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Neutralizing Hezbollah's Tunnel Project:
The Ongoing Campaign against Iranian Regional Influence
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On December 4, 2018, the IDF launched Operation Northern Shield to destroy Hezbollah's cross-border tunnels between Israel and Lebanon. The operation, following intelligence surveillance of a number of years. is underway via a well thought-out plan that combines intelligence exposure, engineering-based targeted action, and cognitive and diplomatic activity, all of which demonstrate clearly to Lebanon in general and Hezbollah in particular the aims and scope of the operation. The goal is both to minimize the risk of misunderstanding Israeli measures and to mobilize international support for the operation. Although the destruction of the tunnels itself is not expected to lead to immediate escalation, the complex and volatile relationship between Israel on the one hand and Iran and Hezbollah on the other has entered another sensitive stage; this requires rational and measured management in order to prevent being drawn into a war that neither side wants. In the event of deterioration in the security situation along the Lebanese border, Israel should leverage the exposure of the tunnels to send a message to Iran, via the United States and Russia, that it must act to restrain Hezbollah's offensive action, and that Iran must not interfere in a military clash that erupts between Israel and Hezbollah.

On December 4, 2018, the IDF launched Operation Northern Shield to destroy Hezbollah's cross-border tunnels between Israel and Lebanon. Israel announced with much fanfare the existence of the tunnels and the operation to destroy them, following intelligence surveillance of a number of years. The operation is underway via a well thought-out plan that combines intelligence exposure, engineering-based targeted action, and cognitive and diplomatic activity, all of which demonstrate clearly to Lebanon in general and Hezbollah in particular the aims and scope of the operation. The goal is both to minimize the risk of misunderstanding Israeli measures and to mobilize international support for the operation. The decision regarding the timing of the operation was based on operational, technological, and intelligence considerations relating to when the tunnels stood to become operationally viable, as well as Israeli domestic political considerations.

The cross-border tunnels are one component of Hezbollah's plan for a ground attack against Israel, if/when the order is given, known as "Conquering the Galilee." The plan is only one element of the broader array of threats that Hezbollah currently poses to Israel,

led by the thousands of long range rockets and missiles deployed in populated areas throughout Lebanon and the array Hezbollah has built since the Second Lebanon War in an effort to establish a balance of deterrence against Israel. The tunnels dug are meant to enable cells of Hezbollah's commando unit – Radwan – to infiltrate Israel and help it achieve a “victory photo” by conquering (if only temporarily) a community, an IDF base, or a main road. On the Israeli side, the operation to expose and destroy the tunnels is part of a project that began more than one year ago to construct a concrete wall at critical sensitive points along the border. In addition to improving intelligence and detection capabilities, building the wall and destroying the tunnels will have a significantly detrimental impact on Hezbollah's plan to establish a credible ground threat against Israel.

Negating this Hezbollah capability solidifies Israel's military superiority and widens the gap between it and the organization in a manner that could affect the balance of deterrence, which has remained stable since 2006. For example, from Hezbollah's perspective, if Israel feels relatively protected against the threats posed by the organization, it will feel more secure in taking action against it and challenging its “red lines” by staging attacks in Lebanon, which would accelerate a dynamic of escalation. Nonetheless, as the mutual deterrence rests on many foundations – including the trauma of 2006 experienced by both Hezbollah and Israel, the threat of broad destruction in Lebanon versus the damage that Hezbollah's missiles will cause to Israel and the damage that Hezbollah could cause to Israel from within Syria – an Israeli operation to thwart the tunnels threat will likely not have immediate implications in the sense of increasing the potential for confrontation.

In practice, and from Hezbollah's perspective as well, the Israeli operation against the tunnels, which is conducted within Israel's borders, is legitimate defensive activity. As long as it remains as such, and does not cross into Lebanese territory, it does not constitute a pretext for war. This view has been expressed by elements inside Lebanon, including Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese parliament. Moreover, exposing the cross-border tunnels provides evidence that in recent years Hezbollah has violated Israeli sovereignty and the relevant UN resolutions. By refraining from punishing the organization for these violations, beyond taking preventive action against the tunnels, Israel is signaling its intent to maintain the stability and calm along the border. Hezbollah, for its part, has imposed a gag order on its spokespeople, perhaps due to embarrassment stemming from the depth of the exposure and the negation of Hezbollah's ability to infiltrate into Israel, and perhaps out of a desire to prevent escalation. Presumably Hezbollah too is signaling a lack of interest in military escalation against Israel at this stage, due to its continued military involvement in the war in Syria, which thus far has taken a heavy toll in resources and casualties (about 2000 dead and

approximately 8,000 wounded, and families that need to be supported), and in light of the sensitive political situation in Lebanon, where it is trying to increase its influence on the government that will be formed. Moreover, offensive action against Israel, undertaken for the purpose of making it pay a price for its action in the border region, could, from its perspective, mean walking into a strategic ambush that provides Israel with a pretext for military action in broader contexts, such as action against the threat of precision rockets in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's tunnels constitute only one layer of the threats posed by Hezbollah, Iran, and the axis of resistance in Israel's northern arena. It is joined by the precision missile production project in Lebanon; the consolidation of Iran's military presence in Syria and the efforts to deploy and produce advanced weapons in Syria and establish a Shiite military force there; and Iran's nuclear program.

Israel's attention is currently focused primarily on the project run by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah to produce and convert rockets into guided long range precision missiles on Lebanese soil. A significant share of Israel's operations in the Syrian arena in recent years was designed to thwart Hezbollah's efforts to arm itself with missiles and convert the rockets at its disposal in Lebanon into guided precision missiles. The increasingly constraining political and military limitations on Israel's freedom of action in Syria, and Iran's effort to move weaponry and technologies directly to Beirut without the use of Syrian space, has shifted the struggle onto Lebanese soil. As a result, in recent weeks Israel has stepped up its struggle against the phenomenon, beginning with the Prime Minister's speech at the UN, in which he presented sites in Beirut that are suspected of being used for the project, to his urgent meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Brussels on December 3, 2018, where they discussed progress in the missile project. As such, Israel is sending a signal to the international community in general, and Hezbollah in particular, that it is liable to take severe action – that is, to stage an attack in Lebanon – in order to eliminate the threat.

Although it is an effort to increase the pressure on Hezbollah and to advance a solution to the crisis by diplomatic means via the international community, Israel could find itself at a moment of truth at which it will need to carry out a preventive attack against the precision missile project in Lebanon. Such a scenario would likely place Israel and Hezbollah on a collision course, as work underway in the border region as part of the destruction of the tunnels could in itself constitute convenient targets for Hezbollah and force Israel to pay a price.

In any event, although the destruction of the tunnels itself is not expected to lead to immediate escalation, the complex and volatile relationship between Israel on the one

hand and Iran and Hezbollah on the other has entered another sensitive stage that will require rational and measured management in order to prevent being drawn into a war that neither side wants. Israel must continue its targeted action against the tunnels until Hezbollah's is stripped of this ability, and until the threat to the residents of the border region is eliminated. In this context, Israel is making correct use of the open media and indirect diplomatic channels, such as UNIFIL, to convey messages and to issue public statements regarding the aims and scope of the operation, with the goal of maintaining stability and preventing escalation.

Beyond this, public exposure of Hezbollah's offensive should serve as a basis for significant diplomatic measures, e.g., the following Israeli demands of the United States and the European Union: (a) increase the pressure on Iran and Hezbollah to cease promoting subversive and destabilizing activity in Syria and Lebanon; (b) improve the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006), which called for a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah; (c) consider the possibility of imposing additional sanctions on Lebanon in a manner that demonstrates, to the government and the public, the connection between Hezbollah's terrorist activity and Lebanese suffering; and (d) demand of the new government in Lebanon, when it is formed, that it incorporate principles into its basic policy platform that can be implemented regarding the actualization of state sovereignty and the protection of its borders, for example, through Western-assisted reform to the supervision of maritime and air ports. Strengthening these mechanisms could significantly help prevent deterioration into a war that would be destructive to both sides, and at the same time serve to reduce the threats posed to Israel.

In the event of deterioration in the security situation along the Lebanese border, Israel should leverage the exposure of the tunnels to send a message to Iran, via the United States and Russia, that it must act to restrain Hezbollah's offensive action, and that Iran must not interfere in a military clash that erupts between Israel and Hezbollah.