

Daggers Drawn, but Israel and Hizballah Likely Prefer Restraint

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Global Research, January 30, 2015

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Israeli politicians responded with outrage to Hizballah's attack on Wednesday on an Israeli military convoy close to the Lebanese border. Anti-tank missiles killed two Israeli soldiers and wounded seven more.

With Israel and Hizballah at the closest point to a major confrontation since their month-long war in 2006, Israel's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, called for a "very harsh and disproportionate" response.

Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, echoed him. "To those who are challenging us in the north, I suggest you look at what happened in the Gaza Strip," he said, referring to Israel's Operation Protective Edge last summer that killed more than 2,000 Palestinians, most of them civilians.

Following the soldiers' deaths, Israel struck southern Lebanon, killing a United Nations peacekeeper. It is unclear if or what further action Israel intends to take.

But the truth is that Hizballah's attack was the very minimum retaliation Israel could realistically expect following an air strike earlier this month on one of Hizballah's convoys in southern Syria.

That attack, on January 18, killed six Hizballah commanders and several members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, including a general.

Israel's offensive could not have been timed to inflict greater humiliation on Hizballah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Two days before, he had made a speech in which he warned Israel against launching attacks into Syria and threatened that Hizballah would respond with long-range rockets.

Hizballah appears to want this episode to draw to a close. Israel's defence minister, Moshe Yaalon, confirmed on Thursday that he had received such a message from Hizballah delivered through UN peacekeepers. Iran, however, may be planning its own retaliation.

The more pressing question is whether Israel will let the matter drop.

On Thursday, Netanyahu sought to place the blame on Iran rather than Hizballah: "It is Iran that stands behind the attack on us yesterday from Lebanon."

Opportunistic attack

There are grounds for suspecting that Israel's original January 18 strike had little or nothing to do with its stated aim: to prevent an imminent attack on Israel.

More likely, it was partly opportunistic – according to Israeli media reports, the Iranian general left on a cell phone, revealing his location – partly driven by Netanyahu's personal calculations as he faces elections, and partly strategic.

As ever, Netanyahu is desperate to cast Iran in the role of bogeyman, in the hope of upsetting the talks between Tehran and the western powers on Iran's nuclear energy programme – his own political hobby horse. Those negotiations have shown signs of progress.

Netanyahu has already mobilised much of the US Congress to his side, with US legislators threatening to impose tougher sanctions on Iran.

The emphasis Netanyahu places on subverting the negotiations can be inferred from his decision to infuriate the White House by engineering an invite to address the Congress in early March to further his cause.

Hizballah and Iran are therefore keen to avoid stepping into Netanyahu's trap. Wednesday's deadly attack was carefully calibrated to make it hard for him to escalate matters further.

The anti-tank missiles were fired into an area known as the Shebaa Farms, a seven-mile strip of mountainous territory between Lebanon and Syria. Sovereignty over the area is disputed.

Lebanon claims it as Lebanese, a position traditionally backed by Syria. But Israel argues it is part of the Syrian Golan Heights and was therefore illegally annexed to Israel along with the Heights back in 1981. Under much pressure from Israel and Washington, the United Nations has backed Israel's claim.

In practice, however, the Shebaa Farms is territory no one controls. Israel Ziv, the former head of Israeli army operations, explained to Israeli journalists on Wednesday the "gentleman's agreement" with Hizballah. "Generally, what happens in Shebaa, stays in Shebaa," he said.

Playing it cautious

That was obviously Hizballah's working assumption as it launched its strike on Wednesday.

Had it hit from Syria, it risked opening the door to more Israeli attacks on Syrian army positions, further weakening the regime as it struggles against opposition forces trying to topple it.

And had it launched the missiles into Israel from Lebanon, it would have justified a stiffer Israeli response against Lebanon, drawing Beirut into the Syrian war and unleashing a wave of domestic criticism of Hizballah.

The Shia militia also indicated its desire to close the matter by firing precise missiles at a military target rather than, as Nasrallah had suggested before Israel's attack on January 18, by launching rockets at Israeli communities in the north.

Further, no effort appears to have been made to capture any of the surviving soldiers, as Hizballah did in 2006, triggering the war with Israel. Certainly a captured soldier would have raised the pressure on Netanyahu considerably to escalate hostilities.

In truth, the Israeli elections may actually stay Netanyahu's hand. Should he seek a major escalation, Israeli military analyst Ron Ben Yishai noted, his opponents would accuse him of waging a "political war", and one that would inevitably result in Hizballah rocket fire on Israel.

Influential columnist Ari Shavit concluded similarly: "The Israeli people will neither forgive nor forget the one who brings missiles to Ben-Gurion Airport, to the Kirya government and IDF compound, and to Tel Aviv's skyscrapers."

More likely, Netanyahu will seek to contain events for the time being.

Confrontation looming

Nonetheless, sooner or later Israel can be expected to push for a major confrontation with Hizballah and Iran in Syria.

Israel's generals are concerned that the two may gain a permanent foothold in Quneitra province, the region on the other side of the ceasefire lines from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. They are – as is Israel – keen to fill the power vacuum created last summer by the Syrian army's loss of control over the area to rebel groups.

Israel wants to maintain its freedom to operate in Syrian skies unimpeded and appears to be working closely with the rebels in the area north of the Golan Heights.

In its security-obsessed worldview, any effort by Hizballah – Israel's most effective regional foe – to establish such a base close to the Golan will be perceived as a major strategic threat.

On Wednesday night, Netanyahu told his security cabinet: "For some time now Iran is trying, via Hizballah, to set up a terrorist front against us in the Golan Heights. We are working aggressively and responsibly against this attempt."

Israel has been working to that end through a series of air strikes in Syria to weaken the Syrian army and its Hizballah ally, and through proxies, making opportunistic alliances with Syrian opposition forces, including the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. It may even secretly work with Islamic State if it believes that will damage Hizballah and the Syrian regime.

The stakes are, of course, no less serious for Hizballah and Iran. Israel's goal of undermining the Syrian regime and army would push Syria further into the mire of feuding sects and militias.

The emerging chaos in southern Syria, fuelled in part by Israeli interventions, offers Israel a final benefit. It has consolidated the consensus in Israel against ever returning the Golan Heights to Syria and removed any international pressure to do so.

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