Experts at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism Discuss: Operation “Northern Shield” – Risks and Prospects

The main threat posed to Israel today by hostile entities on the northern border is their ability to harm the Israeli civilian population in several ways:

- Rocket and missile fire at Israel in the amount of 1,500-2,000 missiles per day.
- Shooting at strategic sites using UAVs.
- The Golan as a second front that, together with Lebanon, will constitute a front of non-state organizations supported by Iran.
- Use of tunnels to carry out attacks on Israeli settlements. This underground weapon allows an element of surprise and killing. Hezbollah wants to show that Israel is turning from a "powerful tiger" into a "paper tiger".

According to Gilad, Operation “Northern Shield” is not expected to escalate because Israel is acting wisely. It is combining a political and military strategy. Currently, the tunnel threat is being eliminated only in Israel. Hezbollah will not enter a confrontation over tunnels that they clearly see as illegitimate and a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

The use of new technology developed for detecting tunnels can dramatically reduce the threat (both in the south and in the north). It involves a combination of technology and intelligence information. The element of surprise is also on Israel’s side.

There is no danger of the southern sector heating up because of the events in the north because Hamas has different considerations than Hezbollah. The two organizations do indeed sympathize with each other, but they do not help one another.
The exposure and neutralization of the tunnels surprised Hezbollah, and the reason for Hassan Nasrallah's lack of response is clear. He is studying the new situation and examining possible courses of action/responses. Meanwhile, his men are monitoring the progress of the work and are conducting a psychological warfare campaign against Israel.

The IDF's activity is reducing Hezbollah's strategic arena of operation and takes the sting out from an essential component of the organization's founding operational idea, which it has emphasized in the last decade as an essential component of its organizational action policy. The message is “transition from defense to offense” and transfer the battle to Israel's territory through the infiltration of groups of fighters (the Radwan force - which was trained for this) to capture "bridgeheads" in the Galilee. This strategy was formulated after the Second Lebanon War and based on the expansion of the organization's operational capabilities during the civil war in Syria.

The exposure of the tunnels and, earlier this year, the exposure of the factories to upgrade Hezbollah missiles in the area of Beirut testify airport to the depth of Israel's intelligence penetration, which, according to Azani, greatly concerns Hezbollah. The organization is apparently preparing to carry out an internal inspection in order to locate the source(s) of the information leak.

It should be emphasized that damage to Hezbollah's tunnel infrastructure reduces, but does not eliminate, the ground penetration capabilities that the organization developed for the Galilee.

complex area of the northern border and the presence of trained forces allow the organization to bring forces into the territory of the State of Israel, albeit not at the scope and pace enabled by the tunnel infrastructure.

As time passes, the friction between Hezbollah and the IDF increases, which could result in the deterioration of Operation “Northern Shield” to a war situation, even if neither side is interested in one.

On the other hand, it should be remembered that Hezbollah's organizational strategic plan also relies on large-scale rocket fire directed at population centers and strategic targets in Israel. These missiles are stored in stockpiles and hiding places prepared in advance in order to preserve operational redundancy. Such missile fire may also include precision missiles in the organization's possession. It is reasonable to assume that in the event of an escalation, the Iranians will act through Hezbollah or other pro-Iranian bodies located in Syria, either from the
Golan Heights front or from the Lebanese sector.

Operation "Northern Shield", even though it is conducted openly and responsibly by the IDF while it conducts an awareness campaign to justify its actions and avoid any friction with Hezbollah or damage to Lebanese sovereignty, could quickly deteriorate into a war situation even if neither side is interested in one. As time passes, it appears that the friction between Hezbollah and the IDF is increasing. The organization is very closely monitoring IDF activity, and its operatives encountered an ambush by an IDF force in at least one location.

In my opinion, at this stage, Hezbollah is assessing the situation together with the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Hezbollah's response policy will be greatly influenced by Iranian interests. At the moment, it seems that Iran is also in no rush to heat things up in the Lebanese arena.

For its part, the Lebanese government is not eager to start a confrontation with Israel. This was expressed in Hariri’s statement after the outbreak of the crisis, in which he claimed that developments on the southern border need not to lead to an escalation. This statement was made despite the fact that Hezbollah’s actions violated UN Resolution 1701. In contrast, Lebanese President Michel Aoun (a Hezbollah ally) instructed the Lebanese army and intelligence organizations to closely monitor developments in southern Lebanon.

In summary: the likelihood of a deterioration of the situation to the point of escalation, against the backdrop of Operation "Northern Shield", is not high but is possible.

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The main threat facing Israel today in terms of the power elements in the region remains Hezbollah from the Lebanese border.

The danger on the Golan Heights front decreased significantly due to the growing stability of the Assad regime in Syria. Cohen believes that Assad himself, and Russia behind him, will not want to jeopardize the recent achievements made after the bloody struggles of many years. Therefore, the likelihood of a violent front in the Golan Heights decreased significantly during this period, even given the front against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

It is worth taking into account Syrian and Iranian involvement against
Israel in a situation in which Israel carries out large-scale maneuvers inside Lebanon (such as Operation “Peace for Galilee”), where Hezbollah will feel a real threat to its continued existence in Lebanon in the configuration that has developed since the Taif Agreement.

In terms of weaponry, the two main threats facing Israel today are the counter-fighting threat – precision rockets fired on most of Israel’s territory and an array of attack UAVs, and the ground war threat – both in a situation where the IDF maneuvers into Lebanese territory and as an offensive initiative by Hezbollah into the Galilee areas of Israel. In Cohen’s opinion, if Hezbollah will not be taken by surprise by the IDF’s move at the start of the campaign, it will aim to surprise Israel and infiltrate into its territory on a significant scale. (This scenario depends on the scope of the tunnels’ exposure in the current operation. If only a small percentage is exposed, it will not affect the possibility of a Hezbollah penetration into Israel). Hezbollah has various types of anti-tank missiles and complex explosive sites that it can use during a battle in Lebanese territory.

It can be assumed that the likelihood of a deterioration into an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah is low, since most of the players have no interest in doing so.

The Lebanese Arena:
The political situation in Lebanon between Nasrallah and Hariri puts a weight on the organization’s shoulders and will only push away the Lebanese side’s quest for solidarity with Hezbollah during the battle (much more than in the Second Lebanon War). In addition, Hezbollah needs more time to return to its desired state after the prolonged fighting in Syria.

The Regional Arena:
The Saudis (Sunnis) as supporters of Hariri and opponents of Iran, and Hezbollah (Shi’ites) will put heavy pressure on the organization and will recruit the US to the matter; The Egyptians have always opposed Hezbollah and have never supported it; the growing stability of the Assad regime in Syria will lead to a reluctance to jeopardize the administration’s achievements and open another military front. From an internal Israeli point of view - the Prime Minister has achieved public support at this stage of the operation. As long as it continues and does not develop into a difficult battle with losses, he will make do with this situation in the run-up to the upcoming elections.
The International Arena:
The United States and Russia (and Europe) will place heavy pressure on Iran and Hezbollah (and on Assad indirectly).

The exposure and neutralization of the tunnels is expected to significantly decrease the possibility of a surprise penetration by Hezbollah into the Galilee (especially alongside the complex barrier that the IDF has been building along the Lebanese border in recent years). The organization will not give up on the idea that was formulated in recent years and will try to implement it in the Har Dov and Hasbani Valley areas (not originally planned), both from the sea in Rosh Hanikra and at weak points that remain along the border. Beyond this land aspect, there is no change in the balance of terror between Hezbollah and Israel.

As long as the operation continues and there is no deterioration, it is reasonable to assume that Hamas (in the southern sector) will not intervene. It is precisely the more radical organizations in the Gaza Strip that will look for ways to stir up and challenge Hamas (as was done recently). Therefore, if the IDF acts disproportionately, it may be drawn into a broader battle. In the event of the operation’s deterioration into a large-scale battle, the likelihood of deterioration in the south also increases.

Israel faces no major threats today in the northern sector unless it enters a war with Hezbollah, which could cause considerable damage to the Israeli home front because of the organization’s arsenal of rockets.

Operation “Northern Shield” did not begin because of an urgent operational need concerning the tunnels, but rather out of Israel’s concern over Iranian rocket factories being built in Lebanon. These factories can only be destroyed by air, but while the IDF has been accustomed to unrestricted freedom of operation in Syrian and Lebanese air space until now, Russia is now threatening to limit this freedom by closing the air space to the Israeli Air Force.
The operation of exposing and neutralizing the tunnels is intended to warn several players:

1. **Iran and Hezbollah** – Israel will not hesitate to act if they continue to manufacture and upgrade Hezbollah’s rocket technology (especially in sophisticated warheads) by establishing an Iranian missile manufacturing plant in Lebanon.

2. **Russia** – In order to preserve certain freedom of operation (as it was prior to the downing of the Russian aircraft) in Lebanese and Syrian air space, Israel wants to signal to Russia that it is determined to act against threats and not to give up on the protection of vital Israeli interests.

Goldberg claims that **Israel is not able to define a logical range of threats, but the sense is that there is a need for extreme tactical actions to deal with threats. For this reason, Israel is unable to produce a suitable strategy.** There is a range of options on the table and each one of them has political implications. However, the option in which things get “blown up” is always the one selected.

**It is possible to live quietly with Hezbollah’s tunnels.** The Israeli government’s need to disrupt the quiet in the north and to neutralize the tunnels is intended only as a warning to Hezbollah, Iran and Russia. It was equally possible to choose another option.

**Therefore, the expectation of an escalation of Operation “Northern Shield” is very small.** First and foremost, Hezbollah is not bothered by this operation. The organization also wants to be perceived as capable of controlling Lebanon and not as a terrorist organization as it is now perceived. A war against Israel due to actions carried out in Israeli territory will present it "in a negative light". In Goldberg’s opinion, the exposure of the tunnels does not reduce the threat to Israel, as proven by the fact that the IDF has already been aware of their existence for two years and did not act on the knowledge. On the contrary, if the operation will not be properly understood or assessed, or if Israel will be perceived as undermining stability and acting aggressively, an outbreak of war is possible.

**A heating up of the northern sector is not expected to heat up the southern sector** even if Hamas exploits the friction with Hezbollah and launches missiles at Israel. The reality does not demand that Israel embark on a ground operation (as we saw in the last round against Hamas). Iran, for its part, wants to upset the balance but is not interested in launching an all-out war because it is concerned about the economic sanctions imposed by the United States. It is interested in survival and, therefore, will not spend money on fighting for Hezbollah.
The greatest threat facing Israel today on the northern border is from Hezbollah – which has almost state-like military capabilities. Additional threats, in descending order, are the establishment of a strengthened Iranian presence in Syria and the opening of the Israel-Syria border in the Golan Heights to hostile activities and terrorism, whether through Iranian proxy organizations that would ignite it or through actions initiated by Hezbollah to build infrastructures there. Terrorist attacks may be routinely launched from there, and in a time of war between Israel and Hezbollah, this may lead to two fronts against Israel (Lebanon and Syria).

The main weapon threat to Israel from the north is high-trajectory weapons, particularly precise high-trajectory weapons. There are rockets and missiles in Syria and Lebanon (held by Hezbollah and Iran) and they are constantly trying to improve them. It also appears that developments with the Russians and the restriction of the IAF’s air space in Syria may challenge Israel in both routine and emergency situations.

Hezbollah and Israel are not interested in escalating the situation. Nevertheless, three scenarios may develop:

1. **Misevaluation** - one party misinterprets certain actions of the other party and responds accordingly.

2. **Tactical activity that will create escalation** - such as destroying a tunnel and accidentally killing Hezbollah operatives that Israel did not know were there; or an Israeli soldier killed by Hezbollah because he accidentally crossed the Blue Line.

3. **An Iranian attempt to exploit the friction and create an escalation** – in response to Israel’s attacks against it in Syria and/or American actions against it on the nuclear issue.

The exposure and removal of the tunnels is indeed important and helps neutralize Hezbollah’s ability to use them, but this ability is not as significant and central to Hezbollah as it is to Hamas since it constitutes one of a wide range of more successful combat systems in their possession. Hezbollah's greatest threat was and remains its arsenal of missiles and rockets.

If the operation in the north remains limited, escalation in the southern sector is not expected, especially since it is in Hamas's interest to reach an arrangement.
The threat to Israel on the northern border is divided into several sectors with different characteristics. In all sectors, the threat stems from Iran's strategic ambitions, with different characteristics in each sector.

The following are the threats, ranked by importance:

A. **Hezbollah in Lebanon is the main threat**
   - The organization's leadership is ideologically and strategically subordinate to the regime in Tehran, which includes the destruction of Israel as a central goal.
   - Hezbollah has in its possession an enormous arsenal of missiles (120-150,000 of all types, according to Israeli intelligence), including long-range missiles, some of which are precise, advanced anti-tank missiles, surface-to-sea missiles and a fleet of drones.
   - Hezbollah has a strong hybrid army that gained extensive combat experience while operating in Syria.
   - Hezbollah dug tunnels along the border with Israel whose function is to facilitate an offensive military operation against the Galilee communities during wartime (as declared by Hassan Nasrallah and explicitly stated in a film released by the organization in January 2015 that simulated a ground attack only).
   - Hezbollah has a decisive influence on the Lebanese political system, within the Lebanese Parliament, and on President Michel Aoun (who declared Hezbollah a legitimate protector of Lebanon). Since the last elections, the organization has been preventing the establishment of an independent functioning government. It is also tightening operational cooperation with the Lebanese army, most of whose troops are Shi’ites.

B. **Iranian presence in Syria**

If Iran succeeds in establishing itself in Syria by establishing independent permanent bases of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (air, sea, and land) with the help of Hezbollah and various Shi’ite militias, this will constitute a strategic threat of the highest level to Israel's security.

Decision makers in Israel understood that the same scenario that developed in Lebanon since 2000, and especially after the Second Lebanon War in 2006, which enabled Hezbollah to become a significant strategic threat with the help of Iran and Syria, should not be allowed to be realized in the “liberated” Syrian territory under Bashar Assad.
Therefore, for the last two years, Israel has acted systematically and decisively to destroy the military presence of Iran, Hezbollah, and Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani Shi’ite militias, especially in southern Syria and near the Golan border.

Recently, there have been reports that, in light of the restrictions stemming from Israeli activity against its land assets in Syria, Iran is trying to get Hezbollah operatives and various Shi’ite militias to penetrate the Syrian army’s units in the south while dressing them in Syrian army uniforms.

It should be noted that at least one Iraqi Shi’ite militia, Harakat al-Nujaba, which is located in southern Syria, officially declared that it had established the "Golan Liberation Brigade" and was working for its release.

C. **Russia as an influential factor in the campaign against Iran in Syria**

Since September 2015, Russia has been actively participating in the Assad regime's military campaign against opposition organizations throughout Syrian territory. This was after Iran, Hezbollah, and the Shi’ite militias failed to prevent an existential threat to Assad’s regime and the Alawites.

Russia’s military intervention (especially in a massive Air Force operation and a certain presence on the ground) succeeded in undermining the resistance by opposition organizations in the large cities - Damascus, Aleppo, Hama and southern Syria - and returning control over much of Syria to the Assad regime. This was done in military cooperation with Iran and Hezbollah.

From the moment that Israel defined Iran’s establishment in Syrian territory as a major threat and activated the IAF to neutralize this threat, it negotiated with the Russian leadership at the highest level and reached understandings about actions against Iranian targets in order to reduce its military presence in Syria.

In September 2018, a Russian reconnaissance plane was mistakenly shot down by the Syrian air defense (in failed cooperation with Russian officers in the area) when the IAF attacked Iranian targets in northern Syria. Russia’s military and political leadership blamed Israel for the incident and quickly transferred S-300 anti-aircraft batteries to the Syrian army. In addition, changes were demanded in the manner of cooperation with the Air Force, which endanger the security of its operations. At the same time, it seems that Russia pressed Iran to reduce its activity in Russia, and as a result Iran is transferring strategic equipment to Hezbollah’s missile arsenal in Lebanon - directly to Beirut.
These developments pose operational and diplomatic difficulties for Israel vis-à-vis Russia, and for the time being there is no answer regarding the format of future cooperation with it. Nevertheless, it was recently reported that Prime Minister Netanyahu updated the Russian president on the discovery of Hezbollah’s tunnels in northern Israel. Russia condemned Hezbollah’s use of tunnels. Apparently, on this occasion, a summit between the two countries was agreed upon to settle the situation.

D. Iraq

Israel seems to have ignored the potential threat from a country that used to be the main axis of the eastern front. It has recently become clear that Iran is increasing its military presence and political influence in Iraq. There are reports that it is transferring long-range missiles to Iraqi territory and activating pro-Iraqi Shi’ite militias, not only to advance its political interests but to maintain the southern axis from Iraq through Syria, Lebanon, and Hezbollah. As a result, there were apparently several bombardments against Shi’ite forces on the Syria-Iraq border. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how to monitor and neutralize the southern corridor that the Revolutionary Guards are building towards Syria and Lebanon.

At this stage, in light of the surprise to Hezbollah, and as long as the exposure and neutralization of the tunnels are being carried out in Israel, it appears that there is no danger that the operation will deteriorate and escalate. However, a local incident that gets out of control could ignite a spark that will lead to escalation, especially if the Iranians have an interest in leveraging the situation.

The situation in the southern sector is controlled by Hamas’ strategy, which is essentially "walking on a tightrope". Since March 2018, the organization has been using a strategy of popular struggle and employing primitive means such as balloons, incendiary kites and marches to the fences. Hamas is well aware of the policy of the Israeli government and the IDF, which are interested in keeping the peace in the southern sector at almost any price, and as long as some of Hamas’ demands are met (such as paying salaries and dealing with the shortage of fuel, water and electricity), it seems that the organization has no intention of escalating the situation. However, this arena is explosive an uncontrolled violent incident or a large-scale operation that claims victims on both sides could lead to a dangerous escalation.

If a war or large-scale campaign nevertheless develops in the northern sector, Hamas may decide to “join the party”. It should not be forgotten that in recent years Hamas has tried independently to develop a missile system in southern Lebanon against Israel.

According to Karmon, the exposure and neutralization of the tunnels is a very important
intelligence and operational success, as it neutralizes Hezbollah's declared plan to attack towns and villages in the Galilee as presented in a detailed video released by the organization in January 2015 (in the video, it was claimed to be an assessment by Israeli intelligence).

Psychologically speaking, the operation is important for the population on the northern border of Israel, which has claimed for years that Hezbollah is digging tunnels. Now residents of the north can feel safer.

However, the biggest strategic threat is Hezbollah's massive surface-to-surface missile arsenal, and Iran's current attempt to increase the number of long-range precision missiles that could hit military and civilian targets in the first attack.

This was demonstrated when the “Iron Dome” system was challenged during the massive Hamas rocket fire in the recent round of violence in Gaza during which it had a lower percentage of interceptions.

In the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Israel destroyed the long-range missile arsenal in the first 34 hours of the war due to extraordinary intelligence. On the other hand, in the current situation in Lebanon, where the government is controlled by Hezbollah and its army is almost subordinate to it, the destruction of the organization's missile system cannot be achieved without a massive, perhaps preemptive, ground war.