

Israel's Response to Lebanese Border Skirmishes

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Brief Analysis

Since March 28, 2002, the first day of Operation Defensive Shield—Israel's attempt to dismantle the Palestinian terrorist infrastructure—Lebanese Hizballah fighters have attacked northern Israeli settlements and military outposts on an almost daily basis. These unprovoked attacks have included the use of antitank missiles, mortars, katyusha rockets, and anti-aircraft weapons directed at Israeli military and civilian aircraft. Among the towns attacked have been Shlomi, Kiryat Shmona, Moshav Beit Hillel, and the Allawite village Ghajar, where Hizballah fire wounded five residents, including three children. In an April 7 Hizballah attack on a military outpost in the western sector (a significant distance from the Shebaa Farms area), seven Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers—five of them women—were wounded. Despite these provocations, Israel has indicated that it does not wish to open a second front against Hizballah, the Lebanese army, or Syria. Yet, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon recently stated, "We are demonstrating restraint and are not interested in an escalation in the violence, but we cannot hold back for much longer," indicating that Israel's patience is about to run out and that harsh military response is imminent.

Are there any indications that Secretary of State Colin Powell's April 15 visit to Damascus and Beirut defused the growing tension? And if not, what are Israel's military options?

Changes in Hizballah's Tactics

Hizballah's behavior since Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon leaves little doubt that the organization, which enjoys Syrian and Iranian sponsorship, is committed to a continuous armed confrontation with Israel until, in the words of its leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, "the liberation of Jerusalem" (see PeaceWatch #365 for analysis of Hizballah activities between the Israeli withdrawal and early 2002). There are several unsettling trends in Hizballah's recent behavior that deserve special attention:

Crossborder attacks beyond the Shebaa Farms. Until recently, Hizballah's fire was directed at the Mount Dov area next to Shebaa Farms—the 750 acres Lebanon claims as its territory, without UN support. In the past two weeks, however, Hizballah has expanded its circle of fire to IDF bases on Mount Hermon and the northern part of the Golan Heights. In addition, Israeli communities in Galilee have come under artillery fire, and at least one incident involved the use of antitank missiles. Such activities show that Hizballah is willing to challenge Israel in other sectors of the border, and that its war against Israel goes beyond the limited objective of Shebaa Farms.

Involvement in crossborder infiltration. During Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, Hizballah refrained from attempts to cross the border and carry out attacks against targets inside Israel. In the past month, however, there have been several attacks against IDF outposts in Mount Dov, with Hizballah gunmen attempting to infiltrate these positions and perhaps seize them. Hizballah is also suspected of involvement in a March 12 infiltration in which Palestinian terrorists shot at cars near Kibbutz Matzuva, killing six Israelis and wounding seven others.

Threatening moderate Arab regimes. Hizballah's increasing prestige in the Arab world has brought its leaders to the realization that they are capable of playing a regional role rather than remaining a diminishing force in Lebanese politics. Nasrallah's speeches on the eve of the Shi'a sacred day of Ashura included threats against moderate Arab

regimes and denunciations of their policies. These confrontational statements may have contributed to the decision of Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah not to attend the March Arab League summit in Beirut.

The Failure of Diplomacy

Despite Israeli demands that the United States, European countries, and the UN exert pressure on Syria and Lebanon to restrain Hizballah's aggression, and despite assurances from Syria's representative to the UN that Syria is not seeking to open a second front, diplomacy has so far shown few meaningful results. There is no evidence that yesterday's visits by Secretary Powell to Beirut and Damascus were any more successful in convincing Syria to restrain Hizballah than earlier telephone calls by Vice President Richard Cheney to Syrian president Bashar al-Asad and Lebanese president Emile Lahoud. UN secretary-general Kofi Annan has made similar efforts with similar results. Moreover, the 4,000 UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon—members of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon—have played a minimal role in preventing Hizballah attacks. Israel, for its part, sent a series of stern messages to Syria reiterating Damascus's responsibility for Hizballah's aggression. Israel also clarified that if peace is not restored along the border, it would be forced to take military action against Lebanese and Syrian targets.

Israel's tough talk and the international pressure were perhaps contributing factors in Lebanon's decision to deploy Lebanese soldiers (approximately 400 of them) in the south for the first time since Israel's withdrawal from the area in May 2000. But this deployment was aimed exclusively at limiting the activities of Palestinian groups such as Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command rather than those of Hizballah. For example, Lebanese forces recently arrested three Palestinians for a shooting attack against Israel, but they are under clear instructions to avoid any conflict with Hizballah.

Israel's Military Options

In response to the recent attacks from Lebanon, Israeli warplanes and artillery have struck at Hizballah targets deeper inside Lebanon than they did in response to previous crossborder attacks since the withdrawal. Israel has also mobilized some of its reservists and deployed artillery batteries along its northern border. These skirmishes could be a prelude to a massive Israeli attack against Hizballah's military infrastructure in southern Lebanon.

Hizballah's spiritual leader, Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, has already warned that if Israel attacks Lebanon, Hizballah will respond with rockets that can reach Haifa and its suburbs. While most of Hizballah's 10,000 rockets are katyushas, some are Iranian-made Fajr-7 rockets with a range of over forty miles, putting approximately 1.5 million Israelis at risk. In addition, Hizballah has modern antitank and anti-aircraft missiles as well as batteries of 130 mm artillery pieces with a sixteen-mile range. Israel's artillery forces rely mainly on M-109 self-propelled howitzers with an effective range of only twelve miles. This means that Hizballah can deploy its long-range weapons out of the range of Israeli artillery fire. Therefore, beyond the twelve-mile range, Israel is limited to the use of airpower against Hizballah targets.

Essentially, then, Israel would not be able to conduct a military offensive from its border. Thus, Israel would have two options:

An incursion into Lebanese territory. Unlike past incursions in 1978 and 1982, in which Israel enjoyed the support of the local population of southern Lebanon, any new IDF invasion would probably face a hostile population that has not overcome the feeling of betrayal caused by Israel's unilateral withdrawal.

An extensive air campaign against Lebanese, and perhaps Syrian, infrastructure, in the hope of pressuring the Lebanese and Syrian governments to crack down on Hizballah, as happened in similar Israeli campaigns in 1993 and 1996. Syria's decision to change the disposition of its forces in Lebanon—shifting some of them from the Beirut area to eastern Lebanon—may indicate a Syrian concern that Israel will exercise this option soon. Israel also hopes that

the threat of harsh military punishment will inspire domestic political action by the Lebanese business community—the sector that is likely to suffer most from such attacks—as well as the Christians and the Druze, with the objective of saving the country from another round of bloodshed.

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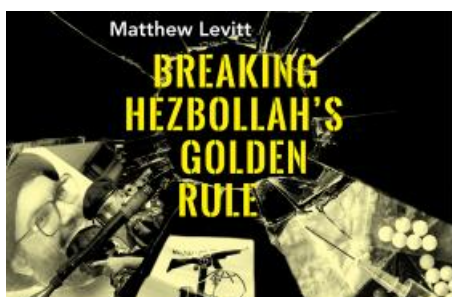
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