

Hezbollah Infiltrates Israel (Part 2): Potential Responses

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Brief Analysis

Israel should act quickly on multiple fronts to show Hezbollah that it will not shy away from escalation, especially if the organization continues to test it.

Two things became clear after the perpetrator of last week's Megiddo terrorist attack was killed: first, a much bigger attack was avoided (as discussed later in this article), and second, Hezbollah probably knew what was about to happen and may have approved the operation, if not executed it firsthand. The latter realization is quite alarming because it means that Hezbollah's leaders were willing to take a risk of real escalation with Israel, even if they perceived that risk to be low. As discussed in [Part 1 of this PolicyWatch](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-infiltrates-israel-part-1-another-step-toward-changing-rules-game>, the attack is another glaring sign that Hezbollah has changed the rules of the game. Israeli decisionmakers must therefore re-clarify their redlines—with force if necessary.

Hezbollah's Role in the Attack

So far, not many details have been published regarding the attack or the perpetrator identity's. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Israel Security Agency have released some information on the weapon used (a claymore-like explosive) and the terrorist's general route, but nothing on his identity. Yet most fingers are pointing in Hezbollah's direction given the group's strong security control over south Lebanon, especially along the border with Israel.

True, Hezbollah is not the only actor that might be involved in such a cross-border attack. For example, Hamas [has entrenched itself \(https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/88184\)](#) in the Lebanese arena in recent years, building military capabilities and recruiting local fighters to its ranks. Another possible culprit is Iran, which is constantly trying to find more ways to execute attacks against Israel from the north. But even if Hamas, Iran, or other actors were involved, they would not have been able to execute such an operation without Hezbollah's approval.

Indeed, the circumstances of the Megiddo attack reminded many in Israel of another terrorist operation that

Hezbollah executed in 2002, when it sent two Palestinian terrorists across the northern border to kill Israelis near the Matzuva kibbutz. At the time, the group likely hoped that using Palestinian operatives might obscure its involvement in the attack. Today, however, Hezbollah can hardly have expected to cover its tracks given that the terrorist crossed its heavily guarded border while carrying advanced explosives, and used a ladder to get over Israel's security barrier—the same tactic used by the 2002 attackers.

Israel's Response Options

Hezbollah's risk analysis was no doubt shaped by what is going on inside Israel today, from growing social rifts to a heavily protested government plan for judicial overhaul. The group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, is considered to be a **close watcher and decent analyst** (<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/nasrallah-judicial-revolution/>) of Israeli politics, so he may have believed that now was a good time to move the goalposts and raise a challenge on the security front.

For Israel, maintaining calm on the northern border has been a top priority in recent years. Officials did not want a flare-up with Hezbollah, so they limited many of the IDF's activities in Lebanon, especially against Hezbollah targets. Even when the group showed that it was willing to test Israeli red lines—most notably last July when it sent drones toward the Karish gas platform, a strategically important site—Israel downed the aircraft but did not take further steps that might escalate the situation (e.g., targeting Hezbollah's drone bases in Lebanon).

Today, however, Israel cannot stop at pointing fingers and issuing harsh statements. The Megiddo attack might have caused much more damage given the additional explosives and other weapons the terrorist was carrying; even the lone device detonated at Megiddo could have easily been used to destroy a larger target such as a bus. Moreover, Hezbollah's apparent effort to test (or shift) Jerusalem's redlines on a dangerous frontier needs to be answered. If Nasrallah has misjudged Israel, then it is incumbent on Jerusalem to make this clear, ideally via the following main steps:

- **Declassify as much intelligence as possible** without risking sensitive sources, publishing all evidence regarding Hezbollah's involvement in the attack and identifying all individuals who had a hand in planning and executing it. At the very least, this would signal to these individuals that they are on Israel's radar and may be attacked at the first possible opportunity, regardless of their affiliations.
- **Reach out to any possible interlocutor with Hezbollah**, conveying the message that further attempts to change the rules of the game are unacceptable and will be met with overwhelming force. This message should be delivered to the Lebanese government as well, since the IDF response to continued attacks against Israel would damage the Lebanese state, not just Hezbollah. Israel can pass this message via the various French or regional officials who are in touch with Beirut and elements of Hezbollah.
- **Last and most important, prepare for escalation.** Unfortunately, the days of keeping the north quiet at any cost have passed, especially if Hezbollah no longer believes Israel is willing to respond forcefully. The last time the organization perceived Israel to be weak was in 2006, and its resultant cross-border operations (e.g., kidnapping Israeli soldiers) led to a war that proved to be devastating, mostly to Lebanon. If Hezbollah tries to challenge Israel again, Israel should be ready to take strong action such as targeting the group's commanders and headquarters in Lebanon—even if this runs the risk of intense fire exchanges or war. Relevant preparations for this option should include increased monitoring of Hezbollah officials—overtly and covertly—and perhaps even the transfer of some military units to the north. Hezbollah needs to know that Israel is no longer shying away from conflict, since this may be the only way of forcing the group to return to the old, accepted rules of the game and step down from the precipice of a war that **it does not appear to want either** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/it-time-new-hezbollah-policy>).

Yes, Israel is currently focused on how to deal with an assortment of weighty problems at home. But it is precisely because of this domestic instability that signaling adversaries like Hezbollah is so important. By sending the right message, Israel can show that it is still a formidable force and should not be tested during this time.

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