

Israel faces threat from Hizbullah tunnels and upgraded missiles

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Hizbullah's cross-border tunnelling into Israel has again spotlighted the volatile Israel-Lebanon border as a conflict flashpoint . *Nicholas Blanford* reports from Beirut on regional reactions and the arguably greater likelihood of conflict that stems from Hizbullah's missile upgrading programme

Key Points

- Israel's discovery of Hizbullah cross-border tunnels on its northern border with Lebanon has raised tensions, although the risk of a further escalation is low given that neither side would currently gain from a conflict.
- Lebanon's government is gridlocked, and its silence on the tunnel discovery has prompted growing diplomatic unease about its positioning.
- Of greater strategic concern than the tunnels is Hizbullah's ongoing programme to upgrade the accuracy of its missile inventory, which could eventually force Israel towards a decision about launching a strike against the organisation.

In early December, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launched a widely publicised operation to uncover and neutralise a series of cross-border attack tunnels built by Lebanon's Hizbullah Shia militant group. By 26 December, the IDF's hunt for the tunnels – dubbed Operation Northern Shield – had uncovered and neutralised five, with the IDF announcing on that day that it had destroyed the fifth tunnel running from the Lebanese village of Aytash Shab.

Operation Northern Shield is the latest step by Israel to increase pressure on Lebanon to curb the activities of the Iran-backed paramilitary organisation, and comes amid mounting Israeli concerns that Hizbullah is also upgrading its armoury of rockets and missiles by adding guidance systems to unguided versions and improving the accuracy of existing guided systems. Israel has released satellite images of what it claims are facilities in Lebanon where the missiles are being upgraded and has warned that Hizbullah's acquisition of such systems constitutes a 'red line' that could require military action.

However, the 'balance of terror' between Israel and Hizbullah, which has ensured relative calm along the Lebanon-Israel border since the last conflict between the two in July-August 2006, remains strong. Both sides are reluctant to embark on another war that could be considerably larger and more destructive than the 2006 conflict. In the short term, Israel appears to favour public diplomacy to highlight what it says are Hizbullah's destabilising activities and breaches of UN Security Council Resolutions, including UNSCR 1701, which ended the 2006 war.

Tunnel vision

Operation Northern Shield began on 4 December and five tunnels had been discovered at the time of writing. Two ran from Kfar Kila on the Lebanese side of the border to an apple orchard just south of the Israeli settlement of Metula. A third tunnel was located west of the Lebanese village of Ramieh, 600 metres north of the Israeli settlement of Zarit. Residents of Zarit had long complained about subterranean noises beneath their homes, making this section of the border a top priority in the hunt for tunnels. The location of the fourth tunnel has not been revealed, and the fifth was destroyed in an explosion on 26 December.



UNIFIL vehicles patrol near the southern Lebanese village of Kfar Kila, next to the concrete border wall separating Lebanon and Israel, on 9 December 2018. On 8 December, Israeli soldiers shot at alleged Hizbullah fighters on the border. (Ali Dia/AFP/Getty Images)

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On 10 December, before the discovery of the fifth tunnel, Hizbullah released a map of the ongoing IDF tunnel searches, identifying five locations – Metula (opposite Kfar Kila), Ramieh, two more east of the adjacent Lebanese villages of Meiss al Jabal and Blida, and another location south of Labboune, a former farmstead close to the Mediterranean coast. By late December, however, Hizbullah had made no public announcement about Operation Northern Shield, although some officials close to the organisation were quoted in the Lebanese media as playing down the tunnel discoveries, describing them as “old” and

accusing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of ordering the operation as a distraction from his domestic legal difficulties.

Lebanon's Al Markazia news agency quoted a Lebanese security source on 13 December as claiming that the first tunnel discovered by the Israelis – the existence of which was confirmed by peacekeepers of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) – was in fact dug by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC) and used to store weapons and fire rockets into Israel in 1980.

The PFLP-GC did construct numerous tunnel networks in south Lebanon in the 1970s. However, the PFLP-GC's trademark tunnels were large enough to house trucks and artillery. Their locations were well known and impossible to disguise. Conversely, the tunnel at Metula bears the hallmarks of Hizbullah, which has employed camouflaged personnel-sized subterranean facilities since the mid-1980s.

Hizbullah has encouraged local residents in southern Lebanon to gather opposite some of the locations where the IDF is searching for tunnels, and some civilians have been filmed having picnics beside the Blue Line – the UN's name for Lebanon's southern border – in a calculated attempt to portray nonchalance. It is unlikely that Hizbullah will take military measures against the IDF, as it could provoke an escalation that does not currently suit its purposes.

Nevertheless, Israel has warned of a powerful retaliation if Hizbullah attempts to interfere with the tunnel hunt. "If Hizbullah makes the mistake, and decides, in any way, to attack us or to oppose our operation, they will be hit with unimaginable blows," Netanyahu vowed on 11 December.

Subterranean warfare

The origin of the tunnel discovered near Metula appears to have been a cement works building less than 200 m from the border. A Lebanese camera crew visited the building a few days after Operation Northern Shield began, but reported that it was used to house chickens and that no tunnel entrances were found.

The proximity of houses and buildings in Kfar Kila to the Blue Line has long made the village a likely source for tunnelling activities. Much of the rest of the border is rugged and covered in thick undergrowth that offers little cover for clandestine digging activities.

However, a satellite image released by the IDF showing the location of the Ramieh tunnel posits that the entrance was around 100 m north of the border in open ground. The border follows a ridge south of Ramieh that possibly enabled the Hizbullah engineers to dig a horizontal shaft through the hill to reach the Israeli side. There are no vehicle-worthy tracks leading to the alleged tunnel entrance, suggesting that the engineers may have adopted a past technique of dispersing excavated spoil by hand beneath the canopy of trees and bushes, rendering the excavation work invisible to overhead Israeli surveillance assets.

If the tunnel entrance is located where the IDF suggests, then Hizbullah apparently does not have to rely on buildings close to the border to disguise its work. This greatly increases the number of locations where it could have penetrated the Blue Line.

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