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**Operation Northern Shield: Interim Assessment**

**Orna Mizrahi**

**Five weeks after Operation Northern Shield was launched, Israel can point to an operational-intelligence-technological achievement regarding the threat of tunnels dug into its sovereign territory by Hezbollah on the northern border with Lebanon. Israel exposed and destroyed the tunnels without escalating the situation, while enhancing, to an extent, its long term deterrence vis-à-vis Hezbollah. Nevertheless, achievement on the accompanying political front is mixed: while Israel enjoys support for its action in the context of its right to defend itself, it did not successfully translate this support into promotion of its strategic interests in Lebanon, foremost among them international recognition of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization that is strengthening its hold over Lebanon. This understanding would also broaden global support for Israel's approach that Lebanon is responsible for the organization's actions.**

Despite questions in the Israeli defense system on the eve of Operation Northern Shield regarding the operation's urgency and nature (military or engineering), a cost-benefit analysis five weeks after it began on December 4, 2018 indicates that Israel has thus far scored a number of achievements, primarily on the military level. Exposure and destruction of the tunnels (thus far five of them) denied Hezbollah of an important tool and thwarted its plan to use the tunnels to surprise Israel during a ground attack that would include infiltration of villages, accompanied by the main threat of massive rocket fire on the Israeli home front. Even if the organization decides not to forego attack tunnels completely, clearly Israel ruined the secret plan in which Hezbollah invested heavily, both in digging the tunnels and in building operational plans in advance of the next campaign against Israel. Had Hezbollah's plan succeeded, it would have had only a small impact on the overall war; nevertheless, the IDF would have had to invest resources to address the challenge that would also have a psychological effect and allow Hezbollah to boast a dramatic victory picture.

Beyond the display of IDF military-operational and technological power, particularly noteworthy is the intelligence achievement: once again, the IDF proved its intelligence superiority by discovering the tunnels and covertly tracking their progress over a period of years. Hezbollah, which had planned to surprise Israel, was instead surprised by Israel's action.

This display of IDF intelligence and operational capabilities strengthens Israeli deterrence somewhat, evident in Hezbollah's "thunderous silence" over the past month and the lack of any significant response by its fighters or leadership, be it a public announcement or activity on the ground, except for the limited effort to show its presence along the border. Moreover, it made no attempt to disrupt the IDF activity, despite the impact of this activity on the Lebanese side (the sound of explosions and flow of liquid concrete poured into the tunnels). One way to explain Hezbollah's restraint is the caution taken by the IDF to operate solely on the Israeli side. However, the restraint also strengthens the assumption that Hezbollah, like Israel, is not interested in an all-out conflict at this time. It appears that Israel's cognitive and public diplomacy campaign surrounding the operation also had an impact, as it presented a clear picture regarding the IDF's goals and activity, including updates given to UNIFIL and through it to the Lebanese army. This in turn reduced the possibility of military conflict, miscalculations, and escalation.

Nonetheless, Hezbollah's main threat to Israeli strategic sites and the home front remains. Moreover, the achievement surrounding the attack tunnels is not significant enough to curtail Hezbollah's continued, Iranian-backed military buildup with strategic weaponry and efforts at improved missile precision. In addition, the IDF will be required to continue to address the tunnels and dedicate resources to this measure on an ongoing basis, along with addressing Hamas tunnels in the south.

Regarding the political campaign that accompanied Operation Northern Shield, achievements are mixed. On the positive side, Israel gained understanding in the international community on the importance of the operation in light of the severe threat the tunnels posed to Israel's northern civilian population and the challenge to its sovereignty by the cross-border digging. Therefore, the IDF can continue operating in response to the tunnels with no political limitations. On the other hand, Israel has not yet succeeded in translating this understanding into the promotion of two strategic goals that would help it in future confrontations with Hezbollah: assigning responsibility to Lebanon for the organization's activities (a position emphasized in all announcements made by the IDF spokesperson regarding this operation); and erasing the West's distinction between the organization's military wing and its political apparatus.

During the Second Lebanon War (2006), Israel avoided attacking Lebanon's infrastructures and strategic sites. Since then, however, the idea of "Lebanon's responsibility" for Hezbollah's military activity has taken root in Israeli political and military circles, out of the understanding that in the next war, Israel will be required to undertake expansive military actions not only against Hezbollah targets but also against Lebanese targets. It will need to curtail the organization's ability to target Israel's

strategic sites and civilian population, while prompting the international community to apply pressure to shorten the campaign. Israel's adoption of the Lebanese responsibility approach should also strengthen Israel's deterrence and thereby enhance restraints on Hezbollah to avoid military attacks against Israel.

That said, the demand that Lebanon be held accountable for Hezbollah's actions suffers two primary weaknesses: the first is the absence of international legitimacy for an Israeli offensive against strategic sites in Lebanon or against its population; and the second stems from the weakness of the Lebanese government and military, which cannot contend with Hezbollah's ever-strengthening presence in Lebanese politics (for example, Saad Hariri's inability to establish a government since the May 2018 elections), alongside the weakness of the Lebanese army, which has limited capabilities (despite efforts by the US and France to strengthen it) and is under Hezbollah influence and has been infiltrated by organizational elements.

Operation Northern Shield created an opportunity to advance international recognition of Lebanon's responsibility, but the Security Council meeting (December 19) dwelled on situational reports. The only responses that indicated some form of support for Israel's demands were from UNIFIL and from Russia, and stemmed from the practical need to consider who would dismantle the tunnels on the Lebanese side. UNIFIL's announcement (December 17) included a request of the Lebanese government to take steps toward uncovering tunnels. According to media reports, Russia also advised the government of Lebanon it must address the tunnel problem on its end, given that the Lebanese government is responsible for implementing Security Council Resolution 1701. Following a meeting with the special UN liaison to Lebanon (December 13), Lebanese President Michel Aoun promised to address the issue so that the tunnels could not be used by Israel to foment instability in southern Lebanon. These types of announcements offer Israel an opportunity that it should not miss.

At the same time, Israel has not done enough to recruit US support for its insistence on Lebanon's responsibility. While the United States works to impose sanctions on Hezbollah, it refuses to hold the Lebanese government accountable or to act against it, especially in light of the importance it places on strengthening the Lebanese army, in which it invested some \$1.7 billion since 2007. According to reports, this was the message by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during their December 3 meeting on the eve of the operation and which was voiced by the US during the Security Council debate. The question remains whether the US administration, and in particular President Trump, would persist in objecting to the Israeli stance even if the Israeli home front sustained a severe attack.

**How Should Israel Operate in the Future?**

From an operational-tactical vantage, it is clear that Israel should continue its efforts to discover and destroy tunnels on its side of the border, while minimizing the possibility of direct conflict, which could lead to escalation and draw a Hezbollah reaction that has thus far been avoided. In parallel, Israel's main effort for the foreseeable future as part of its holistic campaign against Hezbollah should be directed to the political front. Discovering the tunnels provides an important opportunity that thus far has not been maximized, to point out the threat that Hezbollah poses as an organization not only to Israel, but also to Lebanon and its civilians. The main political effort should focus on the international community and include engaging the United States, European Union, and Russia to endorse Israel's stance regarding Lebanon's responsibility and to recognize Hezbollah's destructive behavior, which threatens Israel and Lebanon's stability.

In this framework, Israel should clarify its position regarding the strengthening of the Lebanese army, which matches its demand on Lebanon's responsibility: Israel has an interest in strengthening the Lebanese army as an independent counterweight to Hezbollah and shrinking Hezbollah's influence, as part of the necessary process of disarming Hezbollah of its weapons. The need to address the tunnel threat on the Lebanese side is an excellent basis for engaging international elements. Israel should persist in its demand to neutralize the tunnels on the Lebanese side and call for the creation of an internationally-backed mechanism to address the tunnels in coordination with Lebanon (President Aoun and Prime Minister Hariri). This type of mechanism could also include UNIFIL, but in an enhanced version and with US backing, in order to ensure its effectiveness, which has thus far not been proven.