Iranian presence on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, or preventing the positioning of high quality Iranian weapons such as S-300 surface-to-air missiles in Syria). As the operational cooperation among the constituents of the Iranian axis tightens and as they increase their activity in Syria, so the probability rises that in the distinct context of the future conflict the entire axis (and not only Hezbollah) will be defined as the enemy, and fighting will take place on several fronts. In a conflict that includes the Syrian theater, Israel could break out of the symmetry equation regarding the depth of damage inflicted to both sides, which exists in fighting restricted to Lebanon alone. Israel will still pay a similar price for the conflict, but its impairment of the other side will be measured not only in terms of exacting a price but also in terms of changing the strategic reality (something that is apparently less achievable in Lebanon). Contrary to the Lebanese case, Israel has the ability to pose a real threat to the Alawite regime, and to degrade the forces defending it significantly. An extension of the fighting to Syria, and in certain cases fighting in Lebanon that projects into Syria, could interfere with Russian attempts to stabilize its own order in Syria.

Therefore, Russia could try to limit Israel's political, strategic, and even operational freedom to act. At the same time, Russia is a new element affecting the conduct, restraint, and deployment of all parties, the nature of any possible settlement in Syria, and the possible termination mechanisms for ending a conflict. Russia's new role in the arena could both coerce Israel and enable it to achieve political and strategic objectives using short, limited, and gradually escalating applications of force, combined with political dialogue with Russia and the United States – and it is possible that in certain circumstances such a framework should be the defining idea of Israel's concept for fighting in this arena.

In its six previous campaigns (from Operation Accountability to Operation Protective Edge), Israel acted in a more or less similar way⁸ and with varying degrees of success. Even when Israel made mistakes, the price of such mistakes was tolerable in strategic terms. But the entry of improved-

precision weapons and the entry of Russia could fundamentally change the characteristics of the next conflict, so that it will not be the “seventh in a row.” It is possible that Israel cannot allow itself to delay taking decisions, as it had in the past, and the price of error will be far greater.

The Political-Strategic Objective of the Conflict

The basis for the political-strategic framework of the conflict is the context-dependent decision about who is the enemy and what Israel wants to gain from it in the conflict. The obvious enemy is Hezbollah, but Israel can also define the enemy as the Lebanese Republic, a contention that is increasingly valid as Hezbollah becomes the main shareholder in Lebanon.⁹ The enemy could be defined as the Iranian-Hezbollah axis and the Alawite regime – and this intensifies as the Shiite axis expands its ambitions to establish itself in Syria.

In certain circumstances it is possible to define an “addressee” of the conflict that is not an enemy, mainly when the military action is also intended to influence international processes such as a settlement in Syria or the post-conflict reconstruction of Lebanon. Such an “addressee” could be a power or elements in the international community that influence the shaping of the arena. One of the unknowns in the equation, at least in the immediate context of hostilities on Israel’s northern border, is the lack of clarity regarding the position of the Trump administration – to the extent that it has already formulated its position – and the degree of Israel’s ability to offset restrictions that Russia will try to impose through coordination with the United States.

Alongside openness to the unknown future distinct context, a “generic” analysis of the fundamental level reveals constraints that frame the possible political-strategic framework, including defining the enemy and the objectives of the conflict.

It will be difficult for the Lebanese Republic to influence Hezbollah’s conduct, and the main rationale for attacking Lebanon derives from its status as a Hezbollah asset, in order to activate termination mechanisms, or in an attempt to influence post-conflict reconstruction. However, Lebanon should not be attacked in the hope that it will restrain Hezbollah. There are valid points for making demands of Lebanon in public diplomacy, particularly as Hezbollah increases its involvement in the Lebanese army, in order to achieve international legitimacy should an attack on Lebanon be deemed necessary.

An understanding of the fundamental level and recognition of the limitations of power and limitations of feasibility reveal that there is only a limited range of “positive” and achievable objectives that Israel can hope to attain from Hezbollah and from Lebanon. While the purpose of an armed conflict is always political, in many contexts it is hard to find a political objective that is both meaningful and achievable at a reasonable cost, and that is the reason for the basic lack of value that can be found in an Israel-Hezbollah military conflict. Israel’s main realistic wills are “negative” (and military) – preventing or limiting force buildup, restricting deployments, and preventing hostile activities that are intolerable in routine times¹⁰ (in other words, shaping the rules of the game).

Of course, it is possible to propose an objective of annihilating Hezbollah and changing the internal Lebanese political map, but it is doubtful whether this is realistic; certainly not at a tolerable cost. Even at end states of an intensive, extended conflict, the Shiite population will remain significant in Lebanon, and Hezbollah will still be its representative. Hezbollah will remain an armed and adversarial organization; Iran will rebuild its military force, and at least in certain senses, its combat capabilities after Iranian rehabilitation will be no less than before the conflict. However, there are two possible achievable “positive” objectives: first, severing or at least interfering with the geographical-physical passageways between the Alawite area of Syria and the Shiite area in Lebanon, thereby reducing the access and freedom of action of the axis. Second, it may be possible to use political tools to affect the question of who will reconstruct Lebanon after a conflict. But the Israeli interest in reconstruction of Lebanon by a player such as Saudi Arabia, if such an interest exists, does not justify initiating a war, and should only be a positive side effect of a conflict that erupted in a different context.

Most of Hezbollah’s immediate and realistic wills regarding Israel are also “negative”: preventing Israeli interference with its efforts to build its force and with its deployments (with respect to Iran, preventing Israeli attempts to restrain its penetration of the region, and of course deterring Israel from acting against Iran, for example in the nuclear context). Hezbollah appears to seek the destruction of Israel or at least to gain Sha’ba Farms, but these are not achievable objectives. At deeper levels, the Shiite axis is interested in outlining a Muslim-Israeli fault line and leading the “resistance,” and thus blurring the Shiite-Sunni fault line, but this interest will reach the level of an actual desire in an intensive and immediate war only in extreme cases.

Therefore, at the fundamental level, both sides have only modest “positive,” vital, and achievable wishes from one another (for example, there is no valuable asset that both sides want – as both Israel and Egypt perceived Sinai and the Suez Canal in 1973). Therefore both sides should have large question marks over the cost-benefit ratio of a high intensity conflict. This is an important stabilizing and restraining factor.

Israel’s objectives in a future conflict will be derived first and foremost from what it wants to achieve in the distinct context (such as, for example, preventing Hezbollah’s buildup of certain qualitative edge capabilities or preventing deployment of high quality Iranian weapon systems in Syria), but a review of the fundamental data reveals a few “generic” objectives that could be applicable in many contexts: postponing the following conflict, shaping the rules for the routine times that will follow the conflict, increasing deterrence with respect to Hezbollah and third parties, undermining the attractiveness of Hezbollah’s war paradigm (use of rockets and missiles hidden among the civilian population), preserving Israel’s relations with its allies, and creating the conditions to reduce Iranian involvement in the post-war reconstruction of Lebanon, as well as imposing new and enforceable restrictions on the freedom of access of the Iran-Alawite-Hezbollah axis.

Challenges for the Military Plan

Military strategy and the campaign plan itself are clearly derived from the distinct context in which a conflict breaks out, the definition of who the enemy is and what Israel wants to obtain from the enemy in the conflict, the preferred exit strategy, and the synergy with the planned political effort.

But on the tentative assumption that the next conflict in Israel’s north will be mainly against Hezbollah and will be fought primarily on Lebanese territory, the “generic” analysis of the fundamental layer provides practical insights in many contexts. An examination of the order of battle and operational concept of both sides shows that at present, there is strong linkage between the depth of damage to be inflicted on Hezbollah and the military and civilian price to be paid by Israel for inflicting that damage. In other words, there is some symmetry in the price and the damage to both sides during any conflict between them – and in the case of an all-out conflict, this mutual damage will be significant.

In its conceptual material,¹¹ Israel sometimes stresses the need to realize military superiority by reaching military decision. This means negating the enemy’s ability or will to fight in accordance with its planned paradigm.

Hezbollah was deliberately constructed according to the model of a high redundancy firepower echelon, alongside a ground defense echelon, with both echelons being decentralized, composed of autonomous “fighting cells” that are hidden mainly in populated areas, and deployed deep into Lebanon. This model is intended to make the organization relatively resilient in face of attempts to negate its capability to continue fighting. It is doubtful whether there is already capability for a “fast and elegant” move to deprive Hezbollah of its will or ability to fight, so reaching a military decision against it involves annihilating large swathes of combat elements spread over large and primarily populated areas. Such annihilation is possible, but it requires extended fighting, will exact a considerable military, political, and civilian price, and involves significant risks.

Consequently, Israel’s main military effort – in terms of intelligence, force buildup, and campaign planning – should be aimed at weakening the linkage between the depth of damage to Hezbollah and the civilian and military price that Israel pays. The military effort should be directed at developing Israel’s capability to strike more deeply at Hezbollah, while reducing the price to a tolerable level within the range of expectations of Israel’s decision makers, and all within a defined, short period of time. The military effort should also be aimed at dealing with the qualitative capabilities built by Hezbollah since 2006, starting with its ground raid capability, through unmanned aerial vehicles, cruise missiles, coast-to-sea/coast missiles, surface-to-air missiles, all the way to cyber capabilities.

A study of the fundamental level also shows that even extended fighting will not yield Israel or Hezbollah a “positive,” valuable political achievement or dramatically change reality (unless the distinct context of the conflict dictates otherwise), and therefore it is possible that both sides have a shared interest in reducing the cost of hostilities. It can also be assumed that in nearly every situation, when sufficient time has passed after the conflict, Iran will rebuild Hezbollah and the latter will retain its political standing in Lebanon and at least some of its fighting ability.

It is possible that the distinct context of the conflict will justify a large military move to negate Hezbollah’s will or ability to fight. But at least the “generic” (non-contextual) analysis shows the following: (a) there is a symmetry of sorts of mutual damage in a conflict; there is a need for an extensive annihilation of Hezbollah’s fighting elements in order to reach a military decision, as well as a price linked to the depth of that annihilation; (b) it is hard to identify a “positive” and valuable political objective that

can realistically be achieved in such a military campaign; and (c) it seems that when sufficient time has passed, Iran will in any case rebuild at least some of Hezbollah's capabilities. Consequently, there is little point in an extensive conflict framework, and it is better to be satisfied with "limited" contours, in other words an effort to achieve limited goals at limited costs and risks. To the extent that this is feasible and subject to an Israeli decision, it is worth examining and prioritizing limited conflict contours before deciding on an extended war format. The contour of the conflict and its cost must be optimal and not necessarily maximal, given the distinct context, the objectives, and the cost.

The IDF has been hard pressed to impose a quick termination in some of its recent campaigns (Operation Protective Edge is the latest and most prominent example), and the political echelon must demand that the military echelon – even before fighting breaks out – explain how the execution of its plans will create the conditions for the termination of hostilities. Specifically, military planners must explain why they assess that the intended firepower plan or ground offensive will create such conditions, if and when Hezbollah wants the fighting to continue (this question is less relevant when both sides want a quick termination).

As a starting point for the analysis, Israel can presumably maximize the achievements of its firepower in a short time at the commencement of fighting, when the gap between its own achievements from firepower vis-à-vis Hezbollah's achievements from firepower will peak. (This working assumption could change as Hezbollah acquires precision fire capabilities, and in the future could achieve greater symmetry in the quality of its firepower.) Contrary to firepower, a ground offensive (maneuver) requires considerable time. In many cases a "small" maneuver can make a modest contribution to the campaign's objectives, while a "large" maneuver requires time, resources, considerable costs, and risks – and is mostly beneficial if it is completed. However, in specific contexts such as preventing Hezbollah and Iran from establishing themselves in the Syrian Golan Heights, activating termination mechanisms, or affecting the use by the Iranian axis of passageways between Lebanon and Syria, it is possible that even a "small" maneuver could be of value.

As another starting point for the analysis, it can be assumed that there is a direct link between the duration of the conflict and the civilian and military price to be paid by Israel. Prolonged fighting, or the addition of a ground offensive to the firepower attack, could narrow the gap in the

balance of costs between the sides. Therefore, when looking at possible additional campaign stages, a “large” maneuver, or extra time, the military planner must prove that the additional time and effort is justified in terms of cost/benefit, the distinct context, and achieving the strategic objective.

In the Second Lebanon War, it was possible to remove much of the threat Israel faced, at the time mostly from short range rockets, by means of an orderly ground offensive into South Lebanon. This was not done in 2006, and in the framework of implementing the lessons learned, emphasis was placed on the need for a ground offensive, and the relevant capabilities were reinforced. But since 2006 the nature of the threat has changed, and the ground offensive that was relevant in 2006 would probably not achieve the same benefit today – at least in terms of removing the threat. Thus it is imperative that the purpose of a ground offensive be defined explicitly, in view of the changes in the fundamental level since 2006 and taking account of the distinct context of the next conflict.

The military plan must include a number of possible exit points, which will allow a review of the option of ending the conflict while achieving the desired goals, without the need to continue to the next stages of the plan. It is important to explore in real time whether or not Israel and Hezbollah have a mutual interest in limiting the intensity of the conflict and not deteriorating to all-out war. Accordingly, it is important to monitor Hezbollah’s conduct, its campaign framework, and its pronouncements. The military plan must also include the option of mutually-limited hostilities in time and intensity, with windows of time to investigate this option.

Termination Mechanisms

The desire to shorten the conflict, the assumption that the maximization of the achievement from firepower is already reached in the first few days (an assumption that may change in the future), the premise that the conflict will aim to achieve military decision, and the time required for the operation of termination mechanisms mean that the termination mechanisms must be put into action as soon as the main strategic objective is achieved. This sometimes happens in the early stages of the conflict, even if there is no “victory picture” to be “shown” to the public in Israel. The possibility that the next conflict in Israel’s north will take place on several fronts and also involve Syria should give rise to new termination mechanisms, including those that can be activated early and quickly.

Identifying the relevant and most effective termination mechanism in the distinct context of the conflict must be done early in the discussion between the political and military echelons, before fighting starts, and at the latest, as soon as hostilities break out. In many cases, Israel should strive for a termination that does not include a written agreement, because of the additional fighting time needed to achieve a written agreement, and also because of its minor practical benefit (for example, Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the Second Lebanon War, and is not enforced).

Preparing the Narrative in Advance: Military, Political, and Public Perspectives

A significant part of the feeling of missed opportunity that accompanied the IDF's recent campaigns derived from the inconsistency between the messages from the political and military leaderships and their actions. In at least some cases, correct actions were perceived as incorrect or unsuccessful, because Israel's narrative was not consistent with its actions. For example, Israel expressed its expectation of achieving a decisive victory, but no line of operation was taken that could achieve such an outcome. Sometimes, Israel failed to stop a campaign at the optimal point due to the lack of a political, public, or military narrative to explain such a move.

The next conflict will be considered a success if Israel achieves its strategic objectives in the distinct context. Yet a "generic" analysis of the fundamental data provides a basis for assessment that the conflict will be evaluated as successful if Israel manages to stop certain processes of Hezbollah's force buildup and some of Iran's attempts to penetrate the arena, as defined in advance, and international legitimacy is gained for post-conflict continuation of the efforts to prevent Hezbollah's force buildup; if freedom of action and of access by the Iran-Alawite-Hezbollah axis is somewhat limited; if Iran is excluded from Lebanon's reconstruction; and if Israeli deterrence is strengthened and can further postpone the following conflict. This is in addition to Israel successfully bringing the fighting to an early conclusion, with significant damage to Hezbollah, keeping any damage to Israel to tolerable levels as defined in advance, and without causing friction with Russia that exceeds the working assumptions of the planning and approving echelons.

However, the next round of fighting will presumably not end "elegantly." Israel will not necessarily be the one to fire the last shot, Hezbollah will likely not "capitulate" and will continue to build up its capabilities, and

Hezbollah presumably will continue to promote the narrative of its own “victory.” This is an “advanced,” mature, and not glorious narrative, which must be prepared in advance. To create coherence on the Israeli side, such a narrative should be introduced in advance to Israel’s political, military, and public arenas.

Notes

- 1 The difference between the two is in their Circular Error Probable (CEP) level.
- 2 “Kuwaiti Daily: Missile, Arms Factories Built By IRGC In Lebanon Have Recently been Handed over to Hizbullah,” *al-Jarida*, March 11, 2017, <https://www.memri.org/reports/kuwaiti-daily-missile-arms-factories-built-irgc-lebanon-have-recently-been-handed-over>.
- 3 Gili Cohen, “Head of General Intelligence Confirms: Hezbollah is Setting up a Military Industry in Lebanon Based on Iranian Know-how,” *Haaretz*, June 22, 2017.
- 4 The Israel Electric Corporation Ltd., “Periodic Report for 2016,” which can be downloaded from the TA Stock Exchange site at: <http://mayafiles.tase.co.il/rpdf/1087001-1088000/P1087060-00.pdf>.
- 5 Water Authority, “Israel’s Desalination Plants,” <http://www.water.gov.il/Hebrew/Planning-and-Development/Desalination/Pages/desalination-%20structures.aspx>.
- 6 Amos Yadlin, “Russia in Syria and the Implications for Israel,” *Strategic Assessment* 19, no. 2 (2016): 9-26.
- 7 Ephraim Kam, “Will Russia and Iran Walk Hand in Hand?” *Strategic Assessment* 19, no. 2 (2016): 41-51.
- 8 Ron Tira, “Israel’s Second War Doctrine,” *Strategic Assessment* 19, no. 2 (2016): 143-56.
- 9 Assaf Orion, “Hezbollah and Lebanon, in Aounian Terms: One and the Same?” *INSS Insight* No. 902, February 27, 2017.
- 10 “Routine times” are, in IDF jargon, periods that are neither high or mid-intensity conflict nor peace.
- 11 *The IDF Strategy*, Office of the Chief of Staff, August 2015, and Gur Laish, “Main Points of the Security Concept of the National Security Council – in Routine Times and Emergencies,” *Eshtonot* No. 10, Research Center, National Security College, July 2015.