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**The Campaign between Wars: Faster, Higher, Fiercer?**

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**Strikes reportedly carried out by Israel over the past month in Iraq, and in recent days in Syria and Lebanon, are part of the "campaign between wars" (CBW) that Israel has waged against Iran's regional campaign of proxy warfare. These incidents mark a deviation from the routine and from the principles that had guided the campaign in recent years. The recent sequence of events has three salient characteristics: the theaters of operations, the operational tempo and their public profile. These events have possible explanations in three spheres – strategic, operational, and political – and three possible consequences: escalation in Lebanon, tensions in relations with the United States, and narrower latitude for CBW operations. Furthermore, contending with the precision-guided missile project in the Iraqi and Lebanese theaters requires adaptation of the campaign waged so far within the Syrian theater.**

Over the last two years, the "campaign between wars" (CBW) waged by Israel has focused on Syrian territory, reportedly entailing hundreds of strikes against targets linked to Iran or its proxies, in a bid to prevent their entrenching militarily there, which would necessarily increase the threat to Israel. With this well under way, the past year raised the possibility that Iran would redirect some of its force buildup efforts to Iraq and Lebanon, and senior Israeli figures who warned of this possibility publicly pledged to prevent it. Over the past month, voices in Iraq attributed responsibility to Israel for attacks that blew up four weapons depots belonging to the Shiite-Iraqi militia al-Hashd al-Shabi. American officials relayed that it was Israel that had attacked at least some of the targets (while other US sources noted that some of the explosions were possibly caused by high summer temperatures and inferior safety standards), and in Israel too there were those who hinted as to Israeli responsibility. Israel recently announced that it had thwarted an attempted terrorist explosive drone attack that the Iranian Quds Force planned to launch from the Golan Heights, and that the operational squad had been struck in Aqraba, near Damascus. In parallel, it was reported that two explosive drones operated in Hezbollah's bastion in the southern Shiite suburb of Beirut (ad-Dahiyeh), with one of them blowing up and damaging a local Hezbollah office. It was later reported that the target of the attack was precision-guided missile production equipment. Close to the time of a speech by Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, which featured a fierce commentary on the matter, another air strike took place against Shiite militia vehicles on the Iraq-Syria

border, causing fatalities and destroying rocketry. It is possible that the next day, an additional attack was carried out against a Shiite militia in the Albu Kamal area of northeast Syria.

The recent operations represent a deviation from Israel's previous conduct, in the following respects:

- a. **Theaters of operations:** Expansion of Israel's campaign boundaries to Iraq occurred in response to Iran's efforts to broaden its own theaters of operations against Israel to include Iraq and after the Iraqi government and American efforts fell short in preventing this development. Iraq serves as a link in the logistical chain of the Iranian proxy warfare network and as a base for prospective precision-guided missile launches against Israel. The inclusion of the Iraqi theater of operations within CBW boundaries that in recent years were mainly confined to Syria is a significant change. Attention to the change in Israel has so far been minimal, perhaps because of the absence – for now – of immediate and tangible consequences from this decision. But such convenience may not last for long.

Far more significant is the operation in Lebanon – an explosive drone strike in Beirut against the precision-guided missile project. Although Israel initially avoided commenting on the operation, the President and Prime Minister of Lebanon deemed it a "declaration of war." In his speech, Nasrallah made clear that he regards it with extreme gravity and stressed profusely that as far as he is concerned, two red lines had been crossed: a first, open, and blatant attack in Lebanon in contravention of the "rules of engagement" established since the 2006 war, and the killing of Hezbollah operatives in Syria. He also highlighted the new development posed by the offensive use of drones as suicide weapons for attack purposes.

From its inception, a core principle of CBW has been to avoid escalation and conduct operations under the war threshold, and this has been achieved by reducing the enemy's sense of urgency to react with an escalatory response. Offensive operations have been spread out in terms of time and space to allow the enemy system to "cool off," and special care has been given to maintain a low signature or to blend into background noise so as to provide the attacked enemy with "deniability space" and reduce the political and public impetus to retaliate.

- b. **Operational tempo:** Four explosions in weapons depots in Iraq within the space of a month, and four strikes within days in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon are fomenting the theaters of operations and the campaign theater in its entirety. The successive events in Iraq have generated public and political responses, increasing tensions between the Iraqi government and American forces hosted there. Nasrallah declared that he is not responsible for responding to the strikes in Iraq, but he is

fully determined to prevent by any means a similar development occurring in Lebanon. Hezbollah suffered two blows in one night – the killing of its operatives in Syria and a strike on its stronghold in Beirut. The intelligence and operational details that informed Israel’s decisions to ramp up its tempo have not been made public, and thus it can only be assessed that the decision to approve the operations over the last month reflects a preference for high-rate accumulative damage to the enemy even at a higher risk of escalation. This is a deviation from the CBW history thus far.

- c. **Publicity:** The strikes in Iraq were hinted at in publications in Israel and discussed more openly in the United States. The strike in Syria was given broad publicity in Israel, apparently to justify a lethal and initiated strike to prevent a terrorist attack. This justification might warrant a laconic and dry bulletin line – but not a televised announcement delivered by the Prime Minister at the Golan Heights with the Chief of the IDF General Staff at his side and Syria at his back. And indeed, Nasrallah described this as braggadocio. A video of the Chief of Staff’s briefing senior Northern Command officers while seated at the head of a table at the Bashan Division, and IDF Spokesman’s Unit tweets taunting the Quds Force chief, Qassem Suleimani, also stray beyond what is necessary and familiar. In the first days after the attack in Beirut there was no formal comment in Israel, except background briefings for the media. By Monday, there was already a report (in the foreign press) that the target of the attack was a mixer for missile propellants used within the precision-guidance project. The leaks were perhaps meant to explain the rationale and importance of the attack, but they also increase the humiliation for Hezbollah and may even press it to respond.

It appears that the decision to carry out the strikes stems from the following explanations:

- a. *Strategic:* The Iranian and Hezbollah precision-guided missile project is perceived by Israel as a grave threat to its security. After the Prime Minister presented pictures of the project sites at the UN General Assembly in September 2018, Hezbollah relocated them but continued trying to produce its own capability for launching broad strikes against sensitive sites in Israel. Efforts to improve precision were also apparently underway in Iraq. As thwarting the activity through diplomatic and other means fell short, Israel apparently decided to take offensive action, with the gravity of the threat justifying the increased risks of escalation. In this context it is reasonable to assume that Israel does not perceive a high risk of war in the wake of the attacks, because Hezbollah and Iran currently still prefer to avoid broad escalation.

- b. *Operational*: Enemy activity is a first consideration in planning offensive operations, and sometimes it is also what dictates a narrow and circumscribed window for action. Intelligence and operational capabilities enable Israel to strike at the enemy's efforts but occasionally entail constraints of their own. The timing of the strike in Syria apparently stemmed from the rate of progress in enemy operations. The reason for the timing and the pace of strikes in Iraq is less clear. The strike in Beirut was apparently carried out within a limited window of opportunity, with the target being in a vulnerable temporary storage prior to transfer to a protected site. It is possible that the close proximity in time and the similarity of tools (explosive drones) used in the strikes in Syria and Lebanon were mere coincidence.
- c. *Policy and Politics*: The latest CBW operations exhibit boldness, determination, and decisiveness on the part of the Prime Minister in face of the Iranian threat, as well as his willingness to take risks. With the respective candidates in the forthcoming Israeli election vying over who has the greater ability to provide "security," the halo of anti-Iran operations may help the Prime Minister, who is criticized from right and left over too "weak" a response to the challenges posed by Palestinian terror from both Gaza and Judea and Samaria. Even if the strike operations themselves were ordered without a trace of political calculation, the attendant rhetoric is still mired in politics. In the policy realm, there are hints of possible budding negotiations between the United States and Iran on the nuclear file, which are not to the Israeli Prime Minister's liking. It is possible that in addition to hitting enemy capabilities, increasing the offensive pressure on Iran and its partners is designed to prod them into a hasty response that might compromise the chances of a dialogue opening between Iran and the United States. In the domestic Iranian realm, it is unclear if the blows suffered by Qassem Suleimani and his proxies are strengthening the regime's hardliners or, conversely, weakening them.

Possible consequences of the recent CBW developments:

- a. Possible escalation in Lebanon: In his recent speech, Nasrallah declared that given the drone attack, his organization would no longer accept the presence of Israeli drones in the skies over Lebanon and would take action to shoot them down. Regarding the Hezbollah fatalities in Syria, he promised an appropriate response such that the residents of Israel "will not be safe anywhere in the country," and called on IDF soldiers to brace for retaliation. Israel's defense establishment assesses that the risk of a response from Lebanon has increased, and is preparing accordingly to reduce exposure, provide protection, and ready offensive options. Given the diminished scope for forbearance that Nasrallah has left himself, some

kind of attack can be expected. Sources in Lebanon stressed that Hezbollah aims to carry out a retaliation calculated not to lead to war. In the past, its responses have included rocket fire, sniping, anti-tank missiles, and IED attacks from Syria and Lebanon, but this time it will presumably retaliate from Lebanon, perhaps even with attack drones. Indeed, reports of drones sighted over Israel's Lebanon border have already emerged in recent months. Should Hezbollah seek an in-kind approach, it is liable to try to down an Israeli aircraft in Lebanon or to mount an attack seeking a limited number of IDF casualties – including a lethal strike, for which Israel would have to respond. The challenge here, as seen in January 2015, is that the number of casualties is not fully within the control of those planning the strike and is very much influenced by random factors, between the weaponry used and the fighters' conduct and reactions. Thus, in anticipation of a strike by Hezbollah against Israel, its aircraft or its troops, the situation today is the closest to escalation since 2015 – even if the two sides are not interested in it and many others are working to prevent it.

- b. Increased tension with the United States: The CBW operations generate two sources of tension. One is possible tension over the Iranian nuclear file with President Trump, who is liable to see in the Israeli activity a deliberate disruption of his efforts to promote a deal. The second is tension that has reportedly already erupted between Israel and the US defense establishment – mainly CENTCOM – given the US view of the risk to their forces in the region and to their relations with the Iraqi government caused by the increased Israeli operations in Iraq.
- c. Heightened CBW constraints: The increased retaliatory motivation on the part of the "resistance" axis, the heightened risks of escalation in Lebanon, the enhanced tensions with the United States, Russia's discontent, and even its potential strengthening of air defense systems in the region in the future all converge to form a generalized and substantial mesh of exigencies that will limit Israel's operational leeway in the campaign between wars, at least in the near future.

The gravity of the precision-missile project underscores the tension between the need to foil it and the risks of escalation. In this current point in time, it appears that what is required for a continuation of the forthright and effective response to the Iranian campaign of proxy warfare is to cool things off somewhat and restore the tried-and-tested CBW principles, with a proper combination of operational tempo, a low profile for the operations and their exposure, and a mindfulness for partners and strategic conditions. This would serve the campaign's fundamental objectives: postponing war, preventing escalation, deterring the enemy from attacking Israel, and slowing down the force buildup in order to delay the aggravation of threats against Israel. The new circumstances and

threats will necessitate a more complex equilibrium between the campaign's risks and opportunities than what was successfully employed in recent years in Syria. A new stage has begun.