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Words over Missiles: Hezbollah's Cognitive Campaign in Syria

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Since its inception, Hezbollah has employed cognitive warfare as a force multiplier for its operations. The organization's cognitive campaign is designed to encourage support for its actions while rebuffing verbal and media attacks, and to sow fear and deter enemies, with Israel chief among them. In explaining its military involvement in the civil war in Syria, Hezbollah has conducted a public opinion campaign in Lebanon in order to counter criticism at home for participation in a war not its own that has jeopardized the security of Lebanon. Once the Assad regime regains full control, Hezbollah will have to prepare a cognitive warfare campaign for public opinion in Lebanon that will justify its continued involvement in Syria, despite the consequent risks to Lebanon. At the same time, Hezbollah will also have to devise a cognitive campaign vis-à-vis Israel that will deal with the consciousness and deterrence messages that Israel delivers to the organization, both in the context of its presence in Syria and in the context of the transfer of weapons to Lebanon.

Since its inception, and when it was still a small and unknown organization with most of its activity focused on terrorism alone, Hezbollah has employed cognitive warfare as a force multiplier for its operations. Over the years, Hezbollah has become a multi-dimensional organization with powerful political, economic, religious, propaganda, and military wings. Together with its military buildup, Hezbollah has developed cognitive and consciousness-related tools to leverage its operational capabilities and compensate for the constraints that hinder its activity.

Hezbollah's cognitive campaign is aimed at various targets. The campaign is designed to encourage support for its action while rebuffing verbal and media attacks against it. In addition, the organization's campaign is used sow fear and to deter its enemies, with Israel chief among them. In explaining its military involvement in the civil war in Syria, Hezbollah has conducted a public opinion campaign in Lebanon in order to counter criticism at home for participation in a war not its own that has jeopardized the security of Lebanon.

Hezbollah's involvement in the war in Syria and the growing tension with Israel following the ongoing efforts to transfer weapons from Syria to Lebanon have raised

concern in Lebanon that the organization will eventually cause a conflict that will spill over into Lebanon. The result has been criticism of Hezbollah for preferring Syrian and Iranian interests over those of Lebanon. Indeed, Iran's military involvement in Syria has led in recent months to a direct conflict between Israel and Iranian proxies in Syria. Even before that, Israeli attacks against weapons earmarked for Hezbollah in Lebanon contributed to rising tension in the Syrian theater. With the escalating conflict between Israel and Iran and Hezbollah in Syria in recent months, Hezbollah has directed its cognitive efforts to this sphere, both in order to legitimize its continued presence and fighting in Syria at the side of Assad's regime, and in order to create a counterweight against the Israeli campaign to uproot Iran, Hezbollah, and their foreign Shiite partners from Syria.

As part of this effort, Nasrallah has portrayed Hezbollah's involvement in Syria as a campaign to defend Lebanon and has brushed off the allegation that Hezbollah is a foreign invader with territorial interests. Nasrallah emphasized the legitimacy of the struggle in Syria with the argument that it is essential to the defense of Lebanon and Syria itself. He stated clearly that he had no interest in Syria other than a commitment to support Assad's legitimate regime as long as necessary. In a speech on International Jerusalem Day this past June, Nasrallah stated, "Even if the entire world unites to oust us from Syria, we will not leave before the Syrian leadership tells us we should." He added, "Syria's leadership asked us to come and Hezbollah has no private plan concerning Syria. Hezbollah is not interested in intervening in the internal affairs of Syria and does not want a share of the Syrian economy." Nasrallah repeated that his organization's intervention in Syria was like a dam against efforts by al-Qaeda and Islamic State jihadists to penetrate Syria and attack Lebanon from there. He said that with the impending victory of the "resistance axis.", this mission was almost complete. In face of the domestic criticism of Hezbollah, Nasrallah had previously stated that the Lebanese Army would defend Lebanon within the country's borders, while Hezbollah would defend it from outside by fighting in Syria.

Faced with attacks by Israel in Syria, Nasrallah tried to explain his organization's presence in Syria by distinguishing between the legitimacy of his organization's operations in Syria and the lack of legitimacy for Israel's involvement. In this context, Nasrallah described the civil war in Syria as a "great plot against the resistance axis designed to deliver Syria in the hands of its enemies." In a victory speech on the day following the elections in Lebanon in May 2018, Nasrallah accused Israel of aiding the rebels in Syria, which he alleged included deliveries of arms and air assistance. Following the escalation of Israeli attacks in Syria, led by the attacks at the T-4 airport in Homs against the Iranian UAV array and air defense system - in which 14 military personnel were killed, among them seven members of the Revolutionary Guards,

including the commander of the Iranian UAV unit in Syria - Nasrallah served as a spokesman on Iran's behalf. He addressed Israel directly, saying, "You made a historic, stupid mistake that brings you into direct confrontation with Iran."

Nasrallah also praised the Iranian retaliatory attack against targets in Israel, and claimed that Iran had launched 55 rockets (an exaggeration, designed to prove the power of the Iranian response to the severe blows it suffered, and for which Iran promised a strong response). He threatened, again in Iran's name, "If Israel once again crosses red lines, the next strike will be at the very heart of 'Palestine,'" adding that Israel's attacks in Syria would not be ignored or tolerated. He stated, "If Israel thinks it can continue attacking in Syria, threatening and doing everything it pleases, it is sorely mistaken. Retaliation will come at a time, place, and manner to be decided." Nasrallah resorted to his familiar description of Israel as a spider web and again challenged the endurance and resilience of the Israeli home front, charging that it was "not prepared for war – in terms of shelters, infrastructures, or morale."

Following another Israeli attack against the Syrian air force base in al-Dabaa near Homs, used as a base to receive Iranian weapons intended for Hezbollah, Nasrallah gave a speech marking the 18th anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon and attributed the attack to Israel, saying, "The enemy is always in our skies." On the same occasion, he added, "In any talk about a future war with Israel, we are talking about a certain victory of Hezbollah." Despite his threats, Nasrallah has avoided a confrontation with Israel. When asked why Hezbollah was not responding to Israel's attacks in Syria, he answered that caution concerning escalation (which is liable to also spill over into violence in Lebanon) is a tactic serving the preparations for the big war in the name of the supreme interest, and in any case, Israel's attacks on weapons deliveries to Hezbollah in Syria cannot prevent Hezbollah's increased capabilities and preparedness in Lebanon, and Hezbollah will not show patience if it is pressured.

Thus in the Syrian context, Hezbollah's leader uses public rhetoric that includes rational explanations of Hezbollah's deep involvement in the fighting in defense of the Assad regime as a broad defensive strategy for the security of Lebanon, justified by President Assad's invitation to the organization to enter Syria. At the same time, Nasrallah serves as a spokesman of the resistance axis headed by Iran in order to deter Israel from attacking Assad, while dismissing the significance of the repeated Israeli strikes at the weapons intended for his organization. Nasrallah states that his organization already has high level capabilities that will enable it to deliver a targeted strike against Israel, if and when it is needed on the day following the campaign in Syria.

Once the Assad regime regains full control, there are a number of possible scenarios: Hezbollah's continued presence on a large scale in the country's territory in order to build infrastructure for a second front against Israel in Syria, or a reduced presence for maintaining strategic and operative depth for the organization and safeguarding the continued supply of weapons to its forces in Lebanon. It is also possible that Hezbollah will be involved in training the foreign forces brought to Syria during the civil war. In any case, Hezbollah will have to prepare a cognitive warfare campaign for public opinion in Lebanon that will justify its continued involvement in Syria, despite the risks to Lebanon thereby incurred from Israel. At the same time, Hezbollah will also have to devise a cognitive campaign vis-à-vis Israel that will deal with the consciousness and deterrence messages that Israel delivers to the organization, both in the context of its presence in Syria and in the context of the transfer of weapons to Lebanon.