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**The Israel-Hezbollah Confrontation amidst the Coronavirus Crisis**

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**Tension between Hezbollah and Israel has risen in recent weeks, at the same time that the coronavirus swept through the region. While both sides are busy combating the pandemic, they are also preparing for the expected continuation of the conflict once the crisis is over, while maintaining the existing balance of deterrence between them. At this stage, their actions show that they are adhering to their policies: Hezbollah is smuggling advanced weaponry and consolidating its presence in the Golan Heights, while Israel is countering these measures. Neither side has any interest in further escalation, which could develop into a full-scale war. The "dialogue of warnings" exchanged by the parties in mid-April (Israel's attack on a Hezbollah vehicle after the passengers abandoned it, and penetration of the border fence at three points by Hezbollah operatives) shows that while they are determined to set limits for the rules of the game that have emerged in recent years, their policies are calculated and restrained. At the same time, given Hezbollah's efforts to build up its forces and consolidate its presence in Syria in general and in the Golan Heights in particular, Israel could consider taking advantage of Hezbollah's difficulties at home to inflict substantial damage on its military capabilities, even at the risk of a large-scale conflict. Along with continued and even intensified military operations to thwart Hezbollah's consolidation in Syria, activity in Lebanon should be undertaken only if the threat to Israel increases significantly, especially from precision-guided missiles. In tandem, preparations by the IDF and the home front for a large-scale conflict should continue.**

Over the past month, together with its extensive efforts to deal with the coronavirus, Hezbollah, with help from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, has continued its efforts to consolidate its infrastructure in Syria, especially in the Golan Heights, in order to create another front against Israel, alongside Lebanon. This activity joins Hezbollah's efforts to address the internal problems in Lebanon, which is beset by an economic, political, and healthcare crisis. Hezbollah is taking measures to deal with the coronavirus, but in a way designed to establish its status and legitimacy among the public as a defender of Lebanon. These priorities are also reflected in the recent speeches by Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. His speech on May 4, 2020, which was devoted entirely to the

internal crisis in Lebanon, attempted to highlight Hezbollah's constructive role, and to counter domestic criticism of the organization.

Yet even in the course of its internal campaign in Lebanon, Hezbollah has not abandoned its efforts to obtain advanced weaponry and consolidate its operational infrastructure in Syria, mainly by fostering its local proxies in the Golan Heights. Hezbollah and Iran are persisting in their efforts to transfer strategic arms from Iran to Syria and from there to Lebanon, including components for the precision-guided missile project. To this end, Hezbollah utilizes its influence in the Lebanese political system to preserve its option of both the land route from Syria to Lebanon and its access to overseas flights landing at Beirut Airport. Inter alia, it has been reported that the medical teams at the airport treating Lebanese residents returning from abroad (Hezbollah was among the leaders in the mission to fly them back to Lebanon) are affiliated with the Islamic Health Organization, which belongs to Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's attempts to build up its forces and consolidate its presence in the Golan Heights are a source of concern for Israel. The organization's tenacity in building its own local infrastructure close to the border with Israel in the Golan Heights area is what underlay the grave warning published in Arabic on April 10 by the IDF spokesman, following a visit by the commander of the Syrian army 1st Corps, accompanied by a senior Hezbollah commander, to positions in the area used by Hezbollah. The IDF spokesman made it clear that Israel would not allow the continuation of such activity, which "aims at creating a terrorist structure against Israel." In tandem, warnings were also conveyed to Israel from the Lebanese side, including by elements of the new Hezbollah-sponsored government. On April 19 Lebanon's Minister of Foreign Affairs said that Lebanon was in a state of war with Israel, which penetrates its airspace, and that a complaint about Israel's actions would be registered at the UN Security Council. This statement followed a warning by the Lebanese Prime Minister in his meeting with UNIFIL on April 8 that Lebanon would be hard-pressed to refrain from responding if Israel continues its attacks in Syria using Lebanese airspace.

Israel is clearly resolved to persevere in its strategy of the "campaign between wars" aimed at scaling back the threats against it and establishing deterrence. The attacks in Syria attributed to Israel of February 13, February 28, March 31, April 15, April 20, April 27, May 1, and May 4 should be viewed in this context. The Israeli Air Force has recently been very active in Lebanese airspace on intelligence gathering missions and in firing at Syrian territory. Activity has also been seen along the Lebanese border, including completion of the security fence. The Lebanese regard any entry by an Israeli force into the disputed border areas as a border violation. The killing of Hezbollah operative Ali Mohammed Younis, a close associate of Soleimani, deep in Lebanese territory on April 5

was also attributed to Israel, although it was likewise alleged that he was killed following a dispute within Hezbollah.

Israel's actions in Syria aim at highlighting red lines concerning Iran's military consolidation there, and in particular at keeping Iranian forces and those of its proxies, above all Hezbollah, out of the Golan Heights; disrupting the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah; and above all, thwarting the precision-guided missiles project. Israel is taking care to avoid major deviations from the rules of the game that have emerged in recent years, and in particular is refraining from attacks against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon.

The care taken by Israel and Hezbollah to preserve the rules of the game reflects their mutual wish to avoid escalation into a large-scale conflict. Israel's attack on a Hezbollah vehicle along the Syrian border on April 15 only after firing a warning missile and giving the occupants time to escape should be viewed in this framework. In its response, Hezbollah elected to signal its capabilities and intentions by penetrating the Israeli-Lebanese border at three points simultaneously on April 17, but without violating Israeli sovereignty. This action, which was prepared in advance, was designed to emphasize to Israel that the organization possesses the intelligence and operational capabilities necessary for penetrating Israeli territory and attacking communities and residents of northern Israel and Israeli soldiers. Hezbollah is determined to show that the exposure of the tunnels under the border has not eliminated its ability to conduct land-based operations against Israel. Hezbollah has an interest in establishing ground rules that are likely to facilitate a painful response to a deadly Israeli attack in Syria, or following an Israeli attack in Lebanon, and certainly if a large-scale conflict develops.

Hezbollah's cautious and restrained policy is influenced by both internal economic and political constraints, and by external pressures on the organization itself (such as being classified on May 1 by Germany as a terrorist organization and economic sanctions) and on Iran, its patron. The coronavirus, however, has aggravated the profound economic crisis in Lebanon, which is on the brink of economic collapse, and the government, which is under Hezbollah's auspices, is not functioning. Hezbollah is also subject to mounting criticism by the people of Lebanon, half of whom, according to World Bank figures, are below the poverty line. Hezbollah's current standing in Lebanon enables it to promote the organization's independent interests, and no political group in the country is capable of influencing its decisions. On the other hand, Hezbollah's dominance in the government means that it has a public responsibility for the country's future. Inter alia, Hezbollah has been forced to deal with a renewal of the street protests, despite the coronavirus, and these protests have recently spread and become more violent. Therefore, in the short and medium terms, at least, Hezbollah will presumably strive to avoid a military conflict as

much as possible, although it will persist in its efforts to consolidate its military forces and its presence in the Golan Heights.

This situation highlights Israel's dilemma in its military activity against Hezbollah – specifically, whether it should take advantage of Hezbollah's distress to conduct a preemptive attack and thereby deal a blow to the organization's military power, its consolidation in the Golan Heights, and especially its acquisition of precision weapons in Lebanon. This runs the risk of deterioration to a large-scale conflict, and may generate difficult consequences for both sides. Therefore, Israel would do well to continue selectively and step up preventive actions in Syria, and especially against Hezbollah's entrenchment in the Golan Heights. Operations in Lebanon, however, should be considered only if Hezbollah crosses the threshold in its military buildup, especially in precision-guided missiles, in a way that constitutes an extremely grave threat to Israel. Finally, although the likelihood of Hezbollah initiating a campaign against Israel in the current situation is small, this does not obviate the developing threat against Israel or possible escalation following an Israeli operation. Israel should therefore prepare now for a possible large-scale conflict, despite the budget constraints resulting from the coronavirus crisis, with an emphasis on IDF force buildup and preparation of the home front.