

Hezbollah's Secrets Explode—and Are Covered Up—Again

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Brief Analysis

Hezbollah leaders are still trying to conceal their strategy of hiding military assets in civilian areas, but each self-explosion and Israeli exposure reveals more about the group's political plight, its persistent quest for precision missiles, and its skill with information operations.

Last week saw another round in Israel's efforts to expose Hezbollah's precision weapons and its longstanding human-shield strategy inside Lebanon, with the group inevitably fighting back through denials and cover-ups. As the new revelations and the group's counterpunches make clear, the status quo poses a profound risk to both the Lebanese people and regional security. In response, Israel and the international community need to pursue more intensive information campaigning, integrative policy, and peacekeeping improvements.

DUELING SPEECHES

On the evening of September 29, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu addressed the UN General Assembly by video. Recalling the August 4 port blast in Beirut and the September 22 explosion in Ain Qana, he revealed the existence of a "secret arms depot" near a gas company in the capital's Janah neighborhood, urging the Lebanese people to demand that Hezbollah and Iran "tear these depots down." Shortly thereafter, the Israel Defense Forces [published further details \(https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/hezbollah/exposed-three-hezbollah-missile-sites-in-beirut/\)](https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/hezbollah/exposed-three-hezbollah-missile-sites-in-beirut/) about Hezbollah's Janah site along with two other manufacturing sites for precision-guided missiles in the Laylaki and Choueifat neighborhoods, both sheltered beneath residential buildings.

This sequence was a repeat of what happened two years earlier, when Netanyahu's September 27, 2018, Hezbollah's Secrets Explode—and Are Covered Up—Again UN speech exposed three Hezbollah precision missile sites in civilian areas and the IDF released details right afterward. In an attempt to disprove those allegations, Lebanon's foreign

minister at the time, Gebran Bassil, took a delegation of foreign ambassadors to one of the sites on October 1, but Israel derided this as a cover-up, noting that three days was plenty of time for Hezbollah to clear out a missile factory.

This year, the group responded more quickly. Just an hour-and-a-half after Netanyahu's UN video speech began, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah used his own preplanned television address to declare that a media tour would be arranged that night to "prove Netanyahu's lies." He also claimed that the short notice he was giving—he began speaking at 8:42 p.m., and the promised tour was scheduled for 10:00 p.m.—would not be enough time to allow for the removal of any alleged missiles from the site, proving that none were there in the first place. The IDF **soon tweeted (<https://twitter.com/IDF/status/1311024599765745665>)** the coordinates of each site and wryly noted, "Let's hope the journalists get there before Nasrallah's moving trucks do." Predictably, the **tour resulted (<https://www.newsweek.com/hezbollah-media-dispute-lebanon-missile-sites-israel-1535138>)** in no incriminating missile footage—at least at first glance.

The next day, the IDF struck back with a **video (https://spokesperson.gincher.net/releases/WdsCNPF9BQC-w110EC_tZ)** and more **infographics (<https://app.activetrail.com/S/eiwi3xtw3ja.htm>)** that took a closer look at the tour footage, identifying the Hezbollah members who led the tour and pointing out the presence of machinery used in missile manufacturing. Also released was **drone footage (<https://spokesperson.gincher.net/releases/wZNUzsrCEfW5thq5seGJX>)** of a van traveling between Choueifat and Burj al-Barajneh, where **a fourth missile manufacturing site was exposed (<https://app.activetrail.com/S/eiwi3xtw3jw.htm>)** beneath an apartment building.

HEZBOLLAH'S HISTORY OF EXPLOSIONS AND COVER-UPS

Netanyahu's mention of the Ain Qana explosion was telling as well. In addition to heavily damaging several houses in the area, that incident bore signs of the same cover-up tactics Hezbollah has used in previous cases. Past reports issued by the UN secretary-general describe four arms explosions at Hezbollah sites within the jurisdiction of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) south of the Litani River: **Khirbet Selim (<https://undocs.org/S/2009/566>)** in July 2009, **Tayr Filsay (<https://undocs.org/S/2009/566>)** in October 2009, **Shahabia (<https://undocs.org/S/2010/565>)** in September 2010, and **Tayr Harfa (<https://undocs.org/S/2013/120>)** in December 2012.

In all of these cases, Hezbollah members cordoned off the sites, sometimes violently. In Khirbet Selim, for example, fourteen peacekeepers were injured and eighteen UN vehicles damaged when they attempted to gain access. Within the cordon, thorough cleanup operations took place, with Hezbollah removing remnants of arms and ammunition and transferring them elsewhere. Access was not granted until most incriminating remains were gone; in some cases the facility had even been repainted.

In Khirbet Selim, the UN concluded that the explosion occurred in an active Hezbollah arms and ammunition depot. In Tayr Filsay, the residential building destroyed by the blast was reportedly owned by a local Hezbollah official and had been used as an ammunition depot, but evidence pinpointing the presence of explosives and ammunition was harder to come by—as with all the other sites, signs of tampering were clear. In Tayr Harfa, the ground was bulldozed before UNIFIL was allowed access two hours later (though Israel watched over the bulldozing with drones). Investigators still found sufficient "metallic ordnance fragments" to conclude that the blast resulted from a "detonation of a large quantity of explosives," indicating a direct violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Yet UNIFIL's request to excavate the site was denied by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which share Hezbollah's interest in minimizing exposure and political consequences.

Shahabia apparently took longer to clean, as UNIFIL was denied access for more than twenty-four hours. Even while the cordon was in place, UNIFIL claimed to be "on the spot," when in fact it had simply formed an outer "blue ring" at

a distance around the LAF's inner "red ring" in accordance "with standard operating procedures." IDF drones flying overhead had a clear view of Hezbollah's innermost undeclared "yellow ring," where LAF and UNIFIL personnel were still prohibited and dozens of people were frantically evacuating suspicious objects and loading them onto trucks. The IDF gave the UNIFIL commander realtime updates on these activities throughout the night, but the trucks nevertheless departed the area unhindered, ending up in a Nabatiyah mosque across the Litani.

Last month's Ain Qana explosion occurred outside UNIFIL's area of responsibility, but Hezbollah still scrambled to cover it up. In an Al Jazeera report on the incident, Hezbollah sources stated that "the explosion was caused by a 'technical error' at their arms depot"—but later claimed "the building belonged to a Hezbollah-affiliated de-mining association." They then gave the same excuse offered for the Tayr Harfa incident, namely, that it resulted from "explosive remnants of the 2006 war." According to the BBC, an army unit arrived at the site "instantly" after the blast "and launched an investigation," yet Al Jazeera noted that "Hezbollah members imposed a security cordon around the blast area."

Interestingly, more than seven weeks before the Ain Qana incident, a self-described Norway-based journalist tweeted in Arabic that the village was home to Hezbollah's engineering unit, and that the group had been using several residences to manufacture explosive charges and store tons of explosive material since 2008, using a dairy as cover. Issued shortly after the Beirut port blast, the tweet ended with a warning that any explosion at this factory would cause a major human tragedy in Ain Qana. When an explosion finally did occur, Lebanon's state-owned National News Agency issued a typical deflection, emphasizing that it coincided with "intensive" traffic from Israeli aircraft.

PUBLIC MESSAGING AND INTELLIGENCE IMPLICATIONS

Hezbollah's prompt reaction to Netanyahu's challenge demonstrated not just its improved response time at the tactical level, but mainly the heavy strategic pressure it is currently experiencing. After the port tragedy, the group became more attuned to growing public anger over its strategy of embedding arms and ammunition in populated areas. Netanyahu's words were aimed at that raw nerve, and Hezbollah's instant "media tour" response indicates that he struck home. At the same time, the manner in which Israel presented its evidence gave the group some room to cast itself as the winner of the first round in this exchange. The IDF's animated clip included missile icons, and Netanyahu's imprecise wording (ranging from "secret arms depot" to "missile factory" to "missile explosive depot") strayed from the military's set terminology ("missile manufacturing sites"), allowing Hezbollah to focus the tour on the lack of actual missiles at the site. Whether this exonerated the group in the public's eye remains to be seen, especially since the IDF quickly countered that move.

This information warfare is not just about winning hearts and minds at the strategic and political level. It also has implications at the military and operational levels, where Israeli intelligence efforts are continually striving to pierce Hezbollah's operational security efforts as a secret military organization. Every exposure of a Hezbollah military site—whether by public revelations or self-explosions—forces the group to confront dilemmas on each of these fronts, while also raising intelligence risks for Israel.

For example, authorities had to declassify material in order to expose the sites highlighted by Netanyahu. While this move will likely disrupt Hezbollah's precision missile project and spur complete evacuation of these sites, it also poses risks to Israeli sources and methods. In addition, it effectively removes these sites from the IDF's list of enemy "unknown knowns" and potential future strike targets. At the same time, however, Hezbollah's decision to vindicate itself via a media tour unwittingly gave Israel free indoor reconnaissance at Janah, and the IDF's subsequent public revelations showed deep inside knowledge of the group's personnel and missile project. Any secretive organization confronted with such an exposure would go reeling in search of security breaches real and imagined, potentially reaping further intelligence gains for its adversaries.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The deep problems underlying these info-tactics have only worsened over the years: Lebanon and the international community must still reckon with the fact that Hezbollah maintains its own military arsenal and foreign policy outside the government's control; embeds its forces and weapons in populated areas, thereby exposing civilians to safety hazards and turning them into human shields in the event of another war; and persists in developing precision missiles and other advanced threats that risk provoking Israel to take preventive action. Lebanese and international acquiescence to Hezbollah's embedded arsenal and cover-up mechanisms may wind up deferring an adequate response until it is too late. Thus far, UN mechanisms have failed to address these problems **even in the south (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/green-without-borders-the-operational-benefits-of-hezbollahs-environmental>)**, where UNIFIL is obligated to help the LAF ensure that only government personnel have military weapons.

One step that could help reduce the mortal risk to Lebanese civilians is ending the false distinction between Hezbollah's "terrorist wing" and "political wing." Germany has joined the United States and Britain in designating Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organization, but France is now engaging even more deeply and openly with the group's political figures in the apparent hope that feeding steaks to this tiger will miraculously transform it into an herbivore. Going forward, more military and security elements should be incorporated into the French-led push for Lebanese reform.

Another key step is to address Hezbollah's human-shield strategy by sanctioning group members and other Lebanese figures who enable it, including within the LAF. Moreover, if additional explosions occur south of the Litani, UNIFIL must insist on immediate access to the sites and place drones or helicopters over them. The "**private property**" pretext (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/unifils-yearly-mandate-renewal-maintain-ends-change-ways-and-means>) that Lebanon and Hezbollah are increasingly using to bar peacekeepers access contravenes the UN's duty to protect civilians and must be overridden. The UN's narrow interpretation of this duty is to act against imminent threats only, but seemingly non-imminent threats can be just as deadly when neglected for too long.

Perhaps most important, the Janah case exposed Hezbollah's vulnerability to public uproar against its dangerous conduct. Israel and its allies should therefore increase political pressure on the group through more-frequent, credible, and unsettling exposure of its secrets, lies, and crimes—not just once every couple years at the UN General Assembly, but as part of a continual campaign.

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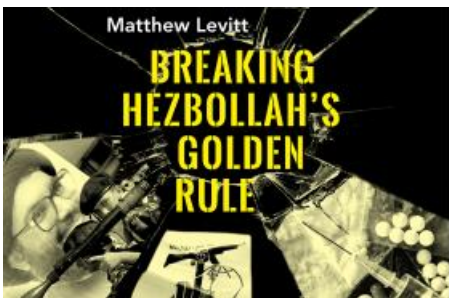
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