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Hezbollah: Caught on the Horns of a Deterrence Dilemma

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Hezbollah wishes to both maintain and change the status quo vis-à-vis Israel, a circle it is attempting to square by threatening retaliation while simultaneously doing what it can to avoid escalation. This inherent contradiction has left Hezbollah with few viable options, leading to a series of tactical failures and an increased need to deliver some kind of success, however cosmetic. The result is a greater likelihood of inadvertent escalation along Israel's northern border.

As a consequence of recent events and its own ill-advised declarations, Hezbollah finds itself caught on the horns of a strategic deterrence dilemma. The Khomeinist-Shiite organization's leadership, sworn to Israel's destruction, has declared that it will retaliate for any Israeli action against its personnel or will prevent it from acquiring the means to achieve that objective. An Israeli strike in Syria in July that killed a Hezbollah operative triggered the promised retaliation by Hezbollah, but its actions were severely constrained by its inability to withstand the consequences of escalation.

The results were failed operations that left the organization embarrassed and under increased pressure to achieve some semblance of success. This pressure can easily lead to inadvertent escalation along Israel's northern border.

The Israeli-Hezbollah conflict relationship along the Lebanese border is complex and built on mutual deterrence. Hezbollah is thus both a deterrer and a deterree. *Mutual* deterrence, however, should not be conflated with *symmetrical* deterrence. Hezbollah's overarching objective—to destroy Israel—is categorically different from Israel's objective, which is to prevent its own destruction. Should Hezbollah, alone or in conjunction with Iran or other allies, attain the capability to destroy Israel, it is unlikely that punitive threats

would suffice to deter an attack, as Israel's enemies would accept extremely heavy damage as the price of success in their efforts to annihilate the Jewish State. Relying on its ability to defeat any existential threat, Israel utilizes deterrence by denial to prevent Hezbollah, as well as other adversaries, from attempting to achieve their overarching genocidal objective.

The goals of each side's immediate deterrent strategies also differ. Israel wishes to maintain quiet along its northern border. Because it is incapable of preventing minor Hezbollah rocket or ground fire attacks, it relies on threats of punitive retaliation and massive escalation for deterrence. Conversely, Hezbollah wishes to deter Israeli action that impedes the strengthening of the organization's capability to attack Israel. Israeli strikes on Iranian/Hezbollah targets in Syria are not retaliatory but preventive, in that they interdict Iranian supply of advanced weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hence, while these strikes contribute to Israel's deterrence of Hezbollah, they are not integral to Israel's deterrence policy.

Hezbollah chairman Hassan Nasrallah has set an unachievable deterrence objective. By attempting to both maintain and change the status quo, he has ensnared Hezbollah on the horns of a deterrence dilemma.

The "Nasrallah Doctrine," which has been in effect for a number of years and was explicitly declared in a speech in early 2020, declares that the organization will retaliate for any harm done to its personnel or interests in Lebanon or Syria. Hezbollah's rocket capability has given the threat a measure of effectiveness in protecting Hezbollah operatives from targeting by Israel, and in maintaining the status quo along the Lebanese border. However, Hezbollah's activity in Syria is meant to shift the status quo in the organization's favor, and the doctrine is insufficient to prevent Israel from acting to maintain that status quo.

Neither side wants escalation. Israel has a strategic and value interest in maintaining a peaceful situation along the border and throughout its territory. Its threat to escalate in the face of Hezbollah provocation is a classic form of deterrence—threatening to take an unwanted action as a last resort in retaliation for a violation of the terms of the deterrence relationship.

Hezbollah's fear of escalation is a consequence of its military inferiority—in other words, it would escalate if it could. While it may be able to concentrate sufficient force in a limited area for a limited time to launch an attack against the IDF, it is in no position to withstand a full-scale Israeli assault. Thus constrained, Hezbollah has limited its actions along the border to minimal force attacks against IDF military targets. Outstanding Israeli intelligence,

competent command decision-making, and effective field execution by IDF troops have combined to render these attacks utter failures.

Paradoxically, the fact that neither side wants escalation virtually guarantees that this situation will continue. Hezbollah's use of minimal, and thus insufficient, force increases the likelihood of the continued failure of its operations. Israel's reluctance to use heavy force or pursue the attackers into Lebanon, while preventing escalation, has been interpreted as weakness by Hezbollah, thus encouraging additional attempts. Additionally, by exacting no higher cost from Hezbollah than the relatively inexpensive fact of failure, Israel adds no punitive deterrence premium to its battlefield successes.

Increasing intimations that Hezbollah was at least passively if not actively responsible for the Beirut Port blast have eroded the organization's popular support and led to calls for it to remove its ordnance from populated areas. This further increases the importance to Hezbollah of achieving a notable military success against Israel so it can deflect criticism and retain its national primacy.

Hezbollah, particularly in the aftermath of the Beirut tragedy, desperately needs to demonstrate success in its central declared mission of confronting Israel. While it will likely attempt to operate within the parameters of the strategic and deterrence rules both sides have established, trying to inflict damage that is more symbolic than real, failure will certainly raise the ante and increase the possibility of escalation. The IDF would do well to continue to maintain a high level of alert along the northern border well into the foreseeable future.

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