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The Potential for a War on the Northern Front
that None of the Parties Want: Insights from a War Game
Udi Dekel, Assaf Orion, Anat Ben Haim, and Zvi Magen

On the night of April 29, 2018, the Syrian army reported that a number of military bases in the Aleppo and Hama region had come under missile fire, and characterized the attack as “new aggression on the part of the enemies of Syria.” Various sources reported that the attack had targeted an airport near Aleppo, as well as a missile storage site and a military base in the Hama area that is also used by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Iran-operated Shiite militias in Syria. It was also reported that the strike targeted an arms shipment from Iran that included surface-to-air missiles. The shipment was sent to a base close to the city of Hama belonging to the Syrian army’s 47th Brigade that is said to have doubled as a headquarters for Iran. Two dozen troops, including officers, were killed in the strike, and three dozen others were wounded.

One month earlier, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) conducted a war game to clarify the boundaries of the ongoing campaign on the northern front and possible developments toward escalation between Israel and Iran and its proxies. Another goal was to consider a fundamental strategic question: is the northern arena truly one unit with two fronts – Syria and Lebanon, or is it still two separate fronts operating according to different logics and reflecting distinct interests.

Two scenarios of escalation were examined in the course of the game. The first involved Israel-Iran hostilities on Syrian soil as part of Israeli action aimed at preventing Iran from consolidating its position in the country and an Iranian attempt to challenge Israel’s red lines. The result was a chain reaction of actions and responses between the two countries and the Iranian proxies, and varying involvement on the part of Russia, the United States, and the international system. The second scenario was premised on escalation in the Lebanese theater due to an attack, attributed to Israel, on a precision missile assembly site on Lebanese soil.

Main Insights

The game revealed a host of tensions among the different actors stemming from their respective interests. At the same time, the prioritization of short term needs over long term interests, in addition to the increasing importance of feelings of honor, visibility, and

image over solid strategic interests, has repeatedly led the actors to take action that runs counter to their basic interests.

The most significant insight from the war game was that each of the involved actors – Israel, Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Russia, and the United States – has a shared interest in preventing escalation that could lead to war. It follows that this shared interest could ostensibly be expected to exercise restraint in an effort to control the level of escalation. The factors restraining the Iranian-Syrian axis include the Assad regime's fundamental interest in the entire Syrian arena, as well as concern regarding Israel's destructive capacity, which could do serious harm to the joint Russian-Iranian project of preserving the Assad regime; President Trump's intention to withdraw US forces from eastern Syria as soon as possible, which justifies Iran's patience until the withdrawal of the US forces; and the need to consider Russia's interests and its efforts to reach a political settlement in Syria. Despite these factors, escalation has a dynamic of its own, particularly given the rules of the game, which obligate numerous actors to respond and retaliate against actions of their opponent. In this context, incidental elements – unintentional outcomes along with miscalculation – have a significant influence on events and developments.

Another insight relates to the boundaries of the campaign. Israel is not necessarily facing a "Third Lebanon War" or a "Third War in the North" (against an enemy coalition that is unified on a single Lebanon-Syrian front), as none of the involved parties has an interest in expanding the boundaries of the confrontation to two fronts, and the actors' respective interests, as understood during the game, have resulted in distinct modes of conduct in each theater. Israel and Iran prefer to fight on Syrian soil, which could actually result in a "First Syrian War" in which Syria serves as the battleground between the two countries and the Syrian regime plays the role of a secondary actor.

Israel has operated according to the concept of an ongoing campaign ("confrontation between wars"), and the actions it has taken to enforce its red lines (by means of focused and effective military action) have been aimed at pressuring Iran into lowering the profile of its deployment in Syria and slowing its consolidation in the theater. However, even with a policy of containment and a desire to avoid war with Israel, Iran cannot continue with its restraint and will eventually seek out effective responses, with a preference for clandestine and unpredictable action.

In the INSS war game, Iran's strategic objective was to deter Israel from attacking its nuclear facilities and create a zone of friction in order to occupy Israel its borders and cause it cumulative damage. Later in the war game, following significant Israeli damage to Iranian targets in Syria (belonging to the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards), Iran chose to escalate the confrontation with Israel. This took the form of a number of

salvos of missiles and rockets from within Syria against military sites in Israel, and efforts at a terror attack on an Israeli site abroad. It was assumed that Iran would prefer to refrain from launching ballistic missiles at Israel directly from its territory in order to avoid linking the campaign in Syria to the nuclear issue and to the international community's demand that Iran limit its ballistic missile program.

The major powers played a secondary role in the simulation and did not use their power to stop the deterioration into large scale escalation. Russia's interests are to preserve what it has accomplished in Syria thus far and to avoid becoming bogged down to the point that it would be unable to extricate itself. It can therefore be expected to adhere to its role as a mediating and containing force, while at the same time being rewarded for its mediation efforts from the different sides. In the clash between Israel and Iran, Russia's importance and value increase due to its ability to talk to both sides in an attempt to prevent escalation into a large scale war. Controlled friction without large scale escalation is beneficial to Russia due to the central role it plays in restraining the sides, delineating the rules of the game, and demonstrating its ability to safeguard the Assad regime and arm it with advanced air defense systems. Although Russia still needs Iran for fighting on the ground, Russian and Iranian interests can actually be expected to diverge in the future, due to the struggle over influence in Syria and the nature of the future political settlement in the country.

For its part, the United States will most likely not deviate from its current policy, whereby it remains both present and absent, by investing the minimum resources required without becoming entangled in another military campaign in the Middle East. On a declarative level, the United States seeks to effect Iran's removal from Syria and limit its influence. In practice, however, it finds it comfortable for Russia to manage the Syria portfolio and has no desire to find itself in a large scale military clash with Iran, which could prove detrimental to its primary goal: the annulment or modification of the nuclear agreement and the reduction of military involvement in problematic areas. The Trump administration will allow Israel freedom of action, due to the fact that, inter alia, this exempts the United States from engaging in large scale military intervention. Like the Arab states, both major powers are not interested in using force and other major elements of power to eject Iran and its proxies from Syria.

In Lebanon, a mutual balance of power exists between Israel and Hezbollah. The Lebanese population is all too familiar with the trauma of forty years of intermittent war in the country (the Lebanon Civil War and Israel's First and Second Lebanon Wars) and harbors serious fears of another war. Unlike the case of Syria in which public opinion means nothing, the delicate religious-sectarian fabric of Lebanese society influences Hezbollah as a political body, especially in advance of the Lebanese elections. At the

same time, and despite this limiting factor, Hezbollah is likely to respond strongly to an Israeli attack inside Lebanon for reasons of public prestige, “honor,” and a desire to preserve its deterrence capability vis-à-vis Israel and its image as the “protector of Lebanon.” Iran is determined to continue to build up Hezbollah as a strategic arm for “D-day,” but with controlled risk and a limited cost. The more Iran’s operational options for attacking Israel are blocked, the more it will seek to make use of Hezbollah’s strategic array with surface to surface missiles and combat drones. President Assad has no interest in entering into a direct confrontation with Israel, except in the defense of Syrian air space against Israeli air operations. However, he will not attempt to prevent its partners – Iran and Hezbollah – from taking action against Israel.

Conclusion and Recommendations

If Israel is in fact responsible for the recent attack in Syria, it is sending the message that it is determined and ready to fight a campaign to prevent Iran from consolidating its position in the northern arena, and that it will act to thwart the Iranian response, on the assumption that it possesses the necessary intelligence and the immediate operational response capabilities.

The most significant challenge for Israeli policy is how to resolve its goals vis-à-vis Iran – preventing its achievement of a nuclear capability, reducing its ability to consolidate its position in Syria, thwarting its development of ballistic missiles and the buildup of its proxies – when in practice, all these developments are occurring concurrently while competing for attention and resources. In the long term, Iran’s consolidation in Syria has severely negative implications for Israel. At the same time, contending with Iran in the Syrian arena presents Israel with advantages, including intelligence and operational accessibility, range and freedom of action, and the ability to respond immediately during an event. Therefore, Israel should maintain its determination to halt the consolidation and buildup of Iran and its proxies in Syria. At the same time, after the Second Lebanon War, Israel exercised restraint with regard to the reconstruction of Hezbollah as Iran’s strategic arm in Lebanon, but managed nonetheless to deter Hezbollah. In order to maintain this deterrence, Israel must adhere to its policy of immediate response in the context of a specific event, in addition to diplomatic action aimed at including Hezbollah in the list of terrorist organizations (in the European Union as well) and at encouraging the internal elements that serve to restrain the organization within Lebanon. In any event, there are operational and political advantages to military and other low signature actions using a variety of methods, without claiming responsibility, in order to disrupt the force buildup of Iran and its proxies in the northern theater.

The April 29 attack occurred while Russia seeking an appropriate response to the damage to its image following the attack by Western coalition forces on the chemical weapons

infrastructure in Syria. Russia appears to have been caught off guard by the April 29 attack, which occurred in close proximity to the staging areas of its forces in northern Syria. The effect was to strengthen Moscow's desire to supply Syria with S-300 advanced surface to air missiles. Particularly if they are initially operated by Russian teams, these systems will impair the Israeli air force's freedom of action in Syria and Lebanon. As a result, the nature of Israeli-Russian coordination, which evolved from operational coordination to deconfliction to strategic coordination, is likely to change. Israel is liable to be perceived as a threatening adversary to the Russian project in Syria as a result of its determination to escalate the confrontation with Iran and its proxies in Syria, including attacks on forces of the Assad regime. Such action would increase the chances of a direct confrontation between Israeli forces on the one hand, and the Russian air force and air defenses in Syria on the other hand. In such a situation, Israel would be forced to consider its response to attempts to intercept its aircraft using S-300 missile batteries operated by Russian teams, and the implications for Israel-Russian relations of an attack to neutralize these batteries.

The situation in Syria will likely remain chaotic over time, and presumably no actor will be willing or able to make the investment necessary to achieve stability in the country. Although Israel has thus far refrained from indicating its preferred final situation in Syria, it appears that from its perspective, the alternatives to the Assad regime are less stable than the Assad regime itself. On the other hand, in order to challenge Israel and force it to engage in a struggle and friction along its borders, Iran appears to be willing to "sacrifice" Syria (and Hamas in Gaza), but less willing regarding Hezbollah in Lebanon, which constitutes one of its strategic arms. The time has come for Israel to relinquish the comfort of its position of ambiguity; to understand that as far as it is concerned, the Assad regime is the least of all evils; and to strive to drive a wedge between Assad and Iran, and between Russia and Iran, on the grounds that at this point in the civil and proxy war underway in Syria, Iran is playing independently at the expense of the interests of Russia and the Assad regime. Recognizing the Assad regime, if it takes action to remove the Iranian forces from Syria, could help it in do so.