

Has Hezbollah Become More of a Threat to Israel?

The seemingly endless 5-year-old Syrian civil war has presented Israel with a number of complex threats, including the rise of the Islamic State terror group. Yet most Israeli leaders believe that the Iranian-funded Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah remains by far the Jewish state's most formidable enemy to the north.

At the same time, during the last several years, Hezbollah has been preoccupied with supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in his fight against rebels and other Islamic terror groups. Has the Syrian civil war, which is viewed as one of the bloodiest conflicts on Earth, taken a serious toll on Hezbollah? Or has the war actually turned Hezbollah into a more potent threat to Israel?

"I think it cuts both ways," Dr. Emanuele Ottolenghi, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD) think tank who counts Hezbollah among his areas of expertise, told .

"Hezbollah has lost a significant amount of experienced fighters on the battlefield in Syria. All of their vigor, youth, expert knowledge and battle experience—which, according to Hezbollah, should have been used against Israel—has been wasted in Syria," Ottolenghi said.

Indeed, Hezbollah has seen significant casualties in Syria, with more than 1,000 fighters being killed in battles against rebel groups and Sunni Muslim terror groups such as Islamic State and the Nusra Front.

Yet Hezbollah has also "gained an unprecedented amount of battle experience [in Syria], including urban warfare, which they will benefit from in any future conflict against Israel,"

Ottolenghi said.

“They have also benefited from fighting in an increasingly integrated fashion with Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and the Russians,” he added. “They have access now to better weapons and have gained with Iran a new front in southern Syria, which they can use to open a new battle against Israel in the Golan Heights, if they wish to.”

Hezbollah has significantly bolstered its weapons arsenal since its last conflict with Israel in 2006. According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Hezbollah went to war with Israel in 2006 with around 13,000 short-range and medium-range rockets, but “today it could have over 100,000 rockets and missiles, including a number of long-range systems as well as systems with improved accuracy, allowing it to strike throughout Israel and with increased precision.”

Hezbollah is also believed to have made significant improvements in its air and coastal defense, including long-range surface-to-air missiles that could pose a threat to Israeli aircraft.

Consequently, Israel has stepped up its military preparedness in the north. In late January, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Northern Command held a major two-week drill on the northern border to simulate concurrent wars in Lebanon and Syria against Hezbollah and other Islamic terror groups.

“We simulated vast maneuvers, substantial fire power and the attack of thousands of targets in all combat areas, with high efficiency, including residential areas exploited by the enemy,” Aviv Kochavi, head of the IDF Northern Command, said at the time.

While tensions between Israel and Hezbollah have been simmering for years, the assassination of Hezbollah-affiliated terrorist Samir Kuntar—who was involved in the murders of an Israeli family in 1979 and was later released from an Israeli

jail in a 2008 prisoner swap for the bodies of dead IDF soldiers—has ramped up threatening rhetoric even more.

In mid-February, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said the terror group has the ability to unleash widespread destruction on Israel that would be comparable to an atomic bomb by targeting strategic sites in Israel such as an ammonium plant in Haifa.

“A few missiles on a few ammonium plants equal the same amount of death as an atomic bomb ... you (Israel) can destroy Lebanon and Dahiye (a Hezbollah stronghold neighborhood). You have the strongest air force, you have missiles and you have other means by which to do it. But we can do the same thing to you with only a few missiles aimed at a few ammonium plants,” Nasrallah said.

A senior IDF official recently told the London-based Arabic newspaper *Elaph* that Israel could “put Lebanon back 300 years” if Hezbollah attacked, but that the political echelon in Israel would not allow it.

“The organization (Hezbollah) and its leader know very well what Israel’s reaction will be, so it will not set out on such an adventure,” the IDF official said.

Aside from Hezbollah’s expanded arsenal and defense capabilities, Israeli officials have also expressed concern in recent years that Hezbollah may attempt to invade northern Israel and occupy towns or villages in the region.

“In the next war, Hezbollah won’t stay on the borders, and the Israeli settlements in the north will not be protected from this,” a source close to Hezbollah recently told *Foreign Policy* magazine. “Hezbollah will bring the war to them, and Israel’s biggest concern is over Hezbollah’s experience in Syria, as it now has the experience to be offensive rather than just defensive.”

FDD's Ottolenghi suggested that even briefly entering Israeli territory and controlling a village would be a huge success for Hezbollah.

"From their perspective, if they could take territory away from Israel, even for a brief period of time, they would view that as a success and an incredible propaganda stunt," he told .

"For Hezbollah, it is not a matter of having moral constraint, it is a question of capability more than anything else," he added.

While Hezbollah's military buildup, support from Iran, and battlefield experience in Syria may pose an increasing risk for Israel, the terror group has also seen its domestic and external support erode in recent years.

"Hezbollah has to some extent seen its relatively popular stance in Lebanon eroded by its involvement in Syria, and it has been blamed in some corners in Lebanon as responsible for plunging the country back into sectarian conflict," Ottolenghi said.

The Lebanese terror group has faced increased opposition within the Arab world, especially from Sunni Arab leaders who are increasingly fearful of Iran's regional ambitions.

On March 2, the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—which includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—formally designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

The GCC's secretary general, Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, declared that the six countries "consider the actions of Hezbollah militias in GCC countries, and the terrorist actions and incitements it conducts throughout Syria, Yemen and Iraq ... incompatible with the moral values, humanitarian principles and international law, and [the actions] pose a threat to Arab

national security.”

“We have gone a long way since the summer of 2006, when Nasrallah and [former Iranian president Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad were so popular in the Arab world as a result of the Second Lebanon War. The GCC now views Iran and its proxies as the biggest strategic threat that they confront,” Ottolenghi said.

For Israel, the GCC designation was a welcome sign of potential cooperation between the Jewish state and Sunni Arab states.

The changes in the Arab world, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently said, “have great potential to change the diplomatic reality in the region. They give hope for a better future for all nations in the Middle East. I hope these ties will help advance our relations with the Palestinians, or at least the Palestinians who want to live with us in peace.”

Yet Ottolenghi cautioned, “I’m very wary of reading into this [GCC decision] as a sign that friendship has blossomed between Israel, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. [Sunni Arab states] are looking out for themselves because they see Iran as the principle threat to their stability and survival.”

At the same time, Israel and the Gulf states have a mutual fear: Iran’s growing influence in the region as a result of the Islamic Republic’s nuclear deal with world powers, which lifted powerful international sanctions against Iran. Both Israel and the Gulf states also feel abandoned by the United States on the Iranian issue.

“They don’t feel like they can rely on the U.S. to do their bidding anymore. I see a U.S. administration hedging and probably betting on détente with Iran,” Ottolenghi said.

In a recent interview with *The Atlantic*, President Barack Obama said the Saudis “need to find an effective way to share the neighborhood [with Iran] and institute some sort of cold

peace.”

Backing the Gulf states against Iran, said Obama, “would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East.”

Nevertheless, Hezbollah will likely be one of the biggest beneficiaries of the regional disarray.

“Hezbollah is benefitting from America’s retreat from the region and its reluctance to confront Iran head-on in Syria,” Ottolenghi said. “The reluctance of the [Obama] administration to have a Syria policy and also to go against Iran’s interest in Syria, [in order] to not undermine the nuclear agreement, has benefited Hezbollah.”

While the Syrian conflict has taken its toll on Hezbollah through losses of both manpower and popularity, the Lebanese terror group’s new battlefield experience and stepped-up support from a resurgent sanction-free Iran promise to make Hezbollah’s next conflict with Israel a costlier affair for the Jewish state.

“They have dramatically improved their fighting skills and access to more advanced and heavier weapons,” Ottolenghi said. “I think the next war with Hezbollah will be bloodier, more intense and destructive than the last one.”

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