

Clashes between Israel and Hezbollah and the “Iran-led Resistance Bloc”

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The strategic equation in the Middle East is about to see major changes. It strongly appears that the Iranian-led Resistance Bloc or Axis of Resistance — comprised of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and a cross-section of Palestinian and Iraqi groups — is about to become more powerful than ever before.

After a cooling of ties, a new understanding is being hammered out between Hamas and Tehran. Meanwhile Yemen is under the control of the Houthis and both the US and the House of Saud have essentially lost the four to five years they had invested after the eruption of the Arab Spring of regime management in Sana. Not only is the Resistance Bloc emerging more powerful, but Iran is becoming indispensable to the regional security architecture of everything east of Egypt in the Mashreq. The security and defensive forces in Syria and Iraq have become integrated with Tehran's security architecture. Hezbollah has emerged stronger than ever too with a genuine regional reach and presence that extends from Lebanon and Syria in the Levant to the territory of Iraq where it is fighting the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Israel is beginning to feel the pressure and has begun to show some signs of panic. When talking about Iranian influence in the Middle East, Israeli politicians and media reports claim that a third Arab capital—Sana—is now under Tehran's control. Moreover, Tel Aviv has begun to rattle the cage as nuclear negotiations—and the undisclosed talks about non-nuclear issues— between the US and Iranian governments have been underway.

The House of Saud is anxious too. For these reasons the relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel are closer and more strategic than ever. Both the Israelis and House of Saud have also started a propaganda campaign using the unconcealed presence of Iranian military personnel in Syria to try to scare the Arab public by ridiculously claim that the Iranians have been using the Syrian conflict to gain influence inside Syria. This rhetoric is fear mongering that ignores that fact that Tehran was already the strategic ally of Damascus before the Syrian crisis and that an Iranian presence existed in Syria long before 2011. What is true, however, is that ties have deepened between Tehran and Damascus.

Iran and the Israeli-Occupied West Bank

In preparation for his March 3, 2015 speech to a joint session of the US Congress, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has gone on overdrive stating that the Iranians have been opening new fronts against Israel. Netanyahu claims that Israel faces a threat from Tehran

on six different fronts. These fronts are (1) Lebanon, (2) Syria, (3) the Gaza Strip, (4) Egypt's volatile Sinai Peninsula, (5) Israel's interests and missions abroad, and (6) the Iranian nuclear energy program.

Netanyahu's talking points are simple: Iran is entrenching itself on Israel's borders with a mission to destroy Israel. This is what he wants to tell the US Congress in what is appearing to become the partisan affair of a Likudnik-Republican political alliance that should also be read as an indicator of a major divide in elite opinions in the US.

Perhaps recognizing the extent of his bravado or being warned about the exaggeration of his claims, Netanyahu's talking points mellowed down a bit. Instead of continuing his rhetoric about the six fronts against Israel, he began to concentrate on the older Israeli talking point about a «third front» being opened by Iran and Hezbollah in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

As an omission of Tel Aviv's occupation of Syrian territory, the Golan Heights have historically been called the Syrian Heights in Israel.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has largely ignored reality. He discredited himself on numerous occasions, ranging from his presentation to the UN General Assembly in 2012, which was reticulated internationally as farce and sophistry, to his imaginative assessment of the 2015 report on the Iranian nuclear energy program by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Not only has Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly presented a delusional and fanciful assessment of the IAEA's report on the Iranian nuclear energy program, he has largely ignored Iranian statements about the only new front that the Iranians have acknowledged that they actually want to create against the Israelis.

The new front that the Iranians want to create against Israel is no secret whatsoever. Iranian security and military officials have been very public about their willingness to arm those Palestinians that want to resist the Israeli occupation of their homeland in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The arming of the Palestinians in the West Bank has been stopped, because the West Bank is run from Ramallah by the collaborationist Palestinian regime of the corrupt Mahmoud Abbas — better known as the Palestinian Authority — which embezzles and squanders the international aid and taxes of the Palestinian people. The shameless Hashemite dictatorship in Jordan — which the governments and major human rights organizations in the US and European Union have done their best to sanitize as some type of liberal democracy in the eyes of public opinion — and its absolute monarch King Abdullah II have also assisted Israel and the collaborationist Palestinian Authority in pacifying the Palestinians in the West Bank as their homeland is illegally colonized.

Hitherto, Iranian military and security officials have been saying for more than half a year that they are more than willing to arm and help those Palestinians in the West Bank who want to end the Israeli occupation. These Iranian calls and offers to arm the Palestinians in the West Bank against Israel, however, were renewed after Tel Aviv killed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Brigadier-General Mohammed-Ali Allahdadi on January 18, 2015.

The Israeli False Narrative about the Attack in Quneitra

Allahdadi was killed near the Quneitra Crossing in the northeastern part of the Golan

Heights that is under Syrian control and not occupied by Israel. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard flag officer died when the Israelis targeted two vehicles with six Hezbollah fighters — including Jihad Mughniyeh, the son of assassinated Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyah — and himself. The vehicles had been doing a reconnaissance and inspection tour of the area to help the Syrian government fight the insurgents that Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the US have been backing since 2011.

Initially, the Israeli government and military said nothing, thinking that Hezbollah and Iran would be too humiliated by the Israeli offensive inside Syria against them to publicize what happened. On the contrary, Tehran and Hezbollah announced it immediately. Hezbollah even proudly declared that the mixture of Lebanese and Iranian blood that was shed in protection of Syria symbolized a common cause and destiny between Lebanon, Iran, and Syria in a historic battle.

The Israelis then tried to spread disinformation. One unnamed senior Israeli security source told *Reuters* that «Israeli forces believed they were attacking only low-ranking guerrillas.» It has been commonly acknowledged that the decision to bomb the reconnaissance vehicles was made at the highest level in Israel.

After the strike on Allahdadi's convoy, the Israelis began to talk about how Tehran and Hezbollah are preparing to open up a new front in the Golan Heights against Israel. Hezbollah has pointed out that these Israeli claims are intended to obfuscate Israel's cooperation with Jabhat Al-Nusra in the Golan Heights and the rest of Syria. Hezbollah has categorically said that the reconnaissance convoy that Israel attacked was not present to prepare for a war against Israel. According to Hezbollah and Tehran, instead the Israelis were protecting Al-Nusra, which has built a strong presence in the area with Israel's help.

Regardless of the validity of these claims, these Israeli talking points about a front in the Golan Heights or Syria have been repeatedly used to justify Israeli military offensives in the Syrian crisis as an air force for the insurgents trying to topple the Syrian government. Not only have there been protests inside Israel by the Druze community against Israel's support to Jabhat Al-Nusra, but the UN Security Council had been told in 2014 by a UN peacekeeping contingent from Ireland, India, and Fiji that Israel has been collaborating with the insurgents.

The insurgents themselves are publicly calling for Israel to continue its military support. *The Jerusalem Post* reported on February 12, 2015 that the Syrian insurgency, «whose forces are fighting against a new offensive in the South [of Syria] by the axis of the Syrian Army, Hezbollah, and Iran, is calling on Israel to attack their positions.» *The Jerusalem Post* says that an Israeli «in frequent contact with the Syrian opposition» asserted that the Syrian insurgents were warning Israel that if it did not attack the Syrian military and stop it from regaining control of southern Syria that the Axis of Resistance will retake the border.

Hezbollah's Response from the Sheeba Farms

The Israelis were sent a startling warning from Hezbollah in retaliation to the Israeli attack on Jihad Mughniyeh's convoy. Tel Aviv seemed to be in shock when Hezbollah reacted without hesitation on January 28, 2015. The US Department of State's spin-doctor spokeswoman Jennifer Psaki would react by contradictorily saying that the US urged «all parties to refrain from any action that could escalate the situation» and that Israel had a right to launch an attack into Lebanon.

The US media would dishonestly also try to conceal some important facts. The first fact that the US media tried to conceal was about the location of the Hezbollah attack on the Israeli military, the Sheeba Farms. The Sheeba Farms is Lebanese territory occupied by Israel, but the US media used misleading wording and made misleading statements to make it sound like the Sheeba Farms was Syrian territory as a means of trying to make it look like Hezbollah had launched an attack outside of Lebanese territory on Israel. The second fact that the US media tried to obfuscate was the fact that a Spaniard soldier serving as a United Nations peacekeeper in the village of Ghajar was killed by the Israelis when they responded to the Hezbollah attack. Press reports would say that a Spaniard peacekeeper died as a result of the attack, but would try to conceal the fact that the Israeli military had killed him.

The Washington Post would report, in what was clearly a calculated information leak, on January 30, 2015 that Jihad Mughniyeh's father, Imad Mughniyah, was killed by the US and Israel together in a joint CIA and Mossad operation. An anonymous former intelligence official told Adam Goldman and Ellen Nakashima that the US had made the car bomb that killed Imad Mughniyah in Damascus. Perhaps the leak was a tactic to mitigate the response against Israel or perhaps it was deemed the right time to reveal that the US had been involved in Imad Mughniyah's murder in 2008. Regardless, it showcased the connections of the *Washington Post* to US intelligence and, more importantly, made an open and negative omission that the US has been carrying out car bombings (like the one that killed Rafik Al-Hariri).

A New Chapter for Hezbollah and Israel

Hezbollah responded during the zenith of Israeli's military alertness. The crisis in Syria has changed the nature of the struggle between Hezbollah and its Israeli enemy. Hezbollah now has a regional presence that extends from Lebanon and Syria to Iraq. Its confidence level has gone up and it has become battle-hardened and gained more experience. This is why Hezbollah did not hesitate to respond immediately as a demonstration that the Lebanese organization could at will chose the location, timing, and target of its battle with Israel. This is why Hezbollah targeted two Israeli military vehicles at almost the exact same time of the day that the Israelis had launched their attack on Jihad Mughniyeh's convoy.

Furthermore, Hezbollah differentiated between an Israeli assassination of one of its members and an Israeli military attack before 2015. That has changed according to Hezbollah's leadership. Secretary-General Nasrallah has announced that the Lebanese organization will treat assassinations and military attacks as one and the same and that Hezbollah will respond to Israeli aggression in a way that it determines fitting in its time and place of choosing.

The Israelis were taken by surprise by the Hezbollah counter-offensive. Firstly, the Israelis wrongly thought that the Syrians and Iranians would not want Hezbollah to respond, because they were afraid Israel would use the opportunity to attack Syria and change the internal balance of power. Hezbollah made it clear that it would react to any attack and that neither Iranian nor Syrian interests would trump that.

Secondly, a new weapon was used against Israel. Due to this new missile technology it has been pointed out — even gloated with pride and triumph — in Lebanon that Tel Aviv could not immediately respond in the field against the Hezbollah fighters that launched the attack, because the Israelis could not detect the missiles even though the Israeli military was on standby and alert after Israel had launched an offensive attack against Hezbollah inside

Syrian territory. Tel Aviv has also been given a demonstration that Hezbollah's intelligence has become more effective in monitoring the Israeli military.

If none of these points were clear to the Israelis, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah made them clear in a public address about the Hezbollah counter-offensive where he stated that the Israelis killed the Hezbollah members in the middle of the day (11:30 a.m.) and that in return Hezbollah killed their soldiers in the middle of the day (11:25 a.m.). In return for the two vehicles that Israel destroyed with its missiles, Hezbollah destroyed two of Israel's military vehicles with its missiles. Nasrallah would point out that there was one main difference between Hezbollah and the Israeli military and that is that the Israelis did not dare to claim responsibility for their attacks whereas Hezbollah has always claimed responsibility for its actions.

The ball was been put back in Israel's court by Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah through their counter-offensive, so to speak. Meanwhile the strategic equation and balance in the Middle East is changing to the benefit of Hezbollah and its allies in the Resistance Bloc. This is important subtext. These factors should not be forgotten when analyzing Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Capitol Hill and anything he says about Iran opening a «third front» on March 3, 2015.

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