

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: *Hezbollah and its leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, do not have the authority to independently unleash their vast rocket/missile arsenal against Israel. That is because this arsenal is an integral part of the Iranian-Israeli balance of power, and is designed first and foremost to deter Israel from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities.*

Hezbollah's rocket and missile arsenal in Lebanon has long been classified as a threat of strategic significance to Israel. Moreover, Hezbollah's extensive precision guidance project is expected to intensify the kinetic potential of this array.

The recent Gaza war was a small indicator of what Israel might experience in circumstances of a comprehensive confrontation with Hezbollah, as the rate of rocket launches from Gaza, their sheer number, and the simultaneous launching of many of them posed a difficult challenge to Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system.

Hezbollah's vast arsenal, which contains mainly short- and long-range rockets but also several dozen Scud-D ballistic missiles with a range of up to 700 km, covers almost the entire State of Israel. Such capabilities are not typical of a country the size of Lebanon.

It is not for nothing that Hezbollah does not seek to control Lebanon directly, though it can do so easily, preferring instead to pull the strings behind the country's political scene. As an Iranian creation, the organization is subject to the full authority of Tehran, certainly with regard to its operational conduct in the Lebanese arena and vis-à-vis Israel.

Iran strives to cultivate effective deterrence vis-a-vis Israel from Lebanon through Hezbollah. In other words, the point of Hezbollah is not to maintain a balance of terror between itself and Israel but between Iran and Israel. Iran is implementing a similar strategy through the Khuti militia in Yemen, which it has equipped with a large array of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and unmanned armed aircraft. In that instance, Iran's object of deterrence is Saudi Arabia.

Ever since the Second Lebanon War (2006), the Israeli defense establishment has cultivated the notion that the operational success of that campaign resulted in Hezbollah's effective deterrence. The evidence for this is purportedly the almost complete calm prevailing on the Lebanese border. However, Israel admits that there is in fact a kind of balance of terror in the Lebanese arena resulting from the existence of Hezbollah's rocket and missile arsenal, which poses a tangible threat to the Israeli home front.

Another systemic insight that has seeped into the consciousness of Israel's military brass is that Hezbollah should be treated as an integral part of the State of Lebanon. Therefore, should Hezbollah conduct an offensive initiative against Israel, Jerusalem would respond with a comprehensive campaign against Lebanon. This concept evolved from the definition of Israel's "strategic mistake" in 2006, when the IDF fought Hezbollah without touching Lebanese state assets. As a result of that approach, the war went on for more than a month.



Image source: BBC

A new and disturbing dimension was thrown into the mix this year: the exposure of Hezbollah's precision guidance project, which is being conducted with the full guidance of Iran. The Islamic Republic's purpose is to turn the terror group's rockets from statistical armaments into precision weapons. This has significant implications in terms of upgrading the rocket array deployed in Lebanon and the potential for damage in Israeli territory, with an emphasis on the weapons' ability to hit both military and civilian quality targets.

This development motivated the top echelons of the Israeli defense establishment to engage in the possibility of a preemptive strike to deprive Hezbollah of strategic capabilities, even at the cost of a flare-up of war. The logic is that if Hezbollah is shorn of its strategic capabilities, it will be less motivated to engage in all-out war with Israel.

It appears that once again, we are witnessing a failure of thinking with regard to the direct threat posed by Hezbollah to Israel. Hezbollah's stockpile of rockets and missiles in Lebanon must be perceived not in the Lebanese-Israeli context but first and foremost in the Iranian-Israeli context. To all intents and purposes, Tehran is establishing a front-line Iranian battle formation in Lebanon under the control and direction of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards.

It is implicit that Hezbollah and its leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, do not have the freedom to unleash their vast rocket and missile arsenal against Israel (except for local border incidents, which both sides wish to contain). This in turn necessitates an in-depth Israeli reassessment of the situation before any populist decisions are made to take action against Hezbollah, or to respond disproportionately to a provocation by the Shiite terrorist organization. The scorching military experience of the Second Lebanon War, into which Israel was dragged by the force of inertia, should serve as a warning in this newer context before catastrophe occurs. The rocket and missile arsenal in Lebanon is effectively under Iranian control, and its purpose is to deter Israel from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities. Systemic considerations regarding Hezbollah must be influenced by that fact.

On a more positive note, it seems that Tehran's need for this massive rocket/missile array in Lebanon indicates an awareness of its limited ability to strike Israel directly from its own territory, despite having ballistic missiles (and unmanned aerial vehicles) within the necessary range. Whether or not that is the case, Iran has turned Hezbollah into a kind of "surrogate"—a battle station on Lebanese soil that is under Tehran's command.

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