

Stretched over Two Borders, Hezbollah is Making Israel Anxious

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Among the many regional players operating on Syrian soil, two arch-enemies are familiar with each other's war tactics: Hezbollah and Israel. After challenging Israel for nearly four decades in southern Lebanon, in recent years the Iranian-backed Hezbollah has sought to open a new battlefield in southern Syria. Tel Aviv is growing anxious and has been aggressively targeting any movement by the Lebanese group that could insinuate building or transferring military capabilities near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Iran's agility in moving weapons and fighters between Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq worries Israel and changes the rules of the game in the Levant.

Covert War in Syria

Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's secret visit to Tehran in April 2013, where he met with Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, was a turning point in expanding Hezbollah's role in the Syrian war. Since then, the Lebanese group has built a military base in al-Qusayr, a Syrian town on the border with Lebanon, to stockpile weapons—including Iranian-made ballistic missiles—and operate a training facility. Iran's strategy to establish a supply line from Tehran to Beirut is gradually expanding Hezbollah's ability to reach Israeli targets.

So far, Israel has generally had the upper hand in the covert war with Hezbollah in Syria. In January 2015, an Israeli helicopter targeted a Hezbollah convoy in Quneitra in the occupied Golan Heights, killing six of its members as well as a prominent general in Iran's Revolutionary

Guard. Ten days later, Hezbollah retaliated from southern Lebanon by launching a rocket attack on the Shebaa Farms that killed two Israeli soldiers. That back-and-forth set the precedent for Hezbollah's attempts to link the two fronts against Israel. Nasrallah reinforced that concept of simultaneous battlefields in a speech last June when he warned that if Israel attacked Lebanon or Syria, "hundreds of thousands of fighters from all around the Arab and Islamic world" would be ready to fight back. While the Lebanese group has repeatedly threatened Israel with new weapons or tactics, warning about combatants from "Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan" is a new trend in Hezbollah's tactics of intimidation.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah's arsenal of weapons seems to grow despite Israel's preemptive strikes. In April, Israeli jets flying the Golan shot several missiles at a military site southwest of Damascus International Airport. Intelligence Minister Israel Katz noted that the attack "corresponds completely with Israel's policy to act to prevent Iran's smuggling of advanced weapons via Syria to Hezbollah." In November 2016, Hezbollah held an unprecedented military parade in al-Qusayr, displaying Soviet made T-72 tanks, Kornet anti-tank guided missiles, and KS-12A anti-aircraft weapons as well as American-made M113 armored personnel carriers that Israeli intelligence concluded were originally supplied to the Lebanese military.

In January 2013, Israeli forces launched an aerial attack on a convoy in the outskirts of Damascus

that was believed to be carrying advanced anti-aircraft weaponry from the Syrian regime to Hezbollah, most notably the Russian made SA-17, an advanced anti-aircraft missile system. However, last year the Lebanese group reportedly acquired the SA-17 that Moscow provided to the Syrian regime in 2015. Whether Russia had or had not authorized such a transfer, it shows the extent of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and its preparations for a potential confrontation with Israel. A Hezbollah officer was reportedly quoted as acknowledging that Russians "give us weapons" (surface-to-surface missiles, laser-guided rockets, and anti-tank missiles); however, Israel's ambassador to Russia told a committee in the Israeli Knesset that Moscow assured Tel Aviv that it had not transferred, and will not transfer, arms to Hezbollah. Even if there is no delivery of weapons, the close coordination between both sides in battles like Aleppo has undoubtedly benefited Hezbollah's battleground experience.

The Golan Heights: New Rules of the Game

Early in the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah tried to become militarily active in Quneitra, the Golan Heights' high valley strategically located along the United Nations' demilitarized disengagement line between Syria and Israel. The tacit agreement between Damascus and Tel Aviv, since the 1973 Arab Israeli War, ensured over four decades of stability in that area. That long-term truce is now in jeopardy as Israel continues to occupy 460 square miles of the Golan.

Samir Kuntar, a Hezbollah commander who played a leading role in attempting to set up the group's infrastructure in the Golan Heights, was killed in December 2015 in a rocket strike near Damascus. That assassination came a few months after Moscow's military intervention in Syria. It became evident since then that a Russian-Israeli understanding is allowing Tel Aviv to strike Hezbollah when it attempts to transfer weapons or plan an activity near the Golan Heights area. In hot-mic remarks last month, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu admitted that Israel and Russia have been in talks about the Iranian role in Syria: "I told [President Vladimir] Putin, when we see them transferring weapons to Hezbollah, we will hurt them. We did it dozens of times."

Now that the Syrian war is entering a new phase, Israel and Iran are using their proxies to force a new reality on the ground. Last March, the al-Nujaba Movement, an Iraqi version of Hezbollah, formed the "Golan Liberation Brigade." Al-Nujaba was formed in 2013 to join the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and played a role in the battle of Aleppo last year. While that new brigade does not appear to constitute a credible threat, it reflects Iranian reach in coordinating attacks against Israel. The Brigade's spokesperson said in a statement that the new group is ready to participate in the liberation of the Golan "should the Syrian government make the request."

Meanwhile, over the last five years, Israel has been quietly setting up a zone of control along

the Golan Heights' demarcation line in a similar fashion to the security belt that Tel Aviv established in south Lebanon until 2000 with the help of the "South Lebanon Army." The control zone runs roughly 6 miles deep and 12 miles long in Quneitra to prevent Hezbollah from approaching the Israeli fence. In 2016, Tel Aviv established a liaison unit to coordinate with Syrian residents, including providing assistance and medical treatment, allowing access to Israel and providing aerial support when needed. Israel is also funding and supporting the Golan Knights (Liwa Forsan al-Joulan), a border guard force of Syrian fighters with light weaponry.

Furthermore, Israeli forces have been increasingly more aggressive this year in retaliating against the Syrian regime. In June, two weeks before announcing the July 7 US-Russia deal, "errant" projectiles were fired at the Golan Heights during confrontations between the Syrian regime and Jabhat al-Nusra. The Israeli Air Force reacted by launching an attack on Syrian regime targets. In April, Israeli forces carried out multiple strikes on pro-Syrian regime fighters in retaliation for mortar fire. These strikes seem to be a message to the Syrian regime that it will come under Israeli attack if it continues to coordinate closely with Iran in southern Syria.

The Lebanese Battlefield: From the South to Arsal

Israel and Hezbollah are satisfied with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which brought a decade of stability in south Lebanon after the July 2006 war. There is no

indication that either side is interested in altering that status quo, as Hezbollah has been mostly invested in the Syrian war. Mediated by the United Nations, Lebanese and Israeli officers continue to hold periodic meetings in the coastal town of Ras al-Naqoura to avoid tensions and confrontation between the two sides. Furthermore, Israel's anxiety extends to the maritime threat, contemplating a scenario where Hezbollah commandos can potentially breach the coast north of Nahariya to carry out a massive attack backed by missiles launched from the Lebanese coast.

In his visit to Paris in July, Netanyahu asked French President Emmanuel Macron to influence the Lebanese government on Hezbollah's regional activities. Netanyahu said in a briefing that Beirut "shouldn't take steps" that would push "a very serious conflict" between Israel and Lebanon. Indeed, the head of the Israeli Air Force, Major General Amir Eshel, warned in June of "unimaginable power" in any future conflict with Hezbollah. "What the air force was able to do quantitatively in the [2006] Lebanon war over the course of 34 days we can do today in 48-60 hours," he added. It is noteworthy that Nasrallah had threatened in February that Hezbollah could, in return, target the Dimona nuclear plant in the Negev desert.

The mutual verbal threats between Hezbollah and Israel remain focused on southern Lebanon and do not include southern Syria, where both sides are working covertly and quietly against each other. The Israeli military sees that the future war with Hezbollah "will be a real war,"

with both guerilla and conventional tactics, as the Lebanese group is growing into a full-fledged army with effective military capabilities.

In that context, in July the Israeli government sent messages to Tehran via Europe warning against the expansion of Hezbollah's fighting capabilities in southern Lebanon. Israel said it "will not tolerate" an Iranian effort to build underground weapons production factories in south Lebanon that will enable Hezbollah to produce advanced rockets with no need to smuggle them from Iran through Syria. The repeated Israeli targeting of Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah compelled both Tehran and the Lebanese group to consider new options for continuing to update military capabilities.

Hezbollah's military operation against Jabhat al-Nusra in Lebanon's Aarsal, which was recently concluded in a deal between both sides, was closely followed by Israel. One of the many implications of that battle is cementing Hezbollah's leverage over Lebanese institutions; most important, however, is the group's control over the Beirut-Damascus highway, ensuring the flow of Iranian arms shipments and the coordination of cross-border operations.

Israel, Hezbollah, and the US-Russia Deal

If there is one thing Hezbollah and Israel agree on, it is their objection to the US-Russia deal in southern Syria. Netanyahu opposed the agreement brokered by Jordan while Hezbollah

remained silent, waiting for clarity from the Iranian-Russian talks. Hezbollah felt its movements were restrained, while Israel believed it did not get enough guarantees that Iranian-backed militias would not be active in southern Syria at a later stage.

Per the US-Russia deal, Russian police have set up checkpoints and observation posts to implement the ceasefire, keeping Hezbollah at least 8 miles away from the Golan's demarcation line. Washington and Moscow reportedly reached a deal where Hezbollah leads the fight against Jabhat al-Nusra in Aarsal (on the Lebanese-Syrian border) in return for the Lebanese group's phased withdrawal from Deraa in southern Syria. Hezbollah's decision to lead the Aarsal battle in July seems to reverse an earlier decision, in May, to move 3,000 fighters from the Qalamoun area on the Lebanese-Syrian border to southern Syria.

Moscow has been sensitive to Israeli demands by excluding the "de-escalation zone" in southern Syria from the Astana talks and by allowing Israeli strikes inside Syria. However, Russia did not refrain from colluding with Iran in Syria. On July 17, Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, said that he could "guarantee that the American side and we did the best we can to make sure that Israel's security interests are fully taken into consideration." The United States is also attempting to calm Israel's anxieties, although it remains focused on fighting ISIL. Israel's complaints regarding the deal are merely an attempt to extract additional concessions and will unlikely risk political

confrontation with either Moscow or Washington.

Israel believes the deal perpetuates Iranian influence in Syria and does not address Iranian plans to establish naval and air force bases. Tel Aviv's red lines in Syria include keeping Iran away from the Israeli border and preventing Hezbollah from acquiring sophisticated weaponry. While Israel might be successful in targeting Hezbollah leaders or Iranian arms shipments, it will be hard in the long run to detect and keep track of the movement of fighters and weapons along the supply line from Tehran to Beirut. The only possibly assured course for Israel, beyond preemptive military strikes, is the implementation of the US-Russia deal and, most importantly, a sustained Russian involvement that can balance Iranian influence in the Syrian conflict.

While in Moscow, meeting with Putin in April 2016, Netanyahu said "with or without a [Syrian] agreement, the Golan Heights will remain under Israeli sovereignty." Iran and Hezbollah will undoubtedly use the Israel occupation card. Despite its backing of a few Syrian rebel groups, Tel Aviv does not enjoy

support from the community in the non-occupied part of the Golan. Earlier this month, protests occurred in an anti-Syrian-regime town in the southern outskirts of Quneitra against factions cooperating with Israel. Similarly, Hezbollah does not enjoy any support in areas outside the full control of the Syrian regime, and the Lebanese group's fighters even engaged in sporadic clashes with Syrian troops in territories where they had differences in tactics. Hezbollah is stretched thin on two borders and could risk its political support in Lebanon.

US options are limited beyond imposing additional sanctions against Hezbollah, as there is no appetite to become involved militarily in the Syrian war. Washington is now relying on Moscow to contain Iranian-backed groups and keep them away from southern Syria. Iran seems open to giving up influence in the southwest and north in return for consolidating its control and maintaining the supply line from Iran to Lebanon. In the long run, the risks of confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah may largely depend on how the US-Russia deal will unfold in southern Syria. Meanwhile, both sides are preparing for a war that, for now, seems a long way off.