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Israel's Uncertain Military Performance and Strategic Goals in Lebanon

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Introduction

It is difficult to judge Israel's military performance in Lebanon at a distance. Too little data are as yet available, and reporting is necessarily impressionistic. So far, however, it does not seem particularly impressive either in terms of strategy or execution. Israel seems to have escalated without a high probability it could do critical damage to Hezbollah or coerce the Lebanese government, and the tactical execution of its air and land actions seems to be weak.

Not unlike the US, Israel has always been much better at using force than at end games. In this case, however, Israel rapidly escalated to the massive use of airpower in ways that only made sense if it felt that it could (a) do meaningful and lasting damage to Hezbollah, and (b) coerce the Lebanese government and military to take advantage of Hezbollah's weakness to fully secure the south and disarm Hezbollah.

Weakening the Hezbollah?

So far, there is little sign that either the Israeli Air Force (IAF) or the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has done critical damage to Hezbollah. Israel's claims about Hezbollah casualties are vague, and reports of 100 killed would mean little in any case.

Blowing up Hezbollah buildings breeds anger and support for the Hezbollah, but there are no high value facilities filled with critical equipment. Destroying most Hezbollah armament means using high cost precision weapons to destroy a few very low cost systems that are easily replaced. The political and propaganda value to the Hezbollah of showing it can ride out IAF strikes, survive, and grow offsets any losses reported to date.

The wild card is that IAF targeting of Hezbollah's long-range rockets and its limited number of other major systems has been far more successful than reported to date. Or, that far more members of Hezbollah's leadership have been hit. If so, Israel is remarkably silent.

Coercing the Lebanese Government

The broad-based IAF attacks on Lebanese targets like infrastructure, and the creation of some 600,000 refugees, has bred some anger against Hezbollah. It also has bred anger against Israel.

What it has not done is lead the Lebanese government to rush towards decisive action against Hezbollah or towards useful reactions from the Lebanese Army. If anything, the IAF has hit enough Lebanese military targets to cause a larger reaction against Israel. The fact that the Lebanese government would not accept Secretary Rice's offer to aid the Lebanese Army in moving south reflects the lack of Israeli success to date.

What is not clear is why Israel thought this would work. Lebanon's confessional politics remain a powder keg, and taking on a movement with so much influence among the Shi'ites, Lebanon's largest faction, is difficult to impossible for a government that does not have massive domestic support in doing so.

Many Lebanese do tacitly or overtly support the Hezbollah in its fight against Israel, and not simply Shi'ites. The IAF has almost certainly increased this support by exacting what

are at least reported to be large numbers of strikes that hit civilians and civilian facilities. Collateral damage normally only results in temporary fear, but it breeds lasting anger.

Again, no hard numbers or reliable data are available, but the IAF seems to have done a bad job of precision targeting. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), special spotter units on the ground, and air strikes on targets of opportunity seem to have hit far more civilians than they should. If this is a tactic of intimidation and coercion, it is a bad one. Case after case shows it breeds more anger than fear.

Land Warfare

The IDF's precision artillery fire in response to Hezbollah rocket attacks seems to have had little impact other than to create refugees and hurt Israel's image abroad. Precision fire is relatively pointless, just as area fire is, unless there is something targeted. Blowing up Hezbollah buildings accomplished no more in the area in artillery range than the rest of Lebanon, and finding and hitting small, dispersed Hezbollah targets remained extremely difficult.

The apparent failure of the IAF air campaign has been followed by mobilizing for an attack that could enable the IDF to reach the Litani and much more limited mixes of special operations against Hezbollah targets in the south and limited overt attacks across the border that seem designed to up the ante in putting pressure on the Lebanese government to act.

It is impossible to know how well the various operations in the south against the Hezbollah have gone, but so far the IDF is not claiming detailed successes and complaining a great deal about problems with intelligence. If several thousand IDF troops are operating in the area, as some media sources report, they must have scored some successes. Hezbollah can disperse, hide men and equipment, and abandon low value facilities and equipment so easily, however, that any such successes will have limited value at best.

As for the more open fighting in Lebanon to date, Israel may be winning tactically, but the strategic value is limited at best. So far, the image is that Hezbollah is standing up to Israel—scarcely the image Israel wants and needs—and the fighting will be meaningless unless Israel moves north in strength, or some combination of an international force and Lebanese forces actually occupy the area. Hezbollah can also afford to lose large numbers of troops with little training and equipment in such fighting, will train a new generation of fighters, and has time to refine its ambush tactics.

Pushing North to the Litani

The IDF has been in south Lebanon before. Creating a new exposed ambush zone where the Hezbollah can selectively strike at times and in ways of its own choosing did not do well last time. This approach also means sustaining the anger and political backlash against Israel in the Arab and Muslim world, building broad anger in Lebanon, and allowing volunteers to come in from Iran and other Arab countries.

It also is not clear that the Litani relay provides the necessary strategic depth. It still allows Hezbollah to attack with longer-range rockets like the Zelzal (125-260 kilometers), Nazeat (100-140 kilometers), and a variety of shorter-range systems.

Shutting Off Syrian and Iranian Resupply

Israel may do better in interdicting Syrian and Iranian resupply. The problem is that lighter weapons are comparatively easy to infiltrate without using main roads. Any roads left open to Syria can be a problem, since trucks and buses can be used to carry heavy equipment, and decoys and camouflage still have some value in spite of UAVs and improved sensors. Ports and coastlines present another problem.

Temporary gains, probably; value in a war of attrition, uncertain. So far, insurgents and irregular fighters always find a way, and they need only limited success to keep up harassment and ambushes.

Using Ceasefires and International Forces

All of this seems to have pushed Israel into a new strategy. Air and land warfare have had limited tactical success, but do not promise lasting strategic benefits. This leaves the option of pressuring the international community into making up for Israel's military limitations by forcing it to react to Lebanese suffering on Israeli terms.

This is, effectively, the option that Secretary Rice advanced in Beirut. An international force comes in with the mandate of securing the south and disarming the Hezbollah. The US builds up Lebanese forces to support this mission and eventually replace it. A combination of the international force and Lebanese forces secures Lebanon's borders with Syria and also stops arms smuggling.

In all frankness, this is not a bad outcome for either Israel or the Lebanese people, and the payoff in regional stability for other Arabs and the international community may be worth it. However, using proxies to make up for the IDF's failures is a poor precedent, and this strategy may not work.

The Lebanese side of this approach may simply expose the fact that the Lebanese government and army will only take limited and cosmetic action. The international force will probably have to do the heavy lifting, be willing to fight, and become the focus of new Hezbollah attacks and ambushes. Non-Muslims will be seen as occupiers and crusaders, and Muslims as traitors. Ambushes, bombings, and foreign volunteers will follow. Can anyone spell IED?