



The Secret War Behind the Exchanges of Fire in the North

by Brig. Gen. (res.) Eran Ortal

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The current war of attrition in Israel's north is not just a series of reaction equations. It is a race to learn about the enemy and prepare for a battle in which both sides will try to overwhelm the opposing military force. The exchanges of fire are providing Hezbollah with an opportunity to study the Israeli air defense system in detail. This is a serious risk that deserves to be given its due weight.

On May 15, 2024, the IDF announced that a Hezbollah unmanned drones had hit the Israel Air Force facility that operated the Tal-Shamaim observation balloon. This strike was unusual in that it took place deep in the Israeli rear. It drew Israel's attention, and not only because it represented a gradual escalation in the reaction equation.

The fact that the drones accurately hit its target was not, in itself, the worst aspect of the incident. Hezbollah's precision strike capabilities, including the killing of two reserve soldiers in Metula, are unfortunately not new. The new information was that the war of attrition in the north, as well as the Iranian attack on the night of April 14, serve another purpose. Those who follow the skirmishes between Hezbollah and the IDF can see patterns that indicate that the enemy is taking advantage of these exchanges of fire to study the performance of our air defense system and find its weaknesses.

Hezbollah's favorite target is the air control base on Mount Meron, an essential facility and part of Israel's air defense system. The enemy has attacked it dozens of times and with varied methods. The IDF has focused thus far on the limited scope of the damage and Israel's relative success at intercepting the rockets and protecting the facility. However, it is quite possible that for the enemy, these attacks are part of a broader ongoing experiment designed to test the performance of Iron Dome. The strikes are also enabling Hezbollah to practice complex attack patterns to overcome our defenses that include coordinated UAVs, rockets, and anti-tank weapons. There is no doubt that the enemy is perfecting this technique and will use it to attack other vital targets.

For weeks there has been a trend of increasing rocket barrages on the north, many of which have hit Kiryat Shmonah and other areas. Hezbollah is undoubtedly closely monitoring the results and analyzing the capacity of Israel's defense system to withstand large barrages for a long period. It could be that here too, the rocket barrages are intended not only to empty the Iron Dome launchers but also to serve as a diversion from the penetration of drones and anti-tank missiles.

The phenomenon of enemy drones appearing in the northern skies, some activating warnings and others not, is not accidental either. Nor are these drones being sent solely to conduct reconnaissance missions and detect new Israeli targets. It can be assumed that the flight paths of these drones are chosen to test our detection systems as well. According to reports, two drones participated in the attack on the Air Force facility at the Golani junction, only one of which was detected and shot down. It is possible that the downed drone was used as a diversion for the air defense formation while the other drones took a more secretive route that was analyzed by the enemy based on accumulated experience.

Hezbollah is suffering serious injuries in the war, but Israel's intelligence and air superiority in the skies of Lebanon, however painful and harmful they may be to the enemy, are not a surprise. Hezbollah has prepared itself for war fully aware that Israel monitors southern Lebanon, mainly from the air, and will be able to locate and attack valuable targets and senior activists.

However, the importance of the weaknesses the enemy is gradually revealing in the Israeli air defense system cannot be overstated. This dangerous reality remains

hidden from the Israeli eye, except perhaps for a very limited circle of air defense experts. As long as the war in the north remains an attrition campaign within a framework of reaction equations, attention is given primarily to those equations.

The IDF is not ignoring this entirely, of course. The IDF spokesman announced that in response to the attack on the Air Force facility at the Golani junction, Air Force planes had attacked a facility in the Lebanese Bekaa that is linked to Hezbollah's precision missile program. From the report it is possible to learn not only the development of the reaction equations (a target deep in Lebanon against a target deep in Israel), but also that Israeli anxiety is growing over the precise and complex attack capability displayed by the enemy. [The IDF had earlier publicized](#) the existence of precision missile factories deep in Lebanon, but refrained from attacking them for seven months into the war. At that point, apparently, the IDF's assessment of the situation changed. The reaction equations allowed, and the enemy's audacity required, the attack on the precision missile factories at that time, but this was a case of shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted.

Over the months of war, the enemy has expanded not only the scope of its precise armaments and deepened its capabilities, but also – and most importantly – developed an advanced understanding of the Israeli air defense system and the operational techniques that could overcome it. If we return to the Tal-Shamaim balloon attack at the Golani junction, we can assume that the choice of target was not accidental. Anyone who studies air defense understands that such a detection balloon has one purpose: to detect cruising targets from relatively low-flying levels. The balloon's location deep in Israel, on a plateau overlooking the Sea of Galilee, could indicate that it was intended to detect targets approaching from the east no less than those approaching from the north.

What can be learned from all this?

First, Hezbollah is building up for an all-out war. In this scenario, the first effort will be to neutralize critical components of Israeli air defenses. Such a neutralization would allow not only a free and effective attack on essential facilities in Israel, but also the paralysis of elements of the command and control system of the ground defense battle on the northern border. The results of such a paralysis, which we saw on October 7, 2023, are well remembered by every Israeli.

Second, even if it were to be an attack by fire alone, the destruction of critical components of the Israeli air defense system would leave the country's home front exposed to continued critical attacks. A situation in which the northern cities are exposed to intense barrages without protection and civilian infrastructure is sustaining serious damage would make it very difficult for Israel to continue the war. Another version of an all-out war scenario - a significant neutralization of the Israeli air defense system - would turn the Israeli home front into a collective hostage of Hezbollah. No need to take actual prisoners.

Third, the damage to the facility at the Golani intersection could indicate Hezbollah's intention to neutralize those elements in Israel that are intended, perhaps only in its own eyes, to serve as protection against the Iranian threat. Was this an Iranian signal?

Fourth, while it seems that there is great satisfaction in Israel about the success of our defenses at stopping the Iranian attack of April 14, the enemy might view the event quite differently. The supreme concentration of effort that night on the part of countries of the region, the United States, and all the IDF's air and intelligence assets might have taught the enemy that our defense capacity was stretched to the limit. If that was the conclusion, the enemy might be tempted to repeat such an attack but from Lebanon, with thousands more missiles, and for a longer duration.

Both sides understand that the current attrition is the prelude to an inevitable war between Israel, Hezbollah and Iran. It is not clear whether we will escalate to this war out of the current attrition or in the medium term. Either way, those who assume the quality of defense we have experienced in the war thus far can be maintained are making dangerous assumptions. Our air defense has not only been eroded by the continuation of the war, but has been studied by the enemy. Both sides can learn, of course, but in the equation of defender and attacker, the advantage of flexibility and surprise is on the attacker's side. This is a perilous starting point for the next war.

What can be done?

First, after the October 7 massacre, it seems that among the general public and even among the decision makers, sensitivity to the strategic and tactical meanings of the threat of fire has decreased. This needs to be fixed.

Second, the assessment of the situation in preparation for the possibility of war in the north must bring to light the erosion of the effectiveness of our defenses under current conditions. One can understand the voices calling for an immediate military solution in the north, but the severe plight of the displaced is only one variable in the assessment.

Third, the ability in principle to mount an attack on the sources of fire must be built. Even under the laboratory conditions afforded by the current exhaustion of the IDF on the northern border, the enemy is mostly succeeding at combining different attack methods into one complex attack barrage without being detected while creating an operational redundancy that ensures that some of its armaments will overcome our defenses. The terrain in the north enables the establishment of immediate attack detection and interception capabilities that will destroy at least some enemy launchers as they are firing and intercept at least some missiles as they are taking off. Such a concept would not only serve as an additional front layer for the defense of the country but would also make the launching of missiles and rockets from Lebanon much more dangerous for Hezbollah. It would turn the attacker into the defender, the defender into the attacker, and transfer some of the attacker's advantages to the IDF.

In light of October 7, it is essential that we maintain critical vigilance about our hidden assumptions. The focus on ground attack scenarios only, a misunderstanding of the connection between the fire threat and the ground threat, and the assumption that the Israeli defense system has passed the test and will continue to do so are all assumptions that require careful review under current circumstances.

Brig. Gen. (res.) Eran Ortal recently retired from military service as commander of the Dado Center for Multidisciplinary Military Thinking. He is a well-known military thinker both in Israel and abroad. His works have been published in The Military Review, War on the Rocks, Small Wars Journal, at the Hoover Institution, at Stanford, and elsewhere. His book The Battle Before the War (MOD 2022, in Hebrew) dealt with the IDF's need to change, innovate and renew a decisive war approach.