

The Blue Line: The Israel-Sudan Border? The Challenge of Infiltrators from Lebanon

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Although Sudanese workers crossing the border are hardly a terrorist threat, they do pose problems that need to be addressed by Israeli, Lebanese, and international authorities.

A new security challenge has emerged from Lebanon: Sudanese trying to cross the Blue Line into Israeli territory in search of work. In May 2020, the IDF prevented three incidents involving ten infiltrators, and in mid-June, one was captured on the outskirts of the town of Shlomi, in northern Israel. In addition, there were at least four cases reported in which close to twenty would-be infiltrators were captured by the Lebanese army, some with the help of UNIFIL, as well as one case of a Sudanese who was found shot to death deep in Lebanese territory. There are also an increasing number of reports of military operations or increased drills by the IDF along the northern border, including illuminating shells, land forces, and aircraft, and in mid-May, a Syrian who had crossed into Israel was shot and wounded in the Mt. Dov region.

A municipality leader went far in describing the seriousness of the situation, and other elected officials compared the attempted infiltrations from Lebanon to past infiltrations along the Egyptian border, in an attempt to leverage this development politically by reigniting the issue of migrant workers in Israel and to take a stab at the legal system. However, those seeking work are not terrorists, a few infiltrators are not a wave, the Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon is not the peace border in Sinai, and the necessary response on both sides of the border must be crafted professionally, based on the unique characteristics of the challenge at the current time.

The deep economic crisis in Lebanon has led to a rapid depreciation of the Lebanese pound, a shortage of dollars, and rising unemployment. The unemployed include many of the roughly quarter-million foreign workers in the country, including a few thousand Sudanese, some of whom have been prodded by the economic plight to try their

luck in Israel. According to sources in Lebanon, there are business or criminal elements driving them to southern Lebanon, taking them near the Blue Line, and guiding them to cross the border barrier into Israel. Other than the infiltrator who was caught in Shlomi and returned to Lebanon, all recent attempts have ended with the infiltrators being prevented from entering Israel. One infiltrator, who crossed from Lebanon in late January, was caught by the IDF, transferred to the Israel Police, and later released in Israel. It is possible that his success has since become known to his unemployed countrymen in Beirut, and has encouraged them to follow suit.

Media outlets close to Hezbollah, including the *al-Akhbar* daily and the al-Manar television station, reported on the infiltrations with much satisfaction, regarding both the infiltrators' success in penetrating the IDF's defensive barrier facing Lebanon, and even more so, these incidents' contribution to undermined confidence among Israelis in the north in the protection that the IDF provides them. Hezbollah supporters drew much encouragement from the overheated stories in the Israeli media regarding panic among the local population, and mainly the populist and irresponsible tongue-lashings by local council heads ("the Northern Command's security concept on the border near Shlomi has failed"), which can serve to strengthen Hezbollah's misperception of Israel as a "spider web" country with weak resilience.

Providing an adequate response to the new challenge requires an understanding of its unique characteristics and the current context, compared to the previous challenge of migration from the Sinai Peninsula as well as terrorist threats from Lebanon. The infiltration of individuals from Sinai seeking work was part of a broad economic system that included a reserve of millions of African migrants in Egypt and complex human trafficking networks that operated from Cairo to eastern Sinai. At its peak, thousands of infiltrators crossed the Israel-Sinai border each month, totaling tens of thousands per year. Israel's response was developed gradually with the investment of significant resources, such as the advancement of the Hourglass barrier from Kerem Shalom to Eilat, the paving of security roads, and the establishment of intelligence collection arrays, while the forces' order of battle was strengthened to secure the area. This involved a combination of holding facilities, legal regulation, deportation proceedings, and approval for the entry of asylum seekers. In tandem, liaison and coordination with operations west of the border by the Egyptian military and the Central Security Police continued. Over time, this led to a halt in the phenomenon on the border and its containment to negligible proportions. The scope of infiltration from Lebanon and its potential expansion are not at all comparable to what occurred at the Sinai border at the start of the 2000s. In addition, the starting point of the IDF defenses on the 104 km-long northern border, the barrier, intelligence collection, and the force size, are immeasurably better than they were along the porous 250 km-long Israel-Sinai border.

The analogy between the infiltration of a work migrant and the penetration of terrorists—"today an infiltrator, tomorrow a terrorist"—is also inaccurate. Technically, any barrier and any defensive array can be crossed, but the operational difficulty in doing so without being discovered increases as the volume of penetration and extent of its danger increase, certainly during routine times. A large group crossing the border is easier to detect than a sole infiltrator. At the military level, the likelihood of a significant surprise attack on Israel by Hezbollah without any early warning is not high. As opposed to those desperate for work acting out of individual and employment considerations, Hezbollah operations are subject to military and strategic logic, and take into account a significant IDF response to such belligerency. In mid-April, for example, Hezbollah exhibited its operational ability to cut the border fence, but at the same time demonstrated the strategic limitations that it places on itself, and avoided penetrating Israeli territory through the breaches that it made.

None of this should lead anyone to dismiss the justified expectations of Israel's northern residents for security and a sense of security, or release the IDF from its responsibility to protect Israel's population, borders, and sovereignty effectively. As with the Sinai border, the response to the new challenge requires a combination of independent action

within Israeli territory and efforts on the other side of the border. As opposed to Egypt, with which Israel has a peace treaty, Lebanon is an enemy country where national military and police operate, as well as UNIFIL peacekeepers, and the most significant military force in the country—the Hezbollah terrorist army, whose **operations along the Blue Line (<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/hezbollah-on-the-borders/>)** pose the main security challenge to the Northern Command.

The response to the challenge of the infiltrators will continue to rely on border barrier infrastructure and current security operations by the Northern Command, supported by significant intelligence efforts. The Lebanese army has reportedly already stopped infiltrators before they reached the Blue Line, perhaps even a greater number than the IDF has stopped, and sometimes with the assistance of UNIFIL. Lebanese security forces, which are entrusted with the security of its borders and the exercise of its sovereignty, can easily prevent infiltrators from crossing deep inside the Lebanese interior, far from the Blue Line—and certainly closer to it. This can be done through preventive operations in Beirut, stopping those who drive the infiltrators to south Lebanon, and stopping infiltrators en route at checkpoints on bridges over the Litani River, the roads leading to southern Lebanon, and on the southern Lebanon road itself. The Lebanese government likely has no interest in this phenomenon continuing, since it is a clear example of the violation of its sovereignty, demonstrating its lack of control over what occurs in its territory and at its borders. Precisely in view of the serious economic-political crisis in Lebanon, the government's motivation to halt this phenomenon can be increased with the encouragement of the international community, especially by countries providing assistance to Lebanon and its military, and even by linking an end to the infiltrations with elements of financial and military assistance.

Some believe that the embarrassment to Israel, the tensions between the IDF and northern residents, and the distraction and the increasing operational efforts on the part of the Northern Command are helpful to Hezbollah, and it will therefore support continued infiltration. It may already be involved in it, since it has tight control over the border area with Israel, and the infiltrators might not be able to pass through it without the organization's agreement. However, Sudanese roaming unsupervised in Hezbollah's operational areas along the Blue Line—including in areas closed by its observation posts operating under the guise of the **Green Without Borders (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/green-without-borders-the-operational-benefits-of-hezbollahs-environmental>)** environmental organization—expose a security lapse of Hezbollah itself, certainly when after crossing the border, they are expected to undergo Israeli questioning. In addition, the challenge of the infiltrations increases the IDF's operational readiness, helps identify loopholes and weaknesses in its defense, and as in the border with Egypt, is expected to gradually lead to significantly greater IDF strength in the sector. A rise in operational tension, which is already reflected in the increased activity of aircraft, forces, and illuminating fire, is felt on both sides of the border. On such nights, the calm of the northern communities is interrupted, but so is that of the Shiite villages in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah's main support base. At the same time, the likelihood of firefights along the border increases, including against Hezbollah terrorists acting in the area, spearheaded by the Radwan units. Concurrently, the risks of an unintended escalation also rise, whereas, according to its leadership, Hezbollah has no interest in this.

Preventing escalation is a shared interest of the IDF, Hezbollah, the Lebanese army, and UNIFIL, which can all be mobilized for action on the matter, certainly just two months before the renewal of the UNIFIL mandate by the Security Council. For all these parties, this involves a limited effort at low risk, outlining room for a possible solution. Another potential response is through the government of South Sudan, whether to influence its citizens in Lebanon or to absorb those seeking repatriation from Lebanon.

In conclusion, the key to a response to the infiltrators is in a realistic analysis of the nature of the actual challenge. This is not an invasion of tens of thousands of infiltrators from Lebanon, or the penetration of terrorists into Israel. It

is certainly not Hezbollah's wartime offensive plans. Alongside the operational response for which the IDF is responsible, Israel's civilian leadership also bears responsibility for the resilience of the residents and their sense of security. The leadership's statements have an effect on both its home audience and the enemy, for better or worse. In addition to a response from the south of the Blue Line, there is the potential for stopping the infiltrators north of it by Lebanon, UNIFIL, and even Hezbollah, through political efforts combined with economic tools. The bottom line, which must be sounded and demonstrated in Lebanon, is that the effort to infiltrate from Lebanon into Israel will fail, and that in the end there is no success story, employment, or economic well-being—just dangers, hardships, and costs.

Assaf Orion is the Rueven International Fellow with The Washington Institute and a senior research fellow with INSS. Before retiring from the IDF in 2016, he held a leadership role in the Planning Directorate that included coordinating with UNIFIL and the LAF. This article was originally published on the INSS website (<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/sudan-israel-border/>). ❖

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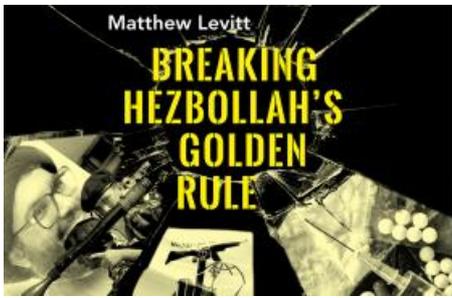
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