

Geopolitical Diary: Hezbollah as an Iranian-Israeli Flash Point

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Israel, Hezbollah: Gearing Up for Another War?

By Stratfor Today This Report Expresses the views of Stratfor.

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The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) conducted a raid in the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, only a day after wrapping up a fierce five-day operation there. The raid follows the high-profile assassination of Hezbollah's operational commander Imad Mughniyah in February and was accompanied by rumors of Israeli reoccupation and a suggestion from an Israeli Security Cabinet member that Gaza and the West Bank be administered, at least for a time, by Egypt and Jordan respectively — a move that would separate the territories from one another.

Israel appears to have recovered from the embarrassment of the 2006 summer conflict with Hezbollah and is displaying a renewed aggressiveness — and Iran seems to have noticed. A Stratfor source indicated on Tuesday that Iranian intelligence officers, military personnel and rocket scientists had recently arrived in Beirut and were hard at work preparing Hezbollah for war. Though Tehran's support of Hezbollah is nothing new, this surge in support could suggest that it is concerned about further Israeli military action in the Levant following the Mughniyah assassination.

But despite Israel's intense operations in Gaza that might seem disproportionate to the ineffective rocket fire (Palestinian rockets do not represent a strategic threat to the Jewish state, but their effect on Israeli politics can be greater than their physical impact), the Palestinian territories can be a strategic distraction for Israel that prevents it from mustering its full military might against Hezbollah. If the IDF can clean house in the territories and stabilize the security situation, it would then be free to mass forces in the north, where it has unfinished business.

Though Israel is not in a position to utterly eliminate Hezbollah, it squandered its opportunity to set the militant organization back by years, if not a decade, in 2006. That conflict was a product not only of Hezbollah's making, but also Tehran's.

It is not just that a militant subnational organization looms just across Israel's northern border with a small arsenal of artillery rockets. It is that in the midst of a competition between Iran and Israel for control of the Arab world, that organization is a proxy for the Islamic republic. This makes the organization less predictable and gives Tehran a powerful trump card.

Hezbollah's proxy status allows the competition to rage. Much of Tehran's attention is absorbed by the United States and the Iraqi quagmire that physically separates the region's two poles; this makes a direct confrontation with Israel too risky. Meanwhile, Israel fears a larger regional war it cannot control. Hezbollah's status, then, makes the group the perfect lever for Iran and the perfect target for Israel.

Thus, while both sides are making diplomatic efforts to curry favor with the various states in the region (Israel is attempting to solidify an anti-Iranian coalition just as Iran is attempting to fragment it), the flash point for the Iranian-Israeli struggle for position in the Middle East is, and will continue to be, the still very functional Hezbollah.

With a newly assertive IDF beginning to look ready for a rematch and the Arab world's patent failure to contain rising Persian power, a third Lebanon war seems in many ways almost inevitable. And the outcome of that war — the success or failure of the Israelis to meaningfully degrade Hezbollah's capabilities — will be an enormous determining factor in the region's evolving political landscape.

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A number of indications suggest that Israel and Hezbollah could be readying themselves for a military confrontation in Lebanon in the near future. Israel's operations in Gaza could be an attempt to ensure it only has to fight on one

front, and Stratfor sources report Hezbollah is gearing up for a battle.

Analysis

With Palestinian rocket barrages continuing and Israel threatening to reoccupy the Gaza Strip, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is visiting Cairo, Ramallah and Jerusalem on March 4 with the ill-fated goal of reviving Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is bound to flare up every now and then, there appears to be a bigger issue in play. Israel's current focus on degrading the Palestinians' rocket-launching ability could in fact be tied to possible Israeli intentions to wage war against Hezbollah in the near future.

Israel launched a major offensive into the Gaza Strip on Feb. 29 after Palestinian militants lobbed around 20 Soviet-designed Grad rockets (a step up from the usual homemade Qassam rockets) into the coastal Israeli city of Ashkelon, 11 miles north of Gaza. These rockets are more disruptive than deadly, but they inflict a heavy psychological toll on Israel. The Israeli government came under heavy pressure to respond in force, particularly after a Qassam attack killed a civilian in the southern Israeli town of Sderot.

Despite international condemnation, Israel has made clear that its operations in Gaza are not over. Haaretz reported March 4 that Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said this is not a quick operation, but rather a long process that will involve more intense offensives. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni even threatened that Israel would reoccupy the Gaza Strip if necessary.

Israel's big push on Gaza might be driven by concerns larger than just its conflict with the Palestinians, however. There are a number of indications that Israel could be readying itself for a military confrontation with Hezbollah in Lebanon in the summer. The Israelis have been extending unusual carrot and stick offers to Syria as a warning to stay out of their fight with Hezbollah; U.S. warships are sitting off the coast of Lebanon, signaling possible U.S. intervention; and Hezbollah — along with its Syrian and Iranian patrons — appears to be making preparations for a coming war.

According to a Stratfor source in Lebanon, a large contingent of Iranian foreign intelligence officers, military officials and security experts have recently arrived in Beirut. Iranian missile and tactical support experts are allegedly in control of several military operations rooms recently set up by Hezbollah in the southern Lebanese town of Nabatiye and the Bekaa Valley towns of Mashghara and Al Hirmil. Stratfor has discussed before the Iranian intent to secure its grip over Hezbollah ahead of any major confrontation with Israel.

Hezbollah, according to a Stratfor source, also is transporting a large number of Zelzal missiles to the heights of the West Bekaa valley. These unguided rockets are large and difficult to transport or hide. They did not make an appearance in the 2006 conflict; however, if Hezbollah has managed to acquire several Zelzals, these long-range rockets could send a large warhead deep into Israeli territory. And Hezbollah is digging out tunnels and underground shelters, reorganizing its command structure in the western Bekaa Valley and training under Iranian military commanders in Tehran. Moreover, Stratfor has received reports that Hezbollah is installing explosive devices in Iranian-built Mohajer unmanned aerial vehicles and has acquired new antitank guided missiles.

While Hezbollah appears to be digging in for a fight, Israel is focusing on diminishing the threat it faces on the Palestinian front. Embedded in a section on manpower requirements and reserve mobilization in the final Winograd report on Israel's performance in the 2006 conflict, several points were made on the difficulties Israel faced due to slow decision-making in fighting Hezbollah in Lebanon while simultaneously conducting operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The difficulty during that conflict was not in fighting the Palestinians per se, but in having enough manpower to cover both fronts. If Israel can manage to degrade a fair amount of Hamas' rocket-launching capability in Gaza ahead of a military confrontation with Hezbollah, it can clear its plate a bit and focus more intently on the issue of allocating enough forces to impose a military defeat on Hezbollah.

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