

Fears grow that Israel might risk surprise strike to cripple Hezbollah

Nicholas Blanford

Beirut

For more than a decade, the assessment that another war between Israel and Hezbollah would be massively destructive to both sides has helped create a mutual balance of terror resulting in a cautious calm along Lebanon's southern border with the Jewish state.

But mounting tensions between these long-time foes have given rise to a belief among some diplomats in the region that Israel may be mulling a pre-emptive strike against Hezbollah on the premise that a conflict with the Iran-backed Party of God is inevitable and that Israel would gain much by striking the first blow despite the expected heavy retaliation against its cities.

Given a constant build-up of Iranian arms by Hezbollah, its experience in fighting conventional battles in the Syrian war and its apparent moves to control territory in the Syrian-held sector of the war-divided Golan Heights overlooking northern Galilee, some Israeli officials appear to consider that a short, sharp offensive to degrade Hezbollah's military assets and reduce the threat it poses in the short to medium term is entirely feasible.

■ There has been a notable increase of Israeli air strikes against suspected arms shipments bound for Hezbollah.

"The thinking in Israel about a pre-emptive attack appears to be changing," a Western diplomat said. "It seems they're taking this possibility seriously."

Similar views were heard recently from other diplomats in Beirut, both resident and visiting.

In April, an analysis in the Jerusalem Post claimed that some Israeli officials were "openly speaking about a pre-emptive war under which Israel would strike first to

significantly degrade Hezbollah's capabilities before they could be used in a full-fledged conflict."

There has been a notable increase in recent weeks of Israeli air strikes against suspected arms shipments, including advanced weapons, inside Syria bound for Hezbollah, underlining Israeli leaders' view that stronger pre-emptive action is required.

■ An Israeli strike would undoubtedly inflict widespread destruction and large loss of life in Lebanon.

"These weapons have promoted a distinct sense of alarm inside Israel's Kiryat, their Pentagon," analyst Jonathan Schanzer of the Washington-based Foundation for Defence of Democracies observed on April 29.

"Officials say the hardware would reduce the Israeli edge significantly when the next war erupts."

Nevertheless, while the option of a pre-emptive strike may be under discussion in Israel, it is hard to visualise the government there risking a unilateral attack against Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The Israelis would have to eliminate a wide range of targets from the outset to inflict as much damage as possible before Hezbollah could retaliate with a missile arsenal Israelis claim totals some 150,000 weapons, including long-range precision systems capable of reaching virtually everywhere in the Jewish state.

Israel did just that in the 2006 war against Hezbollah. In the first two days of fighting, its air force destroyed some of the longer-range missiles among the 13,000 the party had then but it failed to eliminate Hezbollah's firepower completely. And these days, its arsenal is reportedly ten times greater than in 2006.

An Israeli strike would undoubtedly inflict widespread destruction and large loss of life in Lebanon, drawing swift international con-



On watch. An Israeli soldier looks through binoculars as he monitors the southern Lebanese village of Kfar Kila. (AFP)

demnation and straining the ability of Israel's allies to support the surprise offensive.

It is widely understood that Israel favours a short war – a week or so – to wreak as much destruction as possible to force the Beirut government to push for a ceasefire while driving to eliminate the Party of God as a threat.

Such assessments, however, fail to appreciate that the Lebanese government, which includes Hezbollah, has little real influence over the party, which is more powerful than the Lebanese Army, or comprehend the party's determination to prolong the fighting for as long as possible.

Hezbollah knows that the longer a war lasts, the greater the domestic and international pressure on Israel from which Hezbollah could leverage a more favourable outcome.

Even if Israeli military officials can make a case for a pre-emptive strike, the political and diplomatic consequences could be disastrous for the Israeli government.

However, Israeli security analysis Alex Fishman wrote in the Jerusalem Post on April 30: "The Iranian takeover of Syria... is no longer just Israel's problem. There is a feeling in Jerusalem that if and when Israel is forced to put an end to the Iranian crawl into the Golan Heights, it will receive strong American backing."

If a broader pre-emptive assault against Hezbollah in Lebanon appears unlikely, Israel could attack Hezbollah and its allies if they begin to deploy opposite Israeli lines in the Golan Heights, two-thirds of which Israel has held since 1967.

Conversations with sources close to Hezbollah over the past

two years, along with several unclaimed small-scale attacks against Israeli troops in the Golan since late 2013 that bore the stamp of Hezbollah, leave little doubt that Iran and its Lebanese ally seek to establish some form of bridgehead on the contested strategic plateau.

The problem potentially facing Israel is whether to risk launching a broad offensive against Hezbollah in the Golan in the hope of shattering its enemy's ambitions, which could risk triggering all-out war, or to continue with isolated tactical strikes to try to slow an inevitable build-up of Hezbollah forces along Israel's north-eastern corner.

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Where does Lebanon stand six months after Aoun's accession?

Viewpoint



Rami Rayess

Six months after presidential elections, Lebanon seems to be turning in a vicious circle. The momentum that was on the rise at the onset of the new presidential term has been squandered amid the tensions and divisions regarding the long-awaited electoral law.

The populist slogans that were exploited by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) before electing Michel Aoun president on October 31, especially those that dealt with combating corruption, transparency and the rule of law, proved to be mere propaganda for popular consumption.

The speedy approval by the council of ministers of oil and gas tenders worth billions of dollars and the suspicions looming around the electricity plan dramatically increased public fears that there were enormous under-the-table deals done prior to presidential elections without necessarily abiding by laws and regulations.

The dispute over the electoral law continues. Seen by many major players in Lebanon as an extremely important law as it redefines the political lines

between the various forces and specifies the weight of each, there is a countdown as to whether the continued endeavours to reach a new law will succeed before the extended term of the parliament ends June 20.

Undoubtedly, the traditional division of power into two competing camps known as March 8 and March 14 eroded prior to presidential elections when contradictory forces met on the nomination of Aoun and elected him as a local and regional compromise.

With Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri situating himself closer and closer to Aoun and adopting the electoral suggestions proposed by the FPM, a non-announced rapprochement is taking place between Hezbollah,

Lebanese Forces, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Progressive Socialist Party Leader Walid Jumblatt, though that might seem quite illogical and contradictory.

However, regardless of the internal reshuffling of political cards, Aoun seems to be squeezed to find a way to compromise his 11-year alliance with Hezbollah and his official obligations as a president, especially regarding the anticipated alleviation of sanctions against Lebanese individuals and probably institutions from the Trump administration.

This is a repetition of the scenario that had happened when Hezbollah expressed discontent with the Gulf states prior to Aoun's first formal visit to Saudi Arabia. This recurrent duality of

The electoral law is seen as extremely important as it redefines the political lines between the various forces.

the Lebanon's official position and that of Hezbollah is not the first of its kind. During Tammam Salam's interim cabinet, Lebanon was unanimously boycotted by the Gulf states and a travel ban was issued that left negative ramifications on the ailing Lebanese economy.

The president's ability to balance between American interests and requirements from Lebanon and Hezbollah, which is deeply involved in the Syrian civil war, will be hardly manageable if the United States develops its strategy in the region to become less lenient with Tehran.

To be clearer, if the United States considers that an Israeli strike on Iran's ally, Hezbollah, in Lebanon would send a firm message of determination against Iranian regional plots, this would transform Lebanon once more into the battlefield of proxy wars, as it was during its long civil strife (1975-90).

Reverting the Western-Iranian nuclear deal is one thing and launching wars against Iran's regional allies is something else. Lebanon must locate diplomatic methods to transmit to the Trump administration that it cannot – and should not – pay the price again of international and regional differences. This lies way beyond its capacities.

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Aoun seems to be squeezed to find a way to compromise his alliance with Hezbollah and his official obligations.



Turning in a vicious circle. People walk outside the parliament building in downtown Beirut, on May 11. (Reuters)