

Is Israel About to Attack Hizballah?

Contributed by TIME
Monday, 05 November 2007

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By Nicholas Blanford/Beirut

Is Israel laying the ground for pre-emptive air strikes against targets belonging to the militant Shi'ite group Hizballah in Lebanon?

Tensions have been building along the Lebanon-Israel border in recent days. The Israeli army was engaged last week in large-scale military exercises in northern Israel, close to the border with Lebanon, putting into practice the lessons learned from last year's 34-day war against Hizballah. The exercises took place at the same time as Israeli jets conducted a growing number of mock air raids and overflights in Lebanese airspace. Israeli aircraft fly in Lebanese airspace on a near daily basis, but last week Lebanese army anti-aircraft units fired at the jets for the first time since the end of the war.

Hizballah, too, is reported to have carried out over the weekend its largest ever military manouevers in south Lebanon. According to a report Monday in Lebanon's Al-Akhbar newspaper, Hizballah's three-day exercise was a response to the Israeli army's own maneuvers and was intended, according to quoted Hizballah sources, to "deter the enemy from undertaking any further Lebanese adventures."

Accompanying all this heightened activity has been a flurry of reports in the Israeli media about Hizballah's rearming, with claims that the Shi'ite group today possesses rockets that can strike Tel Aviv. Last week, a United Nations report on Lebanon carried information provided by Israel that alleged Hizballah was more heavily armed than prior to the 2006 war, with hundreds of long-range rockets and three times as many anti-ship cruise missiles. "Israel has stated that the nature and number of weapons in Hizballah's control constitutes a strategic threat to its security and the safety of its citizens," the report said. And at a recent panel discussion in Washington, the outgoing deputy chief of staff of the Israeli army openly talked about the need to launch a preemptive strike against Hizballah targets in Lebanon sometime in the future.

Hizballah's leadership is playing down the prospect of renewed fighting with Israel. Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah's secretary-general, said in a speech last week that "these maneuvers and mock air raids and these Israeli drum beats, threats and browbeats which we hear from time to time do not affect us at all."

"Today, we are stronger [than last year] in terms of will, determination, faith, morals, finances, brains, measures, presence in the field and preparations for the confrontation. Nothing intimidates us," he said.

Israel has been looking to restore its threat of deterrence, which was damaged by the inconclusive results of the 2006 war. The mysterious Israeli air strike in August against a suspected nuclear facility in northern Syria is seen as part of a renewed assertiveness. But could Hizballah also be in the Israeli military's sights?

Last month, this reporter sat on a panel to discuss Hizballah at a conference hosted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The other panelist was Major General Moshe Kaplinsky, the outgoing deputy chief of staff of the Israeli army. Before discussing Israel's role, Kaplinsky offered up a series of recommendations that he believed would help neutralize and ultimately disarm Hizballah. They included strengthening the Lebanese army and expanding the mandate of the 13,300-strong United Nations peacekeeping force, known as UNIFIL, to areas beyond the south Lebanon border strip. UNIFIL, he said, should mount patrols in Hizballah's new stronghold in mountains north of the Litani river, the limit of UNIFIL's area of operations. He added that UNIFIL must deploy along the border with Syria to check the flow of weapons smuggled into Lebanon by Hizballah.

However, there is little chance of Kaplinsky's wishes being fulfilled, analysts say. UNIFIL is under threat from groups inspired by Al-Qaeda — six members of the Spanish battalion were killed in June in a car bomb attack — and the peacekeeping force has no wish to make new enemies by deploying along the border with Syria and inside Hizballah's military areas.

Given those realities, perhaps it shouldn't have come as much of a surprise that Kaplinsky also declared that Israel should pre-emptively attack Hizballah targets in Lebanon, such as new positions and arms convoys crossing the border from Syria. "I approve pre-emptive strikes against Hizballah. We have to find the exact time. This is one of the lessons I learned from before," he said.

Kaplinsky has many years experience fighting Israel's enemies in Lebanon, from 1982 when the Israeli army invaded to drive out the Palestine Liberation Organization then dominating south Lebanon. In the early 1990s he commanded the elite Golani Brigade at a time when Hizballah was evolving into a formidable guerrilla-fighting force dedicated to ousting the Israeli army from its occupation zone in south Lebanon. Hizballah's resistance campaign led to an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. Hizballah units moved in to the vacuum and five months later kidnapped three Israeli soldiers from the Shebaa Farms, an Israeli-occupied mountainside running along Lebanon's south east border over which Lebanon claims sovereignty. Kaplinsky and other senior Israeli officers urged then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to order a swift and punishing response to deter future attacks. Barak, however, refrained from a heavy retaliation, apparently worried about being sucked back into the Lebanese quagmire just five months after leaving it.

That restraint encouraged Hizballah over the next six years to build up an impressive military infrastructure of secret bunkers and rocket firing positions in the hills and valleys of south Lebanon, which was put to good use in last year's war.

Kaplinsky and other Israeli commanders say they cannot afford to repeat the same mistake. Although Hizballah appears to have rearmed substantially, Kaplinsky believed the organization is not yet ready for another round with Israel because of its internal political battles with the US-backed Lebanese government. That suggests Israel has a window of opportunity to attack Hizballah's military assets at little cost.

Whether Israel launches pre-emptive raids or not, analysts agree that a second round between Israel and Hizballah is inevitable. And Kaplinsky was confident that Israel would prevail against Hizballah in that event. "I believe that the next round will take us less time, [we will] send [into Lebanon] more quickly our ground forces. We will have to take control of the area for some weeks, some months... to [disarm] Hizballah," he said. Hardly encouraging words for the war weary residents of south Lebanon.

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