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Hezbollah's Death Valley

By Nour Samaha

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In a small enclave between Syria and Israel, Hezbollah is preparing for what it says will be its biggest war ever.



This small Lebanese town straddles a steep valley, with Syria on one side and Israel on the other. It sits under the watchful eye of an Israeli military base perched on the top of a nearby mountain, while an observation post manned by U.N. peacekeepers watches from another. The Lebanese army holds an assortment of positions within the town and its outskirts, and the snow-capped mountaintops of the Israeli-occupied Syrian Golan Heights can be seen clearly from the town center.

This is where the region's many conflicts intersect. It is also where they most amplify one another. A few miles to the east, on the Syrian side of the border, an array of opposition forces — including the al Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front, groups within the Free Syrian Army, and militias aligned with the Islamic State — hold ground. Within the valley, Israel and Hezbollah eye each other warily.

Hezbollah is counting on this becoming a flashpoint for any future conflict with Israel. In fighting alongside the Syrian government, Hezbollah has not only lost the lives of more than 1,000 of its fighters, it has also gained a level of tactical experience and weaponry that has made it a far more threatening force for its enemies elsewhere in the region. Those close to the group say that for the first time Hezbollah has the ability to bring a war with Israel into Israeli territory.

“In the next war, Hezbollah won't stay on the borders, and the Israeli settlements in the north will not be protected from this,” said a source close to the movement based in south Lebanon. “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.”

Between guided missiles and the Islamic State

Hezbollah's recent retaliations against Israel have occurred near Shebaa, highlighting this area as the soft underbelly of Israel's security.

Last month, amid thick fog, several Hezbollah fighters crossed the fence at the foot of the town dividing it from the Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms. Slipping past several Israeli radars and military positions, they planted an improvised explosive device just a few feet away from the large Israeli military base in the area. Two days later, the IED was detonated, damaging an armored D9 bulldozer and military Humvee as an Israeli army convoy passed by.

While the incident passed without earning much attention — there were no fatalities — it highlighted the Lebanese armed group's ability to penetrate into Israeli-occupied territory.

Other Hezbollah attacks in the area have been deadlier. Following an Israeli strike on several key Hezbollah members in Syria's Quneitra province in January 2015, Hezbollah retaliated by firing several missiles at an Israeli patrol in occupied Shebaa, killing two soldiers.

On the Israeli side, top officials have confirmed that Hezbollah continues to be one of the country's top security threats and raised the possibility of a large-scale offensive against the group. “Iran is waging a war against Israel via proxies like Hezbollah in Lebanon, who today poses the most serious threat to Israel,” said Israeli army chief Gadi Eizenkot, architect of the

“Dahiya doctrine,” named after a southern suburb of Beirut, which calls for a disproportionate use of force to achieve military objectives.

Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon went even further. “In Syria, if the choice is between Iran and the Islamic State, I choose the Islamic State,” he said during a conference at the Institute for National Security Studies last month. “Iran determines the future of Syria, and if it leads to perpetuation, Iranian hegemony in Syria will be a huge challenge for Israel.”

While Hezbollah largely fired unguided rockets into Israel during the 2006 war, its weapons capabilities have allegedly received a major upgrade. According to analysts and sources close to the party, the group is in possession of tactical ballistic missiles, Scud missiles, Fateh-110 Iranian missiles, and M-600 missiles, a Syrian modified version of the Fateh-110.

Now Hezbollah has the ability to strike guided munitions across Israel; they can hit targets inside Israel — including central and southern areas — with increased accuracy, including command posts, airfields, and major economic targets,” said Jeffrey White, a defense analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

White said that Hezbollah also seems to have acquired advanced air-defense systems and Yakhont naval cruise missiles, which could also potentially threaten Israel’s air force and target the country’s oil platforms in the Mediterranean Sea.

“This is new,” he said. “Ninety-five percent of the naval activity in 2006 was from the Israeli side, so in the next war the naval operations could look quite different.”

The numerous strikes carried out by the Israeli air force in Syria since 2013, allegedly targeting weapons caches belonging to Hezbollah, testify to the depth of the country’s fears about the group’s acquisition of advanced weapons. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly warned that the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah is a “red line.”

“If anybody wants to use Syrian territory to transfer nuclear weapons to Hezbollah, we’ll take action,” he said during an interview with CNN last year. “And we continue to do that.”

Last month, Israel’s Northern Command — including its naval units and air forces —carried out a massive two-week training exercise in preparation for the possibility of war on multiple fronts on its northern border. And earlier this month, the Israeli air force carried out mock raids over Hezbollah military positions and training camps in the eastern Lebanese town of Baalbek, which sources affiliated to the party speculate were done to test Hezbollah’s response level.

“The Israelis want to see what sort of air-defense systems Hezbollah may be in possession of,” said one source.

The Israel Defense Forces has also changed its operational assessment to reflect the likelihood that Hezbollah was in possession of advanced surface-to-air missile systems and had the ability to target Israeli fighter jets.

But sources within the movement were coy when asked what new weapons Hezbollah might use in a future war.

“Each war there are new surprises in terms of weapons, and we never reveal what we have until the time is ready,” another source added with a smile.

How Syria has changed Hezbollah

Some analysts speculate that the Syrian war has bogged down Hezbollah, preventing it from preparing for a future conflict with Israel. Those close to the party, however, argue that precisely the opposite has happened — that fighting in support of the Syrian armed forces has provided Hezbollah with a well-armed, battle-hardened cadre of fighters.

“Our fighters are getting training and experience through the work they are doing in Syria, and this is a great concern for the Israelis,” said the source within the party. “And our work there won’t distract us from the southern front against Israel.”

In a Feb. 17 speech, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah focused largely on Israel, warning it of the dire consequences if Israel plans on launching a war against the movement. Alluding to the party’s capabilities, he cited the chemical plant in the northern city of Haifa as an example of a possible target. Citing an unnamed Israeli expert, he said that a rocket targeting the ammonia tanks, which contain more than 15,000 tons of gas, would leave tens of thousands dead and 800,000 people affected.

“This would be exactly as a nuclear bomb, and we can say that Lebanon today has a nuclear bomb, seeing as any rocket that might hit these tanks is capable of creating a nuclear bomb effect,” he warned.

But Hezbollah’s changes in the past decade go beyond its more advanced weaponry. Prior to its involvement in the Syrian war, its main battlefield experience in recent years involved sending small teams, comprising between five and 15 fighters, to infiltrate Israeli-held territory. These operations would require a limited number of trained fighters and could be completed — from leaving the base to returning — within a few hours. In Syria, by contrast, Hezbollah’s commanders found themselves responsible for commanding hundreds of fighters in a single battle.

This required Hezbollah’s leaders to develop a sophisticated command-and-control structure, including advanced telecommunications networks, the use of drones for reconnaissance, and the ability to maintain long supply lines — all tactics that its members think could play a central role in the next war with Israel.

“[The Israelis] think we have the ability to not just invade villages in their north, but also stay and control the areas,” said the same source within Hezbollah who spoke about the experience the group gained in Syria.

To fight or not to fight?

Yet according to both analysts and those within Hezbollah's circles, the party is not looking for a war with Israel in the near future. This is not only because of its involvement in Syria, but also because the political climate in Lebanon is not as conducive as it was in 2006.

Overall, Lebanon has become more politically polarized, which has also put Hezbollah on the defensive. Many Lebanese are opposed to the party's agenda — both in Syria and in Lebanon — and can no longer be counted on to welcome those fleeing southern Lebanon in the event of war instigated by Hezbollah. Furthermore, Syria is no longer available as an option for displaced Lebanese, as it had been in 2006. If another war was to break out with Israel, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese could be left stranded under a shower of missiles and fighter jets.

Yet despite such deterrents to war, Shebaa still feels precarious. The tensions within Shebaa itself are a microcosm of those in towns across southern Lebanon: The town is home to a Sunni majority but is surrounded by Druze towns and villages and has a small church that caters to its tiny Christian population. Politically, the strongest force in the town is the Islamist movement al-Jamaa al-Islamiya, which shot to prominence during the Syrian crisis due to the influx of money and donations from the Gulf in order to serve the Syrian refugee population. The parliamentarian for the province is a Baath party member, who has retained his seat for the past 15 years. Furthermore, there remains a strong presence of Resistance Brigade members, the non-Shiite affiliate of Hezbollah in Lebanon, in the town.

Shebaa has also been greatly affected by the influx of Syrians fleeing the war — roughly 4,000 of its 7,000 residents are refugees, largely coming from Beit Jinn, a Syrian town located just over the mountain from Shebaa. While there is little tension between the local population and the refugees at the moment, the longer the war next door drags on, the less stable the relationship could become.

"The Syrians are much cheaper labor than the Lebanese, so this will soon become an issue," one resident said. "And then what will happen?"

A crowded battlefield

What will happen, however, is getting more difficult to predict by the day. The conflict across the border in Syria is becoming increasingly complicated, as armed groups like al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State do battle with the Syrian army and Hezbollah, which are backed by Iran and Russia. Another war between Israel and Hezbollah, some fear, could lead to a conflagration that consumes the entire region.

"It is an extraordinarily fractured conflict where you find more weapons, more irrational actors, and more actors in general," said Nicholas Noe, a political analyst based in Beirut. "Having all those elements operating militarily astride one of the most dangerous fault lines in the world is a really bad idea."

Yet others see the presence of state actors, such as the Russians and the Iranians, as a deterrent to a war on the Golan front.

“The fact there are so many players in the mix creates more of a deterrent factor than a catalyst,” said Randa Slim, an expert at the Middle East Institute. “Neither Russia nor Iran wants a war in the south with Israel right now.”

According to Slim, Israel would be looking to have a “clean” war with Hezbollah, specifically in Lebanon, rather than complicating it through the involvement of a wider Syrian-Lebanese front.

“Today, you would have a multisided, multiparty war that could be extremely messy and complicated, with the possibility of a reshuffling of alliances,” she said. “Israel wants to keep it clean, between Hezbollah and Israel, and therefore keep it within Lebanon.”

Officials and members of Hezbollah have made it clear they would prefer the borders to stay calm, but if Israel pushes the group into a confrontation, “the resistance won’t stay in Lebanon; it will reach the Galilee,” said one of the sources. “It will not look like the 2006 war at all.”