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New Opportunities for Israel in the Cognitive Campaign in Lebanon

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The cognitive campaign is an important element in the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Both Israel and Hezbollah can claim achievements in this struggle, albeit limited. The current stage of the campaign has featured Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech in the UN exposing Hezbollah's weapons stockpiles in the midst of the civilian population in the heart of Beirut and the organization's attempts to deny it, and Nasrallah's threats to avenge the killing by Israel of one of Hezbollah's operatives in Syria. Negotiations on marking the maritime border between Lebanon and Israel have begun, following the collapse of Lebanon's economic, political, and health systems. This development gives Israel an opportunity to deliver positive messages about the expected advantages for Lebanon and its citizens if they abandon the belligerence dictated by Hezbollah, which is also driven by foreign interests, in favor of political and economic dialogue aimed at solving maritime and land territorial disputes.

Recent weeks have marked another act in the ongoing cognitive campaign between Israel and Hezbollah. In a speech to the UN General Assembly on September 29, 2020, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu revealed the presence of Hezbollah missile warehouses in the midst of the civilian population in Lebanon, one of which is close to the facilities of a gas company in the al-Janah neighborhood in the heart of Beirut. That same evening, Nasrallah denied this, and claimed that Netanyahu was lying. Hezbollah organized a tour of one of the sites in order to disprove the accusations, claiming that the missile factory was actually a civilian workshop. The IDF subsequently used photographs taken during the tour of the plant to prove that the equipment in the workshop was used to manufacture missiles, and also identified the "factory manager" as a member of Hezbollah.

Sites in the heart of Beirut were also exposed two years ago in a speech by the Prime Minister at the UN. Then too, Hezbollah invited reporters to tour sites in order to rebut Netanyahu's revelation, but the organization was criticized for its late response. On the recent occasion, therefore, Hezbollah organized its media event the same evening, garnering extensive coverage. Intelligence sources in Israel stated (October 7) that the event embarrassed Hezbollah, and demonstrated Israel's intelligence superiority to the organization.

Because of the large-scale criticism of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Nasrallah is particularly sensitive to allegations that his organization is endangering civilians in Lebanon by using them as human shields while storing explosives in civilian environments, thereby creating a ticking bomb. This criticism intensified following the deadly explosion in Beirut Port on August 4, in which about 200 people were killed and thousands injured, and which caused massive extensive physical destruction and economic damage. Another explosion took place in an arms storage depot in the village of Qana on September 22, 2020, after which Hezbollah did not allow media coverage of the site. The recent explosions in Beirut (on October 9 and October 10), apparently caused by malfunctioning gas tanks, heightened the general feeling of anxiety about Beirut becoming a keg of gunpowder that could explode at any time.

Israel's Cognitive Campaign

The political-cognitive struggle is part of the campaign waged by Israel designed to weaken Hezbollah and restrain its activity against Israel. Israel's cognitive campaign aims to influence the Lebanese population, thereby increasing the pressure on the organization; international public opinion; Arab countries; and Hezbollah's leadership. In this framework, Israel works to expose Hezbollah's activity abroad as an organization that is establishing terrorist infrastructure in various countries around the world. Israel strives to delegitimize Hezbollah by expanding the circle of international parties classifying it as a terrorist organization and extending the sanctions against it. This effort has achieved success in recent years: Germany recently joined the UK, Netherlands, United States, and other countries in Latin America and the Gulf in classifying Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, and Israel is working to convince the European Union to adopt the same position. A trend in this direction is underway also in France, which until now has refrained from classifying Hezbollah as a terrorist organization because of its traditional ties with Lebanon. On September 27, French President Emmanuel Macron criticized Hezbollah for being a partner in preventing the formation of a new government in Lebanon, and said that the organization could not simultaneously be both an army and a political party.

In tandem, Israel strives to influence various sectors in Lebanon, actors in the international theater, and the Arab world by revealing the risk that Hezbollah activity poses to Lebanon, especially to people living in areas where the organization stores its weapons. This cognitive effort, which is part of Israel's strategy of the campaign between wars on the northern front, is designed to exert influence by delivering messages – in this case, to Lebanon – where Israel's military freedom of action is limited. Israel's main effort is to demonstrate its interest in a stable Lebanon and good relations with it on the one hand, and to emphasize that the integration of Hezbollah in Lebanon's political system saddles the country with responsibility for Hezbollah's deeds and exposes it to attack by Israel.

Israel's efforts to influence the Lebanese population have achieved only partial success. It is particularly difficult to sway the Shiite population, which is loyal to Hezbollah, but other parts of the general population, which have been affected by Israel's military operations in Lebanon, are also firmly opposed to Israel's messages, and continue to regard Israel as an enemy responsible for their suffering.

Hezbollah's Cognitive Campaign

Hezbollah devotes great efforts to cognitive warfare against Israel aimed at Israeli decision makers, the IDF, and the general Israeli public. Nasrallah's frequent speeches, which receive extensive coverage in the Israeli media, are one of the main channels in this campaign and are designed to sow fear in the Israeli public. His threats in recent months to avenge the killing of Hezbollah's operative in Syria, as part of the expanded deterrence equation that he is trying to establish, force the IDF to remain at high alert along the Lebanese border for a prolonged period. At the same time, the organization strives to influence cognition among the Lebanese population in general, and especially among Hezbollah's members and supporters, who regard the organization as a deterrent counterweight against Israel. As part of this effort, Nasrallah is portraying a narrative whereby he leads the resistance and is a "defender of Lebanon" against the Israeli threat. At the same time, he is trying to conceal the influence of Iranian interests on his policy.

Hezbollah's need to strengthen its support has recently increased, given the growing public criticism of the organization in the framework of the protest in Lebanon, which peaked following the explosion in Beirut Port. This criticism included direct accusations against Nasrallah (he was hung in effigy). In response, Hezbollah and its supporters are using force to silence the critics. Lebanese journalist Luna Safwan, who criticized Hezbollah, and asserted that "Lebanon is hijacked by an armed militia," has recently been threatened with assassination.

Netanyahu's exposure of Hezbollah's missile factory and Hezbollah's response to this exposure showed that Israel is on the offensive, and Hezbollah is on the defensive, in the struggle to influence cognition. At the same time, the event also showed Hezbollah's ability to respond and learn quickly, although it appears that this speed came with mistakes, leaving Israel with intelligence advantages that it can use later.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Israel

The cognitive campaign is an important element in the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Both Israel and Hezbollah can claim achievements, albeit limited ones, in this struggle. It is important for Israel to persist in its intensive cognitive effort against

Hezbollah, utilizing both overt and covert tools, while adapting its messages to its various target audiences.

The beginning of negotiations on marking the maritime and land border between Israel and Lebanon, combined with the dire economic, political, and health situation in Lebanon, particularly after the disaster in Beirut Port, gives Israel an opportunity to emphasize to the Lebanese people the benefits likely to result from progress in negotiations with Israel. Such progress stands to increase international readiness to grant aid for improving living conditions in Lebanon, and advancing progress toward economic prosperity and stability. This can provide an alternative to the hostile policy toward Israel advocated by Hezbollah, which is liable to escalate and cause further critical damage to Lebanon.

In tandem, Israel should conduct a focused cognitive campaign to make it clear to the Lebanese, Hezbollah, and international public opinion that attacks against Israeli soldiers in revenge for the death of Hezbollah members in Syria will be answered with redoubled force, and are liable to escalate into a large-scale incident that will aggravate the wounds of the collapsing Lebanese economy. Special emphasis should be placed on Israel's deliberate restraint in the face of Hezbollah's recent unsuccessful attacks in northern Israel, with the aim of generating internal and international pressure against the supposed legitimacy of "revenge attacks" liable to destabilize the area.

Israel should emphasize in its messages that Hezbollah is largely to blame for the absence of international aid to Lebanon that could help the country emerge from the worst crisis in its history. Hezbollah continually jeopardizes the security of civilians by placing its weapons stores in the heart of populated areas, and prevents the formation of a government and the implementation of political and economic reforms. At the same time, messages by parties identified with Israel necessarily makes it difficult for a Lebanese audience to accept these messages, including those who oppose Hezbollah.

In the international theater, Israel should persist in its effort to show that Hezbollah is an international terrorist organization that constitutes a threat to the world and undermines regional stability because both of the threat that it poses to Lebanon itself and its opposition to any attempt at a possible solution to the current economic and political crisis in Lebanon. It is particularly worthwhile to aim such messages at the United States and the European Union, especially France, which appears to be trying to restore its influence in Lebanon.

Despite the inherent difficulties in measuring the success of cognitive efforts, the cognitive campaign by Israel in Lebanon in general, and especially against Hezbollah, is now increasingly important. The difficult situation in Lebanon is likely to result in a more favorable response among a Lebanese public bearing the brunt of the crisis to the message

that Hezbollah is one of the main parties to blame for the crisis, or even bears the primary blame for it.