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Confronting Enemy Force Buildup: The Case of Advanced Weaponry for Hizbollah

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According to foreign sources, Israel attacked a convoy that was to transfer advanced weapons – apparently SA-17 ground-to-air missiles – from Syria to Lebanon. This attack raises some important issues, both in principle, concerning Israel's national security concept, and in the specific context of current events in Syria and Lebanon.

In principle, there is a dilemma about whether and when to initiate preventive action against a serious threat is formation that endangers important Israeli security interests. Israel has a history of acting against a wide range of emerging threats, from the Egyptian military buildup in 1956 after the Czech arms deal; again against Egypt, which in 1967 deployed in a threatening manner on Israel's borders; against the Iraqi nuclear program in 1981; and according to foreign sources, in Syria in 2007. Arms ships and weapons convoys en route to Palestinians were attacked in Sudan and the Red Sea, and leaders of terrorist organizations were killed in targeted attacks.

Two opposing approaches address the question whether Israel should launch a preventive military strike against enemy force buildup and potential threats:

- a. The passive approach argues that it is not possible to deal with all emerging threats, and furthermore, that dealing with these threats is liable to lead to escalation into war and increase the enemy's motivation for further buildup. Israel's objective is to obtain long periods of calm, but taking action against the buildup shortens these periods of calm. Israel needs to build deterrent power, and it should confront the enemy's capabilities and neutralize them only when the State of Israel is attacked. This was the approach taken by those who opposed the attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 and those who rejected actions against Hizbollah's buildup after Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and after the Second Lebanon War in 2006.
- b. The active approach argues that ignoring force buildup and future threats may ultimately force Israel to pay a heavy price or even face an existential threat, and therefore in relevant cases it is necessary to take action to remove the potential threat, even at the risk of response and escalation.

Over the past decade, Israel launched three large operations against terrorist organizations: in 2006, against Hizbollah in Lebanon, and in 2009 and 2012, against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In none of these conflicts did Israel intend to achieve a crushing victory (e.g., to topple Hamas); the operations, rather, aimed to achieve calm in the north and the south and improve Israeli deterrence. Nevertheless, in all three cases, it was clear that it would be necessary to deal with the future buildup of the terrorist organizations after a ceasefire was obtained. The mechanisms for handling the buildup were supposed to be part of the ceasefire agreements – UN Security Council Resolution 1701 in the case of Hizbollah, and regarding Operation Cast Lead, UN Security Council Resolution 1860 and an Egyptian and American commitment. These mechanisms were complete failures, and in 2012 there was no pretense of establishing mechanisms to deal with the buildup. Thus, the issue remains a strategic and operational dilemma for Israeli decision makers.

Four main considerations shape any discussion of this type of preventive action:

- a. The existence of intelligence and operational capability to stop the buildup. Barring these, the other considerations are irrelevant.
- b. An assessment of the value of the preventive action. There is no point in risking escalation and the enemy's response if foiling the buildup is not valuable. Nevertheless, buildup with strategic significance – unconventional capabilities, advanced air defense systems, long range missiles – is a target that Israeli must seriously consider attacking.
- c. Costs and risks of the operation: Do the risks of the operation, especially the anticipated response from the enemy, the potential for escalation, and potential exposure of intelligence sources and operational capabilities justify the achievement of a preventive strike? What is the balance between these costs and risks, and the costs and risks of failure to take preventive action? It is clear that in order to justify preventive action, the equation must demonstrate a higher price for a passive policy.
- d. Considerations beyond specifically foiling the buildup: the position of the major powers, implications for other arenas, its contribution to deterrence, and other relevant issues.

These considerations can now be applied in context of the attack that according to foreign sources was carried out by Israel against advanced weapons intended for Hizbollah.

The results of the attack show that whoever launched the attack had excellent intelligence and impressive operational capability. Clearly, the attack prevented the transfer of advanced operational capability that could have challenged Israeli aerial supremacy in a future conflict in Lebanon or ambushed reconnaissance flights essential for collecting intelligence on Hizbollah's force buildup.

The question of the adversary's response is essentially twofold. As for Syria, the Assad regime had no interest in responding immediately and forcefully to the attack. The regime,

mired in a civil war, is fighting for survival. Assad's army is occupied primarily by this struggle, and its capabilities vis-à-vis Israel have eroded. Assad is seeking to avoid international intervention that would change the balance of power in the battle in Syria, and therefore, he has no interest in opening an external front against an actor with very significant power, such as Israel. An additional consideration is the possible harm to Assad's relations with his Russian patron. The transfer of Russian weapons to Hizbollah is not legitimate and violates Syrian assurances to Russia, a vital Syrian ally defending it in the UN Security Council and preventing international intervention in the slaughter underway there. For this reason, Syria was quick to respond that the attack was carried out on a military research institute and not on a weapons convoy. Assad does not want to risk his important alliance with Russia, and therefore, he will avoid escalation.

As for Hizbollah, there is very little legitimacy, if any, for a response. Hizbollah is not a "Syrian shield," and since the attack occurred on Syrian territory, the Lebanese people would not agree to action that would likely involve Lebanon in fighting in order to protect foreign/Syrian interests. Hizbollah is also an ongoing violator of Resolution 1701 concerning the prohibition on transfer of weapons to Lebanon. The organization is supposed to serve primarily as an Iranian military tool against Israel in the event that the nuclear crisis develops into a military confrontation. Therefore, Hizbollah has limited legitimacy for responding to the attack, either within Lebanon or outside the country.

In conclusion, there are two additional points should be made. Israel has not assumed responsibility for an attack on an SA-17 battery en route to Lebanon. This allows Syria and Hizbollah room for denial. Although Syria and Hizbollah chose not to deny the attack, there was in fact no immediate military response. Nevertheless, even if they did not respond immediately or escalate the conflict, Hizbollah and Syria retain the ability to respond in the future, settle open accounts, and operate in remote theaters without taking responsibility for the response.

In addition, the transfer of weapons, including high quality weapons that breach Israel's red lines, will continue to challenge decision makers in Israel in the future as well. Israel will need to continue to consider seriously the danger of escalation, which will grow from incident to incident. Operational planners in Israel must assume that any operational capability, knowledge, and/or weapons in Syria or Iran are liable to reach Hizbollah, or have already done so.