Israel raises alarm over advances by Hizbullah and Iran

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Although an Israel-Hizbullah conflict triggered by developments in southern Lebanon remains probable in the longer term, a potential new front is also opening in southwestern Syria as Iran and its proxies move closer. Nicholas Blanford and Jonathan Spyer assess whether a wider regional conflict is in the making.

The war in Syria is entering a less intensive phase. This has placed a spotlight on Iran’s apparent ambition to establish a long-term military presence in Syria that would include operating bases, commanding pro-Tehran militias, and establishing a foothold in the Golan Heights opposite Israeli forces – a ‘red line’ for Israel. Anticipating Iran’s military consolidation in Syria, Israel has increased and expanded its airstrikes against suspected Hizbullah targets in Syria to include facilities allegedly connected to Iran.

Furthermore, the administration of US President Donald Trump has begun to implement a new strategy against Iran and its regional proxies. Measures include Washington’s potential unilateral withdrawal from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement; further sanctions on Iranian individuals and entities; and attempts to curb Iran’s ballistic missile programme. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman appears to be in concert with the White House in seeking to block Iranian ambitions: in November, Riyadh precipitated a political crisis in Lebanon in a bid to force the Beirut government to adopt a stronger line against Hizbullah.

Supporters of Lebanon’s Hizbullah movement march with a giant Palestinian flag, along with Lebanese and Hizbullah flags, during a rally in Beirut on 11 December 2017. They were protesting against US President Donald Trump’s controversial recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. (Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty Images)
The drawing down of the Syria war and escalating anti-Hizbullah measures across the region have raised concerns in Lebanon that another war between Hizbullah and Israel could be imminent. In October, sources close to Hizbullah told Jane’s that it had begun to withdraw some of its fighters from Syria, including its special forces units, partly due to the reduction in active fronts but also to shore up the front against Israel in case of a sudden deterioration. The sources said that the level of expectation among Hizbullah cadres that another war was imminent had not been higher since the last conflict in July–August 2006.

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Resurgent Hizbullah

Hizbullah has greatly expanded its capabilities since 2006 in terms of force strength, weaponry, equipment, training, and experience. All of this, plus more than four years of battlefield experience in Syria, led the Israeli think tank, the Institute for National Security Studies, to conclude in January that Hizbullah was the “most determined and best trained” force threatening Israel and therefore the “gravest military threat” the country faced.

Israel is aware that a pre-emptive strike against Hizbullah could trigger a far more damaging war than the 2006 conflict, when the Israeli home front was left relatively unscathed. In the next war, Hizbullah’s suspected arsenal of sub-ballistic missiles, some fitted with guidance systems, could be directed at specific infrastructure and military targets across Israel.
Hizbullah is nevertheless aware that another war would inflict massive damage on Lebanon, with no guarantee that it would emerge victorious. It is also likely that there would be a backlash from Lebanese communities, including the party's own Shia support base, which would bear the main consequences of any conflict.

Hizbullah’s influence in Lebanon grew stronger in 2017 following the election of its ally Michel Aoun as president. On 3 November 2016, Aoun appointed Saad Hariri – the paramount Sunni leader in Lebanon, a long-standing Saudi client, and political opponent of Hizbullah – as prime minister, in a power-sharing pact that brought some stability to Lebanon after a decade of bitter political divisions. However, that balance was put at risk in November 2017, when Hariri – a day after being summoned to Riyadh – abruptly announced his resignation.

Hariri blamed Iran and Hizbullah for his decision and claimed that there was a plot to assassinate him. He said that Hizbullah’s military interventions in Iraq, Syria, and especially Yemen risked alienating Lebanon from the Arab world. His resignation coincided with the arrests of dozens of top Saudi officials and members of the royal family on the orders of Mohammed bin Salman in a declared corruption purge.

Lebanese political sources close to Hariri told Jane’s during the resignation crisis that Mohammed bin Salman was upset with the co-operative arrangement that Hariri had with Hizbullah in Lebanon and had forced him to resign. The sources claimed that Mohammed bin Salman wanted to replace Hariri with his older brother, Bahaa, who would mount a stiffer challenge to Hizbullah’s dominance of Lebanon. However, the scheme was misconceived: instead of roiling Lebanese Sunnis against Hizbullah, it elicited sympathy for Hariri and anger at Riyadh for humiliating the country’s prime minister.

The crisis eased after French President Emmanuel Macron invited Hariri to Paris. Back in Beirut, Hariri withdrew his resignation after discussions among the political parties led to a new agreement on disassociating Lebanon from the region’s conflicts. The practical implementation of this nevertheless remains uncertain, as there is no indication that Hizbullah will withdraw anytime soon from Syria, although it has hinted at redeploying its few hundred military advisers in Iraq following the defeat of the Islamic State.

Hizbullah’s military build-up

Since 2006, Hizbullah has built its capabilities in readiness for another conflict with Israel. Jane’s assesses that recruitment soared from around 3,000 full-time and part-time fighters in 2006 to more than 25,000 fully trained and active combatants in 2017, with perhaps another 20,000–30,000 reservists. Hizbullah fighters and sources close to the organisation often refer to its strength as being between 50,000 and 70,000 combatants; this may be an exaggeration but nevertheless points to a substantial increase in force strength.

To accommodate such a rapid influx of personnel, Hizbullah changed its training patterns in Lebanon. It abandoned the pre-2006 low-signature training in wooded areas of the Bekaa Valley, which was difficult to detect by aerial surveillance, and instead constructed large camps with firing ranges, assault courses, accommodation facilities, and even Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) sites.
Most Hizbullah MOUT sites follow a similar pattern of roofless, one- or two-roomed cinder-block structures that follow a straight alignment and resemble a street in an urban area of Israel. These sites suggest that Hizbullah plans to penetrate northern Israel in any future war, as first revealed by Jane’s in 2008; a Hizbullah propaganda video from 2013 showed fighters storming ‘houses’ covered in the Israeli flag in a MOUT site that was geolocated by Jane’s to the Janta training camp in the eastern Bekaa Valley.

Attempts at ground penetration are highly likely, but Hizbullah operatives may also be preparing to move into Israel via seaborne and aerial insertions. The organisation has operated an amphibious warfare unit since the 1990s and – according to Western intelligence sources – may have acquired low-signature vessels from Iran such as semi-submersible boats and swimmer delivery vehicles that are difficult to detect.

Moreover, a Western intelligence source told Jane’s in September that Hizbullah’s research and development teams had developed hang gliders for possible cross-border operations. Such insertions are not without precedent: in 1987, two members of the Damascus-based Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command staged a motorised hang-glider attack into Israel, with one Palestinian militant landing beside an army base near Kiryat Shemona, near the border with Lebanon, and killing six Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers before being shot dead.
Beginning in late 2012, Hizbullah's new recruits gained valuable military experience in Syria through the group's critical role in safeguarding the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Hizbullah has traditionally trained to fight the IDF in the hills and valleys of southern Lebanon, developing a hybrid doctrine of insurgent and conventional tactics.

The Syria war has enabled Hizbullah to learn new martial skills in different geographical theatres and alongside other military formations, including Syrian militias and Russian special forces. “When we went to Syria, we learnt how to fight in the desert and we also learnt urban warfare and how to liberate cities, one house and one street at a time,” said Hizbullah Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naim Qassem in a speech in Tehran on 8 December.

Israel claims that Hizbullah possesses up to 150,000 rockets and missiles, compared with just 14,000 in 2006. The figure is intended more as propaganda to highlight the threat, but there is little doubt that Hizbullah has amassed a significant arsenal of artillery rockets since 2006.

In 2009, Jane’s reported that Hizbullah had acquired the M600, a Syrian-engineered version of the Iranian Fateh-110 rocket with a range of 250 km, a 500-kg warhead, and a circular error probable of 500 m. Since then, Iran has produced other Fateh-110 variants of varying ranges, warhead payloads, and accuracy, some of which may have been delivered to Hizbullah. A Western intelligence source told Jane’s that Hizbullah had acquired battlefield experience with these missiles in Yemen by firing them into Saudi Arabia.
Screengrabs from a video posted on YouTube on 30 August 2015 purporting to show training for Hizbullah special forces, including in model urban settings. Numerous sequences involve training directed at mocked-up Israeli targets. (YouTube)

“The Yemen war is a good opportunity for Hizbullah to tinker with payload and guidance systems to help improve range and accuracy. That’s a useful experience for any future war with Israel,” the source told Jane’s. Moreover, according to sources close to Hizbullah, the organisation is improving the range and accuracy of its missiles to strike specific military and infrastructure targets in Israel.

In February 2016, Hizbullah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah claimed that the organisation’s missiles could hit the industrial ammonia storage tanks in the coastal city of Haifa, 40 km south of the border with Lebanon, and inflict the “same amount of death as an atomic bomb”. A year later, in February 2017, days after the Israeli authorities decided to move the ammonia plant from Haifa because of Hizbullah’s threats, Nasrallah switched his attention to the nuclear reactor at Dimona in southern Israel, saying, “The Israeli nuclear weapon that represents a threat to the entire region, we will turn it into a threat to Israel.” Then, in June, Nasrallah warned, “Hizbullah soldiers and rockets can reach all the positions across the Zionist entity during any upcoming war.”

Sources close to Hizbullah have told Jane’s that rockets are deployed in a ready-to-fire mode, many in underground facilities and pre-aimed at selected targets. The purpose is to ensure that an initial salvo of rockets can be launched with minimal preparation if conflict breaks out.

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Iranian presence

In March 2017, Kuwaiti newspaper Al Jarida claimed that Iran had established two factories in Lebanon, one near Hermel in the northern Bekaa to construct ballistic missiles such as the Fateh-110 family, and another near Zahran in southern Lebanon for smaller armaments. According to Al Jarida, the factories were staffed by Hizbullah technicians trained in Iran. There has been no further confirmation of these facilities.
In August, Israeli media reported that an Iranian-supervised missile production facility was under construction in a valley east of the Syrian coastal town of Baniyas. The facility – visible on Google Earth – has the hallmarks of a weapons production facility. At the time, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu accused Iran of turning Syria into a “base of military entrenchment”, saying, “It is also building sites to produce precision-guided missiles toward that end in both Syria and Lebanon. This is something that Israel cannot accept.”

Israel has staged multiple airstrikes in Syria since January 2013, targeting arms convoys destined for Hizbullah or weapons storage facilities containing advanced weaponry such as ballistic missiles and anti-ship missiles. Since September 2017, however, its target list has expanded to include suspected Iranian weapons manufacturing facilities and military bases.

These include facilities run by the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSSRC) near Masyaf in Hama governorate and Jermaya west of Damascus, where ballistic missiles are manufactured; a factory in the Hassia industrial complex north of Damascus that the Syrian authorities claimed was a copper smelter; and a military base near Al-Kiswah, south of Damascus, that the BBC reported in November was used by Iran (see below).

To date, Syria, Iran, and Hizbullah have refrained from any retaliatory measures other than launching anti-aircraft missiles at intruding Israeli jets. It is likely that Iran is looking at the bigger...
picture of entrenching its influence in Syria as the war begins to wind down and is currently unwilling to risk an escalation with Israel by retaliating.

Airbus Defence and Space imagery showing damage to structures at the Syrian military facility near Masyaf following a 7 September Israeli airstrike.

Perspectives in Tel Aviv

On 2 December, Israeli aircraft struck a military base under construction 15 km southwest of Damascus, in the area of Al-Kiswah, firing five missiles. The aircraft were located in Lebanese airspace at the time of the attack, according to what Jane’s judges to be a credible report on Sky News Arabic. The SANA official Syrian news agency claimed that Syrian air defences had destroyed two of the missiles, but acknowledged that “material damage” was sustained in the attack.

The targeted facility was identified in a BBC report in November as a military base under construction by Iran, a claim that Jane’s cannot corroborate. A number of media outlets hostile to the Iranian government, including the Saudi Al-Arabiya network and the Lebanese Al-Mustaqbal newspaper, later reported that 12 members of the Iranian Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) were killed in the attack, based on information revealed in IRGC-linked Telegram accounts. There was no official Iranian response.

Viewed from Tel Aviv, the Al-Kiswah attack was the latest episode suggesting a collision course between Israel and Iran (and its proxies). Earlier, on 6 September, Israeli aircraft had carried out a similar attack on a facility near the town of Masyaf in Hama governorate, 60 km east of Tartus and relatively far from the Israel-Syria border.
Former Israeli national security adviser Ya’acov Amidror located the raid within a broader Israeli effort to challenge efforts by Iran and Hizbullah to strengthen their forces within Syria, telling Al Jazeera, “We do not interfere in the question of who will rule in Damascus … [but] we interfere with the question of how strong Iran and [Hizbullah] will be in the region.”

In early September, the IDF Northern Command carried out the largest exercise that it had conducted for more than a decade. Taking place in northern Galilee, it was meant to simulate a ground manoeuvre in southern Lebanon in the event of renewed war between Israel and Hizbullah. In late August, Israeli ambassador to the United Nations Danny Danon and US Envoy to the UN Nikki Haley criticised the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for ignoring what Danon called a “Hizbullah build-up” of weaponry in southern Lebanon.

Such events and statements, alongside a claim by Nasrallah in November that Saudi Arabia was inciting Israel to attack Lebanon, led to fears of a possibly imminent renewed conflict between Israel and Hizbullah. Yet there is little basis for the notion that Israel would currently undertake unilateral military action against Hizbullah in southern Lebanon, where the border has been quiet since 2006.

There is nevertheless concern in Israel at what is perceived as insufficient international attention to Hizbullah’s build-up of infrastructure south of the Litani River, which is approximately 29 km from the border. However, given the likely destruction and losses that renewed war would entail, military action appears unlikely. A senior Israeli defence official consulted by Jane’s in late 2017 confirmed this assessment.

For Tel Aviv, the central area of concern is no longer the Israel-Lebanon border, but rather Quneitra and Deraa governorates in southwestern Syria. Equally, the long-standing rivalry between Israel and Hizbullah has come to be viewed within the broader enmity between Israel and Iran and the contest for areas of influence and territorial control.
Unlike in southern Lebanon, in southwestern Syria there is a complete absence of established norms, tacitly acknowledged areas of influence, and mechanisms for defusing tension. This emergent competition therefore generates a heightened possibility for renewed conflict, exacerbated by its zero-sum nature. Iran appears determined to extend its presence to Quneitra governorate and the area adjoining the Israeli-controlled part of the Golan Heights, whereas Israel is determined to prevent this – through action if necessary.

Approximately 640 km east of the Quneitra crossing, a parallel contest – the race to seize the border town of Abu Kamal from disintegrating Islamic State forces – concluded on 19 November with the victory of the Syrian government. The ‘race’ pitted the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against Syrian government forces, including elements of Hizbullah and supported by Russian air power.

The government assault came from the west, across the desert, and was enabled by an earlier offensive on 3 November by Iraqi Shia militia forces to take the border town of al-Qaim, immediately east of Abu Kamal. The militias linked up with government forces on the border on 8 November in a notable manoeuvre that demonstrated how Iran-associated forces were able to coordinate across borders. This enabled the government to avoid a costly fight towards Abu Kamal in the Euphrates river valley, instead entering with the SDF still to the north.

Druze men living in Israel assemble by the border wall after hearing about clashes in the Syrian Druze village of Hadar on 3 November 2017 in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights. A suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attack killed nine people in the government-held village of Hadar in Syria’s Golan Heights, according to state media, reporting clashes between government forces and rebels. (Jalaa Marey/AFP/Getty Images)
Roots of Israeli concerns

After the July and November ceasefire announcements, Israel expressed clear dissatisfaction. In July, Netanyahu clarified that Israel did not accept the ceasefire, judging that it would allow Iran a permanent foothold in Syria. In November, according to an Israeli Channel 10 News transcript of a conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron, he said, “From now on, Israel sees Iran’s activities in Syria as a target. We will not hesitate to act, if our security needs require us to do so.”

Israeli concerns appear to set it at odds with both Moscow and Washington. It discerns Iranian ambitions to maintain paramilitary client forces as close to the border as possible, intending to turn the area into an arena for attacks by proxies, similar to the Lebanon-Israel border.

For Israel, this is a longstanding Iranian ambition. It has repeatedly taken action against operatives that it claimed were engaged in such activities since around 2012, and has also ensured with its proxies that a de facto buffer zone controlled by Syrian rebel groups has maintained control of the greater part of the border area.

The most notable example of Israeli action came in an incident in Mazraat Amal in January 2015, when six Hizbullah fighters and an IRGC general were killed close to the border by UAV-launched missiles. The group had been reviewing the construction of new facilities. In February of the same year, Hizbullah led an offensive to regain a broader region of the Golan from Syrian rebel forces, but this failed and the rebels made further gains, reducing the Syrian government’s hold to a small area around Hader in the northern Golan.

However, the new ceasefire threatens to end this de facto arrangement. Russia is a ceasefire guarantor with influence over the Syrian government, and to date has ignored Israeli actions
against targets in southern Syria. However, Israel has no confidence in Russia’s ability or inclination to persuade Iran away from attempts to establish itself in the border area. Given its assessment of Iranian intentions and lack of faith in outside powers’ ability or desire to frustrate them, Israel is turning toward unilateral military action, as demonstrated at Al-Kiswah.

Tel Aviv is therefore concerned – given the emergent existence of the corridor – that Iran could seek to mobilise and use various paramilitary proxies against it in a future conflict, similar to its relationship with Hizbullah but on a far larger scale. One Iraqi group supported by Iran, Harakat Hizbullah al-Nujaba, has already declared its intention to fight Israel in the Golan, forming a ‘Golan Liberation Brigade’ for this purpose.

An even more serious threat, in Israel’s view, is Iran’s intention – according to a report on Israeli Channel 2 News on 17 August 2017 – to establish missile production facilities in an area east of Baniyas in the valley of Wadi Jahanam. According to a senior official quoted by well-connected Israeli journalist Ben Caspit, "For that, we would need to consider going to war. That should be a red line flashing brightly at us."

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On the web
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