

Nasrallah Apparently Failed to Attack Israel for a Second Time. He May Try Again

Hezbollah likely behind incident on the Syrian border, but Israel careful not to accuse it and push it to revenge ■ Contrary to incident on Lebanon border last week, this time the policy was shoot to kill.



Israeli tanks on the Golan Heights near the Syrian border, July 27 2020 Credit: Gil Eliahu

Was the incident overnight between Sunday and Monday near the border with Syria a second attempt by Hezbollah to avenge the death of one of its operatives killed in an airstrike near Damascus two weeks ago? Army officials are not saying explicitly, but there is a good chance that the answer would be yes. And this time too, the attempt failed.

Combat soldiers from the army's Maglan commando unit, backed by aircraft, lay in wait to ambush the Hezbollah squad, whose four members apparently laid an explosive charge near the border fence and were all apparently killed.

The incident occurred in a Golan Heights salient that is east of the border fence but in an area still under Israeli control. The members of the squad crossed the so-called Alpha line Sunday evening, which is delineated with barrels and is at the edge of the buffer zone. They continued west toward the border fence. According to the military, some were armed and were shot while trying to lay explosives near the fence.

As in the event a week ago in the Har Dov border area with Lebanon, it's apparent that army spotters had been tracking the squad's movements before it even reached its destination. And as with the prior incident, troops were prepared for an ambush. Maglan soldiers had been on the scene for several days.

Unlike the first incident, the order was given to shoot to kill. At Har Dov, the

decision had been taken at the senior political and military levels not to kill the Hezbollah operatives, but instead to cause them to flee. The consideration behind last week's unusual policy related to the general situation in the region. It was thought that killing additional Hezbollah fighters could increase the risk of escalation, and the military decided to make do with warning shots and force them to retreat. Hezbollah then completely denied that an infiltration attempt had been made, announcing that it had yet to settle accounts.

The decision this time around to shoot to kill was apparently related to criticism over the prior decision, but also to the geographic setting. In Lebanese border incidents, Hezbollah deploys its own people. But prior experience shows that the group usually uses proxies in operations against Israel on the Syrian border. A group of several of its people, which has been dubbed the Golan File, works to deploy local squads as required for attacks in that area.

The army has hit such squads in several instances along the Golan border over the past seven years. On a few occasions, the heads of local groups acting on behalf of Hezbollah have been killed in air attacks attributed to Israel, including Samir Kuntar, who carried out a terrorist attack in Nahariya in 1978, and Jihad Mughniyeh, whose father, Imad, was considered the organization's military chief of staff (and died in a targeted killing in 2008). The last time there was a similar incident on the Golan border was on March 2 of this year, which day of the most recent election, when the army foiled a Hezbollah attempted sniper attack against soldiers.

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Israel still isn't explicitly accusing Hezbollah of responsibility for the incident overnight Sunday. And the possibility apparently exists, even if the prospects are slim, that it was a cell with a different ideological affiliation that carried out the most recent operation. Throughout the years of the civil war in Syria, rebel organizations operated in the area. The local ISIS offshoot controlled portions of the southern Syrian Golan until the summer of 2018, when the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad retook the entire Syrian side of the Golan Heights, with

Russian assistance.

In fact, for several years the Israeli army operated a field hospital in the area where this week's incident occurred that treated Syrian civilians from the Golan area, most of whom were Sunni residents of the villages where the rebels operated. The field hospital was closed with the return of the Assad regime.

On Monday morning, in nearly automatic fashion, Israel accused the Syrian regime of responsibility for the latest incident, by virtue of its control of the area. At this point, Israel has not clearly accused Hezbollah. It's possible that this was deliberate, out of a desire not to corner Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah into promising additional revenge.

For the time being, it appears that Hezbollah has chalked up two failures in two attempts. What military intelligence will seek to ascertain is whether Nasrallah will make do with that or wait for another opportune time in the near future. The sites selected so far - Har Dov and the Golan Heights - reflect Nasrallah's desire for a limited, controlled operation without a slide into a wider conflict. In any event, the army is prepared for the possibility that the tension in the north will continue in the coming weeks.

Source:

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