



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Shebaa Operation: A Restrained Response from Hezbollah

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Feb 2015

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Necessity of a Response	1
Calculations for the Confrontation	2
Conclusion	4

Introduction

On January 18, Israel launched another air strike in Syria, this time targeting a convoy of Iranian and Hezbollah leaders in the town of Quneitra. The attack led to the death of six Hezbollah field commanders and an Iranian general who was part of the convoy. Ten days later, Hezbollah responded by hitting an Israeli military patrol in the Shebaa Farms area on the border between Lebanon and Palestine, killing two Israeli soldiers. This recent escalation represents the first serious test to the calm that has prevailed between the two sides since Security Council Resolution 1701 brought the war of July 2006 to an end.

The Necessity of a Response

In the ten days between the Quneitra attack and the Shebaa operation, various assessments emerged on the likelihood of Hezbollah responding, with the odds in favor of no retaliation. With Hezbollah's heavy involvement in the Syrian conflict, experts argued that it was unlikely Hezbollah would choose to open a full second front. A look into Hezbollah's recent reactions to Israeli military operations targeting their senior commanders would explain their assessment. Hezbollah failed to retaliate when Israel assassinated Emad Mughniyeh, one of Hezbollah's most important military commanders, in a car-bombing in Damascus in February 2008.¹ Nor did it take action after it had accused Israel of being behind the assassination of another leading Hezbollah commander, Hassan al-Laqqiss, in December 2013 in Beirut.² Israel has also struck at Hezbollah by attacking convoys inside Syrian territory or on the Syrian-Lebanese border, most recently, on December 7, 2014, when Israeli fighter jets

¹ "CIA and Mossad killed senior Hezbollah figure in car bombing," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2015,

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-and-mossad-killed-senior-hezbollah-figure-in-car-bombing/2015/01/30/ebb88682-968a-11e4-8005-1924ede3e54a_story.html?hpid=z1.

² "Hassan al-Laqqiss fooled everyone, but Israel found him out," *Elaph*, December 5, 2013, elaph.com/Web/news/2013/12/854342.html.

bombed missile dumps said to belong to Hezbollah close to the Lebanese border inside Syria.³

The latest attack however is different. The Quneitra raid embarrassed the leadership of Hezbollah in the eyes of its popular base, particularly since it took out six field commanders, foremost among them Jihad Emad Mughniyeh, son of the Hezbollah military leader assassinated by Israel in Damascus six years ago. The attack also came just three days after a TV interview with Hassan Nasrallah where he vowed to respond to any Israeli aggression, even though Hezbollah was occupied with other battlegrounds. In his words: "From the start we have taken into account the Israeli front. That does not impinge on the abilities, numbers, and resources of the leading Party, nor its preparedness. Therefore, whatever its involvements in other battlefields, this is not and will never be at the expense of the preparedness of the resistance, whose heart and mind, and chief concern is to confront the Israeli enemy, an option that is always available."⁴

On the Iranian front, the loss of a senior general in the attack, reportedly in charge of running the war in Syria, necessitated a response. Embroiled in its battle to create a Shiite crescent in the region, Iran could also not afford to ignore Israel's latest targeting of Hezbollah, as the party constitutes one of its main investments in the Arab Mashriq . This might explain why Hezbollah chose to engage in a response – albeit somewhat measured and restrained – in order to show that it was not powerless in the face of Israeli attacks, while, at the same time, preventing the situation from spiraling out of control towards a full-on confrontation it cannot currently handle.

Calculations for the Confrontation

In choosing to respond in occupied Lebanese territory (the Shebaa Farms) Hezbollah ensured its response would not lead to wider conflict with Israel, or impinge on Hezbollah's room to maneuver inside Lebanon, particularly as the Lebanese government considers the Shebaa Farms as occupied territory and recognizes the legitimacy of armed resistance to restore them. Hezbollah's choice of this region may even have been

³ "Israel strikes against Syria since the start of the crisis," *Al Hayat*, December 8, 2014, <http://www.alhayat.com/Articles/6138630>.

⁴ "Interview with Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah," *Al-Mayadeen*, January 15, 2015, <http://bit.ly/1KODLEt>.

part of a tacit agreement with some of its Lebanese opponents that have long blamed Hezbollah for dragging the country into external conflicts serving regional interests and not Lebanese ones. The response also carefully took into account the position of Hezbollah grassroots – as they would be the prime victims were the situation to escalate further – be it because of the destruction or the displacement arising from any larger confrontation. While the Syrian people took in Hezbollah refugees in 2006, and the Arab states, with Qatar in the lead, helped in the post-war reconstruction, the current situation in Syria means these options are now closed.

Hezbollah's response was also strategically timed. It came at a time when the world's attention, the US's in particular, is fixed on two main issues in the region. First and foremost is the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), in which Hezbollah and the rest of the Iranian axis are major players. The new alliances taking shape in the war against ISIL and other Sunni Jihadi groups, which has Iran and its allies fighting on one front, and the United States and its coalition on the other, might currently be more of a priority than traditional alliances in the region. The second focus is on the nuclear talks with Iran which have reached a very sensitive point, to the extent that President Obama threatened to use his veto against any decision from the Republican-controlled Congress to impose new sanctions on Iran. An Israeli escalation against Hezbollah is thus unlikely to attract American diplomatic cover, particularly when it might undermine the efforts to reach an agreement with Iran.

From the Israeli perspective, since it initiated the aggression, Israel had to absorb some form of response, having made it clear to Hezbollah and Iran, by striking the Golan, that their creation of a military force there constituted a red line. Israel, however, was not in a position to allow an escalation. Entering into an all-out confrontation with Hezbollah would upset the balance of forces in the Syrian conflict that currently ensures the ongoing sapping of a Syrian regime fighting for its existence. Furthermore, Israel's avoidance of an all-out confrontation ensures that the opposition in Syria is not victorious and that Syria does not fall into the hands of Jihadi groups whose existence Israel will not tolerate on its borders.⁵

Domestically, there is no Israeli consensus for entering a major confrontation for many reasons, prime of which is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's fear of anything that

⁵ Salih al-Naami, "Protecting Assad' one of the reasons for the truce between Israel and Hezbollah, Al-Araby Al-Jadid, January 30, 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/d2e68c87-a206-4c7f-8c36-7d12d4e727dd#sthash.iN8OiyM6.dpuf>.

might remotely threaten his success in the general elections slated for March 17, 2015. The Israeli army is also not too keen to enter another war less than six months after the ground invasion of Gaza where it faced more than 50 days of resistance and suffered significant losses, including 71 dead, most of whom were soldiers. No doubt, the economic losses anticipated in any new confrontation are also behind Israel's reluctance to enter a full on offensive. Despite the lack of accurate government statistics, it is claimed that Israel suffered major economic losses during the war on Gaza. The daily cost of the war, according to the Israeli press and based on Defense Ministry sources, was 50 million dollars. There were also losses arising from the suspension of air traffic, and a slowdown in the tourism, hotel, retail, and service sectors.⁶

Other reasons for Israel to avoid escalation might include the fact that the outbreak of a confrontation on the "Northern front" would require the total evacuation of settlers in towns and settlements near the Lebanese border to locations out of range of rocket attacks. These locations are gradually becoming fewer in number as Hezbollah acquires longer-range missiles. This is not to say Israel would not resort to such measures if it felt Hezbollah posed an immediate threat. That is not the case, however, since the Hezbollah operation came in response to a series of Israeli operations against it, while since 2006, Hezbollah has not undertaken military actions against Israel. In other words, the "Northern front" remains calm from Israel's perspective and does not call for paying the price of any escalation.

Conclusion

In sum, it would seem that no parties to the recent crisis stand to benefit from an escalation. This might be the message intended by Hassan Nasrallah when, during the mourning for the Hezbollah commanders, he stated that Hezbollah "does not want war, but does not fear it." The Reuters news agency pointed to a message from Hezbollah to Israel, delivered by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) forces, indicating that it did not seek an escalation.⁷ This was met with similar a Israeli wish for

⁶ "Heavy losses to the Israeli economy due to the war on Gaza," *Al Arabiya*, July 26, 2014, <http://bit.ly/169Gvf7>.

⁷ "Israel: Hezbollah does not seek an escalation," *Reuters Arabic*, January 29, 2015, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN0L20PP20150129>.

containment, and no escalation at this stage, made crystal clear by the request of the Israeli army command to the settlers in the “Northern front” to return to normal life.

This does not necessarily imply, however, that the two sides have agreed to return to the 2006 ceasefire understandings, particularly as Hassan Nasrallah has spoken about the collapse of the rules of engagement that were in force with Israel. This reflects growing fears that Israel will continue to exploit Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian conflict to carry out more strikes against it and weaken it, particularly as Hezbollah is suffering considerable losses on all fronts – material, human, and in psychological terms – as a result of its guns being pointed at a people in revolt against a tyrannical regime.