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From Gaza to Lebanon: Following Operation Protective Edge

Omer Einav

With their respective processes of political evolution and military buildup, Hizbollah and Hamas have gradually assumed semi-state governmental characteristics. Particularly given the weakening of the regular armies in the region in recent years, they now represent the two main immediate threats to Israel. In the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge, therefore, Israel would do well to consider the effects of the military campaign in Gaza on other fronts, in terms of both the current goal of preventing escalation and the significance of the recent round of fighting on a possible future campaign against Hizbollah. In other words, at issue is what Hizbollah can learn from the campaign in Gaza, and how this will affect the way it uses its power against Israel. That Israel must deter its enemies at all times is a familiar platitude; in the case of Hizbollah, however, this mantra is not enough.

In the past, Hizbollah and Hamas underwent a mutual learning process supported by countries like Iran and Syria. This process was reflected in the training of Hamas operatives by Hizbollah and its patrons, which included sharing fighting methods, weapons, and knowledge on how to manufacture rockets and construct underground infrastructures, and sharing lessons learned in the military campaigns against Israel. Moreover, while the two organizations have become more distant over the past two years, Hamas has implemented processes that proved successful for Hizbollah. Examples include a transition to a structured hierarchal military framework with clear command and control capabilities, alongside continued guerilla warfare characteristics; procurement of high trajectory weapons of all ranges, anti-tank weapons, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs); experience in placing sophisticated explosive devices; and construction of an extensive underground system of movement and communications.

Over the past three years, Hizbollah has accumulated diverse operational experience in the fighting in Syria, but following the prolonged quiet on the Israel-Lebanon border, compared with the recurring conflicts between Hamas and Israel, the roles of “teacher” and “student” have been somewhat reversed. Hamas displayed creativity in Operation Protective Edge in its ability to challenge Israel with its extensive infrastructure of

tunnels penetrating into Israeli territory, diversification of the launch ranges of its rockets, and its effective operation of a command and control mechanism. These methods of warfare are not new, but the extent to which they were used is unprecedented in the conflict between Israel and Hamas. The impression is that Hamas has implemented and even expanded Hizbollah concepts. In his public speeches – speeches that were recently cited in Israel – Nasrallah threatened that his organization would surprise Israel in the next war and would move the battlefield to the Galilee. This can be interpreted as referring to a plan of action aimed at a hitherto unknown extent of penetration into Israeli sovereign territory and a challenge to the IDF on the eastern front – a method that to some extent was tried by Hamas. The important question arising from Operation Protective Edge, therefore, is how Israel coped with the range of threats by Hamas, and what the implications will be for the northern front.

Israel demonstrated its ability to locate and destroy a large portion of the offensive tunnels, for example, but it must calculate whether this capability also exists on the northern border, where the topography is different and where Israel's intelligence coverage is less effective. Regarding the rocket fire, Hamas adopted Hizbollah's operational concept, based on multiple launchings from launchers concealed underground in built-up areas, mostly designed for one-time launching, understanding that Israel can locate and destroy the launchers once the rockets have been fired. Hizbollah almost certainly already possesses concealed stores of launchers and rockets, which deprive Israel of the ability to neutralize the launching system. In the field of aerial defense, Israel has demonstrated its improved capability in providing warning to its citizens, intercepting rockets with Iron Dome, and intercepting UAVs. With Iranian assistance, Hizbollah will analyze Israel's interception capability for missiles and rockets, and attempt to identify the weaknesses and gaps in the Israeli aerial defense envelope. Hizbollah will presumably adopt a strategy of barrage launchings of a mixture of rockets and missiles with various ranges.

With its aerial supremacy, the Israeli Air Force demonstrated its complete control of the air, marked by advanced intelligence and precise and effective offensive capabilities. Intelligence and air attacks, however, did not provide an adequate solution for Hamas' underground capabilities, underground launching systems, or far-reaching network of tunnels. Hizbollah understands the significance of Israeli air supremacy and is trying, with partial success, to procure ground-to-air missiles systems in order to deprive Israel of its freedom of action in the air and, less likely, of its ability to gather intelligence. With respect to land-based maneuvering, Hizbollah is likely to reinforce its operational concept of operating from within built-up areas, in view of the IDF's focus on tunnels and efforts to avoid a massive entry into populated areas, due to concern about its own losses and heavy collateral damage to the civilian population. At the same time, the extensive destruction in certain regions in the Gaza Strip could indicate Israel's intentions with

respect to villages in southern Lebanon and the Dahiyeh neighborhood in Beirut. Hizbollah is concerned by the possibility of a large scale land-based campaign by the IDF in southern Lebanon, and will therefore act to draw IDF forces into built-up regions where ambushes can be laid that can inflict many casualties and deny the image of an Israeli victory. Hizbollah will do this while making the necessary adjustments for the major differences between the Gaza Strip and southern Lebanon in land contours and the nature of combat.

During the fighting in the Gaza Strip, Hamas tried to cause escalation in other theaters in the West Bank, southern Lebanon, and even within Israel by encouraging protest on the part of Israeli Arabs. Hizbollah could conclude that it might be necessary to expand the conflict theater to other areas on the Golan Heights, where it currently has an infrastructure and a presence, as well as in the Palestinian theater. A conflict theater that includes both Lebanon and the Golan Heights will require major investment by Israel, including the mobilization of reservists on a large scale, which would have a negative impact on the Israeli economy if the conflict drags on for a prolonged period. It is hard to calculate what a conflict with two or more theaters would involve, but it is likely that Israel will have to take such a scenario into account in the next round of hostilities.

Finally, Israel's room for decision making would likely be an important factor for consideration. Hizbollah will analyze conflicting messages arising from Operation Protective Edge: broad support in Israel for widening the operation, together with encouragement from Egypt and relative passivity on the part of the West, combined with an evident reluctance on the part of the Israeli government to undertake another ground operation in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, Hizbollah is likely to realize that Israel is ready for a prolonged conflict that includes aspects of attrition, and that its national resilience is relatively stable. How Hizbollah will weigh these factors is an open question, specifically, whether a prolonged conflict suits its approach and whether it will try to focus on undermining Israeli national resilience.

In conclusion, Israel must prepare itself for Hizbollah's next would-be strategic surprise in order to neutralize its effect and obtain an advantage in the conflict, which may involve an offensive operation in Israeli territory. Unexpected weapons may be used. In any case, Israel must keep in mind the mutual learning between Hamas and Hizbollah, which grows with each round of conflict. Particularly since the two organizations are the two immediate threats on Israel's borders, Israel's policy toward one has significance for the other. The lessons from the strategy employed in Operation Protective Edge must therefore also be addressed in their implications for future conflicts in other theaters, especially the northern front against Hizbollah.