

Hezbollah's relocation of rocket sites to Lebanon's interior poses wider threat

Contributed by Howard Schneider, Washington Post Foreign Service
Tuesday, 26 January 2010

A Lebanese soldier inspects the site of an explosion, at the entrance of a building in Kfar Fila village, a Hezbollah stronghold in southern Lebanon. (Ali Hashisho - Reuters)

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By Howard Schneider
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Saturday, January 23, 2010

BEIRUT -- Hezbollah has dispersed its long-range-rocket sites deep into northern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, a move that analysts say threatens to broaden any future conflict between the Islamist movement and Israel into a war between the two countries.

More than 10,000 U.N. troops now patrol traditional Hezbollah territory in southern Lebanon along the Israeli border, and several thousand Lebanese armed forces personnel also have moved into the area. A cross-border raid by Hezbollah guerrillas in summer 2006 triggered a month-long war that prompted the United Nations to deploy its force as part of a cease-fire.

The United Nations is confident that the dense presence of its troops in the comparatively small area is helping lower the risk of conflict and minimizing Hezbollah's ability to move weapons across southern Lebanon, but analysts in Lebanon and Israel say the U.N. mission is almost beside the point.

Hezbollah's redeployment and rearmament indicate that its next clash with Israel is unlikely to focus on the border, instead moving farther into Lebanon and challenging both the military and the government. The situation is important for U.S. efforts in the region, whether aimed at curbing the influence of Hezbollah's patrons in Iran or at persuading Syria to moderate its stance toward Israel and its neighbors.

Hezbollah "learned their lesson" in 2006, when vital intelligence enabled the Israel Defense Forces to destroy the group's long-range launch sites in the first days of the conflict, said reserve Gen. Aharon Zeevi Farkash, a former head of IDF intelligence. In effect, he said, "the 'border' is now the Litani River," with Hezbollah's rocket sites possibly extending north of Beirut.

In a December briefing, Brig. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, the IDF head of operations, said some Hezbollah rockets now have a range of more than 150 miles -- making Tel Aviv reachable from as far away as Beirut. The Islamist group has talked openly of its efforts to rebuild, and Israel estimates that Hezbollah has about 40,000 projectiles, most of them shorter-range rockets and mortar shells.

The group "has been fortifying lots of different areas," said Judith Palmer Harik, a Hezbollah scholar in Beirut. With U.N. and Lebanese forces "packed along the border," she said, "we are looking at a much more expanded battle in all senses of the word."

Just a matter of time?

The border has been relatively quiet since the 2006 war, a fact that officials with the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon attribute at least partly to the 400 or so patrols they send out each day to search for weapons stores and prevent border violations.

Armored U.N. vehicles sit at the entrance to southern Lebanon, alongside Lebanese army and intelligence checkpoints; blue-flagged U.N. troops occupy mountaintop posts that Hezbollah used as firing sites in 2006.

"We are covering every square inch," said Maj. S.K. Misra, a spokesman for the battalion of India's 3/11 Gurkha Rifles corps that patrols southeastern Lebanon. "It's impossible for anything to move."

At the same time, debate is raging in political and military circles between those who argue that the damage to each side in 2006 has created a sort of respectful deterrence between Israel and Hezbollah and those who say it is only a matter of time before violence erupts again.

Hezbollah lost hundreds of fighters in the conflict and was put on the defensive in Lebanon, where some questioned whether the group's vow to continue "resistance" against Israel was worth letting an unregulated paramilitary organization effectively make decisions about war and peace.

With Iran backing and supplying Hezbollah and the United States backing and supplying Israel, "the battlefield is Lebanon," said Marwan Hamadeh, a Lebanese member of parliament and supporter of a government coalition that is trying to curb Hezbollah's arms and limit Syrian and Iranian influence in the country. "This is where the Iranian missiles sit, and this is where the Israeli air force can reach."

Israel, meanwhile, lost more than 100 troops and uncharacteristically large numbers of tanks, helicopters and other equipment -- prompting it to rewrite its war doctrine and adjust its perception of Hezbollah's militia. Military analysts now see Hezbollah not as primarily a guerrilla force but as an organization that practices "hybrid war," mixing classic guerrilla tactics with the strategy, equipment and capability of a standing army.

In a 2008 report for the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute, analysts Stephen D. Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman concluded that Hezbollah had performed more effectively in 2006 than any of the Arab armies from Egypt, Syria or Jordan that had fought conventional wars with Israel over the years, and better in some ways than the Iraqi army in its two wars with the United States.

A wider struggle

In Beirut, politicians and analysts agree that the group has only grown stronger since 2006. As they hear Hezbollah's secretary general, Hasan Nasrallah, speak of a conflict that will "change the face of the region," many assume that the IDF will not allow the organization to rearm, recruit and train much longer before striking.

In Israel, Hezbollah is seen as part of a wider struggle for regional influence between Iran and U.S.-allied moderate Arab states, given the group's ties to Iran and Syria and arms supplies assumed to run through both countries.

There is no reason the current calm cannot continue, said retired Maj. Gen. Giora Eiland, a former Israeli national security adviser who is now a senior researcher at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies.

But if a conflict does break out, "Israel will not contain that war against Hezbollah," Eiland said. "We cannot."

Given Hezbollah's capabilities, he said, "the only way to deter the other side and prevent the next round -- or if it happens, to win -- is to have a military confrontation with the state of Lebanon."

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