

Military Implications of the Israel-Lebanon Border Incident

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Brief Analysis

The August 3 border clash between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has important military implications, demonstrating the readiness of the IDF to respond to any border incident and revealing the potential for the LAF and the Lebanese state to become directly and substantially involved in a future conflict between Israel and Hizballah. Moreover, the incident has occurred in the context of serious preparations by Hizballah and Israel for war. While it has become conventional wisdom that none of the players wants war, the relative quiet of the past four years seems increasingly fragile.

The Players

The military picture in southern Lebanon is complicated and becoming increasingly so. Four major players have a role in the border situation: Iranian-supported Hizballah, Israel, the LAF, and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). The result is a scene of complex dynamics both within southern Lebanon itself and between Israel and the players in Lebanon.

Hizballah, without question, is the dominant military power in southern Lebanon. Its robust force structure there, including units and significant numbers of fighters and weapons, dwarfs the capabilities of the LAF and UNIFIL. For internal Lebanese political reasons and in response to concerns about potential Israeli military action, Hizballah normally chooses not to exert or display its capabilities. Hizballah forces occupy positions in villages and in what the IDF calls "nature reserves" (areas of rugged and fortified terrain). Some of these positions are located very close to the Israeli border.

For the Israeli military, Lebanon is the responsibility of the IDF's Northern Command. Under normal conditions, Israel maintains a territorial division (the 91st) with two composite brigades (the 300th and the 769th) on the border. This division comprises a mix of active and reserve units, and is routinely reinforced by artillery, tank, infantry, and engineer formations. The August 3 incident occurred in the 769th Brigade's sector.

For its part, the LAF has three infantry-type brigades in the south facing Israel and reportedly plans to deploy a fourth. Israel believes that some of the LAF elements in the south, including the 11th Brigade, which was involved in the incident, are under the influence of Hizballah.

UNIFIL, meanwhile, has between twelve and thirteen thousand soldiers deployed south of the Litani River and in the

southern Beqa Valley. According to its website, UNIFIL's important missions is as follows: "Assist the Lebanese Armed Forces in taking steps towards the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani River of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL deployed in this area." UNIFIL has had serious trouble executing this mandate, in part because of harassment by the local population apparently aimed at restricting its activities and in part because of its inability to search Lebanese homes for banned weapons. UNIFIL does not have the capability to prevent Hizballah from using armed force.

Military Activity on the Border

The Israel-Lebanon border has been relatively quiet since the 2006 war, although a steady level of military activity has persisted on both sides and occasional incidents have occurred. According to IDF data, in 2009 alone, five incidents took place involving the firing of rockets at Israel, along with eleven other unidentified incidents of "terrorist activity." The IDF has also reported a rise in the number of cases in which LAF personnel aimed weapons at IDF patrols.

Since the IDF withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, the main contest for ascendancy along the border has involved the IDF and Hizballah, and the two groups are watching each other's activities closely; the IDF and LAF are doing the same. For Hizballah, the goal is to extend its control of the south right down to the border. To this end, it conducts surveillance of IDF activity from positions on the border and is believed to use locals for intelligence-gathering tasks as well. In addition, Israeli press reports have indicated Hizballah may be tunneling under the border in preparation for attacks. Should Hizballah achieve relative freedom of action along the border, it would be better placed to launch operations inside Israel, as well as to defend against any Israeli incursions.

In its contest with Hizballah, the IDF seeks to control and secure the area along the border, including its own ability to maintain unimpeded observation inside Lebanon. Prior to the 2006 war, Israel had lost full control of its border, with Hizballah forces operating with relative freedom along it and occasionally penetrating it for reconnaissance and operations.

The IDF conducts several types of activities along the border aimed at restricting Hizballah's military freedom of action. These include clearing obstacles to observation, as on August 3; patrols by elements of the 91st Division; assertion of a presence in the "enclaves" between the blue line international border and the Israeli security fence; establishing ambushes; and conducting aerial observation and reconnaissance. These actions are intended to keep Hizballah at a distance and to restrict its ability to operate close to the border.

The LAF's engagement of IDF elements on August 3 supported, intentionally or not, Hizballah's efforts. The IDF had been acting to remove obstacles to its ability to see into Lebanon as well as objects that could provide cover for potential Hizballah operations, and to secure its side of the border. The LAF action interfered directly with these steps.

Military Implications

The IDF was prepared to respond to the LAF incident with significant force, including with tanks, artillery, and attack helicopters. Israeli troops on the scene reacted quickly, indicating a high level of readiness for a hostile event. Yet while the IDF responded with strength, it also exercised control, limiting its efforts to the area of the clash and the LAF elements directly involved, including the LAF battalion headquarters in the area. All the same, the incident showed unmistakably that the IDF has no real hesitation about striking Lebanese government forces, if provoked.

The decision by local LAF elements to engage the IDF, suggests certain LAF units in the south will actively oppose any future Israeli operations in Lebanon. In response to the clash, higher LAF headquarters tried to get the situation under control, with LAF forces reportedly evacuating posts in some areas, indicating concern about heavier IDF action. Nevertheless, the LAF command has endorsed the action of its troops as defense of sovereign Lebanese

territory and is hailing its dead from the incidents as heroes. In the tripartite meeting held at Naqura, Lebanon, on August 4 (with UNIFIL, the LAF, and the IDF) to address the incident, the LAF representative reportedly stated that the army would resist any violation of Lebanon's sovereignty. Even if this posture is merely rhetoric, such praise and statements may encourage local commanders to act as they see fit.

In the aftermath of the August 3 skirmish, relations will remain tense between the IDF and the LAF, especially along the border. From the IDF perspective, the LAF action was an ambush, with the evidence being that its two casualties were some two hundred meters from the IDF brush-cutting activity and were hit by sniper fire. The IDF had already been concerned about LAF "provocations" along the border, and it will be ready to respond with substantial force in the event of further incidents. Such a dynamic raises the risk of additional and more intense clashes.

Moreover, rising IDF suspicions about the LAF-Hizballah relationship date from before the incident. Those suspicions will not be allayed now. Although Hizballah's involvement has not been proven, the incident served Hizballah's purposes. In addition, the organization's media representatives were present, and the IDF, at least, believes that the Lebanese brigade involved is connected to Hizballah.

As in other cases in southern Lebanon, UNIFIL's severe operational limitations were exposed by the clash. UNIFIL played some role in calming the situation, but the deescalation resulted more from decisions made in Israel and by the LAF. UNIFIL had no real means of either preventing the incident or keeping it in check once it began, other than appealing to the parties involved.

Hizballah is attempting to take advantage of the incident to tighten its relationship with the LAF. The organization's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, was quick to signal in his speech on the same day Hizballah's commitment to defending Lebanon and its willingness to assist the LAF. Such a statement should not be dismissed as simple rhetoric. Rather, it is another indication that Hizballah intends to enlist the LAF to fight by its side in the event of another conflict with Israel.

Outlook

The August 3 incident will have residual effects. Beyond poisoning relations between the IDF and LAF, it has added to what was already seen as an increasingly dangerous situation. Israel's rapid and strong reaction indicates that its forces are poised to act quickly in the event of a border incident. Hizballah's military buildup and the proximity of its forces to the border create opportunities for incidents to occur, either by accident or design. A more aggressive posture by the LAF in the border area only adds to this potential.

War talk is in the air, as it was this past spring. This time, however, it goes beyond discussion of the Hizballah-Israel military balance to recognition of a deteriorating political and military climate. The relative stability that followed the previous war has become increasingly precarious.

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