

The tunnels and Hezbollah's wider strategy

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Introduction

With Israel launching Operation Northern Shield to destroy Hezbollah tunnels within Israeli territory, BICOM CEO James Sorene spoke with Dr Daphne Richemond-Barak, assistant Professor at the IDC Herzliya and an expert in underground warfare. Below is an abridged summary of the conversation.

The tunnels and Hezbollah's wider strategy

James Sorene (JS): How do you see this in terms of Hezbollah's wider strategy of trying to attack Israel in the future?

Daphne Richemond-Barak (DRS): The discovery of the tunnels is a remarkable development. Firstly, because it's the first public admission by Israel that there are cross-border tunnels dug by Hezbollah. Their existence had been suspected for quite a long time – in fact, even in 2006, during the Second Lebanon War, Israel already knew that Hezbollah liked using this tactic, because they found tunnels inside Lebanese territory. Yet until now, the existence of such tunnels along the border was just speculation.

Tunnels generally come up in conversation in connection with Hamas in Gaza. But those tunnels are very different from the ones being discovered in the north. While the Hezbollah tunnels are not necessarily more sophisticated than those dug by Hamas, and while they both have electricity and are of similar size and depth of 20-25 metres, the main difference is the geological environment – the Hezbollah tunnels are dug in stone. This difference also requires Israel to develop entirely new tools and technologies to detect and use sensors that will work in stone. Moreover, because they are built in stone, the Hezbollah tunnels do not need to be fortified with cement.

What had Hezbollah planned

JS: Had these tunnels been completed and prepared for operation, what do you think would

have been Hezbollah's operational desire to use them? How would they have been utilised?

DRS: There is undoubtedly hostile intent behind the digging of these tunnels. But it's not clear whether they would have been used to surprise Israel and kidnap soldiers or civilians, or to carry out a major infiltration, similar to what North Korea has contemplated doing with its own tunnels. Tunnel mining, which is a tactic dating back to the First World War, has been very popular and efficient in the Syrian war so that could be something we witness going forward.

JS: There has been some discussion over what Hezbollah is really trying to do – it's been tied down in the Syrian civil war with many fighters for a very long time and there has been relative quiet on the Israeli-Lebanon border. Where do you think Hezbollah are operationally vis-à-vis Israel?

DRS: There has been relative quiet between Israel and Hezbollah. As you mention, Hezbollah has been very busy with the Syrian war fighting alongside Bashar al-Assad, where they have actually deployed troops and played a crucial role. But Hezbollah has also used the quiet to prepare for the 'next round' with Israel.

This IDF operation, which is set to last a couple of weeks, has obviously been planned for a long time. It could be that it's related to the fact that with the Syrian war winding down, Israel anticipates Hezbollah operatives will be more present along the Israeli-Lebanon border and potentially more ready to carry out some actions. We also know that Israel clearly waited for these tunnels to actually cross the border, which is important because Israel wants to carry out this operation with as much international backing as possible in order to create legitimacy to protect its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Iran changing focus to Lebanon

JS: There is a lot of debate about Iran's role and where it puts its resources and the fact that the

Iranians, who have realised that Syria is not the theatre that gave them as much freedom as they thought – in terms of reportedly building up missile factories etc – may put many more resources into Lebanon, including a project to make its missiles more precise. To what extent do you think these reports are accurate?

DRS: During Prime Minister Netanyahu's address, there seemed to be allusions to the fact the threat is more than just tunnels and that government is not sharing that with the public or world at large.

Alternatively, perhaps these actions are directed at limiting Iran's influence in Lebanon. Potentially, if Hezbollah were to have missile factories – which they probably do – countering them might be stage two or part of what Israel is contemplating in case there is an escalation, which I don't believe Israel wants, but which could happen.

Violation of international law

JS: You're a lawyer by background so can you comment on where this action falls within the purview of international law?

DRS: This is absolutely a violation of international law, as well as of Israel's sovereignty and territorial integrity and UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

There are a couple of things which provides Israel the right under international law to do something about these tunnels.

First, because the tunnels have crossed the border. Second, because they have been dug by a hostile actor.

Moreover, the fact there seem to be many tunnels also matters in terms of strengthening Israel's legal justifications to act.

The next question is whether Israel will be able to destroy these tunnels or eliminate the threat by acting solely within its own territory? If Israel

only destroys the 40m of the tunnels which is on Israeli soil, it runs the risk that Hezbollah will dig the tunnel somewhere else using a different route, thus keeping the threat alive.

In light of this, it's clear that just destroying the parts of the tunnels inside Israel will not eliminate the threat and there is no doubt that Israel will have to enter Lebanese territory – like any other state would.

International law cannot be interpreted in a way that requires the state which is the victim of a cross border violation of this kind to stand idly by waiting for these tunnels to be used. There has to be some level of pragmatism in how this act is interpreted internationally and what tools are given to states to defend themselves against these kinds of actors.

All of these factors matter in terms of assessing Israel's legal right to react and what it can do. I do not believe that a fully-fledged war would be justified in this context. But limited actions and anti-tunnel operations against these tunnels on Lebanese territory would be justified given the nature of the threat and all the aspects mentioned.

The role of UNIFIL and LAF

JS: What do you think this means for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) as well as the Lebanese Armed Forces and Lebanese government. There have been a lot of requests for UNIFIL to raise its game in dealing with threats related to Hezbollah and the Lebanese armed forces are meant to be the only entity that should legally be patrolling the border and are clearly not enforcing that authority.

DRS: The blue line between Israel and Lebanon is a very sensitive border which is meant to be monitored and protected by UNIFIL, who obviously completely missed this tunnel enterprise.

The tunnels also raise serious questions for UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces.

PM Netanyahu showed a map of the tunnel demonstrating how close it was to the UNIFIL post in the area. Hezbollah used trucks to excavate and move earth around to allow for the digging of the tunnel and all of this was going on under the noses of UNIFIL.

This is not the first time there has been a level of disappointment among the Israeli public as to the role that UNIFIL is supposed to fill and what it is actually doing.

It's clear UNIFIL cannot actually stop Hezbollah – and I do not believe it's even in their mandate. But there are means at its disposal to deal with the situation and they can raise flags and call on other parties to act.

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