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**Israel, Hezbollah, and the Deterrence Equation following the Beirut
Disaster**

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The series of explosions that shook the Lebanese capital on August 4, 2020 and killed well over a hundred people, injured several thousand, and caused massive physical damage exacerbated Lebanon's already dire straits. Presumably the disaster will have an impact on Hezbollah domestically, and it least in the short term, affect its struggle with Israel. Indeed, it is likely that the current tension between Hezbollah and Israel will ebb and be postponed to a later date, given the organization's need to attend to internal developments in Lebanon. At the same time, Hezbollah's determination to maintain the struggle with Israel, though not be dragged into a full-scale military conflict, will continue its drive to dictate the terms of the deterrence equation with Israel. It is expected to continue its military buildup, including its precision weapons, and try to maintain the current deterrence with Israel and expand it to activity by the Shiite axis in Syria. In this situation, it is important for Israel to persist in its strategy of the campaign between wars in Syria in order to prevent it from becoming a more threatening arena, while continuing to respond firmly to Hezbollah activity along the border.

The series of explosions that shook Beirut on August 4, 2020 and killed over a hundred people, injured several thousand, and caused massive physical damage exacerbated Lebanon's already dire straits, which stand to turn it into a failed state. On the eve of the disaster, Lebanon was enmeshed in a three-pronged crisis: economic collapse, which created intolerable conditions for the population; a political crisis given a paralyzed government, formed on January 20 by the Hezbollah camp following demonstrations by protesters who took to the streets, but which has not provided any adequate repose to the difficult situation; and the health crisis in face of the coronavirus pandemic, which contributed to the collapse of the health system and now must struggle with those injured in the port explosion. The ramifications of the explosions are still unfolding and not fully clear, but it is possible that the rising tension between Hezbollah and Israel over the previous two weeks may decline and be postponed to a later date, given Hezbollah's need to attend to the internal developments in Lebanon.

The latest round of violence between Israel and Hezbollah began with announcements in the name of the organization that it intended to avenge the death of Hezbollah member Ali Kamal Mohsin, killed in a July 20 attack attributed to Israel near Damascus Airport. These announcements prompted enhanced IDF alertness and preparedness along the northern border. When on July 27 Hezbollah acted on its threat and sent a squad to cross the border in the Mt. Dov area to kill soldiers in an IDF outpost, the IDF chose to counter the action with firing warning shots at the squad and forcing it to retreat to Lebanon, without killing the operatives. At the same time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister of Defense Benny Gantz repeated their warning that the response to another attempted terrorist attack by Hezbollah would be severe. The Israeli response was criticized by some in Israel, even after IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi stressed that the aim was to thwart the attempted penetration without killing anyone in order to avoid escalating the conflict. For its part, Hezbollah denied that the event had taken place, and its spokesmen threatened that the organization still intended to exact a bloody price. The connection between the August 3 attempt by a four-man squad to lay explosive charges, thwarted by the IDF in a move that killed the team's operatives, and the tension with Hezbollah is unclear. Israel believes that Iran is behind the attack, and quickly responded by attacking Syrian army targets. This event also highlights the close cooperation between Shiite axis groups in the struggle against Israel, while at the same time illustrating the difference in the deterrence equation between the Syrian and Lebanese fronts.

The sequence of events on the Lebanese border before the explosions at the Beirut port demonstrates anew the importance that Hezbollah attributes to the existing deterrence equation with Israel that the organization seeks to expand. While this equation previously included only a response to Israeli operations in the Lebanese theater, over the past year Hezbollah has sought to prevent Israel's ongoing attacks in Syria, primarily against arms deliveries to Hezbollah, thereby adding another element to the equation. Hezbollah has warned that it will respond to every attack against its operatives in Syria, and since September 2019, Nasrallah has tried to enforce this equation. On September 1, 2019, an anti-tank missile was fired against an IDF vehicle in the Avivim area in response to a drone attack attributed to Israel against the precision missile project in Dahiya, the Beirut stronghold of Hezbollah, and an attack in Syria on a Shiite axis squad about to launch offensive drones against Israel. Two Hezbollah members were killed in the latter attack.

Hezbollah presents itself as a Lebanese resistance organization defending Lebanon's sovereignty against Israel, but it is also a key element of the Shiite axis and protects the interests of its partners, Iran and Syria. In a speech on May 25, 2020 celebrating the 20th anniversary of the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon, Nasrallah referred directly to the deterrence equation in Syria and Lebanon, and in an effort to create a clear link between

the two fronts described it as dynamic, evolving, and influencing Israel's activity in Syria. He asserted that in its attacks in Syria, Israel had avoided attacking "combatants" due to fear of a response by Hezbollah or Syria, and that Israel's actions had clearly changed since Hezbollah's operation on September 1, 2019. Nasrallah also mentioned the Israeli attack on the organization's vehicle on the Syrian-Lebanese border on April 15, 2020, in which the IDF refrained from harming its occupants "out of fear of Hezbollah's response" (following the attack against the vehicle, for which Israel did not take responsibility, Hezbollah sent a warning message by cutting holes in the border fence between Israel and Lebanon in three places close to Israeli communities on the border).

In this speech, Nasrallah explained that Hezbollah and Syria were currently acting with "strategic patience" until the campaign in Syria is completed. It appears, however, that the considerations guiding the organization's activity against Israel are much broader. They include the need to maintain Hezbollah's standing and independence in Lebanon and its continued military buildup, in view of the heavy internal and external pressure facing it, in addition to expectations by its patron, Iran, that Hezbollah will take Iranian interests and problems into account. An important factor is the deteriorating internal situation in Lebanon, where the organization constitutes a dominant part of the country's leadership. The government, which Hezbollah was instrumental in forming, is paralyzed and provides no response to the urgent needs of the Lebanese people, and internal criticism of Hezbollah is on the rise.

In the pressure exerted on Hezbollah, the extraordinary call in mid-July by Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rahi to declare Lebanon a neutral country that is uninvolved in regional conflicts (amounting to criticism of Hezbollah for involvement in Syria) stands out. Hezbollah did not respond officially to this call by a leading religious authority, but initiated counter-criticism by its supporters of the implied threat to its independent status and its commitment to the Shiite axis. On August 7, 2020, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is scheduled to hand down its verdict on the indictment of four Hezbollah members for the murder of late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, which is also likely to echo the criticism of the organization.

In these circumstances, and certainly following the catastrophe in Beirut, it appears that Hezbollah seeks to avoid escalation toward a large-scale conflict with Israel, and therefore faces a dilemma: how to preserve the existing deterrence equation and extend it to the Syrian theater without having its responses to Israel's activity escalate into a full-scale war, with likely severe results for Lebanon, Hezbollah itself, and the Shiite axis. Hezbollah's efforts in this area appear to be only partly successful. A balance of deterrence exists on the Lebanese border, and the IDF has avoided large-scale activity on sovereign Lebanese territory and harm to Hezbollah operatives and Lebanese civilians,

but this balance is fragile and incomplete. Evidence includes the attack against the precision missile project in Dahiya, attributed to Israel; continued IDF air activity in Lebanon for intelligence and operational objectives (including for the purpose of attacks in Syria); and intensive campaign between wars activity in Syria to halt weapons deliveries from Iran to Hezbollah. Thus far, the organization has been unable to extend the deterrence equation to Syria. Israel has exhibited its determination to deny Hezbollah this achievement, as reflected in the IDF's response to the attempt by a Hezbollah squad to lay explosives on the Syrian border on August 3 (direct fire against the terrorists and an attack against Syrian army targets).

Israel has succeeded in thwarting Hezbollah's efforts thus far, but the ball is now in Hezbollah's court, which must decide whether to undertake additional action against Israel on the Lebanese border in the near future. Nasrallah has evinced determination to set the rules of the game and impose them on Israel, but is also weighing his steps well and maintaining uncertainty about his future responses and measures (probably also due to the failure to date to exact a bloody price from Israel). In order to preserve the balance of deterrence, according to its wider interpretation, Hezbollah is not averse to taking risks. Had the squad dispatched to Mt. Dov on July 27 succeeded in injuring IDF soldiers, the Israeli response might very well have been extensive, leading to a round of violence. At the same time, given its current dire straits, the possibility of Hezbollah seeking to divert public attention to military friction with Israel in order to strengthen the organization's standing as the "defender of Lebanon" and leader of the "resistance" cannot be completely ruled out. Hezbollah may accordingly seek to maintain the tension on the Israeli-Lebanese border for an extended period.

For its part, Israel has a strategic interest in continuing its activity in the Syrian theater designed to reduce the military presence of Iran and its proxies in Syria, and in preventing arms shipments to Hezbollah, with an emphasis on thwarting the precision missile project. At the same time, Israel has no interest in lengthening the current violence and keeping its forces on the Lebanese border, especially at the current time, when it has no wish for a large-scale conflict along the northern border that is liable to involve simultaneous warfare on both the Syrian and Lebanese fronts. It nevertheless appears that the bleak state of Hezbollah and its Shiite partners enables Israel to persist in the strategy that it has adopted. This strategy is based on continuing the campaign between wars for the purpose of preventing the Syrian theater from becoming a threatening front on the same scale as Lebanon, coupled with a firm response to any action taken by Hezbollah along the border. It therefore appears that even if the present round of violence seems to have ended, the ongoing efforts by the two sides to shape the deterrence equation has not ended, and will not end any time soon. Hezbollah and its

Shiite axis partners are determined to continue entrenching themselves in Syria and shipping precision weapons to Lebanon, and Israel is equally determined to prevent this.