



IRAN'S PRECISION MISSILE PROJECT MOVES TO LEBANON

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ON DECEMBER 3, 2018, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu held an impromptu meeting with U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo in Brussels, [reportedly to discuss](#) the growing threat of Hezbollah acquiring precision missile capabilities inside Lebanon. Among other requests, he apparently asked Pompeo to warn Lebanese authorities that Israel will take action of its own if they fail to address the threat.

The next day, the Israel Defense Forces launched Operation Northern Shield to destroy a series of cross-border tunnels that Hezbollah had constructed from Lebanon into Israel. U.S. national security advisor John Bolton praised the operation on Twitter, stating that Washington “strongly supports Israel’s



efforts to defend its sovereignty.” For its part, Hezbollah issued a [video rebuke](#) in which Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah warned that Israel will “regret” invading Lebanon, and that “there will be a response to every Israeli attack.” To drive the message home, the video included map coordinates pinpointing various strategic sites inside Israel (e.g., military bases, oil facilities, nuclear weapons facilities).

Tensions over this issue had already begun to mount in previous weeks due to an uptick in suspicious Iranian air deliveries. In mid-October, for example, a 747 cargo plane from the Iranian civil airline Fars Air Qeshm [reportedly landed in Beirut](#) carrying prohibited weapon components for Hezbollah, including GPS kits that would enable the production of precision-guided missiles in Lebanese factories. Prior to reaching Beirut, the plane landed at Syria’s Damascus International Airport. The apparent delivery surfaced a month after reports that Fars Air Qeshm had been flying unusual routes from Tehran to Beirut with stopovers in Damascus.

While the American troop presence at al-Tanf has thus far thwarted Iranian efforts to secure a “land bridge” through southern Syria and into Lebanon, the international community has struggled for years to impede the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from its Levantine proxies by air. Damascus International Airport has long been a primary IRGC drop-off for arms, components, and cash intended for Hezbollah, and the group has subsequently moved much of this materiel overland from Damascus to Lebanon. The recent flights between Damascus and Beirut may indicate that the IRGC now sees the overland route as too risky.

Why Move to Lebanon?

After securing most of its war goals in Syria, Iran seemed to shift its objectives toward establishing a military presence in that country while upgrading Hezbollah’s fire precision and effectiveness in Lebanon. Once its Syrian facilities came under increased Israeli fire, Tehran began moving some of these activities into Lebanon, knowing that Israeli strikes would be more complicated there due to the escalation potential. Yet the prospect of Hezbollah acquiring or producing advanced weapons is Israel’s main redline, and could put the parties on a collision course that leads to conflict in Lebanon.

During his September 27 address at the UN General Assembly in New York, Netanyahu shared photos of what he said were three Hezbollah “secret sites” near Beirut International Airport, all of which were using Iranian technology to convert the group’s rockets into precision-guided missiles capable of threatening targets deep inside Israel. In late October, his government [reportedly asked a French envoy](#) to send Lebanon the same message delivered to Pompeo in December: that Israel will take action against Hezbollah missile factories if Beirut does not. Meanwhile, Nasrallah claimed [in a September 20 speech](#) that Israel was too late because the group already had “precision” weapons: “No matter what you do to cut the route, the matter is over.”

Hezbollah is currently believed to possess around 130,000 missiles and rockets in Lebanon. In a future war, the Israel Defense Forces estimate that the group would launch thousands of them per day across the border. Currently, most of these weapons are unguided, thereby limiting their potential impact. Yet if large numbers of them are fitted with Iranian precision guidance kits, they are bound to present a greater threat.

The group and its patron seem to believe that performing such upgrades in Lebanon rather than Syria or Iran is less risky. Since the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, both sides have been cautious to avoid sparking another major conflict in Lebanon, correctly understanding that it would be highly destructive, very costly, and of little utility in policy terms. The IDF’s power far exceeds Hezbollah’s, but the group’s arsenal is sufficiently large to inflict heavy damage inside Israel—a realization that has yielded more than a decade of mutual deterrence and restraint along the border. Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syria war has given it another reason to keep a low military profile against Israel, albeit with some exceptions. Yet even as both parties try to avoid a dangerous war, they each have their own dilemmas and options that could lead to different scenarios.

Israel’s Dilemmas and Options

Israel currently finds itself caught between long-term threats and short-term risks. In the long term, Iran and Hezbollah’s “precision project” will gradually increase the threat to Israel’s strategic infrastructure

from “significant” to “severe,” potentially allowing the group to achieve more hits on critical Israeli installations with fewer missiles launched. In other words, if the project is left uninterrupted, Israel would face narrower margins for maneuver, a steep rise in the cost of a future war, and a stronger Iranian deterrent against further military actions in Syria or elsewhere.

In the short term, any direct efforts to derail the precision project would run up against other risks. Although strikes against project facilities in Syria are still possible, they are now under heavier constraints. In addition to the standard tactical risks posed by Syrian air defenses and possible escalation, Israel faces newer challenges stemming from the Assad regime’s accidental shootdown of a Russian military plane in mid-September. Since that incident, Moscow has apparently changed its posture toward recurring Israeli airstrikes in Syria, with numerous sources noting its tougher tone in official statements on the matter, its stricter operational requirements on the IDF (e.g., demands for longer warning time before attacks), and its delays in scheduling further meetings between Putin and Netanyahu, among other difficulties. The IDF now has to consider potential Russian diplomatic blowback and perhaps even physical threats to the pilots flying such missions. The situation [may become even more prohibitive](#) when the recently delivered Russian S-300 air defense systems become operational in Syria.

As for the prospect of strikes inside Lebanon, one must factor in the “rules of the game” that have governed Israel and Hezbollah’s actions there since 2013, when the two sides conducted cross-border attacks against each other, then decided to confine such hostilities to Syria. According to these dynamics, Lebanon is off-limits to overt Israeli attacks, but not to Israeli overflights (e.g., for reconnaissance purposes or strikes in Syria). This presents a dilemma for Israel: it has exposed its knowledge of Hezbollah and Iran’s secret activities, and its tactical ability to strike them needs no revalidation, but unless it finds ways to blunt the emerging missile threat without risking war, its actions will be constrained by strategic calculations.

These blunting options may include preparing defensive, protective, offensive, preventive, and suppressive measures for wartime, alongside disruptive “all domain” measures as part of the so-called “Campaign between the Wars.” The Israeli government’s

recent warnings, diplomatic action, and exposure of Iranian/Hezbollah activities fall well within this campaign’s strategy of combining information operations with diplomatic, legal, economic, covert, and military operations. In particular, the exposures and warnings serve as a shot across the bow—although their aim is to defuse the threat without the use of force, they also prepare the ground for tougher measures by legitimizing potential military action should it be needed.

Hezbollah’s Dilemmas and Options

Enhanced precision targeting capabilities would allow Hezbollah to conduct more effective wartime strikes deep into Israeli territory, including against military targets, critical infrastructure, and population centers. More accurate missiles would also enable the group to launch quick, focused, and effective attacks with little preparation. Yet Hezbollah also knows that the next war would be wider and more destructive than in 2006, greatly affecting both its Shia hinterland and Lebanon at large. Despite the progress it has made on the precision project, the group is not prepared for such a conflict. Its dilemmas are manifold.

Unlike in 2006, the Levant is currently flooded with refugees and displaced persons, generating donor fatigue, regional polarization, and multi-front challenges that would make international postwar reconstruction in Lebanon more doubtful this time around. Foreign funding from Gulf, Western, and Iranian sources has dwindled, and Hezbollah is in a serious financial crisis. The group’s losses in Syria far exceed those of 2006, and the leadership understands that the battle experience its forces gained in defending the Assad regime would have only limited relevance against Israel’s military power.

Most important, Lebanon’s Shia citizens are done with war. They appear largely untroubled by Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria because it takes place away from them. And they view the 2006 “divine victory” as a deterrent measure, believing that the group will avoid starting another war with Israel. They have enjoyed a period of relative peace since that conflict, leading many of them to start thinking about the future, make long-term investments, and develop a business mentality that does not align with talk of war.

Hezbollah will therefore be blamed if these investments are threatened by conflict inside Lebanon.

Given these factors, the group seems intent on avoiding war with Israel, viewing the precision project as a way to strengthen its deterrence rather than escalate tensions. Earlier in the Syria conflict, Iran appeared to believe that placing the IRGC–Qods Force and foreign proxies on the Golan Heights frontier would boost its deterrence and give it the advantage of pressuring Israel on two fronts: southern Lebanon and southwestern Syria. Things did not go as planned, however. Iran lost most of its facilities in Syria after its own ally—Russia—acquiesced to Israeli strikes against them, and its presence in the Golan proved to be complicated as well.

In this context, moving the precision project to Lebanon became a more favorable option. Tehran's current objectives seem to be twofold: in the short term, building up Hezbollah's forces under the deterrent umbrella of its "no hostilities inside Lebanon" dynamic with Israel; and in the long term, equipping the group with better military capabilities for a future war. According to this thinking, Israel may hesitate to strike immediately, buying Hezbollah some time. In practical terms, this would likely mean continuing the production of precision missiles inside Lebanon, keeping the pace moderate to avoid provoking an Israeli attack, and moving the facilities around whenever they are outed. These steps are not guaranteed to prevent another conflict, but they may delay it to a certain extent.

If Israel limits itself to exposure and warnings alone, Hezbollah can probably handle the diplomatic consequences without resorting to force. Yet if Israel goes forward with a kinetic approach such as targeted airstrikes, the group might feel obliged to retaliate, and the probability of escalation will rise. Israel may choose a less overt approach in which some sites in Lebanon are damaged in indistinct ways and no responsibility is claimed, giving Hezbollah a wider scope for its response in terms of time, domain, and space. Yet as seen in [the recent flare-up](#) between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, covert action is not risk-free and may bring complications of its own. Meanwhile, the lack of an efficient international response to the missile issue makes the escalation scenario seem more likely over time.

Another dilemma for Hezbollah is that the Leba-

nese people are becoming more aware of the precision project's growing presence within their borders. Domestic pressure on the group could rise significantly if its core Shia constituency weighs all the risks that the project poses to their way of life.

Role of Lebanese Institutions

Lebanon's government is unlikely to do anything about Hezbollah's domestic weapons production or its arms in general—on the contrary, Beirut has repeatedly proved willing to cover such matters up. This mindset is hardly poised to change following the May 2018 parliamentary elections, which increased Hezbollah and Iran's influence over the country's security decisions.

For example, following Netanyahu's pointed revelations at the UN regarding secret airport sites, Lebanese officials sought to protect Hezbollah's precision project through obfuscation. Interim foreign minister Gebran Bassil belittled the preponderant evidence as mere "allegations," then invited a group of ambassadors to tour some of the sites. The attendees included representatives from Russia, Iran, Europe, and numerous African and Asian nations; U.S. officials were invited but chose not to go.

Even more problematic are the seemingly shifting sympathies of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Over the past twelve years, the LAF has received more than \$1.5 billion in assistance from the United States. Yet it has also established [increasingly close connections with Hezbollah](#), a U.S.-designated terrorist group, so its potential role in another conflict is under question. Israeli officials have repeatedly pointed out that in a future war, they will no longer distinguish between the Lebanese government, the LAF, and Hezbollah, citing both the group's sway over these institutions and their complicity in its operations. Adding to the fire, LAF commander Joseph Aoun [has declared on several occasions](#) that his forces intend to participate in any war against the Israeli "enemy."

In light of these attitudes—and the reality of Hezbollah's domestic military superiority—the LAF leadership may not be able or willing to stop the group from establishing precision missile sites. In fact, they may not even be willing to monitor and report such activity given the preponderance of pro-Hezbollah sentiment among their ranks. Ideally, the government

could mandate international oversight of Beirut's airport, to include monitoring flights and inspecting cargo for potential transfers of weapons or related parts to Hezbollah. Yet regardless of who is responsible for actually enforcing such a regime, its prospects for success seem doubtful in terms of both political will and practicality.

For one thing, the security agency in charge of the airport is not the LAF, but the General Security Directorate, headed by pro-Hezbollah general Abbas Ibrahim. The general visits Washington frequently, where he meets with the CIA and other agencies to coordinate on counterterrorism matters. In November 2018, however, he [reportedly praised](#) Hezbollah's terrorist activities—at a counterterrorism conference of all places. During a speech before representatives from several African countries, he sought to defend the group's "resistance" policy, stating, "Terrorism that terrorizes your enemy is not only your right but your duty." Then, after distinguishing such activity from reprehensible attacks on "innocent people," he declared that it is "a source of pride for us" when outsiders label Hezbollah activities as "terrorism."

What About Russia?

Currently, Russia's main regional goal is to stabilize Assad's rule in Syria and reap the war dividends. At face value, then, it is not in Moscow's interest to let Tehran continue its precision missile activities with Hezbollah, which could lead to a war encompassing Israel, Iran, Lebanon, and perhaps even Syria.

At the same time, however, Russia's close relations with Iran in Syria, its shared combat experience with Hezbollah, and its accumulated frustration with Israel's embarrassing strikes may explain its apparent lack of interest in stopping Iran's military buildup there. Such considerations could also shed more light on Iran's decision to move some of these buildup activities to Lebanon. As discussed previously, this shift was at least partly spurred by Israel's strikes (and to some extent it may have been part of Tehran's plan all along). Yet Russia's repeated request to Iran—namely, to lower the risk of further trouble in Syria—may have shaped the decision as well. In any case, the end result is the same: Moscow's current stance allows Iran to incrementally increase its threat buildup in both Syria and Lebanon while constraining Israel's countermeasures.

Meanwhile, Russia has continued to expand its own influence in Lebanon over the past few months. In August, Defense Ministry officials in Moscow announced that they had asked Washington to jointly organize the return of millions of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. Although a convincing plan of return has yet to surface, many Lebanese citizens responded positively to the initiative, and coordination between Beirut and Moscow has since increased. If Russia helps resolve the refugee crisis in the near term, Lebanon will be even more inclined to deepen the security and military relationship. As in Syria, such a development would complicate any Israeli plans to strike Hezbollah targets in Lebanon.

Implications & Recommendations

All of the above scenarios involve higher risk for Israel, whether in the form of near-term escalation, growing danger to its strategic infrastructure in a future war, or both. Thus, if Hezbollah continues working on precision missiles inside Lebanon, Israel may feel compelled to respond one way or another. To avoid a disastrous escalation, the international community will need to plan ahead and take concerted action on several fronts.

RETHINK UNIFIL

In theory, a number of existing UN Security Council resolutions already address the precision missile threat from various angles, including measures related to Iranian arms exports, Iranian proliferation, the illicit transfer of weapons to Lebanon, and the problem of military capabilities not under Lebanese government control. Likewise, one would think that the mandate and area of operations of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon might serve to restrict Hezbollah's well-known practice of embedding military infrastructure in populated areas of the south and Beirut.

Yet the recent missile revelations once again demonstrate the shortcomings of those resolutions and their incomplete application on land, air, and sea. The disparity between costs and benefits becomes particularly stark when one considers that UNIFIL alone deploys 10,500 personnel to Lebanon at a yearly price of almost \$500 million. To account for these shortcomings and the changes in its mission environment since 2006, UNIFIL should undergo

deep downsizing and other adjustments to its shape, role, and budget.

At the same time, the international community could take a more useful approach to the threat of escalation in Lebanon by pursuing concerted diplomatic efforts against the IRGC–Qods Force and its proxies, including Hezbollah. This means designating them more widely as the terrorist actors they are and imposing costs on their ongoing operations, including those carried out by their partners and front companies.

TARGET COMPLICIT AIRLINES

In 2011, the United States sanctioned Iran’s Mahan Air for providing services to the IRGC and Hezbollah along the Tehran-Damascus route. In 2012, it added the Iranian cargo company Yas Air to sanctions lists on the same grounds; Yas is also subject to UN sanctions. Yet Washington has not designated Fars Air Qeshm, the IRGC-tied firm that has operated regular flights between Tehran and Damascus for nearly a year and was involved in the most recent efforts to smuggle precision missile kits into Beirut. To draw further attention to Iran’s air bridge and its role in escalating Israeli tensions with Hezbollah and Tehran, the United States should sanction the airline for these smuggling activities.

Around the same time as the Mahan and Yas designations, the Obama administration asked the Iraqi government to deny overflights to Iranian aircraft believed to be carrying aid for the Assad regime and Hezbollah. The flights were suspended for a time before resuming in mid-2012.

Such flights have also used Turkish airspace, whether during direct routes from Tehran to Damascus or as part of convoluted routes from Damascus to Beirut. Ankara has taken action against these flights in the past. In March 2011, Turkish authorities seized weapons and materiel from a Yas cargo plane flying from Iran to Syria, according to a UN monitoring report.

The current and previous U.S. administrations have also pressed various governments to prohibit airports and service providers from working with designated Iranian airlines. For instance, Saudi Arabia banned Mahan Air in 2016, when the company conducted flights from Tehran to Sana following the Yemeni capital’s takeover by Houthi rebels. Yet Mahan and other Iranian carriers continue to fly to and from other Gulf countries several times a day.

Some of the more problematic flights have landed in Qatar, such as the Fars Air Qeshm plane accused of smuggling GPS kits into Beirut in October 2018; it reportedly flew into Doha during its return to Tehran. Qatar’s ability to restrict such airlines is constrained by its reliance on a narrow channel of Iranian airspace to navigate inbound and outbound flights—a situation that arose after its Gulf Arab neighbors imposed an ongoing land and air embargo in spring 2017. Airlines from the United Arab Emirates face fewer constraints than Qatari firms, but several of them still use Iranian airspace for overflights while operating in the crowded Gulf airspace. Resolving the diplomatic rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council—however difficult that may be—would give each of these countries greater leeway in pushing back on illicit Iranian activity.

BRING EUROPE AND TURKEY INTO THE FOLD

In the past, the risk of war breaking out between Israel and Iran helped rally Europe behind U.S.-led sanctions against Tehran. Although transatlantic relations have suffered since Washington withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal, the same risk can once again be used as leverage. Specifically, the United States should recruit its European and regional partners, including Turkey, for intensified pressure on Iran’s malign use of commercial aircraft, cargo flights in particular. Such carriers continue to operate in Europe and across the Middle East.

KEEP A CLOSER EYE ON THE LAF

The future of U.S. aid to the LAF is currently under debate. The original objective behind this funding was to help the LAF implement Security Council Resolution 1701, which requires the disarmament of Hezbollah and other Lebanese militias. That goal was later put on the back burner so that the LAF could focus on fighting local branches of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Yet while that important mission was successful, Hezbollah’s sway over the LAF increased to the point where many in Washington are now asking the Trump administration to halt the funding.

This approach would be deleterious, however, because the aid gives U.S. officials a degree of leverage over Lebanon’s military institutions. A better

option is to create a monitoring mechanism and a set of conditions that help contain Hezbollah's influence over the LAF.

CUT AID TO SUSPECT INSTITUTIONS

The United States should take firmer action against other Lebanese state institutions that are too close to Hezbollah, and encourage its allies to do the same. Once Lebanon's new government forms, Washington should halt aid to any ministries headed by Hezbollah members. Such warnings have already been issued [regarding the Health Ministry](#), but other institutions—such as the General Security Directorate—collaborate even more closely with Hezbollah and should be targeted.

Getting the Europeans behind such efforts is imperative. The EU named Hezbollah's military "wing" as a terrorist entity in July 2013, but it stopped short of designating the wider organization, in part because of concerns that this would impede European governments from working with Beirut. An EU asset freeze against Hezbollah writ large would not preclude such contact, however—instead, it would call into question the most problematic forms of assistance, such as the ample European funding that flows to the General Security Directorate. If the EU needs further justification to take that step, it need only look to the charges that the Special Tribunal for Lebanon [laid out in September 2018](#), when prosecutors tied senior Hezbollah

officials to the operatives who assassinated former prime minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005.

RELEASE INTELLIGENCE DETAILS

U.S. officials have made only limited comments on the recent upgrades to Hezbollah missile facilities in Lebanon. Speaking at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling on November 29, State Department representative Brian Hook [briefly mentioned](#) U.S. "evidence" that Iran is helping the group build such facilities. Washington should consider going further than that by publicly releasing whatever detailed intelligence it has on these sites. Among other benefits, this would empower the Lebanese government to take action against some or all of these sites, toward the longer-term goal of reestablishing a monopoly on all military capabilities within its borders (however distant that prospect may seem at present).

HIGHLIGHT THE HUMANITARIAN RISKS

The international community should do more to show the Lebanese people that Hezbollah's domestic missile activities put their livelihoods and very lives at risk. This message could be particularly resonant among the group's core Shia constituents, who are beginning to see the danger signs on their own but need to hear a clear, credible warning about potentially losing everything they have built since 2006.



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