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Escalation on the Northern Front: Background and Significance Security-Political Simulation

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The attack carried out by Hizbollah at Mount Dov (Shab'a Farms) in October 2014 heightened anxiety about a possible security escalation on the northern front. This attack substantiated messages that Hizbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah sent Israel over the last year, in which he stressed that Hizbollah activity against the Islamic State and other armed organizations fighting against the forces of Bashar al-Assad would not divert it from the struggle against Israel and the goal of avenging the killing (attributed to Israel) of senior Hizbollah figure Imad Mughniyeh. Behind this statement, there was information that Hizbollah was planning a series of terrorist attacks in the Golan Heights and the Shab'a Farms area, along with its continued attempts to transfer advanced strategic weaponry to its forces from Iran through Syria. Some of these deliveries may have already reached their destination.

The Military and Strategic Affairs Program at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) conducted a simulation designed to test the conditions under which Hizbollah might carry out its threats and escalation would develop on the northern front. Among the groups represented in the simulation: Hizbollah; Israel; the US; the radical bloc in the Middle East – led by Iran; the Palestinians – the Palestinian Authority and Hamas; and Russia. The roles were played by INSS researchers, joined by external experts dealing with Middle East security-strategic issues.

Opening Scenario

According to the scenario, two simultaneous attacks were conducted by Hizbollah against Israeli targets: one using explosive booby-traps and the other using machine guns and anti-tank weapons against an IDF patrol in the Har Dov area. The IDF forces suffered two dead and two wounded, plus one soldier missing. Another attack on an IDF patrol in the northern Golan Heights using explosive booby-traps killed one IDF soldier and moderately wounded three others. On the following day, which was the date of the activity in the simulation, Israel's security cabinet ordered a response by the IDF. Three Hizbollah targets in the Beqaa Valley and one on the Syrian side of the Syrian-Lebanese

border were attacked. Hizbollah wasted no time in responding. That same night, there was anti-tank fire against IDF positions, and short range rockets were fired at Nahariya, Safed, and Kiryat Shmona. Other than a number of anxiety attacks, no casualties were reported.

Respective Positions

Israel's starting point, as formulated by those participating in this group, included two strategic goals: avoiding escalation and strengthening Israeli deterrence. Because there is structural tension between these two goals – actions to strengthen deterrence are liable to lead to escalation in the conflict – a number of alternative actions were considered. The first was “quiet in return for quiet,” aimed at “containment” of the events. The second alternative focused on exerting pressure on the international community to encourage Hizbollah to refrain from provoking Israel. The third alternative was a military offensive that would be painful for Hizbollah, but would not require it to respond with massive force. After considering the alternatives, the Israel team decided on a combined response: an attack on Hizbollah with strategic long range firepower, along with an appeal to the international community and a public statement demanding “quiet in return for quiet” and return of the missing soldier.

The starting point of the Hizbollah team was that a message had been delivered to Israel that the organization sought a mutual deterrence equation that would improve Hizbollah's situation. At the same time, it wanted to avoid escalation. The Hizbollah team interpreted the magnitude of the Israeli response as an indication that at this point Israel too did not want major escalation. The response to the Israeli attack was therefore to fire at a military base and open space. In addition, and as part of the measures for implementing its strategy, the organization delivered a message that it was considering giving the Lebanese government responsibility for the kidnapped soldier.

Perceiving a the danger that the Islamic State would gain control of territories in Syria and Iraq, thereby threatening the stability of the regimes in Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and other Persian Gulf countries, the United States' primary goal in the Middle East at this time is the struggle against the Islamic State. The team playing the role of the American administration therefore sought to refrain from diverting resources in the direction of another conflict, such as that threatening to erupt between Israel and Hizbollah. On the other hand, the administration regards Iran as a party that could help in the struggle against the Islamic State, even while negotiations with Iran on the nuclear question are underway. In principle, Iran can be asked to use its close connections with Hizbollah to persuade it to refrain from escalation, but the American team opted not to do this so as not to invite Tehran to request a concession on the nuclear question. Like the Israeli team and the Hizbollah team, and given the basic assumption that neither party

wanted a major conflict, the US team chose to refrain from direct and conspicuous involvement in developments, confining itself to monitoring the events.

The radical bloc countries, Syria and Iran, assessed the events from the same perspective. They both wished to prevent further escalation, which was liable to embroil them. They acted on two tracks: an attempt to restrain and moderate Hizbollah's response to "Israeli aggression," and a request of the US that it restrain Israel (the talks between Iran and the major powers made it possible for Iran to contact the US directly). At the same time, both countries made it clear that if the situation escalated, they would stand behind Hizbollah. Note that where Damascus and Tehran were concerned, their relations with Russia did not appear very relevant to the developing conflict.

Regarding the Palestinians, an inverse relation was visible between their weight in developments and the complications they created. The Palestinian team in the simulation represented both the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas – two competing entities/"authorities" with different strategic reasoning. Hamas regarded the developing conflict between Israel and Hizbollah as an opportunity to escape its unhappy situation following Operation Protective Edge, in view of the risk that delay in the renewal project in the Gaza Strip would cost it support in the Palestinian home arena. For Hamas, backing Hizbollah was designed to help it renew its connections with Iran, while at the same time weakening the PA (since it was not expected to encourage Hizbollah's struggle against Israel). For its part, the PA regarded the conflict as a risk, because it was liable to divert international attention from the Palestinian issue and halt its diplomatic momentum. Furthermore, the PA feared that demonstrations in support of Hizbollah in the West Bank would lead to escalation between Palestinians and Israel. For the reason, the PA acted to prevent over-enthusiasm among the Palestinian public, while avoiding the impression that it was acting in Israel's interest.

Russia remained on the sidelines of the events. The Russian team expressed concern about Israel being dragged into a conflict in Syria, which would have negative consequences for its significant interests in that divided country. The possibility of provocation was therefore considered, for example by sending a warship to Syria. The team believed, however, that the conditions did not justify such a spectacle. The attempt to move the US to relax the sanctions against Russia imposed in retaliation for its policy Ukraine was unsuccessful; the sanctions, combined with the collapse of oil prices, triggered a severe economic crisis in Russia. The possibility of sacrificing Assad in return for making the sanctions less restrictive, which was considered by the team, was not tested in the simulation.

Insights

A key feature of the simulation was the lack of enthusiasm, common to all the parties, at being dragged into escalation. All the parties tried to contain the event and confine it to a

short round of strikes. Among the restraining factors were the challenge posed by the Islamic State and the weakening of the Shiite axis in the region, Hizbollah's involvement in Syria, and the dialogue between Tehran and Washington – on both the nuclear question and in dealing with the Islamic State, their common enemy. For Israel, one restraining factor was a significant interest in avoiding a conflict on the northern front – particularly due to concern that it would spread to the Palestinian theater at a time when Israel was facing a strong international political and diplomatic challenge. For Hizbollah, the weakening of the Shiite axis in the region was an added restraining factor. According to the dynamic that developed in the simulation, it appears that Hamas remained the primary resistance factor, with Israel occupying the leading place on the Hamas agenda.

Beyond these insights, the question remains what motivated Hizbollah to act in the Har Dov theater in October. Despite the restraining influences, the event passed without any significant Israeli response, which could have led to uncontrolled escalation and ignited the northern front. A simulation naturally gives the impression – perhaps illusory – that the developments and the course of events are under control. Considerations involving vengeance and honor, for example, are not expressed. Thus it appears that Israel and Hizbollah are not interested in escalation, because there is no clear and certain achievement that can be attained; quite the opposite. At the same time, there is no guarantee that they will not be dragged into a round of violence against their wills by the conflict escalating as a result of each side misreading the other's steps and considerations.

