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The Incidents in the Northern Theater (Syria and Lebanon): A Change in the Rules of the Game?

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Israel has been preparing for escalation in the northern theater for a long time. In particular, it fears that the events in Syria will spill over into Israel, creating an area along the Golan Heights border that is not controlled by a central government and that will be used by rogue terrorist and jihadi elements against Israel. Indeed, the three violent incidents on Israel's border with Syria and Lebanon since early March 2014 may signal that the long standing situation is changing: as these events harbored greater potential for escalation, perhaps a lengthy period of relative quiet in Israel's northern theater (Syria and Lebanon) may be ending, with the area in question becoming a site of increasing activity. The challenge that can be expected in the northern theater is complex, given the various actors with conflicting interests and objectives. This could drag Israel, willingly or unwillingly, into a series of border incidents, a prolonged conflict, or even rocket fire or gunfire deep into Israeli territory and widespread escalation.

However, the incident of March 18, in which an IDF patrol on the Golan Heights was struck by a roadside bomb, is not at the heart of these scenarios, because all signs point to the bomb's having been placed by Hizbollah-backed forces, apparently with the knowledge and aid of Assad's forces. Indeed, it is likely that all three incidents in March – two on the Syrian border, in territories controlled by the Assad regime and Assad loyalists, and the third in the area of Mount Dov, a Hizbollah stronghold – were Hizbollah attacks against Israel.

The apparent catalyst for the recent wave of incidents is the February 24, 2014 attack on a weapons convoy from Syria to Lebanon, attributed to the IAF. Unlike previous attacks attributed to the IDF, this strike took place in Lebanese territory and apparently resulted in more extensive damage than the destruction of weapons. In turn, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah promised to respond at the appropriate time and place. Nasrallah and his forces may believe that the aerial attack in Lebanon indicates a change in the rules of the game that were ostensibly in place until now, and that therefore Hizbollah must signal

that it will not accept continued air strikes in Lebanon. More generally, it is obligated to respond, *inter alia*, in order to maintain its image as Lebanon's protector against Israel.

If the assessment is correct that Assad (or his forces) were a party to the bombs in the Golan Heights, at least in terms of knowledge thereof, the question is, what led to this change in the previous policy, namely, not to respond to air strikes attributed to Israel? There are a number of developments that may affect Assad and Hizbollah's cost-benefit assessment of the situation and the expected harm they will suffer from testing the boundaries of the rules of the game with Israel and risking escalation.

Hizbollah has regained some obvious self-confidence after achieving military successes in Syria in the Yabrud sector and driving rebel forces from the Syrian-Lebanese border. Regarding internal Lebanese politics, the rival political forces have reached an agreement on establishing a government, whose basic guidelines refer to Hizbollah's right to act against Israel, with a focus on the Israeli "occupation" of Lebanese territories (Shab'a Farms/Mount Dov). Nevertheless, the domestic processes in Lebanon are not evolving in Hizbollah's favor – evidenced by the series of car bombings aimed at organization officials.

Assad is defying predictions and surviving the third year of the uprising. The story Assad wove when the violence began – that this was not a popular uprising by the Syrian public, but an attack by Salafist jihadi terrorist elements against the Syrian state and government, whose objective was not the benefit of Syrian citizens – is in fact proving true, and now appears to be a correct description of the uprising, given the weakness of the moderate and secular opposition. Assad is supported financially and militarily by Iran and Russia, has even received international legitimacy following his agreement to dismantle the chemical arsenal, and his participation in implementation of the agreement. Russia has increased its assistance to Assad, channeling more funding and sending more advisors to support the regime. Furthermore, Putin has shown himself a tough leader who does not recoil from conflicts with the West and from establishing facts on the ground using aggressive measures (e.g., *vis-à-vis* Ukraine and Crimea). Add to this the failure of the second Geneva conference. This has made it clear that there is no viable alternative to the Assad government, which is prepared to position itself for reelection by Syria's citizens.

The question, then, is whether and to what extent the parties are interested in changing the rules of the game that have been in place until now.

While Assad recently may have felt strengthened, he likely understands that if Israel has to intervene in the conflict in Syria, there would be a dramatic change in the balance of forces arrayed against him, to the point that his regime could be jeopardized. However,

he has also received enough messages making it clear to him that Israel prefers not to intervene in Syria's domestic conflict and be drawn into the Syrian swamp.

Hizbollah has paid for its active support of Assad in the erosion of its status and legitimacy within Lebanon. Therefore, if it has to clash with Israel, it prefers to transfer the battlefield to the Golan Heights and not position it in Lebanon. Nasrallah apparently fears that Israel will attempt to take advantage of his distress and introduce new rules of the game. Hence, on the one hand Nasrallah has made a commitment to respond to the recent attack attributed to the IAF in Lebanon: he fears that if Israel is moving toward new rules of the game, he must signal to Israel that he too can change the rules (by choosing to operate in the Golan Heights). On the other hand, Hizbollah is committed to Assad, and therefore, it must carefully consider its moves and avoid actions that could jeopardize the future of the Assad regime.

Israel's offensive response against the Syrian army and security positions on the Golan Heights indicates its assessment that Hizbollah is responsible for the IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and that the attack was carried out with at least the knowledge of Assad's forces. At this point, Israel has no intention of, or interest in, intervening in events in Syria because there is no guarantee that the situation after Israeli intervention would be better from Israel's point of view. All signs indicate that there is no real moderate alternative to Assad, and that the regime's ouster could thrust Syria into the hands of Salafist jihadi elements.

The uncertainty concerning Syria's future has created a tripartite deterrence of sorts among Israel, Syria, and Hizbollah, with each side having the power to damage the others, which could lead to an uncontrolled deterioration of the situation. Therefore, only the non-state actors – the anti-Assad jihadi elements – are likely to try to exploit the situation by sparking incidents and masking them as Hizbollah or Syrian provocations in order to drag Israel into escalation and thereby lead to deterioration of the situation and the fall of the Bashar Assad regime.

Indeed, it appears that all sides are attempting to delicately shape the rules of the game, without breaching the overall framework in existence. Nevertheless, in terms of the boundaries of each side, there is the potential for escalation because Syria and Lebanon have unstable, shaky systems and every action can easily lead to a chain of unintended and unanticipated consequences. Accordingly, there is the potential for uncontrolled deterioration in which each party reacts to the response of the other, prompting a process of escalation.

Thus while Israel has been preparing for the changing situation in Syria and on the Golan Heights front, the Israeli response was directed at Assad's Syria as the responsible state

actor that must prevent any operations against Israel from Syrian territory. This response was chosen even though Assad controls only one-fifth of the country and his forces do not control the situation; the assessment that Hizbollah was acting with Assad's knowledge also requires proof.

The IDF must adjust its actions to the developing hybrid situation. It must be prepared for a series of provocations directed at Israel, refrain from uncontrolled operant responses directed at irrelevant actors, and not fall into the traps that Syria, Hizbollah, and rogue actors try to set for it. Only in incidents when it is clear that Hizbollah, Syria, and Iran are behind the anti-Israel operations is it important for Israel to direct its response to pro-Assad forces, and in the event of escalation, to signal and threaten the Assad regime, because it is its interest in survival that drives it, along with Iran and Hizbollah.

