Israel threatens Hezbollah and Lebanon

Jean Shaoul
23 January 2010

Israel has stepped up its warmongering against Hezbollah and the Lebanese government, worsening tensions throughout the Middle East.

Last week, Ehud Barak, Israel's defence minister, warned Hezbollah to "avoid entering in conflict with us." He said, "We need to constantly prepare for a change in the status quo, though we don't know when it will occur. We don't want for it to happen, and it might not, but we will not be afraid to react if we have to fight back."

Barak said that the calm enjoyed in recent years could be broken without warning, declaring, "We are here on the northern border, facing Hezbollah positions. I see that the IDF is very well prepared."

In a significant escalation, Israel has said that it will hold the Lebanese responsible for any violations by Hezbollah of United Nations Security Council resolution 1701. Barak reiterated that should Hezbollah mount any attacks, Israel would retaliate against not just Hezbollah, but Lebanon and anyone else who helps Hezbollah.

With its almost daily low-altitude flights over Lebanon, it is Israel that is in reality in breach of UN Security Council resolution 1701, which ended the 2006 war. Last June, the tenth report by the UN secretary general on the implantation of the resolution listed 388 Israeli airspace violations, 48 territorial violations and 77 Sea violations. Michael Williams, the UN special envoy for Lebanon, said, "To the best of my knowledge, there is probably no other country in the world which is subject to such an intrusive regime of aerial surveillance."

Israel's increasingly bellicose tone follows some border flare ups, with Hezbollah rockets fired into Israel and the discovery by UN forces in southern Lebanon of arms caches one kilometre from the border with Israel. Last week, Lebanon's anti-aircraft artillery fired at four Israeli fighter jets violating its airspace.

Israel claims that Hezbollah now has an arsenal three times the level of 2006, with more than 42,000 rockets capable of reaching towns and cities in southern Israel. Last November, Israel's navy intercepted a ship in the Mediterranean carrying 500 tons of rockets, mortars, and other ammunition, claiming it was an Iranian arms shipment intended for Hezbollah via Syria.

Washington too has upped the pressure on Lebanon. At a White House meeting last month, President Barack Obama asked Lebanese President Michel Sleiman to stop the flow of weapons being smuggled into south Lebanon "that potentially serve as a threat to Israel".

He warned that a failure to do so would lead to another invasion by Israel. Vice President Joe Biden went further, telling Sleiman that Israel would invade Lebanon and go all the way to Beirut to destroy Hezbollah's weapons if the government failed to rein in Hezbollah.

Tel Aviv's war of words with Lebanon has already served to destabilise relations in the region, and any military attack could lead to Israel fighting a war on several fronts.

Lebanon's new government, which includes two Hezbollah ministers, has agreed that Hezbollah can maintain its arms to resist Israel. Ali Al-Shami, the foreign minister, has stressed that Lebanon will not relinquish its right to liberate its occupied territory and will defend its territory against any aggression. He also called for strong ties with Syria. Sleiman has warned that Israel is a "permanent threat" to Lebanon.

Lebanon has resumed relations with Syria, frozen for five years since the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Both the prime minister and the president have visited Damascus recently. Sleiman also met with Iran's visiting deputy, Mohammad-Reza Mir-Tajeddini, in Beirut and discussed the coordination of Iran and Lebanon's positions at the UN Security Council, where Lebanon has begun a two-year term (from 2010 to 2011) at the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member.

Israel has warned Syria that it would not allow Hezbollah to obtain SA2 missiles.

According to a report in *Ha'aretz*, a senior US official has warned that if Syria provides Hezbollah with SA2 anti-aircraft missiles, which are controlled from a remote command centre, Israel will bomb Damascus, and a war would likely follow.

The Jerusalem Centre for Research and Documentation has published a report warning of rising tensions in the Golan Heights, despite the long-standing calm in the area, and recommended that Israel keep its troops there on high alert.

Syria has said it would respond if Lebanon were attacked, adding that Damascus considered any threat to Lebanon's security and stability as a threat to Syria's security. Damascus has pointed to the Israeli deployment and manoeuvres along Israel's northern border, in preparation for a military operation

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in Lebanon in May.

A Hamas official in Beirut, Ali Baraka, pledged that Hamas would fight alongside Hezbollah in the event of another Israeli war on Lebanon.

In the last few weeks, Israel has complained that its security is being threatened by rockets from Gaza and launched provocative raids killing dozens of Palestinians, despite the almost complete cessation of rocket attacks on Israeli towns from Gaza since Israel's 22-day assault last year. Mahmoud Abbas, the nominal president of the Palestinian Authority, said that this was aimed at drawing a violent response, while Israel's settlement expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem were ruining security and stability in the West Bank.

The raids have prompted numerous reports about Israeli preparations for another military assault on Gaza, with *Ha'aretz* saying that the count-down has already begun. Israeli television reported that "Operation Cast Lead 2" would involve an armed invasion and the use of "advanced warfare technologies" in densely populated areas to intercept Hamas' short range missiles targeted on Israel.

The ultimate target of Tel Aviv's verbal assaults on Hezbollah, Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinians is Iran, the largest country in the region, which it sees as an existential threat.

While there are reports that Israel might launch a pre-emptive strike on Iran's nuclear power installations before June 2010, there is not unanimous support within the political and military establishment for such unilateral action. Barak told legislators that Iran's new installation at Qom "cannot be destroyed through a conventional attack" and has called for severe economic sanctions on Iran.

Tel Aviv is also working with the CIA to finance and train opposition groups in order to hold up Iran's nuclear programme and stoke up internal dissent to achieve a regime change from within.

Tehran has claimed that it had information that Israeli and US intelligence intended to carry out terrorist attacks in the capital. It blamed last week's assassination of the Iranian physicist Massoud Ali Mohammadi on an exiled opposition group known as the People's Mujahideen, accusing it of acting on behalf of Israel and the US. While the opposition group and Washington have denied involvement, Tel Aviv has refused to comment on the allegation.

Al Ahram, which is part-owned and controlled by the Egyptian government, no friend of Iran, claimed that the head of Mossad, Meir Dagan, was "Israel's superman" and the "brains" behind the assassination. According to Ashraf Abu al-Haul, head of the paper's Gaza bureau, Dagan was responsible for Israel's bombing of Deir el-Zur in Syria, the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh and covert operations in Iran that have hindered the Iranian nuclear programme for the last seven years.

While pushing an aggressive foreign policy, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is also whipping up a climate of fear and anxiety within Israel itself.

Last week, the National Emergency Authority (NEA) held the largest ever exercise to train security forces to respond to a city-wide biological attack. It involved Israel Defence Force (IDF) Home Front, the Israel Police and Magen David Adom, the ambulance service. The hospitals had to treat dozens of people feigning a variety of symptoms and identify those suffering from a biological attack.

The government also announced that it is to distribute gas masks to every man, woman and child in the country over the next three years, at an estimated cost of between $125-200 million.

No justification for these measures was given, with defence experts acknowledging that Hamas' and Hezbollah's new longer range missiles would probably only carry conventional warheads. But Israeli journalist Anshel Pfeffer offered an explanation. He said, "Any armed conflict between Israel and its enemies, including an airstrike on Iran's nuclear installations, will include an intense bombardment of Israeli cities."

This indicates that Israel is preparing a strike on Iran that it knows will prompt a swift retaliation.

According to the US weekly, *Defense News*, the US will double the amount of emergency equipment it keeps in Israel, and Israel will be allowed to use US ordnance in the event of a military emergency. Israel has recently completed the renovation of all its 5,000 public bomb shelters and is developing a new missile defence system, Iron Dome, to fend off missile attacks from Hamas and Hezbollah.

It is also significant that Netanyahu, without success, invited Tzipi Livni, the leader of the opposition Kadima party that has the largest number of seats in the Knesset, to join his weak and fractious coalition and form a government of national unity. Bringing Kadima into his tent would help preclude any opposition to his war plans.

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