

# Deterioration along the Israel-Lebanon Border

Feb 12, 2002



## Brief Analysis

In the past month there have been no less than six incidents in which Hizballah's antiaircraft batteries opened fire against Israeli civilian and military aircraft flying in Israel's northern airspace. This in addition to its repeated and unprovoked attacks on Israeli outposts in the Mount Dov region, next to the Shaba Farms—the 750 acres Lebanon claims as its territory without UN support. In the latest attack on January 24, Hizballah fighters fired rockets, mortars, and forty antitank missiles at an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) outpost.

Hizballah does not limit its attacks to the Shaba area; it is willing to challenge Israel in other sectors of the border. Hizballah's behavior indicates a deliberate attempt to heat up the Israel-Lebanon border area and force Israel into an escalating conflict. Despite American and Israeli warnings of the potential consequences of continuous Hizballah provocations, the governments of Lebanon, Syria, and Iran have so far failed to urge the organization to curb its military activities along the border. "Hizballah and Iran feel comfortable that the drums of war are beating so loudly," says Nizar Hamzeh, head of the political science department of the American University of Beirut.

In light of Hizballah's intransigence, militant rhetoric, and military activities on the ground, Israel and the United States will have to consider new diplomatic and military tools to address the problem.

### Hizballah's Behavior since May 2000

Against the prediction of many Western experts, Hizballah has not moderated its behavior since the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000. On the contrary, the organization's leadership has refused to accept the UN ruling that Israel is in full compliance with Security Council Resolution 425—which calls for Israeli withdrawal—and has expressed its commitment to the armed struggle against Israel. Hizballah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah pledged on several occasions to continue attacking Israel "until the liberation of Jerusalem." Hizballah's leaders express their commitment to assist the Palestinians militarily, while calling upon the Palestinians to emulate "Hizballah's model" by fighting Israel through any means possible.

With the acquiescence of the Lebanese government in addition to aid from Damascus and Tehran, Hizballah was able to recruit and train hundreds of additional fighters since May 2000. The February 8 Christian Science Monitor quotes "a Hizballah insider with military connections" saying "truck after truckload" of weapons have been brought to southern Lebanon after the Israeli withdrawal. Hizballah has up to ten thousand rockets, mostly katyushas, but also some Iranian-made Fajr-7 rockets capable of reaching a range of over forty miles. Fajr-7 rockets are considered by Israel to be strategic weapons because their range can put at risk approximately 1.5 million Israelis, in cities as far from the border as Haifa and Tiberias. Besides this, Hizballah has modern antitank and antiaircraft missiles, as well as batteries of 130 mm artillery pieces with a sixteen-mile range.

Since the Israeli withdrawal, Hizballah fighters have launched dozens of attacks on Israeli forces. They have kidnapped and killed three Israeli soldiers and are still holding Israeli reserve officer Col. Elhanan Tenenbaum, who was kidnapped in Europe sixteen months ago. In addition, in October 2000, Hizballah facilitated an infiltration attempt of a terrorist squad into Israel. It has also played an active role in a number of operations to smuggle

weapons into the Palestinian Authority, the latest of which was the Karine-A affair.

### Israel's Reaction to the Provocations

Embroided in the hostilities with the Palestinians, Israel is reluctant to open a second front that could put it on a collision course with Syria, Lebanon, and possibly Iran. It is assumed that a heavy-handed Israeli response is exactly what Hizballah aims to achieve in order to widen the conflict. To prevent a situation in which Israel would be forced to retaliate, the IDF invested great effort into minimizing the risk of casualties by fortifying its outposts along the border. Nevertheless, senior Israeli officials expressed their concern that Israel cannot accept a situation where attacks in the north by Hizballah become routine.

To deter Syria from assisting Hizballah, Israel declared that Damascus is responsible for Hizballah's provocations, and to follow up, it attacked Syrian radar stations in Lebanon twice within the past fourteen months. But Israel's policy toward the Syrians is not based only on sticks. For example, Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer proposed two weeks ago to Damascus an unconditional resumption of the peace talks in exchange for Syria ending its support for Hizballah. The Israeli overture was flatly rejected. Without channels of direct communication with Damascus, Israeli diplomatic activity is limited to increased pressure on the United States, Europe, and the UN in an attempt to convince these powers of the potential regional repercussions of unbridled Hizballah activity.

### What Can the United States Do?

Pressure on Syria and Lebanon. In the aftermath of September 11, Hizballah's situation became increasingly complicated. The United States has placed it high on the list of terrorist organizations to be dealt with in the war against terrorism. It also placed the head of its security apparatus, Imad Mugnyah, on the list of America's most-wanted terrorists. Washington is putting pressure on Syria, as well as the Lebanese government, to restrain Hizballah and force it to hand over terrorists who were involved in attacks against U.S. targets in the past. So far, neither Lebanon nor Syria has complied with American demands. The United States could adopt more drastic measures against both Syria and Lebanon, such as adding Syria to the so called "axis of evil," including Lebanon on the State Department list of state sponsors of terrorism, or adopting various economic sanctions against Syria and Lebanon.

Despite the strong Syrian influence on Lebanese politics, Lebanon should be held accountable for its failure to deploy its army in the south to guarantee stability along the border. The government of Lebanon should also be held accountable for abdicating its responsibility toward the residents of southern Lebanon, who are likely to be the prime casualties of any future escalation in violence. Furthermore, the United States could identify and build relations with some political elements in Lebanon that have expressed growing aversion toward Hizballah's conduct.

Formation of a uniform U.S.-European policy toward Hizballah. Unlike the United States, the European Union (EU) has shown little resolve in dealing with Hizballah. Most EU delegations in Beirut maintain contact with Hizballah, including Britain, the closest Washington ally. Last month, the British ambassador in Beirut officially met with Sheikh Nasrallah. Days later, the French government announced that it opposed adding Hizballah to the European list of terrorist organizations. The United States could increase its diplomatic efforts to persuade its European allies to sever their ties with Hizballah and to limit its operations in European countries. In three different incidents, Hizballah sent recruits holding European passports to conduct terrorist missions in Israel. The continuously forgiving European approach is likely to encourage Hizballah to expand its operations in Europe and become more involved in international terrorism.

Pressure through the UN. The presence of approximately four thousand UN troops in southern Lebanon has done nothing to deter Hizballah from initiating military activities against Israel. Security Council Resolution 1391, from

January 28, extended the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for an additional six months and expressed "great concern" about the deteriorating situation along the border. The resolution did not amend any of UNIFIL's rules of engagement, nor did it call for a more assertive role on UNIFIL's part in dealing with Hizballah's violations. To fulfill its mandate to "restore international peace and security," UNIFIL's mandate, means, and rules of engagement could be reassessed. Members of the Security Council could also use Syria's temporary membership in this body to demand that it exercise greater responsibility.

Lt. Col. Gal Luft (IDF, res.) is a former IDF commander in Rafah and a doctoral candidate at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. He is the author of *The Palestinian Security Services: Between Police and Army* (The Washington Institute, 1998).

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