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Israel's Information Campaigns: An Alternative to Kinetic Strikes

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In recent months, the Israeli defense establishment has made increasing use of "information campaigns," or exposure through the media of enemy activity that has been detected by Israeli intelligence. This modus operandi has developed into an alternative to kinetic strikes.

Information campaigns, which involve the revelation through the media of enemy activity, allow military decision makers to utilize sensitive intelligence to disrupt enemy build-up processes and attack plans without the associated risk of escalation that comes with kinetic strikes. In recent months, the Israeli defense establishment has made increasing use of such campaigns.

Information campaigns tell enemy decision makers that their activities have been exposed and warns them to cease if they wish to avoid firepower strikes. It also applies pressure on international actors, such as states from which non-state actors operate, and global power actors that are keen to avoid armed conflict in their areas of influence.

As such, information campaigns have become a key part of Israel's War Between Wars – the low-profile IDF campaign against Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and others in the northern and southern arenas.

The War Between War has twin goals: to disrupt enemy force build-up and to make enemy decision makers feel vulnerable to Israel's intelligence capabilities. This boosts Israeli deterrence and pushes back the prospect of the outbreak of a new full-scale war. Both these goals can, in theory, be well served by information campaigns.

However, information campaigns appear to be most effective when they complement firepower strikes on developing threats. Kinetic strikes boost the deterrent messages of information campaigns in the War Between Wars, making information campaigns more effective as warnings.

The effectiveness of information campaigns, much like that of their kinetic strike equivalents, can only be measured through longer-term results. If they prove to have a sustained disruptive effect on the development of threats, rather than only a short-term effect, they can be considered useful preemptive tools.

Israel's defense establishment has utilized information campaigns several times in recent weeks and months. On April 1, for example, Hebrew-language media outlets carried warnings from unspecified security sources about plans by Palestinian Islamic Jihad to launch "an attack or series of attacks against Israel in the coming hours or days" from the Gaza Strip, as a Ynet news report stated. That report included an analysis of PIJ's motivation – "an apparent bid to damage the significant progress of the Egyptian-UN mediation efforts between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip."

The Ynet report said the plot could have involved firing an anti-tank missile from Gaza at an Israeli target – an attack that certainly could have placed Gaza on the fast track to a new armed conflict. PIJ denied the plot, which may be an indication of its embarrassment and discomfort at being exposed.

Some reports suggested that PIJ was plotting the attack without Hamas's knowledge. If true, the information campaign could also have served as an alert to Hamas, telling it that Iran's proxy in the Strip is about to drag it into a new escalation that runs against Hamas's current interests.

On April 1, Israel's Channel 13 reported that the US had passed on a severe warning to the Lebanese government over the intention of Iran and Hezbollah to build a new precision missile production site on Lebanese soil. According to the report, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo delivered the warning to Lebanese PM Saad Hariri during a visit to Beirut last month.

The report – which cited a senior American official as a source – can be considered part of an information campaign, since Israel used intelligence to deliver a warning to enemy decision makers about their activities. Israel used the US and the media as "transmitters" for the warning, while at the same time informing international actors like Russia that regional stability is under significant threat. These elements can all act as pressure levers on the Iranian-Shiite axis to scale back its activities or risk Israeli strikes on Lebanese soil.

Throughout February and March, Hebrew media reports, as well as the Israeli civilian satellite imaging company, ISI, published reports about a new and suspicious missile manufacturing site in northwest Syria.

Israel's Channel 12 cited Israeli intelligence sources as saying that Iran has not given up its efforts to secretly build new and advanced missile production sites in Syria.

ISI followed up by releasing satellite imagery of the suspicious site in Safita, Syria, concluding that the site is likely a missile manufacturing site, and adding that it resembles compounds on Iranian soil.

Last year, Israeli information campaigns drew attention to Iranian and Hezbollah precision missile production sites in Lebanon, where Israel has been reluctant to launch overt kinetic strikes due to Hezbollah's effective deterrence.

In September 2018, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu and the IDF Spokesman's Unit spearheaded an information campaign by releasing intelligence on multiple underground sites in Lebanon for converting unguided rockets into guided missiles. Netanyahu delivered the warning during his UN General Assembly speech, and the IDF then released details about the sites.

"Hezbollah's senior members took a deliberate decision to shift the center of gravity of the precision missile project, which they have been working on for a while, to the civilian area in the heart of Beirut," the IDF stated on September 27.

Three months after these warnings, in December 2018, Netanyahu said that Hezbollah had shut down these conversion centers.

It is difficult to evaluate the success of information campaigns due to the murky and largely classified world of covert intelligence tracking, which does not make the transition into the public sphere unless decision makers in Israel choose to make that transition.

However, based on Netanyahu's own statements, the information campaign to stop the missile sites in Lebanon was successful, with Hezbollah dismantling the sites before Israel could strike them.

Meanwhile, as the significant March 28 Israeli strike on an alleged Iranian weapons site near Aleppo in northern Syria indicates, kinetic strikes will continue to do much of the heavy lifting in the War Between Wars.

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