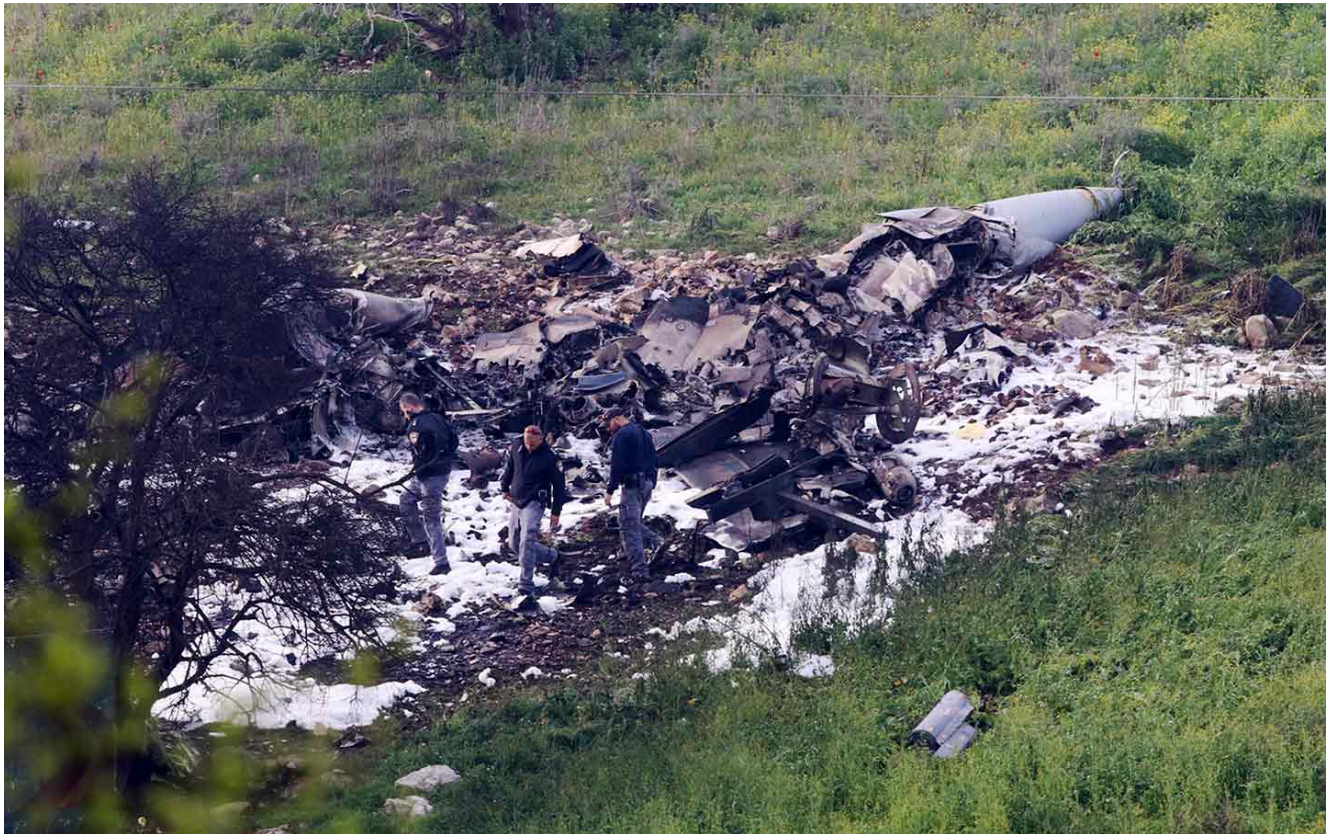


Israel and Hezbollah Are Girding for War—and the Next Round Could Be Horrific

Hezbollah has been steadily consolidating power and weapons—and some fighters maintain it played a role in shooting down an Israeli jet over Syria.



Israeli security officers survey the wreckage of an F-16 that crashed near the Harduf kibbutz, in northern Israel, February 10, 2018. (AP Photo/Rami Slush, File)

Unlike urban areas of the country, the air in southern Lebanon is free from pollution. The hills are lush with early-spring growth and the entire landscape has a rugged beauty that belies the violence it has experienced. The only visible marks of war are martyrs' posters that line the streets winding through picturesque villages—young local men lost in a decades-long conflict with the neighboring Jewish state of Israel.

Just a few kilometers away from the border, where Israel is in the process

of erecting a hotly disputed wall to separate itself from the Hezbollah-controlled south, a local official and brigade leader in the Iranian-backed Shia militant group smoked a slim cigarette as he discussed the prospect of yet another round of violence. Every now and then, a villager wandered into his house, which sometimes doubles as an office, to get documents stamped, and the conversation paused until the visitor was gone.

“The Iranians and Hezbollah are now at the borders of Israel in Lebanon and Syria; any upcoming war will be endless.” —Hezbollah official

The last major episode in the conflict took place in 2006, when Israel invaded Lebanon in a retaliatory offensive unsuccessful in eradicating Hezbollah, which has been celebrating its victory over the invaders ever since. The 2006 war was an impressive win for the group, in that it successfully fought the most powerful army in the Middle East until it was forced into a cease-fire, with fewer Hezbollah casualties and more Israeli casualties than expected. Hezbollah has been consolidating power and weaponry ever since, fully funded by its Iranian benefactors and increasingly alarming its neighbor, which is better accustomed to facing the much less imposing Palestinian Hamas.

“The situation is very tense in the south and we are closer than ever to conflict,” the Hezbollah official said. “The Iranians and Hezbollah are now at the borders of Israel in Lebanon and Syria; any upcoming war will be endless.”

The official, like all the Hezbollah members interviewed for this article, asked to remain anonymous because he is not authorized to speak with foreign press. He was referring to the political atmosphere after an Israeli F-16 jet was shot down over Syria on February 10, where Hezbollah is fighting on behalf of Bashar al-Assad’s regime. The jet was responding to an Iranian drone’s incursion into Israeli territory when it reportedly took fire from up to four different kinds of Russian-made anti-aircraft missiles and crashed in northern Israel. Israel then launched a second raid, which it claims damaged a significant portion of Syria’s air-defense systems, hitting 12 Iranian and Syrian targets.

All news coverage of the event reported that the Syrian regime fired the barrage of surface-to-air missiles, one of which hit the Israeli plane or exploded close enough to bring it down. Israeli officials and even Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s secretary-general, credited Syria with the decision to destroy the first Israeli F-16

since the country began using the jets in the 1980s. Analysts agreed that Syrian regime soldiers manned the position from which the surface-to-air missiles were fired.

In an official statement, Hezbollah celebrated the event, saying it marked the end of Israel's ability to freely exploit Syrian airspace. "[This is the] start of a new strategic phase," the statement read. "Today's developments mean the old equations have categorically ended."

Hezbollah-controlled media also triumphantly covered the downing of the jet. But some Hezbollah members took the celebrations further, privately claiming that their group played a role in the decision to shoot it down. They said the Iranians and Hezbollah wanted to send a message to Israel via the Syrian regime, but the group's involvement wasn't made public in order to avoid further escalation. According to two of these men, if it became known that Hezbollah was involved in shooting down one of its planes, Israel would look weak unless it responded forcefully to the Shia militants—and they acknowledged that neither side is ready for an all-out war yet.

Four Hezbollah members separately claimed the Shia group played a role in shooting down the jet. Their identities were individually confirmed by viewing photos and/or video taken during combat in Syria and during the 2006 war with Israel. One Hezbollah captain held up his phone to show off a picture of the Israeli plane falling from the sky, which had been turned into a meme—one of many shared on social media following the incident. "Junk F-16 parts for sale" was written at the bottom in Arabic.

"We broke their wings. They'll think twice before flapping them over Syria again."
—Hezbollah captain, on the downing of an Israeli F-16

"We broke their wings," he laughed. "They'll think twice before flapping them over Syria again."

Most analysts have said these claims must be merely bravado. But Hezbollah and its supporters certainly treated the downing of an Israeli jet as a victory for their side. Even if the Syrian Arab Army was manning the position from which the plane was shot, Hezbollah is fighting side by side with the regime. Russia, which is heavily involved in the conflict alongside the regime and Hezbollah, has been providing the Syrian government with sophisticated weapons for some time

now. That raises the question of just how much advanced weaponry Hezbollah now possesses as a result of its role in the Syrian civil war—particularly in regards to surface-to-air missiles, or SAMs, which would pose a problem for Israel’s air power in a future war.

There have been reports that Russia is directly arming the Shia group, but most experts say that since the Russians are supplying the Syrian regime with advanced weaponry, some of it probably makes its way to Hezbollah indirectly. However it gets there, given the deadliness of Russia’s arsenal, the prospect of Hezbollah moving such weaponry into Lebanon has increasingly concerned Israel since the Syrian war broke out. The Jewish state has responded to this threat by reportedly striking Hezbollah weapons convoys in Syria nearly 100 times in five years. In March 2017, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that Israel’s air force had launched raids on Syrian-regime targets in order to destroy advanced missiles that were destined for Hezbollah.

Nasrallah claimed in a 2013 speech that the group was receiving “game-changing weapons” from the Syrian regime, so whether Russia is directly arming Hezbollah or the group is receiving gifts from its Syrian allies, it seems likely that advanced Russian weaponry is ending up in Hezbollah’s hands—but how much could be moved into Lebanon is an open question.

According to Phillip Smyth, Soref Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank in Washington, DC, despite the number of airstrikes against the group in Syria, it seems impossible that Israel has been able to prevent every movement of Hezbollah weaponry into Lebanon. He said this has likely allowed the group to build up significant arsenals in both Syria and Lebanon—a development that could be quite dangerous for Israel in a future conflict.

“The Israelis have a very efficient air force, but they can’t get everything, so in a war, they’ll need to have air power not just in South Lebanon but also deep into sites in Syria.” —Phillip Smyth, WINEP

“The Israelis have a very efficient air force, but they can’t get everything, so in a war, they’ll need to have air power not just in South Lebanon but also deep into sites in Syria,” said Smyth. “So what happens if [Hezbollah has] access to a longer-range, or even a medium-range, ballistic missile or another kind of

advanced rocket system? Since there's no chance [Israel] can strike all these weapons in transit, what happens if Hezbollah hits Tel Aviv?"

Uzi Rubin, a former brigadier general in the Israeli Air Force and a missile-systems analyst, said he believes Hezbollah has access to most of the Syrian regime's arsenal. "I think there is no difference between Hezbollah and Syria," he said. "Whatever Syria has, Hezbollah has. So it's not important whether at this moment, it is located on Lebanese soil. Hezbollah has [the weaponry]; it's available to them."

In Dahiyah, a suburb of Beirut controlled by Hezbollah, a fighter in a Special Forces unit was on leave from deployment in Syria. According to him, Hezbollah has accumulated even more advanced arms than the Syrians. "We have a different set of weapons than the regime," the fighter said. "Ours are better because we don't depend on anti-tank and such; we count on anti-aircraft, anti-ship, and long-range missiles."

What these men said about the incident with the Israeli jet placed even more emphasis on the cunning and military prowess of the group and its Iranian sponsors. Asked about the downing of the plane, the Special Forces fighter said that although he wasn't present, he was told the entire sequence of events, starting with the dispatch of an Iranian drone into Israeli territory, was a setup to bait the Israelis into flying into a trap. "We fired 20 or 25 [low-grade] missiles [at the jet], and among them, one sophisticated missile," he said. "I think the Israeli air force is not as free as before to fly over Syria."

The narrative that the Iranians, the Syrians, and perhaps Hezbollah flew a drone into Israel in order to tempt the Israelis into a trap seems far-fetched, but it has some backing by analysts who have studied the scenario. Smyth of the Washington Institute said it's notable that the Iranians sent that drone in particular, which indicates there may have been some foresight involved.

"They didn't just send one of these cardboard cutout things, like they would have ten years ago," Smyth said. "It's interesting that they sent this one, which was a copy [of an American drone] and probably launched out of the back of a truck. The other interesting factor is that they flew it over the state of Israel for a while."

According to the IDF, the drone was shot down after traveling three or four miles

into Israeli territory, and was indeed a sophisticated copy of a US drone intercepted over Iran in 2011. Iran and Syria denied that the drone violated Israeli airspace and claimed it was on a routine intelligence-gathering mission against ISIS. The Israeli government released a video of its helicopter destroying the drone, but admitted that it remained a mystery why the drone entered Israel. During an interview in Dahiyah, the leader of a small Hezbollah tank unit in Syria also claimed the drone was meant as bait in an elaborate trap. "At the same time [an advanced anti-aircraft] missile was fired, many other minor missiles were also fired as a disguise mechanism," the unit leader said.

The claims of these Hezbollah members do fit with the fact that, according to Israeli media reports, several different types of Russian anti-aircraft missiles were fired at the Israeli plane—all of which vary in technological sophistication. Elias Hanna, a retired Lebanese army general and lecturer on military strategy at the American University of Beirut, argued that if the Israeli jet was shot down as the result of an ambush, that would mean Iran, Syria, and possibly Hezbollah likely wanted to engineer a rewriting of the rules of engagement, not spark a full-on conflict.

"The Iranians may have wanted to draw some red lines of their own," said Hanna. "Things are changing. Now, the Israelis will really try to calculate how they are going to go into Syria and hit a convoy of Hezbollah's or a convoy of the Iranians."

But most analysts were skeptical when asked about the Hezbollah members' claims that the group was directly involved with the decision to shoot down the Israeli jet. Joseph Bahout, visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, another Washington-based think tank, said the idea was ludicrous and dismissed Hezbollah members' perception of the F-16's destruction as a victory.

"The result is that the Israelis made raids after that," said Bahout. "OK, [the Syrians] succeeded in shooting down an F-16, but that's it. I mean, it stops there...the fact is that every time the Israelis overfly Lebanon to mid-Syria, there is no answer from Hezbollah. So either they can't or they don't want to, in order not to unveil their capacity."

Other experts said the group has certainly built up an impressive arsenal but weren't convinced they played a role in the downing of the Israeli jet.

“It seems unlikely,” said Matthew Levitt, director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy’s counterterrorism program. “What I had heard was that...it was different this time because [the Syrians] really wanted to hit something, and they shot up a whole bunch of stuff at once.” He added that although he doesn’t believe Hezbollah is militarily capable of shooting down an F-16 at this point, the fear among Israelis is that they will acquire that capacity as a result of the Syrian conflict.

Asked why these men would be claiming credit for the downing of the jet if Hezbollah was uninvolved, Smyth, who is also skeptical that Hezbollah played a major role, explained that members of the group could be using the incident as an excuse to celebrate Hezbollah’s own surface-to-air missile capacity in another war with Israel.

“In any future conflict, Hezbollah will attempt to do more than simply bloody Israel’s nose,” said Smyth. “In the realm of SAMs, this means constraining Israel’s significant ability to control the air. Air power is always a major, if not the major, game-changer in a conflict. Does bravado tie into this? Sure. It’s highly likely it does. The reason they all said it could [be] that possibly Hezbollah does have a new anti-aircraft capability...with this recent incident, they might want to send a stronger signal for propaganda value.”

When pressed on exactly what type of weaponry Hezbollah has acquired, the tank unit leader in Dahiyah smiled enigmatically. “Hezbollah cares most about surprises in the next war,” he said. “We will never say exactly what we have.”

But the Hezbollah official in South Lebanon was much more unconstrained in his assessment of the group’s arsenal, though it was sometimes hard to tell truth from bravado. He sipped a glass of syrupy tea as he talked animatedly.

“As long as Hezbollah is on the ground [in Syria], Russia is giving us weapons,” he boasted. “Russia gave the maximum they could for Hezbollah. Hezbollah has T-90 light tanks in Qusayr [a city in Syria].... In addition, Hezbollah owns S-200 [surface-to-air] missiles.... The hills where we used to fight Daesh [ISIS] and Jabhat al-Nusra in the Qalamoun area and northern Baalbek are equipped with anti-aircraft missiles. Now the strategy has changed; fighters are scattered everywhere, fully equipped with advanced weapons and missiles.”

The official also lent credence to another potential flashpoint in a future

conflict: reports that Hezbollah and Iran have built missile factories inside Lebanon itself, an action that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has called a “red line.” The Hezbollah official said that the factories exist, but claimed they don’t have the capability to actually manufacture missiles, just improve upon the ones they have already acquired. “We only upgrade missiles here [in Lebanon], but we do not make them,” he said.

According to Levitt, that assessment makes sense. “It’s probably not true domestic production,” he said. “It’s probably just enabling Iran to ship the stuff in much smaller pieces. Then you don’t need a big flatbed truck, you know, with these big rockets.... There’s precedence for this idea of finding a way to make it easier to smuggle by just sending smaller components...but for the Israelis, that’s a real problem.”

Rubin said that regardless of capacity, if Hezbollah and the Iranians have established any type of missile factory inside Lebanon, the Israelis would consider it a very serious development.

“Both sides profess...that they don’t want a war because they’ve reached a point...of mutually assured heavy damage. But that’s not always a guarantee that things won’t get out of hand.” —Robert Malley, International Crisis Group

“That could start a war,” he said. “It was announced by Netanyahu that [missile factories in Lebanon] are a red line, and I believe him. And he will have the support of the country.”

Robert Malley, former National Security Council adviser to President Barack Obama and president of the International Crisis Group, explained that given all these highly combustible components, this conflict is particularly prone to another flare-up—which would almost certainly be much more severe than the 2006 war.

“Both sides profess, and I think it is accurate, that they don’t want a war because they’ve reached a point—not of mutual assured destruction, because I don’t think Hezbollah could destroy Israel—but mutually assured heavy damage,” he said. “But that’s not always a guarantee that things won’t get out of hand...because each side has to regulate how far it can go without going too far in the eyes of the other side. Any system that is based on mutual deterrence runs the risk that one side will misread the other. Each side is constantly probing, and at one point they

could make a mistake and it could trigger a reaction by their opponent which exceeds what they can accept without reacting in kind.... That's the way unwanted wars start."

In the south, where the impact of an "unwanted war" on Lebanese civilians would be most severe, local residents seemed unconcerned by the potential destruction a new round would bring. Israel has long accused Hezbollah of operating in civilian areas in order to maximize potential casualties, essentially using them as human shields. After experiencing several Israeli invasions in the past few decades, though, most civilians here are enthusiastic supporters of the *muqawama*—"the resistance," as they call Hezbollah.

Fatimah, a local woman in her 50s officially unaffiliated with Hezbollah, said that no matter what happens, she would not leave her home. "It is my country, it is my land, and it is my ideology," she said. "It is not about Hezbollah. Many people stayed here during the 33 days of war [in 2006]. We were living off the vegetables we grew. If we ate a chocolate bar, we did not throw the paper on the ground, because if the [Israeli] jets saw any sign of life, they would hit us."

She smiled triumphantly. "Israeli people cannot tolerate war. They cannot endure like we do."

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