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Are We Really on the Brink of Escalation on the Northern Front?
Insights from a War Game

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The possibility that the northern arena is on the brink of escalation and liable to deteriorate into war was raised on several recent occasions, including: the annual intelligence assessment of the Military Intelligence Directorate that was presented to military reporters; a speech by the Chief of Staff on December 29, 2019 at a conference in Herzliya; and the INSS annual strategic assessment published at the start of 2020. In contrast with these assessments, the war game held as part of the INSS annual international conference in late January 2020 saw a different result. Despite an escalation scenario that could have led to a large-scale conflict in several arenas (resulting in “the first northern war”), during the game, all of the players – Israel, Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, Russia, and the United States – made significant efforts to prevent a deterioration to such a war. The scenario in the game was of several days of high-intensity combat, which all of the players sought to end quickly. This outcome could stem from the limitations of the game, but it also raises the possibility that the weight of restraining factors is more extensive than recently assessed, thus enabling Israel greater freedom of operation that could indeed lead to escalation, but not necessarily to a large-scale war.

The Scenario

The war game dealt with the implications of geostrategic developments in recent years for the nature of a possible future conflict in the northern arena. The scenario described a relatively advanced stage of “inadvertent escalation” between Israel and Iran and its proxies in three arenas (Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq), and on the Israeli home front.

According to the storyline, during the evening and the morning prior to the game, the following events occurred: in an Israeli attack in Syria launched as part of the “campaign between wars,” seven members of Iran's Quds Force and Hezbollah operatives were killed; Quds Force and Hezbollah responded with rocket fire from Syria and an anti-tank missile launched from Lebanon, killing three Israelis. Israel responded in turn with a large-scale aerial attack in Syria and Lebanon that led to the deaths of 25 Iranians, Syrians, Hezbollah operatives, and Lebanese civilians. Hezbollah then responded with a

barrage of dozens of missiles and rockets that led to the death of six Israelis, while failing in an attempt to infiltrate into Israeli territory. Israel then launched a broader air attack on some 80 targets in Syria and Lebanon that led to dozens killed in the two states. Following these events, the Syrian army raised its alert to the highest level. Meanwhile, an Iraqi militia launched missiles at Israel (which failed to hit their targets) and killed four American military personnel in an attack on a base in Iraq.

The players in the game were represented by figures with extensive military and security experience. The head of the Israeli team was Maj. Gen. (ret.) Nitzan Alon, formerly the head of the IDF Operations Directorate and OC Central Command; the head of the Iranian team was Shimrit Meir, journalist and commentator on Arab affairs and the Middle East; the head of the Hezbollah team was former Deputy National Security Adviser for Foreign Policy Orna Mizrahi; the head of the Syria team was Gen. (ret.) John Allen, President of the Brookings Institution; the head of the United States team was Gen. (ret.) Joseph Votel, former commander of United States Central Command (CENTCOM); and the head of the Russian team was Russian economist Dr. Igor Yurgens.

How the Players Acted

The underlying assumption of the game was that an escalation scenario such as this would very likely lead to a large-scale conflict, and thus the game would help clarify the scenario of the "northern war" – a conflict against forces in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and perhaps additional arenas. However, during the game all of the players individually reached the conclusion that such a war is not desirable and consequently made significant efforts not to deteriorate into war. In this framework, there were prominent restraining factors that influenced the various players, and led to a scenario of "controlled escalation" – several days of high-intensity combat, which each of the players sought to end as quickly as possible while containing events, offsetting losses, and creating an image of achievements. These days of combat included rockets and missiles (including precision missiles) launched at the Israeli home front and broad, powerful Israeli attacks in Lebanon and Syria.

The Iranian strategy in the war game was to refrain from escalation into a large-scale war, not to endanger the Bashar al-Assad regime, and to keep the war away from Iran itself. Additional Iranian interests were to keep the United States out of the conflict, maintain the close coordination with Hezbollah, and protect the assets that it has accumulated in Iraq. Therefore, it preferred that Hezbollah respond to the Israeli attack from Lebanese territory in a measured manner that would not lead to a large-scale, multi-arena conflict. Another possibility that the Iranians examined was to respond from Syria too (via the Shiite militias active there), on the assumption that such a conflict would not escalate into a large-scale war.

Hezbollah came across as subject to a wide set of constraints and limitations, including the demonstrations and hostility against it within Lebanon; economic distress; and the problematic situation of the Iranian patron, given the sanctions and the fear of conflict with the United States. As a result, it tried not to escalate the conflict to war, despite the large-scale Israeli attack, and to end the event within a relatively short time frame. While Hezbollah was forced to respond due to the intensify of the precedent-setting Israeli action (an open attack within Lebanese territory), it settled for measured fire at Israeli military targets in a manner that was meant to enable it to come across as having the last word, but without exacerbating the situation to the point of war.

Syria, for its part, tried to refrain from conflict with Israel, and the Syrian government's main interest appeared to be its survival and maintaining its sovereignty (which is challenged in any case) as it seeks to end the long civil war. The foreign activity (by the Iranian Quds Force, Hezbollah, and Shiite militias) was not coordinated with it, and consequently the regime saw it as dangerous. However, the regime recognized its obligation to the coalition that has enabled its survival (Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah). It therefore turned to Russia and asked it to use its diplomatic influence to enlist a broad international effort to end the escalation. When the events intensified, the regime also turned to Tehran and demanded that it restrain the Quds Force and prevent Hezbollah and the militias from operating from Syrian territory.

Russia likewise sought to refrain from escalation that could harm the assets it has accumulated in Syria. While it estimated that a limited escalation contains some advantages, it was concerned that the situation would spiral out of control. Therefore, it tried to use its good relations with all of the actors to bring about a quick end to the escalation, including turning to China to exert joint economic pressure on Iran. Russia also prepared for the possibility of a deterioration to war and was mainly concerned about the possible use of Israeli ground forces within Syrian territory. In such a case, Russia estimated that it might need to send additional forces to Syria.

The United States took action against the militia that attacked its forces in Iraq in a way that was meant to increase the pressure on the Iraqi government to carry out its responsibility and use its forces against the Shiite militias. The United States did not want an escalation to a large scale conflict or war, but its strategy focused on supporting Israel in its actions in Lebanon. Another element of the American strategy was an attempt to remove Iran from the conflict, although without leading to a direct escalation between Iran and the United States. The United States did seek to convince Israel that there is no point in Israeli action in Iraq and that it should leave the arena to the American forces.

Israel identified correctly the fear of war on the part of the various elements in the radical Shiite axis (Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria) and estimated that under the conditions that emerged, it would be possible to expand its freedom of operation significantly and the boundaries of the campaign between wars, even at the cost of risking a significant escalation that would last several days, but without being drawn into a large-scale war. Israel also estimated that in this case it would be backed by the United States, and perhaps friction would even develop between the United States and Iran that would serve its interests. Consequently, it decided to attack targets on a relatively large scale in both Syria and Lebanon, in a way that would serve the effort to damage Hezbollah's missile precision project and the Iranian entrenchment. However, Israel did not seek to exploit the events in order to carry out a large scale attack to remove the Iranian forces from Syria, inflict more significant damage on Hezbollah, or undertake significant action in Iraq.

All of the teams raised additional ideas that could have led to large-scale war in the northern arena, but they were ultimately rejected by the team leaders.

Assessment

War games aim inter alia to consider and help understand future situations, and clarify possible modes of action and their implications, while challenging existing perspectives and breaching the boundaries of imagination. However, the results of a game are of course limited by the scenario it is based on, the identity of its participants, and the specific dynamic that unfolds. The results of the war game that was held as part of the INSS annual international conference are also limited to these parameters. Nevertheless, the outcome of the game is interesting because it challenges the accepted thinking and especially the assessment that at the current time there is increased likelihood of the development of a dynamic of escalation that could lead to a large-scale war – even despite the policy and the interests of the sides involved.

There are three possible explanations for this gap between the common assumption that the region is on the brink of escalation and the results of the game. One is that the assessments regarding the high likelihood of war are mistaken, and the results of the game better reflect the intensity of restraining factors among each of the players (especially following the killing of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani). According to this explanation, the risk of war in the current strategic reality is lower than it appears from previous assessments of those involved in this field. If this is indeed the case, then all of the players – including Israel – still have freedom of operation that they can exploit as part of the campaign between wars, without war being an inevitable result.

According to the second explanation, the behavior of the players in the war game was more influenced by their basic assessment of the behavior of the actors they represented at the current time, and less by the challenging scenario posited in the game. In other words, the basic assessment whereby all of the actors seek to refrain from escalation in the current state of affairs was also projected on a scenario that is completely different from this situation, in which each suffered a relatively large number of casualties and large-scale attacks that demanded significant responses to restore deterrence.

According to the third explanation, the dynamic of escalation actually takes place on the level between decision makers and publics, which the game had difficulty reflecting. In this case, the relatively sterile atmosphere of the game led all of the players (most of whom have a professional background in the military field) to conduct an analytical discussion of risks and opportunities in a way that did not consider the public response to escalation, and in particular, calls for a more extreme and violent response.

Significance

Thus, the results of the game can be explained in several ways, some of which are related to the limitations of the game, the identity of the players, and the way they chose to address the scenario. However, another possibility that arises from this result is that the weight of restraining factors is greater than what has been estimated. This possibility is in effect supported by the reality in recent years, during which the sides in the northern arena have indeed succeeded in refraining from deterioration into a large-scale conflict, even in the face of challenging scenarios (though significantly less intense than the scenario in the game). If so, the main implication is what was identified by the Israeli team in the game: it is possible that the current conditions enable Israel to expand its activities as part of the campaign between wars, while incurring the risk of a controlled escalation – which would be expressed in several days of high-intensity combat and would not deteriorate into war.

This expanded format of the campaign between wars (days of high-intensity combat) requires discussion on the benefit that can be achieved versus the damage it could cause to Israel. Based on initial insights from the game, it seems that this format could yield more significant achievements against Iran and Hezbollah's missile precision project, but more limited achievements against the Iranian entrenchment in Syria.