

# Don't Look Down: The Struggle Over Lebanon's Airspace

by [Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](/experts/assaf-orion)

Jul 7, 2022

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Assaf Orion \(/experts/assaf-orion\)](/experts/assaf-orion)

Assaf Orion, a retired Israeli brigadier general and defense strategist whose broad research scope ranges from relations with China to Israel's regional political-military strategy and policy, is the Liz and Mony Rueven International Fellow with The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**To avoid past mistakes and counter the most potent threat on its borders, Israel requires an accurate intelligence picture in Lebanon, but Iran and Hezbollah risk destabilizing the situation by chipping away at the IDF's air superiority.**

**A**lthough Iran's military expansion in the Middle East is usually discussed in terms of proxy militias gaining ground and expanding their rocket and missile arsenals, Tehran and its partners are increasingly contesting the region's skies as well. In particular, two troubling trends are on the rise: unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strikes against states that Iran considers rivals, and the proliferation of air defense systems to Iranian partners. In Yemen, for example, Houthi forces have not only conducted UAV attacks against targets inside Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, but also fired on coalition drones with surface-to-air missiles. To drive home the latter threat, Iran's "Military Achievements Media" published an infographic on July 1 illustrating the variety of air defense systems deployed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force, releasing the information in Farsi, Russian, Arabic (<https://imadl.ir/Infographic/2022/07-July/July%201,%202022%20--%20infographic%20of%20air%20defense%20systems%20of%20IRGC%20Aerospace%20Force%20-%20AR.jpg>), Hebrew (<https://imadl.ir/Infographic/2022/07-July/July%201,%202022%20--%20infographic%20of%20air%20defense%20systems%20of%20IRGC%20Aerospace%20Force%20-%20HE.jpg>), and English (see below).



Yet the most dangerous risk of air escalation lies in Lebanon. On June 29, Israel downed a Hezbollah drone headed to its economic zone. On July 2, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted three Hezbollah drones launched from Lebanon and reportedly headed in the direction of the [Karish offshore natural gas platform](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-karish-offshore-gas-field-facts-and-figures) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-karish-offshore-gas-field-facts-and-figures>). Earlier that day, an Israeli airstrike [reportedly targeted](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-711178) (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-711178>) Iranian air defense systems deployed in northwest Syria near the border with Lebanon. These and other developments point to a sobering fact: operational conditions in the country's skies have changed to the IDF's disadvantage, hampering some of its intelligence efforts while heightening the potential for wider conflict with Hezbollah.

## Hezbollah Contesting Israel's Freedom of Action

In an interview conducted April 5, the outgoing chief of the Israeli Air Force (IAF), Maj. Gen. Amikam Norkin, [stated](https://www.timesofisrael.com/outgoing-air-force-chief-says-israel-no-longer-has-freedom-of-action-of-lebanon/) (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/outgoing-air-force-chief-says-israel-no-longer-has-freedom-of-action-of-lebanon/>) that the country's freedom of action in Lebanon's skies had been impaired. This setback did not occur overnight. As early as 2009, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah [warned](https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLG384449) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLG384449>) that obtaining air defense systems would tip the balance in a conflict given Israel's heavy reliance on air supremacy. He also declared that Hezbollah had the right to acquire such systems to protect Lebanon's sovereignty.

In response to such efforts, Israel has [reportedly](https://www.politico.com/story/2013/01/israel-launches-airstrike-in-syria-086976) (<https://www.politico.com/story/2013/01/israel-launches-airstrike-in-syria-086976>) struck air defense systems destined for transfer to Hezbollah throughout Syria's civil war next door, [including](https://www.airrecognition.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=621) ([https://www.airrecognition.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=621](https://www.airrecognition.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=621)) Russian-made SA-8 and SA-17 batteries as well as Iranian systems deployed to Syria. After a drone strike hit Hezbollah targets in Beirut in August 2019, Nasrallah [vowed](https://www.memri.org/tv/hizbullah-leader-nasrallah-we-will-confront-israeli-drones-lebanon-skies) (<https://www.memri.org/tv/hizbullah-leader-nasrallah-we-will-confront-israeli-drones-lebanon-skies>) to shoot Israeli UAVs out of Lebanon's skies.

Airspace tensions went up another notch last year. On February 3, 2021, Hezbollah [launched](https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/1612367648-anti-air-missiles-launched-at-idf-drone-over-lebanon-military-says) (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/diplomacy-defense/1612367648-anti-air-missiles-launched-at-idf-drone-over-lebanon-military-says>) surface-to-air missiles at an Israeli UAV but failed to hit it. Soon afterward, the IAF [held](https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/in-message-to-hezbollah-iaf-practices-striking-3000-) (<https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/in-message-to-hezbollah-iaf-practices-striking-3000->

**targets-in-24-hours-659151**) an exercise (“Rose of the Galilee”) whose opening scenario reportedly began with a Hezbollah anti-aircraft missile hitting an Israeli fighter jet. Involving up to 85 percent of all IAF personnel, the exercise simulated a massive Israeli response striking 3,000 targets in Lebanon within twenty-four hours, including air superiority missions against Hezbollah air defense targets in Beirut and the south. Leaving little to the imagination, the IDF announced that this was what the enemy should expect in response to any attack on a fighter jet.

Nasrallah was seemingly undeterred, however. During a February 2022 interview, he **stated** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwVJUNPo4Dw>) that in the previous two years, Hezbollah **had operated** (<https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/article-695901>) air defense systems that greatly reduced Israel’s activity in Lebanon’s skies and impaired its reconnaissance against the “resistance.” He also **bragged** ([https://t.me/C\\_Military1/32832](https://t.me/C_Military1/32832)) that the group had begun manufacturing drones of its own. According to him, two key consequences resulted from this supposed restriction of Israeli activity: the IDF could no longer do anything to stop Hezbollah’s **production of precision missiles** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-lebanon>), and Israel now had to run human agents inside Lebanon to compensate for the loss of UAV reconnaissance. Whereas Israel used to fly over the Beqa Valley and south Lebanon on a daily basis, he claimed, the Beqa had not seen a UAV in months, while the south had witnessed a decrease in activity and a change in flight routes.

General Norkin **admitted** (<https://www.kan.org.il/item/?itemid=125160>) in his April interview that some elements of intelligence collection were indeed affected. He also noted that Israel had enhanced other elements by using alternative methods, adding that “this is part of our work plan for 2022.” It remains to be seen whether he meant developing intelligence alternatives or reclaiming air superiority.

## What Do the Numbers Say?

**A**lthough neither Hezbollah nor Israel has provided data documenting these trends, UN reports shed more light on the matter. Since the end of the 2006 war, the UN secretary-general has submitted special reports on Lebanon to the Security Council around March, July, and November of each year. Initially, these documents described Israel’s air activity in general terms only. Since the November 2017 **report** ([https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/964](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2017/964)), however, they have included quantitative descriptions of airspace violations and flight hours. Taken together, the reports do in fact illustrate a dramatic drop in Israel’s air activity over Lebanon.

Typically, summer months offer the best visibility conditions for such air reconnaissance, so aerial activity tends to peak during this season (see table). Summer 2020 was particularly active—with the border on high alert following Hezbollah’s threat to avenge a member killed by an IDF strike in Syria that July, Israel’s summer flight hours over Lebanon wound up totaling 7,750, almost triple the seasonal average for the preceding three years.

Decrease in Israeli Flight Hours Over Lebanon, 2017-2021

Flight Hours	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2017-2020 Average	% Change
SPRING	—	1,518	1,002	1,298	413	1,273	-07/decrease-
SUMMER	3,188	2,057	3,292	7,750	378	4,072	9%
Summer average 2017-2019	2,846				378		israel-
Peak Summer				7,750	378		5%
WINTER	1,684	1,048	890	788	198	1,103	flights-

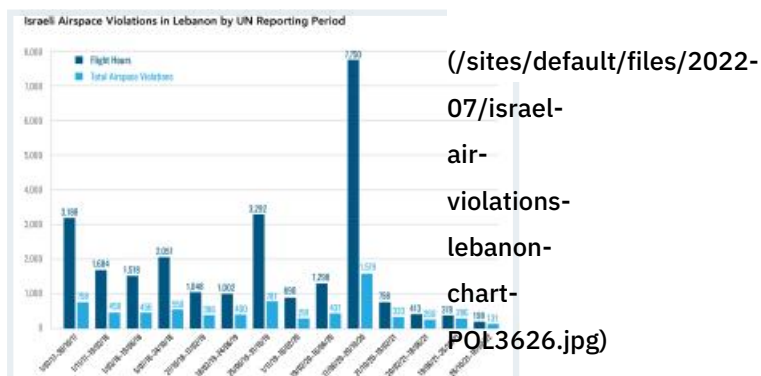
lebanon-

table-

Yet these figures began to plummet in 2021, with 413 flight hours that spring—just 32% of the seasonal average for 2017-2020 (1,273 hours). An even more dramatic drop occurred that summer, with 378 flight hours—just 13% of the 2017-2019 seasonal average (2,846) and a mere 5% of the summer 2020 high mark mentioned above. In sum, UN

reports indicate that Israel decreased its air activity over Lebanon by 70-90% in 2021 compared to previous years, with the biggest cut reported in the busiest season for air reconnaissance.

The UN is of course justified in thoroughly documenting Israel's overflights, since these activities violate Lebanon's sovereignty. (Notwithstanding the fact that these flights are conducted to reconnoiter Hezbollah's own military activities, which violate not only Lebanese sovereignty, but also several Security Council resolutions. But that subject merits its own analyses (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-avoid-another-lost-year-unifil>)). Unfortunately, however, the UN has been inconsistent in how it characterizes the trends it documents—for instance, it emphasized (<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/311/96/pdf/N2031196.pdf?OpenElement>) the “significant increase” in Israeli violations between June and October 2020, but failed to comment at all about their dramatic drop in 2021.



More important, the changing airspace situation has added another fuse to the strategic powder keg along Israel's borders with Lebanon and Syria. In 2018, Israel struck a Hezbollah patrol in the Syrian-controlled portion of the Golan Heights, and the group retaliated from Lebanon, killing two IDF soldiers. In 2019, the IDF struck a team deployed by Iran's IRGC-Qods Force as it was trying to launch drones from Syria, and some of the operatives turned out to be Lebanese. As Iran and its proxy continue to increase their threats against Israel, additional Hezbollah fatalities in Syria are only a matter of time. For its part, Hezbollah has vowed to keep retaliating for such losses from Lebanon, as seen when it attempted several attacks and exchanged fire with Israeli forces across the UN-demarcated Blue Line in summer 2020.

Another wrinkle emerged in August 2021, when Palestinian armed groups inside Lebanon launched rockets against Israel. According to Israeli assessments, such launches would not happen without Hezbollah's consent, if not direction, and the IDF spokesperson emphasized that the Lebanese state is responsible for whatever attacks are launched from in its territory. Israel responded (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-renews-counterstrikes-as-fire-from-lebanese-rocket-engulfs-northern-hillside/>) to the barrage with a rare airstrike in Lebanon (the first since 2014) and more than a hundred artillery shells. Hezbollah then answered with a twenty-rocket salvo into Israel. Palestinian groups launched another rocket from Lebanon this April.

Additionally, Hezbollah UAVs have often been observed flying along the border this year—one such drone was downed (<https://www.ynetnews.com/article/r124qxnj5>) in mid-February, and another triggered air raid sirens and unsuccessful (<https://www.israelhayom.com/2022/02/18/iron-dome-intercepts-drone-that-enters-israel-from-lebanese-territory/>) launches by Israel's Iron Dome defense system. In short, the border that so many officials have characterized as “calm” is actually sparking with incidents, and while the situation was hitherto managed well enough to avoid escalation, the changing airspace conditions could upset that fragile balance.

From this perspective, the threats to Israel's air superiority have substantial destabilizing potential. Between its withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and the war against Hezbollah in 2006, Israel spent too little effort following the

group's military buildup, bitterly awakening to the consequences of this failure in battle. Since that war, Israel has acknowledged Hezbollah as the top military threat on its borders and made an exceptional effort to stay well informed about the group's capabilities, **as IAF overflights show (<https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-709182>)**. During the month-long "Chariots of Fire" drill conducted this May, the IDF exercised a massive precision strike and wide maneuver against these capabilities, confirming that its response to Hezbollah escalation will be a wide-scale, intelligence-driven air and land campaign.

To keep this capability ready to use, Israel needs to continue its collection efforts and update its intelligence picture well into the future. Developing collection alternatives to air reconnaissance is one option, but Israel likely still faces a dilemma: either accept gradual degradation of its intelligence picture over time or expose its air reconnaissance missions to Hezbollah's air defenses. In Syria, Israel has shown a willingness to destroy defense systems that threaten its aircraft, but in Lebanon it has acted differently so far. The IDF and Hezbollah have long been walking the tightrope between deterrence and escalation, prudently managing to avoid the latter. Yet with Hezbollah raising the bar against a vital tool of Israel's national security, the stakes are becoming even higher.

*Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (Res.) is the Rueven International Fellow at The Washington Institute and former head of the Strategic Division in the IDF General Staff's Planning Directorate. ❖*

---

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### **Biden in the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges**

July 11, 2022, starting at 12:00 p.m. EDT (1600 GMT)

◆  
Ebtesam al-Ketbi,  
Tamar Hermann,  
Dennis Ross,  
Robert Satloff

**(/policy-analysis/biden-middle-east-opportunities-and-challenges)**



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### **The United States Needs a Better Strategy to Deter Iran**

Jul 6, 2022



Dennis Ross

(/policy-analysis/united-states-needs-better-strategy-deter-iran)



#### IN-DEPTH REPORTS

### Counteracting Iran's Regional Strategy (Hebrew)

*A Long-Term, Comprehensive Approach*

Jul 5, 2022



Eyal Zamir

(/policy-analysis/counteracting-irans-regional-strategy-hebrew-long-term-comprehensive-approach)

#### TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

#### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)