

# Keeping Israel's Northern Front Under Control

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Jul 21, 2014

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Although rocket fire from Lebanon and Syria remains sporadic for now, Israel and other parties need to be aware of the potential for serious miscalculation and escalation.**

**A**s Israel's Operation Protective Edge continues in Gaza, the conflict is affecting almost all major cities in Israel, including communities near the northern borders. Yet northern cities did not begin using their bomb shelters because of Hamas, but rather because of sporadic rocket fire from Lebanon and Syria. As with past operations in Gaza, Lebanese and Syrian terrorists are showing their solidarity with groups in the strip by firing rockets into Israel, raising the possibility -- for now unlikely, but no less real -- of escalation on the northern front.

## LEBANON

**S**ince Protective Edge began on July 8, at least four rockets have been launched from Lebanon into Israel, while other attempts were stopped before launch by the Lebanese army. All of these actual and attempted launches are believed to be the work of Palestinian factions in southern Lebanon.

This ritual of sporadic rocket fire also occurred during Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012 and Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009, as a way for small Palestinian groups in Lebanon to display their solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. For the most part, the rockets used by these factions are considered to be old, with limited capacity to cause serious damage.

For its part, Hezbollah is very unlikely to escalate the situation, especially since many of its fighters are occupied with intense fighting in Syria. In the past week alone, seven Hezbollah members were killed on the Lebanon-Syria border, a front that has claimed hundreds of the group's fighters in total. Furthermore, Lebanon's internal security situation is unstable, particularly in Shiite neighborhoods, where terrorists from the Sunni jihadist groups Jabhat al-Nusra and the "Islamic State" (a.k.a. ISIS) have been targeting civilians and military personnel.

At the same time, however, Hezbollah has long used the concept of "al-Muqawama" (resistance) as a major tool for

garnering support, so it occasionally needs to show that it is still relevant to the fight against the "Zionist entity." This is why it has conducted occasional operations from the Golan Heights against Israel in the past few months. Moreover, in a phone call with the leaders of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) last night, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah emphasized "both Hezbollah's and the Islamic resistance in Lebanon's support for the resistance in Gaza." Indeed, southern Lebanon is Hezbollah's fortress, and it is difficult to believe that rockets could be fired from that area without the group's knowledge. Hezbollah may therefore be turning a blind eye to the activities of Palestinian organizations in the south or, even worse, approving sporadic rocket fire. The latter seems unlikely, but the group had good relations with Palestinian factions in the past and likely still has some degree of coordination with them.

As happened this past week and on other occasions, Israel will likely continue to retaliate against infrequent launches from Lebanon by firing a few artillery shells and nothing more. Yet if one of these rockets were to score a direct hit that results in serious injuries or deaths, the equation would change. In that case, Israel would feel obligated to respond more forcefully, probably against Palestinian terrorist training camps in Lebanon. The probability of this scenario is still low, but it should not be discounted.

After long years of overt and covert war, Israel and Hezbollah have learned how to hurt each other without escalating. This time is unlikely to be different, as both sides prefer to wage their war in other arenas and not on the Lebanese border.

## **SYRIA**

In the past two weeks, Israel has come under fire from Syrian territory twice: a mortar attack on July 13, and a rocket strike a day later. And prior to the latest Gaza clash, there were several border incidents targeting Israeli forces, including a June 22 attack in which an antitank missile launched from a Syrian regime military post killed an Israeli boy. In many cases, the exact perpetrators of these incidents -- whether regime forces, Hezbollah, or other actors -- have been unclear, particularly given the fluctuating state of control between the regime and rebels. Whatever the case, Israel generally views the regime as responsible for the border.

As for mindset in Damascus, Israel has conducted a number of airstrikes in Syria over the past two years, so Bashar al-Assad and other regime officials probably believe they have the right to retaliate in some way. In May 2013, after one of these strikes, Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad stated, "When they [Israel] attack, this is a declaration of war...We dealt with this on several occasions, and we retaliated the way we wanted, and the retaliation was always painful to Israel, and they will suffer again." In addition, Assad has felt more secure and powerful in recent months, especially after his June "reelection," various battlefield victories against the rebels, and suggestions by some U.S. officials about working with him to counter ISIS/IS. For these and other reasons, Assad may feel comfortable testing Israel's resolve by tolerating or perhaps even ordering further border violence.

Yet now is not a good time to try Israel's willingness to fight back. While engaging heavily in an operation to "restore deterrence" in Gaza, Israel will not restrain itself from acting against any threat from the Syrian border. Last week, in response to the rocket fired from Syria, it bombed the home of the governor of Quneitra province, which borders Israel. At the same time, Israel needs to acknowledge that there are some military actions Assad will not be able to ignore. Therefore, assuming Israel does not want to escalate the situation even further, it needs to act responsibly as well. And both sides need to avoid miscalculations that might worsen the situation.

## **OTHER ACTORS**

On both the Syria and Lebanon borders, there is always the possibility of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups such as the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB) or Jabhat al-Nusra, or even extremists from the "Islamic State," taking advantage of situations in order to show that they are willing to fight Israel. For example, the AAB's Ziad al-Jarrah

Battalion fired rockets on Israel in 2009 and 2013 and might do so again, though it and similar organizations are more focused on the Syria and Lebanon theaters at the moment.

## CONCLUSION

The bottom line is that neither Israel nor its enemies want the situation in the north to escalate further. Each of the main actors is preoccupied with its own fights in different arenas, and none of them wants to open a new front.

Even so, while Hezbollah and Israel know each other's calculus pretty well, there have not been many clashes between Syria and Israel, so neither government completely understands the other's political and military thinking. Both sides must therefore refrain from reacting drastically. More broadly, no one can predict the possibility of unintentional escalation in situations where live fire is being exchanged, as in the past week. As mentioned previously, even a single rocket inflicting serious damage in northern Israel could quickly lead to serious fighting.

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