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**Not by the Media Alone: The Israeli Campaign against the Conversion  
of Rockets in Lebanon to Precision-Guided Missiles**

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**The ongoing attempts to upset the Iranian efforts to arm Hezbollah with advanced weapons, whether through kinetic attacks in Syria, diplomatic activity, or clandestine operations in Syria and Lebanon, show the difficulty in deterring enemies from force buildup. The repeated intelligence disclosures about the project for manufacturing precision-guided missiles in Lebanon and the public statements on the matter have failed to halt the project and remove the threat against Israel. Thus if this is indeed a genuine strategic threat to Israel that is in the advanced stages of development, and considering the growing difficulty in taking kinetic action in Syria, Israel will have to take greater risks in order to create a credible threat and signal its determination to remove the danger. The importance that Iran and Hezbollah attach to precision-guided missiles to create a balance of deterrence against Israel, which still maintains military supremacy, and the high risk of escalation incurred in an attack on Hezbollah's military buildup that could culminate in a war that Israel wishes to avoid, require continued efforts to develop responses to the challenge of precision-guided missiles in Lebanon.**

In his speech at the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned, "Iran is directing Hezbollah to build secret sites to convert inaccurate projectiles into precision-guided missiles." As evidence, he presented a map showing three sites in southern Beirut near the international airport, which Israeli intelligence claims are related to this project. The expose was accompanied by a video clip distributed by the IDF spokesperson to the media and on the social networks with more information about the project, and text messages were sent to residents of Beirut. The speech, including the disclosure of sensitive information about both the missile conversion sites in Lebanon and the warehouse of nuclear materials in Iran, met with a mixed reception. Some praised the political act designed to increase the pressure on Iran and Hezbollah. Conversely, some criticized the disclosure of the hard-earned intelligence material.

What is Israel's ultimate goal in the campaign against the production of missiles in Lebanon - prevention or delay? And, is the media policy, including the disclosure of intelligence, useful in attaining this goal?

The information about the project to convert rockets into high-precision missiles on Lebanese territory was first revealed in a Kuwaiti newspaper in March 2017. Already then the Israeli press hinted that Israel was behind this report. Three months later, then-Israeli Military Intelligence Directorate Chief Maj. Gen. Herzi Halevi confirmed the information in a public lecture. The Prime Minister and senior military establishment leaders then declared that Israel regards “gravely” the construction of factories for production of advanced weapons in Lebanon, but refrained from threatening direct military action to attack the project.

The impression is that the Israeli leadership has refused to commit itself to take direct military action to remove the threat due to Hezbollah's success in consolidating a deterrence equation against Israel, whereby an attack in Lebanon is a red line for Hezbollah. As part of Israel's ongoing campaign since early 2013 against Hezbollah's arming itself with advanced weapons, in February 2014 IDF forces attacked an arms shipment on the western side of the Syrian-Lebanese border. In a counterattack against IDF forces on Mt. Dov (Shab'a Farms), Hezbollah acted for the first time since the beginning of the campaign to enforce the red line it had drawn. Since then, the IDF has refrained from attacks on Lebanese territory. In establishing weapons production plants in Lebanon, Iran and Hezbollah therefore presumably assume that Israel will not attack them out of concern about Hezbollah's response and the possibility of escalation in Lebanon.

In these circumstances, Israel has continued its operations against the project through air force attacks in Syrian territory – a conduit for delivery of advanced missiles and conversion equipment to Lebanon – and also probably through covert operations in Lebanon itself. In July 2017, IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot claimed that Israel was “working all the time against it [missile conversion in Lebanon] with a set of tools that it is best to keep quiet about, and with the aim of not causing a deterioration [in the situation].” Two months later, he said that the IDF had successfully prevented Hezbollah from attaining capability to launch precision missiles into Israeli territory. It appears, however, that the Israeli efforts did not succeed in delaying the project for long, and Israel accordingly resumed its use of the media to reveal additional information about the project and deliver threats aimed mostly at the Lebanese side, such as in an article published by the IDF spokesperson early this year.

The repeated use of the media indicates that Israel has likely not achieved its goals in Lebanon through other means. Furthermore, in the absence of a credible threat of military action, its use of the media indicates that Israel is deterred from acting in Lebanon, thereby signaling implicitly that Iran and Hezbollah are free to continue to carry out their plans. It therefore appears that Israel's use of the media to expose Hezbollah's operations

is not aimed at those directly responsible; rather, it is designed mainly to exert pressure on the international community and the authorities and public in Lebanon. This pressure is meant to increase concern about a war between Israel and Hezbollah that will "cause the destruction" of Lebanon, its infrastructure, and its army, and aggravate instability in the region, in the hope that the parties who are the subject of this pressure will intervene and halt the project.

Nevertheless, it appears that these efforts have not borne fruit. Even after the Prime Minister's speech at the UN, the international community is still indifferent to the issue, and refuses to use the means at its disposal to exert pressure on Lebanon. The US administration is preoccupied with internal affairs and other urgent foreign policy issues (the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs, relations with NATO, and trade with China), and has left the Syrian-Lebanese theater to Russia. This is evident through Russia's expanding influence in Syria, as indicated inter alia by the orchestration of diplomatic measures aimed at reaching a political settlement of the crisis and bringing the refugees back to the country; the emerging economic and security agreements between Russia and Lebanon; and the withdrawal of American Patriot missile batteries from Jordan. The sanctions imposed on Hezbollah, including those recently approved by the US House of Representatives, are also proving unsuccessful in exerting pressure on the organization on this issue. Europe, for its part, regards Hezbollah as an element contributing to internal stability in Lebanon, and still supplies unconditional monetary and military aid to that country. The response of the Lebanese administration, paralyzed in any case in the absence of a government almost six months after the elections, is led by Hezbollah's allies, who are helping to cover up for it, as indicated by the staged tour for foreign ambassadors conducted by the Foreign Minister and Hezbollah's partner in the March 8 alliance. The Lebanese public, including residents of southern Beirut living in the vicinity of the production sites, has refrained from criticism of Hezbollah.

The ongoing attempts to upset the Iranian efforts to arm Hezbollah with advanced weapons, whether through kinetic attacks in Syria, diplomatic activity, or clandestine operations in Syria and Lebanon, show the difficulty in deterring enemies from force buildup (in contrast to the use of force). The repeated intelligence disclosures about the project for manufacturing precision-guided missiles in Lebanon and the public statements on the matter have failed to halt the project and remove the threat against Israel. However, the disclosure has not upset Israel's ability to take military action against the threat in Lebanon, and in all probability Jerusalem never intended to take such action. In addition, the disclosure is likely to enhance the sense among the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah that they have been penetrated by Israeli intelligence, and in this specific case may also delay the process, due to the need to move the exposed sites to alternative locations. Nevertheless, the ongoing recourse to the media has a negative

impact on the image of Israeli deterrence, and reinforces the sense that Israel is deterred and does not wish to operate militarily in Lebanon.

It appears, therefore, that at this stage Israeli action is insufficient to achieve its main goal of forcing the international community and Lebanon, not to mention Iran and Hezbollah, to take action to halt the project. Thus if this is indeed a genuine strategic threat to Israel that is in the advanced stages of development, and considering the growing difficulty in taking kinetic action in Syria, Israel will have to take greater risks in order to create a credible threat and signal its determination to remove the danger. Possible means include delivering an ultimatum, with an explicit threat of military action in Lebanon, or conducting a preemptive attack on the known production sites there, even with the accompanying risk of escalation into a large scale military conflict.

The importance that Iran and Hezbollah attach to high-precision missiles to create a balance of deterrence against Israel, which still maintains its military supremacy, and the high risk of escalation incurred in an attack on Hezbollah's military buildup that could culminate in a war that Israel wishes to avoid, require continued efforts to develop responses to the challenge of precision missiles in Lebanon. Whether Israel attacks the existing sites or whether it succeeds in generating indirect pressure that makes Iran and Hezbollah suspend the project, it cannot be ruled out that Iran's goal to arm Hezbollah with advanced weapons will remain unchanged.