



PERSPECTIVES

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Hezbollah's Advanced Missile Targets Israeli Drone as Israel Rethinks Purpose of Future War

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Hezbollah's [firing](#) of an advanced surface-to-air missile at an Israeli intelligence-gathering drone over Lebanon on February 3 is an acute reminder of the high-stakes cat-and-mouse game being conducted daily between a democratic state and a terror organization that has morphed into a terror army.

On February 3, 2021, Iranian-backed Hezbollah used an advanced surface-to-air missile (SAM) to target an Israeli intelligence-gathering drone over Lebanon. The terror organization is attempting to hide its activities from Israeli eyes in the sky as it continues to install missiles and rockets in built-up areas in Lebanon, pointing them at Israeli cities.

While the SAM failed to bring down the Israeli drone, its firing shows Hezbollah's new ability to challenge Israeli air activity over Lebanon, whether that activity is for surveillance or for future air strikes.

Israel employs drones and manned aircraft to help map out Lebanese territory that Hezbollah uses to build up a mass launch base, an effort underwritten by Iran.

Hezbollah's efforts in this regard [constitute a fundamental violation](#) of international law; specifically, the law of distinction. According to this key principle of the laws of war, combatants have to distinguish between enemy forces and civilians—a distinction Hezbollah deliberately ignores by planning to fire indiscriminately on Israeli civilians and deliberately target cities in a future conflict.

Hezbollah's [intention](#) to send murder and kidnap squads through tunnels into northern Israeli civilian communities also represents a blatant intention

to violate international law. Hezbollah's embedding of its launchers in civilian areas in Lebanon is yet another violation of international law, which prohibits the deliberate use of human shields.

According to Brig. Gen. (ret.) Yossi Kuperwasser, former head of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate's research division and now director of the Project on Regional Middle East Developments at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, it is too soon to determine whether the SAM incident signals a new Hezbollah campaign to challenge Israeli intelligence-gathering activity.

But, he added, further Hezbollah attempts to bring down Israeli drones could lead to an escalation.

It is possible, according to Kuperwasser, that the firing was an isolated incident. "Perhaps the drone approached a sensitive area for Hezbollah," he said, "and it wanted to move it away. An area sensitive enough for there to be anti-aircraft missiles there."

If so, he said, the missile launch was not an indication of a fundamental change in Hezbollah's use of its weapons. The IDF did not appear to respond to the incident, and did not publicly rush to determine that a new trend had begun in Lebanon.

Separate air strikes [occurred in southern Syria](#) that same night, attributed in media reports to Israel. But those were more likely triggered by weapons deliveries from Iran, Kuperwasser said, adding that Israel appears to be adopting a wait-and-see approach to determine if Hezbollah has changed its agenda on challenging Israeli air activity over Lebanon.

Israel's air superiority is essential for gathering intelligence in Lebanon and is "an important component in the relative stability of the area," Kuperwasser said. He noted that Hezbollah has had an inventory of surface-to-air missiles for several years, a fact that Israel "does not like, though the level of threat to Israel's freedom of maneuver is limited."

If Hezbollah attempts to smuggle in more significant surface-to-air missiles, that could also be a source of military escalation.

Meanwhile, in a sign that the relative quiet could be challenged in the coming year, the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate released an [annual assessment](#) last week that held that for the first time since the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah is prepared to risk entering into a number of "days of battle" with Israel.

Unlike the 2006 war, during which Hezbollah fired some 4,000 rockets at northern Israeli cities, Hezbollah is today capable of firing 4,000 rockets at

Israeli cities *per day*. Its arsenal of projectiles is now larger than that of [95% of the world's militaries](#).

While Hezbollah appears to be very busy with Lebanon's multiple ongoing crises and is deterred by the prospect of an immediate war with Israel, it remains determined to take "revenge" for the killing of one of its junior members last July in an [alleged Israeli air strike](#) on an Iranian target in Damascus. The terror group has since attempted to kill IDF soldiers twice, both attempts [foiled](#) by Israeli military alertness.

Kuperwasser said a look at Hezbollah's actions in the past year reveals that it is not keen on entering into a new escalation with Israel, even a limited one.

"It is preparing for a calculated, tit-for-tat response as part of its 'equation,'" he said. "They say, 'You killed our soldier, we will kill your soldier.' They remain committed to doing this, and they have the patience and space to maneuver."

Despite Hezbollah's caution, the general stability of the area could face major challenges in the coming year. This is because localized incidents in Lebanon could escalate, and Hezbollah and Iran are under pressure.

Within Lebanon, the [assassination](#) of political activist Lokman Slim, a vocal Hezbollah opponent, could increase such pressure. Hezbollah is widely suspected of being behind the shooting. If this is the case, it demonstrates that the organization feels "very threatened by all of the accusations in Lebanon against it," said Kuperwasser. They include accusations that the organization is driving Lebanon's increased [international isolation](#), as well as that Hezbollah's refusal to cooperate with the IMF is [standing in the way](#) of desperately needed international financial assistance for a failed economy. In addition, Hezbollah's pattern of storing explosives in civilian areas came under increased criticism following the devastating [Beirut blast](#) last August.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah's Iranian patrons are waiting to see whether they will realize their dream of the lifting of crippling US sanctions. So far, they are getting mixed signals from the new administration in Washington.

For their part, Israeli military strategists are rethinking what a future war with Hezbollah could look like. Writing at the Dado Center, the IDF's official think tank, Brig. Gen. Eran Ortal, who heads the Center, shed valuable light on the IDF's new thinking in a [Hebrew-language paper](#).

Sketching out a possible new "activation concept" for the IDF, Ortal called for any future Israeli ground maneuver in enemy territory to lead to "the exposure and destruction of its projectile-firing capabilities." In his paper, Ortal identifies the challenges faced by a state military when it engages an

asymmetric enemy like Hezbollah, which relies on missile attacks and hides itself in civilian areas.

“The missile enables its user to remain hidden, at least for most of the time,” he wrote. Hezbollah’s stealthiness is matched by its deadliness, as it can fire relatively precise and lethal weaponry while remaining embedded in hidden locations, often in built-up areas.

“The answer lies in two simple principles,” said Ortal. The first is to “turn on the light” by employing a network of advanced sensors to expose Hezbollah’s positions. The second is to “put out the fire” by linking those sensors to Israel’s firepower and counterattacking Hezbollah’s missile launchers. IDF units in Lebanon could also take advantage of their closeness to Hezbollah to help intercept the organization’s projectiles as they are taking off for Israel, thereby sparing the Israeli home front additional damage and air raid sirens.

The answer to the problem, he argued, is to deploy large numbers of unmanned vehicles in the air and on the ground and to fit them with sensors that can deliver a clear picture to the IDF, enabling it to destroy Hezbollah’s capabilities. Creating “flocks” of unmanned platforms with sensors that can automatically detect enemy positions is possible, he said, because the enemy becomes exposed as soon as it fires its missiles—whether they are anti-tank missiles, mortars, or surface-to-air missiles.

An additional [contribution](#) to rethinking Israel’s efforts in a future war against Hezbollah came in a Dado Center paper written by former Israeli NSA Maj. Gen. (res.) Yaakov Amidror. In it, Amidror suggests that any future war should not only destroy Hezbollah’s military capabilities but also create a new situation in which Hezbollah is unable to rearm after the war as it did after the Second Lebanon War.

To that end, Amidror envisages two stages of the conflict. The first stage—the relatively short and intensive one—would last two to three weeks. Israeli ground forces would take a large part of southern Lebanese territory while the air force would be active throughout Lebanon destroying Hezbollah targets, including many of its rocket and missile launchers as well as its ground cells designed to take on the IDF in Lebanon. The second stage, “the longer clean-up stage,” would last months, and see the IDF destroying the full scope of Hezbollah’s infrastructure and weapons. After eventually withdrawing, the IDF could activate its forces to prevent Hezbollah from rebuilding by launching targeted strikes.

Amidror notes that such an operation would also indirectly weaken Iran by removing its most powerful and influential Middle Eastern armed proxy—the centerpiece of the Iranian terror army model—from the region. This would

not only significantly dent Iran's ability to project power in the region, but would also undermine the proxy warfare system Iran has championed and used to spread terrorism for decades.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) originally published by The Investigative Project on Terrorism on February 16, 2021.

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