


# COUNTING THE COST

## Avoiding Another War between Israel and Hezbollah

By Nicholas Blanford and Assaf Orion



“He who wishes to fight must first  
count the cost.”

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While Lebanon and Israel, like the rest of the world, grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, neither Israel nor Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah has allowed the deadly contagion to distract them from their long-running enmity.

Israel persists in its campaign of air strikes against Iran- and Hezbollah-linked targets in Syria, while Hezbollah continues to assist Iran in establishing a military foothold in the war-battered country.

On April 15, 2020, a suspected Israeli unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) fired a warning “knock on the road” missile near a vehicle carrying Hezbollah fighters in the Syrian town of Jdeidet Yabous close to the border with Lebanon. A second missile destroyed the vehicle once the passengers had disembarked.<sup>1</sup> In an apparent response, Hezbollah cut holes in the technical fence running the length of the border between Lebanon and Israel in three separate places, messaging the group's ability to penetrate Israeli territory despite the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) security measures.<sup>2</sup> The physical signal was soon followed by a written confirmation by one of Hezbollah's distinct voices in the Lebanese *Al-Akhbar* newspaper, which confirmed that the breaches were an “intelligence and operational message” to Israel from Hezbollah.<sup>3</sup>

Even before the outbreak of the global pandemic, tensions had been running high in the region following the death of Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani,

the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, in a US air strike in Baghdad on January 3, 2020.<sup>4</sup> Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of the Iran-backed militia and political party, Hezbollah, vowed a campaign to drive the US military presence out of the region.

While that campaign has yet to materialize in any meaningful way, Israel's northern front remains calm but tense with all parties acutely aware that a minor escalation along Israel's northern borders with Lebanon and Syria could spin out of control and bring a sudden and dramatic end to the relative calm that has prevailed here since the end of the monthlong Second Lebanon War between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006.

While both sides do not seek another war, the IDF and Hezbollah have undertaken enormous efforts to prepare for what many believe is an inevitable encounter. A fine line separates a tense calm from a destructive war; this line has been tested several times since 2006, on a tactical as well as a strategic level. Each tactical kinetic action between the IDF and Hezbollah risks a miscalculation that could lead to an escalation and all-out war. On a strategic level, the “balance of terror” could be upset by a number of developments, including Iran's precision project<sup>5</sup> that seeks to improve the precision of Hezbollah's rockets by converting them into accurate guided missiles, Iran's military entrenchment in western

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- 1 The Hezbollah vehicle was targeted by two missiles. The first missed the vehicle and alerted the passengers, who disembarked but returned moments later to retrieve bags. The second missile was launched shortly afterwards and destroyed the vehicle. Israel appears to have chosen to spare lives to avoid an escalation with Hezbollah, but the true goal remains unknown. Ben Hubbard and Ronen Bergman, “Warning Shots: Israel Spares Hezbollah Fighters to Avert a War,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/world/middleeast/israel-hezbollah-knock-on-roof.html>.
  - 2 “Lebanon Border Fence Damaged at Three Locations, But Not Breached, IDF Says,” *Times of Israel*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-lebanon-border-fence-damaged-at-3-locations-but-no-infiltrations/>.
  - 3 Ibrahim Al Amine, “Knocking on the Door of the Settlements: A Readiness Test Between Attack and Defense,” *Al-Akhbar*, April 21, 2020, <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/287410>.
  - 4 Phil Helsel, Ken Dilanian, and Josh Lederman, “U.S. Airstrike Kills Top Iran General, Qassem Soleimani, at Baghdad Airport,” NBC News, January 3, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/airstrike-kills-top-iran-general-qassem-suleimani-baghdad-airport-iraqi-n1109821>.
  - 5 Israel Defense Forces, “Hezbollah's Precision Guided Missile Project,” September 2, 2019, <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/hezbollah/hezbollahs-precision-guided-missile-project/>.



Italian troops helicoptered into Tyre in south Lebanon on September 2, 2006, as the vanguard of a newly-strengthened UNIFIL in compliance with United Nations Security Resolution 1701, which helped end the 2006 war.

*Photo credit: Nicholas Blanford.*

Syria<sup>6</sup> and Israel's attempts to stop it, the United States' "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, and domestic challenges facing Hezbollah and Iran that could alter their conflict calculus.

Since the 2006 war, Hezbollah has grown in size, capabilities, structure, and experience. Today, Hezbollah's manpower stands at an estimated 30,000 fighters with a reservist corps that could draw upon another 10,000 to 20,000 combatants. Israel estimates that Hezbollah today has 130,000 to 150,000 surface-to-surface rockets and missiles in its arsenal, ten times larger than its 2006 stockpile. Some of these missiles carry 500 kg warheads and are believed to be accurate to within ten meters of their targets. Militarily, Hezbollah has benefitted from its intervention in the war in Syria since 2012. Thousands of new recruits have proved themselves on some of the world's bloodiest battlefields.

Meanwhile, Israel has focused on sharpening its warfighting readiness for another Lebanon-centered challenge—a clear recognition that Hezbollah

remains the number one conventional military threat to Israel's national security. Hezbollah is the focus of a large proportion of Israel's intelligence efforts. The IDF has also massively acquired precision strike munitions and operationalized intelligence capability for high-capacity targeting.<sup>7</sup> This allows for a combined and massive intelligence-driven precision strike. On the land side, the IDF has invested heavily in equipping its ground forces with more effective arms, improving their survivability, intelligence gathering, and logistics. Much effort has been put into training from the IDF's headquarters down to the maneuvering forces. These efforts have been focused on Lebanese scenarios, stressing warfighting in rugged and urban areas, including underground warfare.

Perhaps the most important recent development is Iran's "precision project." This project seeks to convert Hezbollah's multiple, but "dumb," statistically free-falling rockets into accurate global positioning system (GPS)-guided missiles that are able to hit targets with high probability and seeks to

6 Israel Defense Forces, "Iran Attacks Israel from Syria," May 9, 2018, <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/iran/iran-in-syria/iran-attacks-israel-from-syria/>.

7 Israel Defense Forces, "The New Goals Arena Was Inaugurated in the Intelligence Division," (in Hebrew), March 14, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2HOu3ag>.

improve the accuracy of existing projectiles. Given Israel's small size and highly vulnerable strategic infrastructure, such a capability in the hands of its enemy would greatly enhance the threat of a crippling blow to its national security, perhaps even giving Hezbollah and Iran an incentive to strike first. Israeli officials have openly stated that Israel "will not accept Hezbollah's precision missile project on Lebanese soil"—reportedly raising the project to higher national security priority for Israel, second only to Iran's nuclear program—and have resolved to stop it "even at the risk of war."<sup>8</sup>

Almost fourteen years since the 2006 war, Hezbollah and Israel seem to be drifting closer to war than at any time in the last decade. Given the military buildup on both sides, the mutual destruction will be far reaching. A war prevention strategy should include anti-escalation measures at the tactical level and strategic stabilization efforts at higher political/diplomatic levels.

It is important to maintain and strengthen the vital liaison channels of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) between Lebanon and Israel. It is also advisable to focus the efforts of UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) on the most sensitive area of Lebanon's southern border district, 3-5 km deep along the Blue Line, the line of withdrawal defined by the United Nations between Israel and Lebanon. Hezbollah would likely resist such a move that may curtail its massive military assets along the contact line, which are in violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which helped end the 2006 war.<sup>9</sup> If enhanced inspections by UNIFIL are not possible, one option is to downsize the force to reduce the unjustifiable risk to peacekeepers and the mission cost while maintaining its key liaison and interposition role. Another option is to leverage potential foreign aid to

ease Lebanon's financial crisis. Additional sanctions and pressure should be applied by international and regional players on Hezbollah and its supporters and enablers in the business community and political arena.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, options for relief should be offered, conditioned on tangible and verifiable security measures. Similarly, provided real progress on security in Lebanon is achieved, mainly on Hezbollah's military deployment in the south and its strategic capabilities, Israel can show flexibility and creativity on border disputes with Lebanon and the near daily overflights by Israeli jets and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—both of which violate UNSCR 1701.

US military aid to Lebanon should be maintained as Lebanon requires a strong and effective military to help maintain stability, especially in the event of an economic collapse that could lead to a breakdown in law and order. The United Kingdom may want to expand its military assistance program from the border with Syria—where it helped train and equip four LAF Land Border Regiments (LBRs)—to the southern border, either by helping establish two more LBRs or concentrating efforts on boosting the capabilities of the "model regiment" to be deployed in UNIFIL's area of operations.<sup>11</sup>

At the systemic level, Iran's strategic lines of communication, which it uses to arm and rearm Hezbollah, should be cut in order to stem the tide of a future war.

With unprecedented political and economic crises in Lebanon on the one hand and the potential catastrophe of a destructive war on the other, there is now a rare window of opportunity to avoid another chapter being added to history's "March of Folly."<sup>12</sup>

8 "IDF Chief Calls on UNIFIL to Stop Hezbollah's Precision Missile Project," *Israel Defense*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/node/40033>; Amir Buhbut, "Hezbollah's Accuracy Project: Israel Will Operate in Lebanon—Even at the Cost of War," *Walla! News* (in Hebrew), September 6, 2019, <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3311168>.

9 Resolution 1701 (2006), United Nations Security Council, August 11, 2006, [https://undocs.org/S/RES/1701\(2006\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/1701(2006)).

10 Assaf Orion, "Southern Lebanon: The Land of Three Armies," INSS Insight No. 1184, *Institute for National Security Studies*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/southern-lebanon-land-three-armies/>.

11 The LAF's "model regiment" is intended to assist UNIFIL in its area of operations in south Lebanon. The plan was endorsed in a United Nations Security Council resolution in August 2018, but has yet to be implemented. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2433 (2018), UN Security Council, August 30, 2018, S/RES/2433 (2018), <https://unifil.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/2433-en.pdf>.

12 Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

## INTRODUCTION

The US air strike that killed Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani—the mastermind of Iran’s growing influence in the Middle East—in Baghdad on January 3, 2020, was a dramatic and unprecedented development in the struggle between the United States and Iran.

Iran responded to Soleimani’s death by firing numerous ballistic missiles at two bases housing US troops in Iraq. While the January 8 attacks caused extensive damage, there were no fatalities.<sup>13</sup> That same day, Iran’s military accidentally shot down Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 shortly after it took off from Tehran’s international airport, killing all 176 passengers and crew on board. The international and domestic backlash that followed the downing of the airliner appeared to lead to a de-escalation of the crisis.

Iran has, however, vowed that the ballistic missile attacks do not mark the end of its retaliation and that its goal is to oust all US forces from the Middle East. Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, clearly articulated this goal in a January 12, 2020, speech in which he said that retaliation for Soleimani’s death is “a long track which must lead to US forces leaving the region.”<sup>14</sup>

In December 2019, before Soleimani’s death, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi warned that Israel’s campaign to deny Iran a military foothold in Syria and Iraq will continue “even at the risk of war.”<sup>15</sup> Until now, Iran’s response to this campaign has been limited and relatively ineffective, consisting of the occasional firing of rockets toward Israel from Syria. Nevertheless, there is the risk that, given the rise in regional tensions, a minor escalation along the Lebanon-Syria-Israel front could spin out of control and bring a sudden and dramatic end to the general calm that has prevailed along the Lebanon-Israel border since the end of the monthlong war between Hezbollah and Israel in July-August of 2006.

In the fourteen years since the end of the Second Lebanon War in 2006, there have been only seven Hezbollah-initiated, and claimed, attacks along the Blue Line in retaliation for direct and indirect actions by Israel.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the specter of another war between Hezbollah and Israel looms large. While both sides do not seek another war, the IDF and Hezbollah have undertaken enormous efforts to prepare for what many believe is an inevitable future encounter—one that will certainly overshadow the 2006 conflict in terms of destruction and strategic consequence. Hezbollah fighters speak of the next round with Israel in near apocalyptic terms,

13 It later emerged that US troops had been injured during the strikes. Idrees Ali and Phil Stewart, “More Than 100 U.S. Troops Diagnosed with Brain Injuries from Iran Attack,” Reuters, February 10, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pentagon-tbi-exclusive/exclusive-more-than-100-u-s-troops-diagnosed-with-brain-injuries-from-iran-attack-officials-idUSKBN2041ZK>.

14 “Key Notes from Nasrallah Speech Marking One Week After Soleimani Assassination,” *Middle East Observer*, January 13, 2020, <http://middleeastobserver.net/key-notes-from-new-nasrallah-speech-marking-one-week-after-soleimani-assassination/>.

15 Judah Ari Gross, “IDF Chief Warns Israelis: The Next War Will Hit Our Home Front Extremely Hard,” *Times of Israel*, December 25, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-chief-israel-alone-in-the-fight-against-iran-in-syria-iraq/>.

16 On August 7, 2013, Hezbollah detonated two improvised explosive devices (IEDs) against a unit of IDF Golani Brigade soldiers that had infiltrated 400 m into Lebanese territory at Labboune. Four IDF soldiers were wounded. Elhanan Miller, “Explosion That Hurt Troops Was a Hezbollah Ambush,” *Times of Israel*, August 8, 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/explosion-that-hurt-troops-was-a-hezbollah-ambush/>.

On March 14, 2014, Hezbollah detonated two IEDs against an IDF patrol in the Shebaa Farms, part of a campaign of retaliation for a February 24, 2014, Israeli air strike on a Hezbollah facility near Janta in the eastern Bekaa Valley. (Hezbollah’s other reprisal attacks emanated from the northern Golan Heights).

On October 7, 2014, Hezbollah detonated two IEDs against an IDF patrol in the Shebaa Farms, wounding two soldiers, in retaliation for the death of an engineer who was killed while dismantling a booby-trapped Israeli device tapping a Hezbollah communications cable. “The Shebaa Farms, a Tug-of-War Mideast Conflict Zone,” AFP, October 8, 2014, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-shebaa-farms-a-tug-of-war-mideast-conflict-zone-2/>. (continues on the following page)

describing it as the “last war” with the Jewish state.<sup>17</sup> They aver that there will be no nebulous outcome as in 2006, but a result in which one combatant stands alone and triumphant on the battlefield, the enemy defeated and crushed.

As part of its deterrence strategy, Israel has warned that it will treat Lebanon as the enemy in the next war and not limit its actions to Hezbollah.<sup>18</sup> This threat, if fulfilled, promises to inflict massive destruction on a country that saw nationwide protests against the political elite in late 2019 and is grappling with its gravest economic crisis since the end of the 1975-90 civil war.<sup>19</sup>

It is the anticipated scale of the next war and the calamitous impact it will have on Israel and Lebanon that has served as a form of mutual deterrence for nearly fourteen years. Yet, it is a very fine edge that separates a tense calm from a destructive war; it has been tested several times since 2006 both on a tactical and strategic scale. Despite neither side so far seeking war, each tactical kinetic action between the IDF and Hezbollah risks succumbing to a miscalculation that could lead to an escalation and all-out war.<sup>20</sup>

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(Footnote 16, continued) On January 28, 2015, Hezbollah launched six anti-tank missiles at an IDF convoy at the foot of the Shebaa Farms. An officer and a soldier were killed and seven others wounded. The attack was reprisal for an Israeli drone strike in the Golan Heights that killed an Iranian general and six Hezbollah fighters. Jodi Rudoren and Anne Barnard, “Hezbollah Kills 2 Israeli Soldiers Near Lebanon,” *New York Times*, January 28, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/29/world/middleeast/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-missile-attack.html>.

On January 4, 2016, Hezbollah detonated three IEDs (one explosively formed projectile and two Claymore-style charges) against IDF soldiers operating a D9 bulldozer in the Shebaa Farms. The bulldozer was damaged, but there were no casualties. The attack was reprisal for the death of Hezbollah agent Samir Kuntar in an Israeli air strike near Damascus. John Davison and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Hezbollah Targets Israeli Forces with Bomb, Israel Shells South Lebanon,” Reuters, January 4, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-security-israel/hezbollah-targets-israeli-forces-with-bomb-israel-shells-south-lebanon-idUSKBN0U1C320160104>.

On September 1, 2019, Hezbollah fired three anti-tank missiles at an IDF armored ambulance near Avivim in western Galilee in retaliation for the deaths of two Hezbollah fighters killed in an Israeli air strike in Syria. No casualties were reported. David M. Halbfinger, “Hezbollah Hits Back at Israeli Army But Without Casualties,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/01/world/middleeast/hezbollah-israel-airstrike.html>.

On September 9, 2019, Hezbollah said it shot down an Israeli drone near the southern border village of Ramiyeh. Israel acknowledged it lost a drone in Lebanese territory. James McAuley, “Hezbollah Downs Israeli Drone in Ongoing Tension Between Iranian-backed Groups and Israel,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/hezbollah-downs-israeli-drone-in-ongoing-tension-between-iranian-backed-groups-and-jerusalem/2019/09/09/9c712628-71b5-46b3-a1cb-93d3c9ddcfe9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/hezbollah-downs-israeli-drone-in-ongoing-tension-between-iranian-backed-groups-and-jerusalem/2019/09/09/9c712628-71b5-46b3-a1cb-93d3c9ddcfe9_story.html).

- 17 Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle with Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011).
- 18 Yaniv Kubovich, “Senior IDF Official: Hezbollah Controls Lebanon’s Army, We Won’t Distinguish Between Them in Next War,” *Haaretz*, September 6, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/senior-idf-official-hezbollah-controls-lebanon-s-army-1.6459643>; Amos Harel, “With Lebanon No Longer Hiding Hezbollah’s Role, Next War Must Hit Civilians Where It Hurts, Israeli Minister Says,” *Haaretz*, March 13, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/next-war-with-lebanon-must-hit-civilians-where-it-hurts-bennett-says-1.5447209>; “Bennett Says Israel Will Destroy Lebanon If War Breaks Out,” *Arutz Sheva*, December 7, 2018, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/255852>.
- 19 “Explainer: Why is Lebanon in an Economic and Political Mess?” Reuters, November 6, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-protests-causes-explainer/explainer-why-is-lebanon-in-an-economic-and-political-mess-idUSKBN1XG260>.
- 20 One of the seven post-2006 operations mounted by Hezbollah against the IDF occurred in January 2015—an anti-tank missile ambush against an IDF convoy in the Shebaa Farms. The attack was reprisal for a missile strike 10 days earlier by a pair of IDF unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) in the Golan Heights that killed a general in Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and six Hezbollah fighters, including Jihad Mughniyah, a senior commander. In the Hezbollah ambush, a captain and a sergeant were killed when their lead vehicle was hit by two 9M133 Kornet (AT-14 Spriggan) anti-tank missiles. Even as the attack was underway, Hezbollah delivered messages to Israel via the United Nations office in Beirut and UN peacekeeping force in south Lebanon that the group would undertake no further action. If the Israelis chose to retaliate heavily, Hezbollah was prepared to continue fighting, the message added. The IDF responded with reactive artillery fire across the Blue Line, but no more than that and the clash ended. However, one of the six missiles fired by Hezbollah hit a school bus, apparently by accident, which had been travelling on the same road as the IDF convoy. The passengers had abandoned the vehicle when Hezbollah’s attack was launched. If the vehicle had been hit while the passengers were on board, several children could have been killed which would have forced Israel to escalate its reprisal, thus potentially setting in motion an escalation that could rapidly spiral out of control.



There are also strategic considerations that could upset the current “balance of terror” along the Blue Line. These include:

- Iran’s precision-guided missile program,<sup>21</sup> which involves fitting Hezbollah’s existing unguided rockets with guidance systems that extend their range and improve their accuracy. Israel sees this program as a severe threat to its national security and has vowed to prevent it.
- Iran’s entrenchment in Syria and western Iraq, and construction of a new military front in southwest Syria opposite Israeli lines in the Golan Heights. Israel has conducted multiple attacks against Hezbollah and Iranian targets and linked assets.
- Iran’s advances towards nuclear breakout capabilities gradually increase the likelihood of preventive action by the United States and/or Israel.<sup>22</sup> Hezbollah’s military capabilities serve as Iran’s deterrent against such an action, and would probably be employed if an attack on Iran occurs.
- The United States’ campaign of “maximum pressure” against Iran since the Trump administration abandoned the 2015 nuclear deal. This campaign includes extensive sanctions against Iran and its proxies, chief of which is Hezbollah.
- Tensions in the Arab Gulf between Iran and the United States and its Arab allies that have, in the past year, been marked by the seizure of oil tankers, the downing of a US unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), mortar and rocket attacks by Kata’ib Hezbollah against US bases in Iraq,

a missile attack on Saudi Arabia’s oil and gas infrastructure, and, most significantly, Soleimani’s death and Iran’s retaliation. April 2020 saw an increase in friction between the US and Iranian navies in the Gulf.<sup>23</sup> Any escalation between these parties has the potential to reach the Lebanon-Syria-Israel front.

- Domestic challenges in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon that could change the calculus of Iran’s leaders and Hezbollah to escalate brinkmanship to dangerous levels. Lebanon is undergoing its most serious political and economic upheaval since the end of the 1975-90 civil war, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. Protesters have taken to the streets in large numbers demanding the ouster of the political leadership. Hezbollah has emerged as the most vocal opponent of the protest movement, which it fears could unravel the political gains made by the party since 2005.<sup>24</sup> While the shutdown in Lebanon because of the coronavirus has effectively stalled the protest movement, it is widely expected to resume once the health crisis dissipates. Iran and Iraq have also witnessed protests against the leaders of both countries.

This report examines the current force posture of the IDF and Hezbollah, identifies potential triggers that could lead to a war, analyzes how the next war would be fought by both sides, and offers recommendations to at least maintain the current relative calm and offset a conflict that could cost thousands of lives and bring unprecedented ruin to both Lebanon and Israel.

21 Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre, “Hezbollah’s Precision Missile Project,” February, 2019, <http://www.bicom.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Precision-Project-Paper.pdf>.

22 David Albright, “Statement by the Institute for Science and International Security on Sanctions, the Coronavirus, and the Need to Verifiably Dismantle Iran’s Uranium Enrichment Program,” Institute on Science and International Security, April 27, 2020, <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/statement-on-no-enrichment>.

23 “Iran Warns US Navy Over Gulf Incident,” BBC News, April 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52348099>.

24 Lin Noueihed and Dana Khraiche, “Hezbollah Followers Fill Streets to Oppose Protest Demands,” Bloomberg News, October 25, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-25/lebanon-s-hezbollah-asks-followers-to-quit-street-after-scuffles>.

## PREPARING FOR THE NEXT ROUND: A TENFOLD HEZBOLLAH

In the fourteen years since the end of the 2006 war, Hezbollah has fundamentally changed in size, capabilities, structure, and experience. In 2006, Hezbollah numbered between 3,000 and 5,000 full-time and part-time fighters. Most of these fighters had some combat experience against the IDF from the years of Israeli occupation of south Lebanon between 1978 and 2000 and the conflict in the Shebaa Farms, a strip of disputed territory at the intersection of the Lebanon-Syria-Israel border and the Golan Heights, from October 2000 to July 2006. Today, Hezbollah's manpower stands at an estimated 30,000 fighters, of which perhaps 7,000 belong to its special forces division, with a reservist corps that could draw upon another 10,000 to 20,000 combatants.

This massive and rapid post-2006 war recruitment drive served two purposes. The first was to replenish and expand Hezbollah's ranks in anticipation of another war with Israel. The second was to bind more Shias to the party given the political tensions that existed at the time between the Hezbollah-led March 8 parliamentary coalition and its rival March 14 coalition, which dominated the then Lebanese government.

Traditionally, recruitment into Hezbollah is a lengthy process of background checks, religious education, and military training with the goal of producing an obedient, devout, well-trained, and disciplined combatant. However, in recent years, a second tier of recruits has emerged due to the need for fighters to serve in Syria. This second-tier cadre is usually motivated to join by a combination of peer

pressure, financial remuneration, and the prestige of being a member of the "resistance." These recruits were given a month of basic training at camps in the Bekaa Valley and then deployed to Syria. This second tier of fighters does not necessarily initially subscribe to the strict adherence to Hezbollah's ideological and religious values, as taught to, and followed by, the traditional recruit, but learns them while serving as combatants. While this second tier was useful in the context of fighting in Syria, it is unlikely that it would be committed to action against the IDF.

Israel estimates that Hezbollah today has 130,000 to 150,000 surface-to-surface rockets and missiles in its arsenal, ten times larger than its 2006 stockpile. New additions are believed to include the Fateh-110 family of surface-to-surface missiles, which carry a 500 kg warhead and have ranges of 250-300 km, depending on the variant. By 2014, Israel assessed that Hezbollah had acquired a "few dozen" Scud sub-ballistic missiles, including the Scud-D, which has a range of around 700 km.<sup>25</sup>

Hezbollah's amphibious warfare unit, which is tasked with coastal defense and sea-borne infiltrations of Israeli territory, is reported to have acquired the P-800 Yakhont anti-ship cruise missile, a supersonic system with a range of up to 300 km.<sup>26</sup> Russia sold a consignment of Yakhonts to Syria in 2010.<sup>27</sup> Some of these missiles and their launchers are reportedly in Hezbollah's hands.<sup>28</sup> In July 2013, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) reportedly attacked a military compound north of Latakia in northwest Syria that was believed to contain a consignment

25 Dan Williams, "Israel Tests Arrow Missile Shield, Sees Hezbollah Threat," Reuters, January 3, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-arms-israel-arrow/israel-tests-arrow-missile-shield-sees-hezbollah-threat-idUSBREA020E120140103>.

26 Alexander Fulbright, "Hezbollah Said to Have Obtained 'Game-Changing' Anti-Ship Missiles," *Times of Israel*, February 19, 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-said-to-have-obtained-game-changing-anti-ship-missiles/>.

27 "Russia to Sell Syria Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles," BBC, September 17, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-11347495>.

28 Adam Entous, Charles Levinson, and Julian E. Barnes, "Hezbollah Upgrades Missile Threat to Israel," *Wall Street Journal*, January 2, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hezbollah-upgrades-missile-threat-to-israel-1388707270>.



A Google Earth satellite image of a suspected Hezbollah UAV air strip in the northern Bekaa Valley. The 2,200-foot-long strip was constructed between 2014 and 2015 in a remote location and out of sight of populated areas. It may have been employed for Syria theater operations. Although Hezbollah has possessed UAVs since 2004, its fleet has expanded in size and sophistication in recent years. The war in Syria has allowed Hezbollah to develop expertise and experience in UAV operations. (Google Earth) Inset: A Mohajer-2 UAV on display at Hezbollah's military museum at Mlita in south Lebanon. The wings and tail carry the logo of Hezbollah's recently formed "Air Brigade."

*Photo credit: Nicholas Blanford.*

of Yakhont missiles.<sup>29</sup> Possession of the Yakhont system would allow Hezbollah to threaten shipping and infrastructure along Israel's entire coastline and potentially target Israeli gas platforms in the Mediterranean Sea.

Hezbollah has operated UAVs since 2004, most of them Iranian versions. It is believed to have a fleet of a few dozen UAVs that comprise its "Air Brigade," including the Aabil-3, the small Yasir reconnaissance UAV, and the off-the-shelf DJI Phantom minidrone for over-the-hill surveillance. The group may also have acquired the Shahed-129 unmanned combat aerial vehicle, Iran's most sophisticated UAV. In April 2015, *Jane's Defence Weekly* reported the discovery of a possible

Hezbollah airstrip constructed in a remote area of the northern Bekaa Valley that appeared to be configured for UAV missions.<sup>30</sup> The strip was unpaved at the time but was asphalted in late summer 2015. It may have been used for Syria theater operations. Hezbollah has flown drones into Israeli airspace several times since 2004; the most recent incursion was in March 2020.<sup>31</sup>

Little is known about the scale and variety of Hezbollah's air defense assets. Unlike other weapons systems that were used for the first time in the 2006 war, Hezbollah did not employ air defense, partly because the group's hidden bunker networks afforded some protection and partly due to the scarcity of suitable IAF targets above south

29 Michael R. Gordon, "Israel Airstrike Targeted Advanced Missiles That Russia Sold to Syria, U.S. Says," *New York Times*, July 13, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/world/middleeast/israel-airstrike-targeted-advanced-missiles-that-russia-sold-to-syria-us-says.html>.

30 Nicholas Blanford, "Analysis: Hizbullah Airstrip Revealed," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, April 24, 2015, <https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/jdw58435-jdw-2015>.

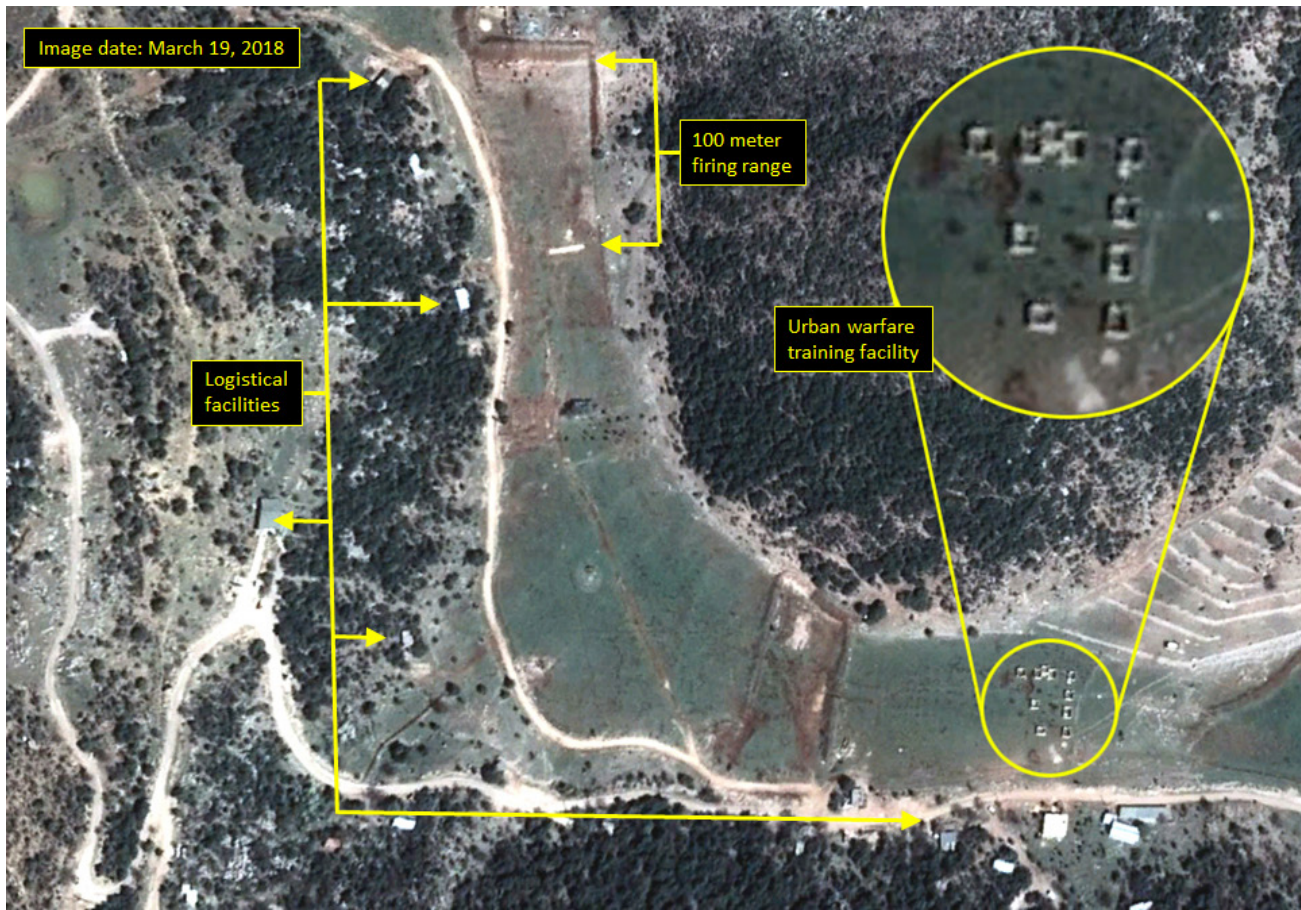
31 Judah Ari Gross, "IDF Shoots Down Drone from Lebanon, Says It Was Flown by Hezbollah," *Times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-shoots-down-drone-from-lebanon-says-it-was-flown-by-hezbollah/>.

Lebanon, and possibly also because the group did not want to reveal all its military assets.<sup>32</sup> In January 2013, the IAF targeted a facility west of Damascus that was believed to contain a convoy of Buk-M2 (SA-17) missile systems that was reportedly about to roll out toward the border with Lebanon.<sup>33</sup> Syrian television footage of the aftermath of the strike showed several destroyed 9K33 Osa (SA-8) platforms at the facility.

The size of the conflict theater has traditionally been determined by the range of Hezbollah's rockets, which up to 2006 limited the battlespace essentially to south Lebanon and northern Israel. However, the range of Hezbollah's larger missile and rocket systems has broadened the battlespace to encompass today the entire territories of both Lebanon and Israel. Hezbollah now has the capability of launching missiles deep into Israel, not only from Lebanon's south, but also from the northern Bekaa Valley and southwest Syria.

32 The IAF made extensive use of fixed wing assets over Lebanon during the 2006 war, but very little use of rotary wing assets due to their lower operating altitude and the perceived risk that Hezbollah would employ air defense, such as the SA-18 Grouse MANPAD, which Israel believes Hezbollah acquired in 2002. The only helicopter shot down in the 2006 war over south Lebanon was a Yasur troop transporter, which was struck by an anti-tank missile as it was taking off after having deployed an IDF platoon. The pilot and crew were killed.

33 Isabel Kershner and Michael R. Gordon, "Israeli Airstrike in Syria Targets Arms Convoy, U.S. Says," *New York Times*, January 30, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/31/world/middleeast/syria-says-it-was-hit-by-strikes-from-israeli-planes.html>.



A Google Earth satellite image dated March 19, 2018, shows part of a sprawling Hezbollah training camp in south Lebanon. The huge surge in numbers of recruits post the 2006 war compelled Hezbollah to significantly expand its training facilities, even at the expense of becoming detectable from the air.  
*Photo credit: Google Earth.*

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM SYRIA

While Hezbollah's traditional focus of military effort has been on Israel, it has experienced its most intense and prolonged period of fighting in Syria where the group has fought to defend the regime of its ally, Bashar al-Assad. What began as a covert support mission in 2012 turned into an open and extensive campaign.

Hezbollah's fighters traditionally are trained to fight a single enemy, the IDF, in a single environment, the hills and valleys of south Lebanon, an area with which they are intimately familiar. Hezbollah's weapons and tactics were similarly shaped for that opponent and location. In Syria, Hezbollah found itself operating in a much broader fashion, conducting offensive attack-clear-hold missions in unfamiliar environments with vastly differing terrain, from barren mountains to dense urban areas.

Hezbollah's enemy was not a superior conventional army like the IDF, but inferior irregular forces, relatively lightly armed and utilizing asymmetric tactics similar to those Hezbollah used against the IDF in south Lebanon in the 1990s. Indeed, Hezbollah gradually began to play more of a conventional military role in Syria than it was traditionally used to. By late 2016, Hezbollah had established an armored "brigade,"<sup>34</sup> was fighting in relatively large company-sized formations, and for the first time fought alongside other military units, including the Syrian army, Russian special forces, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and Iraqi Shia militias. Hezbollah also participated in corseting operations, in which experienced cadres joined lower-quality Syrian army units to stiffen their backbone, and played advisory roles and helped in operational planning.<sup>35</sup> An estimated 5,000 to 10,000 Hezbollah fighters were deployed in Syria at any one time depending on operational needs. Many fighters fought multiple tours in different

locations. Hezbollah learned how to organize a coherent logistical supply chain to feed, equip, and rotate combat units. The cadres learned how to call in air strikes and on at least one occasion deployed from helicopters by parachute to reach a besieged Shia-populated village in northern Syria.

"Hezbollah has a trained army now and the resistance [Hezbollah] is no longer relying on guerrilla-style wars," Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general, was quoted as saying in November 2016.<sup>36</sup> "We are heavily-armed and well-trained and have acquired well-developed expertise all of that in order to protect Lebanon and in the interest of Lebanon."

Nevertheless, many of the skills Hezbollah's fighters learned in Syria will be redundant in any future war with the IDF. The conventional capabilities Hezbollah has exhibited in Syria—calling in air strikes, operating armored vehicles, deploying by parachute—will be abandoned against Israel. Instead, Hezbollah will return to its lower-signature, small-unit tactics, using its best trained and most experienced fighters rather than employing its full strength. But the one lesson learned in the Syria campaign that could have a crucial impact on the capabilities of the individual Hezbollah fighter against the IDF is combat experience. A whole new generation of Hezbollah recruits has fought in a brutal conflict. Hezbollah's veterans from the resistance campaign in south Lebanon in the 1990s never experienced such prolonged and intensive periods of combat operations that left several thousand killed and wounded. Hezbollah fighters now know what it is like to kill and come under fire at close range, an experience almost unknown to the current generation of IDF soldiers.

34 Hezbollah held a parade in Qusayr in western Syria in November 2016 to show off its armored "brigade," which included T-54A, T-55, T-62, and T-72 Main Battle Tanks, 2S1 Gvozdika self-propelled howitzers, and BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicles.

35 Jeffrey White, "Hizb Allah at War in Syria: Forces, Operations, Effects and Implications," *CTC Sentinel* 7:1 (January 2014). <https://ctc.usma.edu/hizb-allah-at-war-in-syria-forces-operations-effects-and-implications/>.

36 Nicholas Blanford, "Lebanese Hezbollah Offers a Glimpse of its Firepower," *New Atlanticist*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/lebanese-hezbollah-offers-a-glimpse-of-its-firepower/>.

## PREPARING FOR THE NEXT ROUND: ISRAEL

Stepping into the top command office after the 2006 war, then IDF Chief of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, who was recently tapped as Israel's next foreign minister, repeatedly said that "an army is either warfighting or preparing for war."<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, he placed a strong emphasis on preparing the IDF for war. The following years saw both Hezbollah and the IDF draw lessons from the 2006 war, combining force buildup and current operations. Based on its enemy's capabilities and intentions, Israel focused its warfighting readiness on another Lebanon-centric war. Its recognized gaps in intelligence, munitions, and land warfare capabilities were translated into acquisition, equipping, and training. While Israel has conducted three military campaigns in the Gaza Strip since 2006 and focused heavily on countering Iran's nuclear program, Lebanese Hezbollah remains the number one conventional military threat to its national security.

Elevated to a high-priority target, Hezbollah is the focus of a large proportion of Israel's intelligence efforts. According to reports by the United Nations secretary-general, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) had, between February 2019 and February 2020, recorded 1,378 Israeli violations of Lebanese airspace for a total of 5,434 overflight

hours.<sup>38</sup> The vast majority of the overflights were conducted by UAVs. Israeli jets have also used Lebanese airspace to launch standoff munitions at targets in neighboring Syria.<sup>39</sup> Israel has never denied its heavy air reconnaissance effort in Lebanon, and even stresses that it is the least it could do for self-defense against Hezbollah's growing military threat. Besides providing an early warning about possible attacks by Hezbollah, this heavy intelligence effort is allowing for a deep and continuous intelligence preparation of the battlefield, uncovering Hezbollah's military assets that are embedded in populated areas, mostly Shia villages.

A clear demonstration of Israel's intelligence penetration into Hezbollah's secrets was evident from the exposure in December 2018 of six "attack tunnels" dug across the border into Israel.<sup>40</sup> Hezbollah sought to use the tunnels to conduct surprise infantry attacks by establishing numerous bridgeheads inside Israeli territory and behind its frontline defenses. Israel's exposure and destruction of the tunnels was noteworthy because the tunneling project was run as a highly compartmentalized secret activity, covered by civilian cloak, and its sites are still off-limits to UNIFIL and the LAF under the pretext that it is "private property."<sup>41</sup> Other examples of the IDF preparing the

37 Mazal Mualem, "Israel's Netanyahu, Gantz reach deal on unity government," *Al-Monitor*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/israel-netanyahu-gantz-deal-government-coronavirus-.html>; Hanan Greenberg, "Chief of Staff: Preparing to Deteriorate on Both Fronts," *Ynet* (in Hebrew), June 5, 2007, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3409017,00.html>.

38 United Nations Security Council, "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) During the Period from 18 February to 24 June 2019: Report of the Secretary-General," S/2019/754, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/754>; United Nations Security Council, "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) During the Period from 25 June to 31 October 2019: Report of the Secretary-General," S/2019/889, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2019/889>; United Nations Security Council, "Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) During the Period from 1 November 2019 to 18 February 2020: Report of the Secretary-General," S/2020/195, <https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/195>.

39 "Syria Claims Israel Struck Homs for a Second Time This Month," *Jerusalem Post*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/syrian-air-defenses-intercept-hostile-targets-over-homs-623095>.

40 The IDF discovered six tunnels, of which three were also verified by UNIFIL technical investigators as of April 2019. "UNIFIL Confirms a Third Tunnel Crosses Blue Line," UNIFIL, April 25, 2019, <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-confirms-third-tunnel-crosses-blue-line/>; Israel Defense Forces, "Operation Northern Shield," December 7, 2018, <https://www.idf.il/en/articles/hezbollah/operation-northern-shield/>.

41 Assaf Orion, "Tip of the Iceberg: Report of the UN Secretary-General on Resolution 1701, November 2019," INSS Insight No. 1242, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), January 5, 2020. <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/tip-of-the-iceberg-report-of-the-un-secretary-general-on-resolution-1701-november-2019/>.



IDF troops operate along Israel's Northern border during Operation Northern Shield.  
*Photo credit: Flickr/Israel Defense Forces.*

battlefield include the erection of frontier defenses, which have strengthened Israel's border against cross-border attacks; the building of multitier missile and rocket defenses; and improving the home front and populace readiness for wartime threats.

Some aspects of lessons-derived preparation include Israel's hefty acquisition of precise strike munitions and operationalizing of intelligence capability for high-capacity targeting.<sup>42</sup> Put together, this allows for a combined and massive intelligence-driven precision strike, or as defined in the IDF strategy, a "system-wide firepower... with a capacity to hit thousands of targets in a single combat day."<sup>43</sup>

On the land warfare front, the IDF has invested heavily in equipping its ground forces with more effective arms (Merkava IV battle tanks, Namer infantry fighting vehicles, improved missiles), improving their survivability (Trophy and Iron Fist armored vehicle protection systems), intelligence gathering (drones and low-flying UAVs), and

logistics. The IDF has also invested a lot of effort, from its headquarters down to the maneuvering forces, in training both regular forces and reserves in Lebanese scenarios. This effort has focused on warfighting in rugged and urban areas and in typical "militarized villages," including subterranean and tunnel warfare.

On the maritime front, well aware of Iran's acumen in gray zone naval warfare, demonstrated since May 2019 in the Arabian Gulf, Israel has invested in improved detection and defenses of its shores and maritime assets against various threats, such as missiles and most probably also underwater and fast-boat attacks.

The last leg in this all-domain defense and wartime preparation includes protection against cyberattacks on military, defense, and national infrastructure.

42 Israel Defense Forces, "The New Goals Arena Was Inaugurated in the Intelligence Division," (in Hebrew), March 14, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2HOu3ag>.

43 Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, "Deterring Terror: How Israel Confronts the Next Generation of Threats: English Translation of the Official Strategy of the Israel Defense Forces," special report, August 2016, 42, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/IDFDoctrineTranslation.pdf>.

## THE CAMPAIGN BETWEEN THE WARS

The 2006 war not only evoked a sense of urgency for Israel's war preparation, it also gradually transformed its conceptual framework on national defense. Reflecting on the behavior of Iran and its regional proxies both in the prewar years and in the postwar period, Israel recognized its enemy's continuous warfare campaign by proxy, connecting the dots between its multifront conflicts over the past forty years. It became clear that Israel is directly threatened by Hezbollah in Lebanon (and by Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza), but only as an extension of Iran's gray zone indirect warfare that is enabling the military capabilities of these neighboring enemies.<sup>44</sup> This awakening shook the misleading "peace or war" dichotomy,<sup>45</sup> replacing it with a recognized enemy strategy of a long twilight struggle which is, in essence, a slow-motion, slow-burning war. Israel understood that its enemies use the years of quiet on its borders to build up their ranks and capabilities, incrementally raising the threat to Israel's population and encroaching on its freedom of operation. Gradually, combining operational activity experience and theoretical conceptualization, a new dimension in Israel's national security concept was born. Dubbed the "Campaign Between Wars" (CBW, or *Mabam* in Hebrew<sup>46</sup>), it is explained in the 2015 and 2018 editions of IDF Strategy: "The CBW goals are to decrease present and emerging threats, to defer war while improving conditions for victory in war, to preserve and enhance deterrence, to raise the State of Israel's and the IDF's value as an asset [for

others], to expand the IDF's freedom of operation and to narrow the enemy's. The CBW activity is continuous, conducted across the theater of war [regionwide] according to ongoing assessment and enabling intelligence, as part of an overarching [strategic] concept of the general command. The campaign includes all-domain operations in various attack tools: kinetic, judicial, political, cognitive, technological, electronic, cyber, cooperation and military diplomacy."<sup>47</sup>

This gradual development increased Israel's efforts to foil enemy military buildup, and led to the deaths of figures in Hamas, Hezbollah, and the ranks of the Syrian military.<sup>48</sup> However, Israel's reported role in the foiled attempt to assassinate Soleimani in October 2019 and its purported part in the US strike which finally killed the Iranian general on January 3 remains unclear.<sup>49</sup>

As the war in Syria ground on, two major developments occurred. First, Iran accelerated its efforts to equip Hezbollah with advanced weapon systems and then sought to establish its own military power base in Syria. Concurrently, the Assad regime became increasingly vulnerable as it fought for survival. Second, Israel increased its efforts to counter its enemies' arms buildup by striking weapon transfers to these groups. The response from Iran and Hezbollah gradually shaped the rules of the game. Most of Israel's strikes occurred in Syria, while Lebanon enjoyed an "off-

44 Michael Eisenstadt, "Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran's Asymmetric Way of War," Policy Focus 162, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/operating-in-the-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-of-war>.

45 The White House, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," December 2017, 28, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

46 Amos Yadlin and Ari Heistein, "The Mabam Strategy: Israel, Iran, Syria (and Russia)," *Jewish Review of Books*, Spring 2019, <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/5205/the-mabam-strategy-israel-iran-syria-and-russia/>.

47 Chief of Staff Office, "IDF Strategy," Israel Defense Forces (in Hebrew), August 2015, <https://bit.ly/2TyzQ9B>; Chief of Staff Office, "IDF Strategy," Israel Defense Forces (in Hebrew), April 2018, <https://www.idf.il/media/34416/strategy.pdf>.

48 Itamar Eichner, "Mossad Head Threatens: 'Suleimani Knows His Elimination is Possible,'" *Ynet* (in Hebrew), October 10, 2019, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5605484,00.html>; Adam Goldman and Ellen Nakashima, "CIA and Mossad Killed Senior Hezbollah Figure in Car Bombing," *Washington Post*, January 30, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-and-mossad-killed-senior-hezbollah-figure-in-car-bombing/2015/01/30/ebb88682-968a-11e4-8005-1924ede3e54a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-and-mossad-killed-senior-hezbollah-figure-in-car-bombing/2015/01/30/ebb88682-968a-11e4-8005-1924ede3e54a_story.html); "Israeli Commandos' Killed Top Syrian Official—Leaked US Files," BBC, July 16, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33548065>.

49 "Iran Says it Foiled Plot to Kill Major General Qassem Soleimani," Al Jazeera, October 3, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/iran-foiled-plot-kill-major-general-qassem-soleimani-191003151306433.html>.



limits” status after a 2014 attack near Janta in the eastern Bekaa Valley provoked a response from Hezbollah.<sup>50</sup> In most cases, Syria’s role remains in air defense fire only. In several cases, Iran tried to launch rockets at Israel from Syrian soil. When Iran tried to move national military assets into Syria, build arms factories in that country, and establish an operational presence in the Golan Heights, Israel repeatedly responded by attacking those assets. As Iran deployed missiles in Iraq, and diplomatic efforts to stop Tehran fell short, a series of air strikes against Iraqi al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias was reported.<sup>51</sup> These air strikes heightened tensions inside Iraq and between the Iraqi government and US forces based in the country,<sup>52</sup> which were seen as responsible for their Israeli ally’s attacks.

There is an ongoing competition between Iran’s efforts to increase the threat to Israel from near and neighboring areas, such as Gaza, Lebanon,

Syria, but also Iraq and Yemen, on the one hand and Israel’s resolve to foil these threats on the other. In this competition, Israel has repeatedly demonstrated not only its intelligence and strike superiority on the operational level, but also its refusal to accept Iran’s rules of the game. Israel is clearly ready to use force against capacity building efforts even before the enemy intends to imminently employ this capacity, showing that in a slow-burning war, as in classical war, logistics and armament are legitimate targets. There is ample recent evidence to show that Israel is ready to go beyond inflicting material damage and depriving enemies of threatening capabilities. It is also willing to impose a cost and inflict casualties on proxies, dispatchers, enablers, and hosts alike, including Iranian forces. This Israeli willingness is a direct assault on Iran’s strategic preference to fight its war indirectly, by other peoples’ hands and from other peoples’ lands.

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50 On the night of February 24, 2014, Israeli jets struck a building on a track used by Hezbollah to smuggle weapons from Syria to Lebanon. The target was likely an arms transfer operation underway. Hezbollah acknowledged that one of its facilities had been targeted by Israel and vowed retaliation. There followed over the next few weeks several unclaimed attacks or attempted attacks all but one emanating from Syrian territory in the northern Golan Heights where Hezbollah had a presence at the time. The one exception was a roadside bomb attack in the Shebaa Farms, which some months later was claimed by Nasrallah during an interview. The mini reprisal campaign concluded with the wounding of four IDF soldiers near Majdal Shams in a roadside bomb ambush; “Hezbollah Vows to Respond to ‘Israeli Air Strike,’” BBC, February 26, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26352905>.

51 Michael Knights and Assaf Orion, “If Iran Deploys Missiles in Iraq: U.S.-Israeli Response Options,” Policywatch 3119, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 13, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/if-iran-deploys-missiles-in-iraq-u.s.-israeli-response-options>.

52 Jacob Magid, “Alleged Israeli Strikes in Iraq Unlikely to Threaten US Presence, Experts Say,” *Times of Israel*, August 31, 2019, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/alleged-israeli-strikes-in-iraq-unlikely-to-threaten-us-presence-experts-say/>.

## TURNING ROCKETS INTO MISSILES

The most important development of recent years is perhaps Iran's "precision project." This project seeks to convert Hezbollah's multiple, but "dumb," statistical rockets, such as the M-302, into accurate GPS-guided missiles that are able to hit targets with high probability. It also seeks to improve the accuracy of Hezbollah's existing missiles, such as the M-600. In 2014, Ehud Barak, a former prime minister of Israel, warned that in five years, groups like Hezbollah would have missiles so accurate that they could "choose which building in Israel to hit."<sup>53</sup>

In 2009, when reports first emerged that Hezbollah had received the M-600, its Circular Error Probability (CEP)—by which missile accuracy is measured—was estimated at 500 m.<sup>54</sup> In other words, 50 percent of the time the missile would strike within a 500 m radius of its target. That level of accuracy was sufficient to target a city or an air base, but not a specific building. Western intelligence sources told an author of this report that in the past two years, Hezbollah has been able to increase the accuracy of the M-600 to a CEP of ten meters or less. However, Israel Defense Intelligence reportedly believes that Hezbollah does not possess an array of precision missiles that it could use against Israel and has yet to begin a systematic missile production line.<sup>55</sup> Given Israel's small size and highly vulnerable strategic infrastructure, such a capability in the hands of its enemies would greatly enhance the potential of a crippling blow to its national security, perhaps even giving Hezbollah and Iran an incentive to strike first with the

expectation that they would risk only a diminished response from an incapacitated Israel.

Hezbollah's arsenal has reached a size where acquiring greater numbers of rockets and missiles carries less of an advantage than upgrading existing systems to extend range and improve accuracy. After its preferred offensive countermeasures, Israel's main defense against surface-to-surface missiles is a three-tiered missile interception system. Iron Dome is intended for short-range projectiles, such as 122 mm Grad rockets, David's Sling tackles intermediate systems such as the Fateh-110 or Zelzal rockets, and the Arrow 3 defeats ballistic missiles such as the Iranian Shehab-3, which has a range of 1,000-2,000 km.

The first two anti-missile systems are relevant in the context of the Hezbollah-Israel theater. To overcome the Iron Dome and David's Sling anti-missile systems, Hezbollah will employ saturation tactics—firing multiple rocket salvos towards various targets to overwhelm the anti-missile systems.<sup>56</sup> Faced with dozens of incoming projectiles, the interception systems prioritize which missiles to hit. Those that are assessed to fall into open or unpopulated areas are left alone while those heading for protected areas are intercepted. This is the action adopted by the IDF when facing projectiles fired from Gaza. In the next war with Hezbollah, the IDF could face as many as 1,200 missiles and rockets heading toward Israel per day.<sup>57</sup> In such an event, the IDF will need to balance its defense resources between key

53 "Barak: Hezbollah Will Be Able to Pick Which Building to Hit," *Ynet News*, March 26, 2014, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4503841,00.html>.

54 Alon Ben-David, "Hizbullah Deploys Missile on Lebanese Soil," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, October 23, 2009. <https://janes.ihs.com/Janes/Display/jdw41234-jdw-2009>.

55 Amos Harel, "Israeli Army Sees Chance to Escalate Attacks Against Iran and Its Allies," *Haaretz*, January 16, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/iran/.premium-israeli-army-sees-chance-to-escalate-attacks-against-iran-and-its-allies-1.8402081>.

56 Hezbollah has used similar swarming tactics against IDF armored vehicles, especially the Merkava family of main battle tanks (MBTs), which are among the most heavily armored MBTs in the world. The initial projectiles could consist of older systems such as 107 mm recoilless rifles and AT3 Sagger wire-guided anti-tank missiles (ATM) to blast off the reactive armor—and potentially overwhelm the new Trophy defense system—protecting the MBT, thereby exposing the steel skin of the tank to a more advanced ATM such as the AT-14 Spriggan.

57 Tom Wheeldon, "Bolstered by Iran, Hezbollah 'Capable of Destruction on a Whole New Scale,'" *France 24*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.france24.com/en/20181219-iran-israel-hezbollah-tunnels-missiles-lebanon-syria-nasrallah>.

strategic assets such as military bases, industrial centers, communication hubs, airports, seaports, and government facilities, and major civilian-populated areas. However, the dilemma facing the IDF is that if Hezbollah has been able to upgrade the accuracy of most of its larger systems (M-302 and above) there will be a greater number of projectiles heading for strategic targets that must be tackled and fewer that can be ignored. This will intensify the pressure on Iron Dome and David's Sling to defeat the incoming missiles.

As a CBW classic, Israel's efforts to counter the precision project included diplomacy, showcased in 2018 by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's presentation in the United Nations General Assembly of three alleged missile conversion sites in Beirut, and later with a full IDF information campaign about the precision project and its Iranian and Hezbollah leadership figures.<sup>58</sup> In addition to these efforts, Israel's CBW included kinetic strikes on missiles, conversion kits, and factories in Syria. On August 25, 2019, Hezbollah accused Israel of

conducting a drone strike in Beirut, reportedly against a missile propellant mixer involved in the precision project.<sup>59</sup>

Israeli officials openly stated that Israel "will not accept Hezbollah's precision missile project on Lebanese soil," reportedly raising the project to a higher priority, second only to Iran's nuclear project, and expressing resolve to stop it "even at the risk of war."<sup>60</sup>

Strategic competition is often paradoxical in nature. Iran and Hezbollah's quest to increase their threat to Israel, and hence their deterrence over it, in fact increases Israel's threat perception and pushes it to accept higher risks to prevent the threat. Israel's efforts to deter war and prevent higher future threats to its homeland may actually lead to escalation and even war. The prospects for another war will only increase if both sides persist on their current paths.

58 Amos Harel, "Netanyahu's UN Intel Reveal Forces Hezbollah to Reconsider Beirut Missile Sites," *Haaretz*, September 29, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-between-palestinians-and-hezbollah-israel-tries-to-steer-clear-of-an-october-surprise-1.6513219>; Israel Defense Forces, "Hezbollah's Precision Guided Missile Project.

59 Ben Hubbard, "Hezbollah Says Drones That Crashed in Beirut Suburbs Came From Israel," *New York Times*, August 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/25/world/middleeast/israel-drones-beirut-hezbollah.html>; Richard Spencer, "Israeli Drone Attack Targeted Iranian Missile Makers in Beirut," *Times*, August 28, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/israeli-drone-attack-targeted-iranian-guided-missile-technology-5680836b9>.

60 "IDF Chief Calls on UNIFIL to Stop Hezbollah's Precision Missile Project," *Israel Defense*, September 2, 2019, <https://www.israeldefense.co.il/en/node/40033>; Amir Buhbut, "Hezbollah's Accuracy Project: Israel Will Operate in Lebanon—Even at the Cost of War," *Walla! News* (in Hebrew), September 6, 2019, <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3311168>.

## UNDER PRESSURE

Paradoxically, while Hezbollah has never been stronger militarily or more powerful politically, it also faces an array of threats that could in time undermine the organization.

Twenty years ago, Hezbollah had an enviable reputation in Lebanon of being untainted by the endemic corruption that soared from the end of the 1975-90 civil war. Hezbollah then was a small organization focused on resisting the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. It had a small but potent parliamentary presence. However, it did not immerse itself deeper into Lebanese politics in order to protect its resistance priority because it was unnecessary as long as neighboring Syria was the ultimate source of authority in Lebanon. Hezbollah began to engage more deeply in Lebanese politics only after the Syrian military withdrew from Lebanon in April 2005.

Following the 2006 war, corruption began to emerge within Hezbollah's ranks as the organization expanded massively over a short period of time. This was coupled with substantial monetary inflows from Iran and Hezbollah's various in-house revenue-generating streams. Although Hezbollah's leadership has attempted to root it out, corruption has spread and is eroding the party's moral fabric and the respect afforded it by its Shia base.

In tandem with the corruption, Hezbollah's financial difficulties have also weakened its support. Reduced, or suspended, salaries, smaller pensions to families of "martyrs," and public appeals for donations to the "resistance" have undermined Hezbollah's reputation by creating an atmosphere of vulnerability and fiscal unreliability. It also breeds resentment among the populace who look to Hezbollah for a living. The Lebanese Shia business community, once a significant donor, is distancing itself from Hezbollah to avoid being tarnished as a "terrorist financier" and potentially targeted by US sanctions.

The coronavirus crisis in Lebanon could grant Hezbollah a temporary reprieve from the unhappiness of some in the Shia community as its support base looks to the party for help. Nasrallah has described COVID-19 as a "global war" and Hezbollah has widely publicized its efforts to mobilize some 25,000 people, including medics, to contain the outbreak in Lebanon.<sup>61</sup>

Hezbollah's 1985 manifesto rejects Lebanon's confessional political system. However, Hezbollah has emerged in the current political and economic crisis as, ironically, the main defender of the status quo. It views the protest movement and its demands as a potential threat to the gains it has made in the past fifteen years. Hezbollah's defense of a political elite widely viewed as corrupt and inefficient, and the counterrevolutionary actions of its supporters in October and November 2019 on the streets of Beirut and in the south and Bekaa Valley, undermined its original credo as a champion of the oppressed and tarnished its image of being proudly aloof from sordid sectarian politics.

This May marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the IDF's withdrawal from south Lebanon—the pinnacle of Hezbollah's martial achievements. Since then, a whole new generation of Lebanese Shias has grown up with little or no experience of the Israeli threat. The last time Hezbollah fought a sustained conflict with Israel was almost fourteen years ago. Under such circumstances, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Hezbollah to sustain the "Society of Resistance" concept that binds the Islamic Resistance to the supportive Shia population in perpetuity. Since the 2006 war, Hezbollah has carried out only seven claimed military operations from Lebanese territory against the IDF, all of them either defensive in nature (against IDF troop and aerial incursions) or in retaliation for Israeli actions, such as assassinations of its cadres or air strikes. On the other hand, Hezbollah has spent most of the past six years fighting fellow Muslims, albeit Sunnis, in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

61 Tom Perry and Laila Bassam, "Hezbollah Deploys Medics, Hospitals Against Coronavirus in Lebanon," Reuters, March 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-hezbollah/hezbollah-deploys-medics-hospitals-against-coronavirus-in-lebanon-idUSKBN21C3R7>.



An IDF soldier in south Lebanon on September 26, 2006, near the village of Marwahin in south Lebanon. It took several weeks for the IDF to withdraw from south Lebanon after the war ended on August 14, 2006. The sign beside the soldier reads the "Street of the Martyr Nizar Ali Saleh", a reference to one of four Hezbollah fighters who were killed during the IDF's withdrawal from south Lebanon in May 2000.

*Photo credit:* Nicholas Blanford.

These foreign interventions strain Hezbollah's anti-Israel resistance narrative, despite the best efforts of the party's leaders to justify why their fighters are in Syria and Iraq.<sup>62</sup> They also intensify the view that Hezbollah is less a national resistance movement

geared toward defending Lebanon against Israel and more a foreign policy tool of Iran. Nasrallah's two speeches following Soleimani's death in which he extolled the slain Iranian general and promised retaliation only harden that view.<sup>63</sup>

62 Hezbollah's leaders continue to deny or play down any role in Yemen because there is no Lebanon-centric reason for the organization to be there. The Syria intervention was justified by Hezbollah as a defense of the "backbone of resistance" and that the fall of Assad would mean the loss of the Palestinian cause. Furthermore, Assad's enemies in Syria, Hezbollah averred, were "Takfiri" fanatics who represented a danger to Lebanon as well. The Iraq intervention was justified as part of the anti-Islamic State campaign.

63 "Key Notes from Nasrallah Speech Marking One Week After Soleimani Assassination," *Middle East Observer*, January 13, 2020, <http://middleeastobserver.net/key-notes-from-new-nasrallah-speech-marking-one-week-after-soleimani-assassination/>; "Crisis Puts Lebanon's Survival at Stake, Hezbollah Warns," Reuters, February 16, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis/crisis-puts-lebanons-survival-at-stake-hezbollah-warns-idUSKBN20A0JL>.

## THE NEXT WAR: ACCIDENTAL OR INITIATED?

Other than an accidental war triggered by an unchecked escalation of tactical events, there is the question of an initiated war. Hezbollah could start a war on Iran's bidding, most likely following a major attack on Iranian soil by either Israel or the United States that could be seen as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic's leadership. From Israel's perspective, the national ethos evolves around wars of necessity imposed by others or seeking to remove an existential threat. The 1982 First Lebanon War of choice is still a formative living memory for Israel's leadership, a reminder of the simple entry, complicated exit, high costs, and low gains involved with war. The Second Lebanon War in 2006 developed out of a tactical incident, approved as an operation and recognized as a war only in retrospect. During his years as IDF chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz, who currently leads the Blue and White (Kahol Lavan) party and recently agreed to join Netanyahu's emergency unity government as vice prime minister and defense minister, often said "operations we do when we can; wars only when we must."<sup>64</sup> When Israel bombed a secret nuclear reactor in Syria in 2007, it was willing to risk war to prevent a nuclear-armed Assad.<sup>65</sup>

It is difficult to believe that Israel will initiate a war with Hezbollah unless it would seek to prevent an unacceptable danger. A nonnuclear danger is in essence a matter of threat perception and judgment, not a numerical threshold, in terms of, for example, the number of precision-guided missiles in Hezbollah's possession. Israel estimates that Hezbollah has few precision missiles, yet clearly declared that a continuation of the precision project is unacceptable. One can deduce then that the current threat level does not justify an initiated war, but that Israel will be willing to risk escalation to prevent this threat from growing.

Even if Israel's leadership has an agreed red line missile figure above which the arsenal becomes a *casus belli*, it wisely chose not to disclose it, warning Hezbollah only in general terms against increasing its threat. This way, Hezbollah's calculus about its continued precision efforts must take into account both Israel's CBW preemptive attacks on Lebanese soil and the possibility that at some point Israel may choose to launch a preventive war. The humbling lessons for Hezbollah from 2006 were that correctly assessing Israel's threshold of escalation is a tricky and dangerous business, and that seemingly calculated, risk-aware brinkmanship may easily turn into disastrous gambling. Soleimani's death reinforced that lesson after he fatally failed to calculate the United States' threshold. Unlike 2006, the current calculus involves not only Hezbollah's force deployment and kinetic operations against Israel in Lebanon, but also its force buildup and activities in Syria and Iraq, and possibly ripple effects of an exchange of blows between the United States and Iran.

As for Hezbollah, it remains in a defensive stance ringing northern Israel and serving as a form of deterrence for Iran. Planning for an attack on Iran has to take into account Hezbollah's reaction. That reaction will depend heavily on the target and scale of an assault on Iran. If the attack is limited in scope and duration to setting back Iran's nuclear agenda, it is unlikely that the Iranian leadership will ask Hezbollah to launch a war against Israel, especially as there are numerous asymmetric retaliatory options available to the Islamic Republic. But if a large-scale operation is launched against Iran, one that poses a potential existential threat to the regime, then Hezbollah could be called upon to commit to a full-scale attack on Israel.

64 Gal Pearl Finkel, "Do Deals When Possible, War When There Is No Choice," *Davar 1* (in Hebrew), February 2, 2018, <https://www.davar1.co.il/108146/>.

65 Stephen Farrell, "Israel Admits Bombing Suspected Syrian Nuclear Reactor in 2007, Warns Iran," Reuters, March 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-syria-nuclear/israel-admits-bombing-suspected-syrian-nuclear-reactor-in-2007-warns-iran-idUSKBN1GX09K>.



A slab of reinforced concrete poking out of the ground is all that remains of a large Hezbollah bunker discovered by the IDF after the August 14 ceasefire that ended the 2006 war. The bunker was subsequently dynamited. The bunker lay just 100 yards from a UNIFIL position lying on the Lebanon-Israel border. It was also only 400 yards from – and in full view of – a large IDF border post. The bunker ran 120 feet underground and spread over an area three quarters of a square mile. It contained firing positions, ammunition storage facilities, operations rooms, medical facilities, lighting and ventilation, kitchens and bathrooms with latrines and hot and cold running water. Neither UNIFIL nor the IDF detected any digging activity.

*Photo credit: Nicholas Blanford.*

## HEZBOLLAH IN BATTLE

Given that neither Israel nor Hezbollah currently seeks a full-scale war, if one were to break out, it would likely be the result of a miscalculation, one that triggers a tit-for-tat escalation that spirals into a broader conflict. The critical calculation for both sides is determining the threshold moment when it becomes clear that a minor confrontation is escalating toward war rather than scaling down, and, therefore, who will launch the first massive strike.

As in 2006, Hezbollah's overarching strategy will be to maintain the flow of missile and rocket fire into Israel as it is its main means of placing pressure on the Israeli government and leveraging a favorable outcome. Rhetoric aside, Hezbollah will not destroy Israel in the next war. Victory for Hezbollah will come through survival of the Islamic Resistance, the failure of Israel to achieve its war goals, the public perception that the IDF was "defeated," Hezbollah's ability to rearm and rebuild to an equal or greater prewar capacity, the continued support of Lebanon's Shia community, and the preservation of Hezbollah's political influence in Lebanon.

Israel has warned that it will seek to inflict massive damage on Lebanon in a future war, a policy known as the "Dahiyah Doctrine," a reference to the destruction by Israel of much of Beirut's southern suburb (Dahiyah) in the 2006 war.<sup>66</sup> While the Dahiyah Doctrine serves as a form of deterrence during times of peace, once war breaks out, Hezbollah will not halt operations to avoid further destruction to Lebanon. On the contrary, such a step would be tantamount to surrender. Therefore, while Israel may prefer a quick conclusion to the war, Hezbollah will draw out the conflict for as long as possible—at the cost of increasing the level of destruction in Lebanon—in the knowledge that the longer the war lasts, the greater the pressure on the Israeli government to accept a ceasefire.

If the leaders of Iran and Hezbollah assess that full-scale war is inevitable, they will seek to launch a broad missile barrage against key military and civilian assets in Israel before Israel can launch a preemptive strike against their missile facilities. If Hezbollah has had time to mobilize its forces, the missile strike could be accompanied by incursions into Israeli territory by land, sea, and possibly air by the Radwan Brigade. The discovery in December 2018 of several attack tunnels running from Lebanon into Israel beneath the Blue Line points to one method of infiltration.<sup>67</sup> Hezbollah could also stage decoy explosions at various spots along the Israeli technical fence stretching along the border while quietly entering Israel elsewhere. In 2011, Nasrallah said in a speech that the day may come when he would ask the resistance to "liberate Galilee."<sup>68</sup> However, any incursion into northern Israel will not attempt to liberate territory by holding it but to sow panic within the civilian population and complicate the IDF's response. If war breaks out suddenly, border communities will have little time to evacuate. This would leave open the possibility that the Radwan Brigade may attempt to seize all or part of one of the settlements that abut the border, such as Metulla, Manara, or Misgav Am.

Other Radwan Brigade units could carry out acts of sabotage against infrastructure, mount roadside bomb ambushes, and cut communication lines. They may pursue a propaganda advantage by including a cameraman among them to film the fighters entering Israeli communities and then beam the images around the world.

Hezbollah may attempt to infiltrate Israel from the Golan Heights as well as south Lebanon. It has an amphibious warfare unit and is suspected of having a variety of fast-attack boats, semi-submersible boats, and swimmer dispersal vehicles that may aid seaborne infiltration of Israel's northern coast. The Israeli navy closely monitors its northern waters for

66 "Israel Warns Hezbollah War Would Invite Destruction," Reuters, October 3, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-israel-lebanon-hezbollah/israel-warns-hezbollah-war-would-invite-destruction-idUKTRE4923I020081003>.

67 Israel Defense Forces, "Operation Northern Shield"; "UNIFIL Confirms a Third Tunnel Crosses Blue Line," UNIFIL, April 25, 2019, <https://unifil.unmissions.org/unifil-confirms-third-tunnel-crosses-blue-line>.

68 "Hezbollah Will Conquer Galilee If There Is War," *Jerusalem Post*, February 16, 2011, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Hezbollah-will-conquer-Galilee-if-there-is-war>.





One of two entrances to a Hezbollah bunker deep inside a hill near Rshaf village in south Lebanon. The entrances were painted black to prevent reflected sunlight potentially exposing the bunker's existence to Israeli aerial assets. The interior of the bunker was painted in white gloss to better reflect electric lights. The bunker was used by Hezbollah in the 2006 war and later abandoned. It contained a kitchen, bathroom with water boiler, waste water system, sleeping quarters, blast doors, ventilation shafts, and three large water tanks. May 7, 2007.

*Photo credit: Nicholas Blanford.*

such attempts. The amphibious warfare unit also operates Hezbollah's anti-ship cruise missiles, which could be used to attack Israeli oil and gas platforms in the Mediterranean Sea and to impose a blockade on vessels along the length of the Israeli coast.

In 2006, all of Hezbollah's rockets launched at Israel were fired from south Lebanon due to their relatively limited range. The increased range of Hezbollah's missiles means they can now be fired from other parts of Lebanon and from southwest Syria. Therefore, the IDF and the IAF will have to commit greater resources to locate and neutralize the launchpads. This could increase their vulnerability to Hezbollah's air defense assets.

The Shia civilian population in south Lebanon will likely flee northwards as soon as the shooting starts, a sad tradition for the beleaguered southerners since the IDF's 1978 incursion and subsequent invasions and offensives leading up to the 2006 war. In times of tension, southern Lebanese place packed suitcases beside their front doors in preparation for hurried departures. The civilian casualty toll likely will be high initially, not only in the south but also elsewhere in Lebanon. After the first few days, however, few civilians will remain in the villages and towns of the south, leaving the battlefield relatively unpopulated.

In 2006, the IDF quickly realized that airpower alone was insufficient to stem the flow of rockets fired into Israel. It had to deploy ground forces into south Lebanon. The same reality is likely to apply in any future war between Israel and Hezbollah. However, the topography of south Lebanon does not favor an invasion from the south. The main lines of communication in south Lebanon run east to west with the axes of northbound advance limited to the coastal highway in the west, the Salouqi/Hojeir valley system in the center, and the Hasbani and Shebaa valleys in the east that lead to the Bekaa Valley. However, these routes effectively channelize armored vehicles, making them vulnerable to ambush by anti-tank missiles and explosively formed penetrator (EFP)<sup>69</sup>/Claymore lateral blast improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and vertical

blast belly charge IEDs.<sup>70</sup> The IDF would face the same problem if it was to deploy armored columns into the Bekaa Valley itself. The Bekaa is a natural tank trap. While the flat valley floor would allow for swift egress, the Bekaa is approximately 10 km wide and flanked by steep mountains that allow anti-tank missile teams overview of the ground below, a tactic used by Syrian army anti-armor teams in 1982 when the IDF advanced into the southern Bekaa.

In Syria, Hezbollah has fought more along the lines of a conventional army than the hybrid-style force of 2006. In a future war with Israel, it will likely return to its hybrid/guerrilla-style roots, albeit on a much larger scale than 2006, as it is the most effective means of confronting a powerful conventional military such as the IDF.

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69 EFPs are explosively formed penetrators first used by Hezbollah in the late 1990s in south Lebanon. The EFP uses a molten copper slug to cut through armor. The Claymore is an antipersonnel charge containing hundreds of steel ball bearings.

70 In the final 60 hours of the 2006 war, the IDF deployed an armored column into the Hojeir valley system in an attempt to reach the village of Ghandourieh. Channelized by the deep valley, the armored column was struck multiple times by IED belly charges and Hezbollah anti-tank teams hidden in the slopes above.

## IDF IN BATTLE

At the strategic level, there is a serious debate on Israel's war objectives and desired outcome. In the event of a war, Israel would seek to minimize the damage to its own population and homeland while attempting to significantly improve the post-war security situation to include a reduced military threat and a calm border, if not actual peace. While there is little doubt that Hezbollah's warfighting capability must be heavily degraded and its war effort disrupted, several questions still remain open on the road to war, during the war, and after the war. As strategic thinking goes, one may approach these questions in reverse order.

Postwar questions involve the resulting regional balance of power, preventing the rearming of Hezbollah by the Quds Force, as expected by Iran's proven gray zone capability-building between wars; deterring attacks on Israel from Lebanon; and stabilizing the common border and the post-conflict zone at a time when donor fatigue is rampant.

The big questions during war are escalation management; the fragile choice between a "short" cost-minimizing limited conflict and an achievement-maximizing "all-out" war; the role of the Lebanese state, government, and armed forces in the war (many Israeli officials no longer see a distinction between Hezbollah and the country it now dominates); and the possible spillover of the war into additional fronts (Syria, Gaza, Iraq) and even its expansion to a direct conflict with Iran. There is a significant change since 2006 in the roles of the great powers in influencing a future conflict and its termination as a result of a diminished US interest and a larger Russian presence in the Levant.

The chain of events leading up to the war will dictate the parties' ability to conduct an opening surprise offensive that maximizes the military advantage of the initiator against the surprised target. Evidently, there is an inherent tension between one's own preparedness and the enemy's surprise, as more preparations emit more warnings and indications to the other side. To bridge this tension, parties

often decide to take higher operational risk in order to maximize surprise by engaging in strategic deception, as superbly demonstrated by Egypt and Syria against Israel in 1973.

The opening scenario notwithstanding, one can assume that the IDF war effort will include an all-domain strategic defensive to thwart and minimize the impact of Hezbollah's offensive on Israel's population, national infrastructure, and warfighting capabilities. This includes a land defensive against Hezbollah's declared intention to "occupy the Galilee" through cross-border incursions by special forces units, such as the Radwan Brigade; an air defense against incoming rockets, missiles, drones, and UAVs; a maritime defensive of Israel's shores, waters, and strategic energy assets at sea against boats, missiles, and underwater enemy attacks; a cyber defensive against cyberattacks on Israel, regardless of the geographical source of such attacks; and protection of the population by evacuating civilians from border communities, focused early warnings against incoming threats, public guidance for risk-mitigating behavior, enhanced national support to municipal-level operations, and increased readiness for medical services and national wartime stockpiling.<sup>71</sup> While strategically aiming to decrease costs for Israel, reduce harm by the enemy, and decrease its utility of attack, the strategic defensive may include offensive operations for that same purpose, striving to fulfil the state's responsibility to safeguard its citizens against external perils.

Defensive action alone will not bring victory, nor is it Israel's signature way of war and military thinking, which has historically evolved around a defensive strategy and an offensive doctrine. The key will be Israel's main war effort: the all-domain strategic offensive that seeks to destroy and disrupt the enemy's warfighting effort and promote strategic war goals. This offensive will include massive intelligence-driven precision strikes on Hezbollah targets launched from air, land, and naval platforms. A combination of deep and wide penetrating

71 "Hezbollah Will Conquer Galilee If There Is War," *Jerusalem Post*, February 16, 2011, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Hezbollah-will-conquer-Galilee-if-there-is-war>.



Aitta Shaab village in south Lebanon on August 14, 2006, the day of the ceasefire that ended the 2006 war. Most of the village was destroyed after 34 days relentless fighting. Although it lies less than a mile from the border, the IDF was unable to fully seize the village. A future war between Israel and Hezbollah promises to produce this level of damage but on a far larger scale. *Photo credit: Nicholas Blanford.*

intelligence on Hezbollah’s military assets and high-volume firepower that reaches thousands of targets per day can produce an extremely high-intensity impact. Nevertheless, Hezbollah’s large arsenal will still allow it to launch a considerable number of projectiles against Israel. A decisive land maneuver is perceived as a critical effort in suppressing enemy fire at its source, in inflicting heavy, even decisive damage to Hezbollah’s main fighting force, and in waging battle on the enemy’s territory. The strike and maneuver vectors are mutually supportive, while all efforts are enabled by a common situational awareness and augmented by naval, space, cyber, and information operations.

Since 2006, the role of land maneuvers in wartime has been hotly debated in Israel. This debate has been marked by interservice differences and the

political leadership’s lack of appetite for land warfare, its costs, and its complications. Two out of three Israeli military campaigns in Gaza (in 2008 and 2014) included limited land maneuvers. At the time of the next Lebanon war, the debate on the role of land forces will still be raging, but the scales will probably be tipped by the weight of Hezbollah’s fire’s pressure on Israel and its decision makers. The IDF strategy calls for an “immediate combined offensive” and seeks early maneuver as part of the war’s opening moves.<sup>72</sup> After their initial opening shock, fire efforts usually accrue diminishing returns over time, creating a need for another escalation level, often found on land. Thus, if a land maneuver does not take place immediately as a war opens, the chance of it being launched will increase with any additional day of undecided or unending stand-off fighting.

72 Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, “Deterring Terror.”

By air, land, or sea, the battles will be waged in Hezbollah's chosen battlefields. Hezbollah's original concept of operations was shaped on a guerrilla design, embedding its military operations in the local population, following Mao Tse-tung's maxim that "a guerrilla swims among the people like a fish swims in the sea."<sup>73</sup> Yet this choice, useful in Hezbollah's early and lightweight days, has been seriously overstretched when Hezbollah's arsenal and organization were upscaled to a full-sized military.<sup>74</sup> In 2006, Israel's decision makers deliberated whether to strike first and risk collateral Lebanese casualties, or defer the strike, risking higher rocket impacts on their own population. They approved a limited precision strike on Hezbollah's medium-range Fajr rockets hidden in dozens of homes. At the time, Hezbollah had a total arsenal of 12,000 rockets and missiles.

As its fire threat to Israel grew tenfold—Hezbollah currently has 130,000 to 150,000 rockets and missiles—Hezbollah has become a much more serious and pressing threat. When the next war comes, the threat presented to Israel's leaders would be significantly higher and the horns of the dilemma so much sharper: either directing a massive preemptive strike with wide Lebanese collateral damage on the one hand or risking delayed action and heavy damage to Israel's home front on the other. Any reasonable political leaders will answer the call to protect their own, with both national duty and political calculations converging. Hezbollah's massive and survivable arsenal will be able to hurt Israel, but will also inevitably bring the wrath of war on its own populace, turning the militarized dwelling of the Shia hinterland into smoking rubble.

Here again the paradoxical nature of strategy is revealed. Hezbollah's quest for a better deterrent against Israel, while hiding behind its own population shield, worked fine when guerrilla size, but when massively industrialized can only bring on a disastrous, self-inflicted calamity on a scale unknown. Massive and quick ruin awaits Hezbollah's supporting population, its popular power base and its home villages and neighborhoods, despite the IDF's collateral-mitigating processes. Serious damage and

casualties inflicted on Israel will hardly improve the conditions of the Shia community in Lebanon.

To add an international angle to the already entangled situation, one should recall that the blazing battlefield between the Litani River and the Blue Line is also the area of operations of more than 10,000 UN peacekeeping troops who will be caught in the crossfire. The safety and fate of foreign troops will surely top their countries' priorities (as it did in the 2006 war when there were only 2,000 UN peacekeepers in south Lebanon) and raise the anxiety level in their capitals.

A military conflict between Israel and Hezbollah will be a lethal contest between combatants. Each side will try to inflict maximum casualties on the other. More importantly, a parallel competition will be pitched between Hezbollah's firepower aimed at Israel's populace and national infrastructure and the IDF's efforts to protect them by both offensive and defensive measures. Given the growth in size of Hezbollah's order of battle and its arsenal since 2006, one can easily assume that the damage in Lebanon in the next war would be at least ten times worse than in 2006. "You cannot enter the same river twice," the maxim goes, and the next war will not be "2006 reloaded." Given the significant Israeli preponderance over Hezbollah in terms of the size of its population, resources, and military power, Hezbollah may be able to give Israel a bloody nose, but will be unable to stem its invasion into the Shia hinterland, its chosen battlefield, or the mass destruction caused by Israel's counter-ballistic strike. In war's "kingdom of uncertainty" it is presumptuous to predict the exact outcome, but safe to assume some certainties.

On Israel's side, one can expect unprecedented damage to the home front, heavy tolls in blood and treasure, and a predictable political crisis following the national trauma. On the other side of the Blue Line, the inhibiting cost of the next war will be paid by Lebanon, by Hezbollah and its supporters, setting it back and risking the loss of most of Hezbollah's material, social, and political gains since 1982. Furthermore, a substantial number of US citizens on both sides of the border could be among the casualties of a full-scale war between

73 Kyle W. Fonay, "On Guerrilla Warfare: Two Takes, Mao vs. Guevara," *Small Wars Journal*, August 18, 2013, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/on-guerrilla-warfare-two-takes-mao-vs-guevara>.

74 Tal Lev Ram, "Chief of Staff: We Are Required to Stand Firm Against the Terrorist Armies That Surround Us," *Maariv* (in Hebrew), June 12, 2019, <https://www.maariv.co.il/news/Article-703371>.

Israel and Hezbollah, which could result in calls for a noncombatant evacuation operation and draw Washington deeper into the crisis. This is valid for many other Western countries.

This grim aftermath is only made starker given the limited scope of actual contentious issues between Lebanon and Israel, other than Hezbollah's armed obedience to Iran against Israel. Territorial disputes and water issues between the two are negligible, while the Palestinian diaspora in Lebanon is dwarfed by the tenfold presence of Syrian refugees. Israel looks at Lebanon merely as a platform for an Iranian threat to its national security. It can show some flexibility to resolve most other outstanding issues. Threatening Israel is obviously an Iranian interest, and Hezbollah's traditional flag, yet wielding Iran's sword comes at a price to its bearer, risking total destruction of Lebanon as a consequence. Hamas is not less devoted to the Palestinian cause than Hezbollah, yet Israel and Hamas demonstrate that ongoing fighting does not

preclude communication, then partial and gradual political arrangements, even if indirect and mutually denied. With the stakes so much higher in Lebanon, Israel, Lebanon, and Hezbollah may consider the road hitherto not taken: limited, gradual steps away from the threshold of a disastrous war.

The Second Lebanon War in 2006 ended with UNSCR 1701, which sought to prevent another war. Almost fourteen years later, in the months before Soleimani's death, Hezbollah and Israel seemed to be drifting closer to war than at any time in the past decade. Given the military developments on both sides, the mutual destruction will be far reaching. Avoiding the warpath and deferring conflict must be prioritized. This effort must be energized with recharged urgency that dissipated as the lessons from 2006 dissolved in the ensuing period of relative calm. War prevention strategies should include both anti-escalation measures at the tactical level and strategic stabilization efforts at higher levels.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors of this report bring two perspectives to the table—one from Israel and the other from Lebanon. As a result, while there are areas of agreement in terms of recommendations to maintain calm while building toward a more permanent level of stability, there are inevitably some divergences in views. Accordingly, we have split our recommendations into three categories: the first is a joint set of recommendations, the second includes what are considered achievable recommendations from a Lebanese perspective, and the third is a set of recommendations from an Israeli perspective.

### Joint recommendations

- Strengthening UNIFIL's vital liaison channels between Lebanon and Israel is of critical importance. This could be facilitated by easing UNIFIL's access and crossing into Israel and by adding more telecommunications options to the procedures that require a physical presence. Liaison capabilities could possibly be expanded at a tactical level on both sides. The monthly tripartite meetings chaired by the UNIFIL force commander and attended by senior IDF and LAF representatives have served as a useful forum to iron out disputes and misunderstandings. This tripartite mechanism is probably among UNIFIL's most valuable functions.
- Pressure can be maintained on Hezbollah by continued sanctions against individuals affiliated to the party as well as its allies and enablers in the political and business community.
- Performance-based economic assistance could be gradually provided by the international community to Lebanon. This could encourage incremental steps towards a more secure future for Lebanon and Israel alike. Given Lebanon's

huge national debt, the eastern Mediterranean gas prospects are a potential bailout. Negotiations between Israel and Lebanon have foundered in the past, but the United States has expressed a readiness to mediate a solution if both sides are willing. To this end, the Lebanese government should accept the framework for negotiations suggested by US envoys in order to launch the proposed talks.<sup>75</sup>

- Optional financial relief routes should be opened, conditioned on tangible and verifiable security measures. Similarly, if real progress on security in Lebanon is achieved, Israel could show flexibility and creativity on border disputes, including the northern end of Ghajar village, which resides north of the Blue Line,<sup>76</sup> and on addressing overflights in Lebanese airspace (both of which are breaches of UNSCR 1701), as well as eventually on mutually agreeable security arrangements in the Shebaa Farms/Mount Dov area.<sup>77</sup>

### Recommendations from a Lebanese perspective

- The United States has delivered more than \$2 billion in military assistance to the LAF since 2006. This assistance, along with aid packages and training programs from other countries, notably the United Kingdom, has helped improve the Lebanese military's performance and capabilities. The LAF's swift and successful campaign to oust the Islamic State (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL) from northeast Lebanon in August 2017 was a clear demonstration of the LAF's enhanced capabilities compared to its performance in the three-month battle in 2007 against the Fatah al-Islam group in

75 Joseph Haboush, "Resolving the Lebanese-Israeli Border Dispute: What's in It for Washington?" *Middle East Institute*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/resolving-lebanese-israeli-border-dispute-whats-it-washington>.

76 Ghajar is a Syrian Alawite-populated village seized by Israel from Syria in the 1967 war and whose residents since 1981 have held Israeli nationality. The Blue Line cuts through the village leaving the northern half in Lebanese territory and the southern half in the Israeli Golan previously ruled by Syria.

77 "[S]o long as the Israel Defense Forces remain in northern Ghajar, Israel will not have completed its withdrawal from southern Lebanon in accordance with its obligations under resolution 1701," as written in a UN report from 2007. UN Security Council, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006)," October 30, 2007, 4, <https://undocs.org/S/2007/641>.



Army Gen Joseph L. Votel, then-commander United States Central Command, receives a mission briefing at the Lebanese Armed Forces 9th Brigade observation position at Dahr Al Jabl overlook, near the Syrian border during his visit to Lebanon June 7, 2017. On the trip, Votel met with key leaders of the Lebanese government and military to reaffirm a shared commitment of stability and security in the region.

*Photo credit: US Air Force, Tech Sgt. Dana Flamer.*

north Lebanon.<sup>78</sup> The assistance program must be maintained as Lebanon requires a strong and effective military to help preserve stability, especially in the event of an economic collapse, which would lead to a breakdown in law and order. Termination of the assistance program would create a vacuum that could be filled by Russia, which is showing an interest in Lebanon and the LAF, and even by Iran.<sup>79</sup> There should be no illusions that the LAF will at any time directly challenge Hezbollah's military autonomy—such a step would be tantamount to triggering a civil war. As two armies crammed into a tiny country, the LAF and Hezbollah engage in case-by-case deconfliction efforts. As the LAF grows stronger, Hezbollah's rationale

that it must retain its weapons because only it is capable of defending Lebanon effectively grows weaker. Hezbollah's spoiler actions during the LAF's 2017 offensive against the Islamic State provided a rare glimpse of the party's concerns about the LAF's improving capabilities.<sup>80</sup>

- The United Kingdom has helped raise, equip, and train four LAF LBRs, which are deployed along Lebanon's porous border with Syria. The United Kingdom may want to recommend to the Lebanese government a revival of plans to raise fifth and sixth LBRs for deployment along the Blue Line and to scrap the current UNIFIL-inspired "model regiment" plan. Alternatively, the "model regiment," which has yet to be fully

78 For more, see Nicholas Blanford, *The United States-Lebanese Armed Forces Partnership: Challenges, Risks, and Rewards*, Atlantic Council, May 7, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-united-states-lebanese-armed-forces-partnership-challenges-risks-and-rewards/>.

79 Bryant Harris, "Pompeo Calls for Review of Security Assistance to Lebanon," *Al-Monitor*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/05/pompeo-calls-review-security-assistance-lebanon.html>.

80 Nicholas Blanford, "The Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah's Competing Summer Offensives Against Sunni Militants," *CTC Sentinel* 10:8 (2017), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-lebanese-armed-forces-and-hezbollahs-competing-summer-offensives-against-sunni-militants/>.



raised, could be a recipient of the UK military training program and fitted on an incremental basis with much the same equipment as the LBRs, including fortified towers with surveillance and reconnaissance assets. Either step would help assert the Lebanese government's visible presence along the Blue Line, serve as a reassurance to local communities, strengthen cooperation with UNIFIL, and help further undermine Hezbollah's claim as sole effective defender of Lebanese sovereignty.

- Similarly, international donors may want to consider enhancing the capabilities of the Lebanese Navy in light of international interest in oil and gas exploration/extraction opportunities in Lebanon's Exclusive Economic Zone and the United Nations' goal of transferring maritime operations from UNIFIL's Maritime Task Force to the Lebanese government.

### Recommendations from an Israeli perspective

- At the tactical level, it is clear from the various attacks since 2006 that Hezbollah is fully deployed militarily throughout south Lebanon and employs its force at will. Past lessons teach that ready and available Hezbollah military capabilities along the Blue Line have extremely high escalatory potential, heightening the need for Israel to launch early strikes when tensions arise. It is thus advisable to focus the efforts of UNIFIL and the LAF on the most sensitive areas of Lebanon's southern border district, some 3-5 km deep along the Blue Line; to grant expanded authority to the LAF and UNIFIL there; and to increase the latter's awareness and documentation capabilities. Preventing escalation by buffering and demilitarizing south Lebanon would be positively served if UNIFIL could inspect suspicious sites regardless of "private property" pretexts. In quite a few cases, however, it is the LAF itself that impedes UNIFIL's mission. Presently, Hezbollah has no difficulty blocking LAF and UNIFIL access to these suspicious locations and by doing so

cripples UNIFIL's freedom of access, situational awareness, and useful reporting.<sup>81</sup> Hezbollah would likely resist a move to grant access to suspicious sites. If enhanced inspections are not possible, the sharp mismatch between UNIFIL's size and authority will continue, exposing 10,000 peacekeepers to an unjustifiable risk. One option to reduce this risk is to downsize UNIFIL and decrease the mission's cost, while focusing its efforts near the Blue Line and on an enhanced liaison role.

- On the systemic level, to stem the coming tide of war, it is important to sever and disrupt Iran's strategic lines of communication and logistics that enable the IRGC's Quds Force to arm and rearm Hezbollah, raising the threat to Israel and its impetus to counter it despite ever-growing risk. International enforcement of arms embargo resolutions on both exports from Iran and illicit imports to Lebanon is a potential line of effort toward this goal.
- Finally, it is time to acknowledge that many national and international policies on Lebanon emerged in 2005-6, and since then have been flying on auto pilot. Most of the underlying assumptions of these policies were shaken or totally collapsed by the political and military developments in Lebanon and regionwide over the past fourteen years. Yet most capitals and diplomats seek the elusive stability of a sovereign Lebanon even as Hezbollah's violent dominance over the country has become clear. After most policy measures have failed to lead their owners to a desired reality, a thorough policy review is called for to avoid a famous definition of insanity: "doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results."

The unprecedented political and economic crises in Lebanon on the one hand and the potential catastrophe of a destructive war on the other have opened a rare window of opportunity to avoiding another chapter being added to history's "March of Folly."

81 Assaf Orion, "Southern Lebanon: The Land of Three Armies," INSS Insight No. 1184, INSS, July 2, 2019, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/southern-lebanon-land-three-armies/>; Assaf Orion, "Hiding in Plain Sight: Hezbollah's Campaign Against UNIFIL," Policy Note 71, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote71-Orion.pdf>.

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