

Why the Lebanese Hezbollah is escalating against Israel

On Monday, Israeli forces fired on Lebanese Hezbollah fighters who had infiltrated Israel from Lebanon. The incident reflects Hezbollah's increased interest in carrying out lethal attacks.

Hezbollah media said it suffered no casualties and that the incident was one simply born of Israeli paranoia. The *Jerusalem Post* reported that there were three to five fighters in the Hezbollah group. Whatever the outcome, the key issue here is why Hezbollah did this in the first place. The group's leaders knew that there was a very significant risk that their fighters would be engaged and killed. Considering that Israeli forces are not engaged in a military campaign against Hezbollah, the group's risk-reward calculation here would seem to skew toward not attacking.

But there are two other factors.

First, Hezbollah has been significantly undermined by recent losses inflicted on it by Israel and the United States. The death, in January, of Hezbollah's primary Iranian interlocutor, Qassem Soleimani, was a serious setback for the group's work with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. That work centers on establishing a missile launching capability in southern Lebanon and southern Syria to enable Hezbollah's targeting of major Israeli population centers. Hezbollah suffered another loss last week when one of its fighters was killed while guarding such a missile stockpile in Damascus. Hezbollah again referenced this loss on Monday, warning Israel, "Our response to the martyrdom of the Mujahid brother Ali Kamel Mohsen... is definitely coming, and the Zionists only have to wait for the punishment for their crimes."

Were Hezbollah in a stronger position, it might fear an escalation in the form of punitive Israeli strikes. Yet the group's increasingly precarious domestic situation likely alters that assessment. Lebanon's economy is collapsing under the weight of decades of artificial currency manipulation and sanctions that have isolated Syrian investors from the Lebanese banking system. An international bailout is desperately needed. Hezbollah, however, is refusing to agree to the necessary

economic and political reforms being demanded by the European Union and the U.S. in return for any bailout. The group knows these reforms would undermine the sectarian cronyism in which its power is rooted. But with populist anger growing over its intransigence and the crisis no closer to being resolved, Hezbollah risks its erstwhile political allies forming new alliances without it. And if that happens, the group will truly be in trouble.

It's in this context that Hezbollah might view an exchange of violence with Israel as serving its short-term interests. Lebanese civil society tends to unify around Hezbollah during the conflict with Israel. Even for those who oppose Hezbollah, populist antipathy toward Israel offers a rare opportunity for a pretense of nationalist unity. So if, for example, Hezbollah kills a few Israeli soldiers, it will hope that any ensuing Israeli retaliation only strengthens its Lebanese nationalist credibility.

Iran's hard-line leadership is also likely to favor short-term escalation. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is deeply upset at being caught between his own collapsing economy, a coronavirus catastrophe, and restored American deterrence against his escalation. If Hezbollah can give Israel a black eye, even if Israel strikes back far harder, Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards will see it as boosting their own credibility. Iran will also regard this as delivering a veiled "We're still powerful" threat to Iraq's new prime minister, Mustafa al Kadhimi, who is adopting an agenda to mitigate Iran's influence.

In short, expect new Hezbollah attacks in the days ahead.

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