

# Israel provokes Lebanon border clash

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Israel has become increasingly provocative towards Lebanon, its northern neighbour.

Last Tuesday, an armed clash broke out after Israeli forces made an incursion into Lebanese territory. Israel claimed that the intention was to cut down a tree near the Lebanese village of Adaysseh that was obscuring its security forces view of Lebanon.

When Lebanese soldiers fired warning shots, Israeli forces responded with artillery and rockets fired from helicopters. Three Lebanese soldiers, a Lebanese journalist and an Israeli officer were killed in the clash. A further four Lebanese soldiers and one Israeli officer were wounded. It was the most serious clash since Israel's war on Lebanon four years ago.

Michel Suleiman, Lebanon's president denounced Israel's action as a violation of UN resolution 1701, introduced to end Israel's 34-day bombardment of Lebanon in 2006 and which stipulates that Lebanese sovereignty should not be breached, and called on the Lebanese army to "confront any Israeli aggression, whatever the sacrifices".

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "Israel has responded and shall respond aggressively in the future to any attempt to disrupt the calm along the northern border or to harm residents of the north or the soldiers protecting them".

Israel followed up this incident with mock air raids over Nabatieh, Iqlim al-Toufah, Marjayoun and Khiam in the south of the country on Wednesday and numerous sorties over several areas of Lebanon. The southern towns of Tyre, Hasbaya and Bint Jbeil also experienced flyovers and dummy attacks. Israeli jets routinely flout UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and fly over Lebanon's airspace, with hundreds of recorded Israeli violations.

Early on Saturday morning, Israeli navy boats fired warning shots at a Lebanese fishing boat in Lebanese territorial waters, causing the boat to change direction.

No injuries or damage were caused. An Israeli military spokeswoman said, "Warning shots were fired after a Lebanese entered a closed zone", without explaining what she meant by a "closed zone" or even whether the boat had entered territorial waters.

The border incidents prompted a flurry of international and domestic reaction and increased speculation that a fresh Israeli-Lebanese conflict, long expected, would soon erupt. It followed a warning only two days earlier by Syria's President Bashar Assad that "the possibility of war is increasing [in the region]".

The incident was significant in that it was the first clash between Israeli and regular Lebanese forces since the war in 2006 that killed more than 1,500 people, injured thousands more, and damaged thousands of homes and public infrastructure. But that war, despite wreaking enormous damage, failed to achieve Israel's political and military objective: the eradication of Hezbollah, the armed militant group and political party, which is a member of the Lebanese coalition government. It has bases, complete with bunkers, tunnels and lookout points, in southern Lebanon. Since the 2006 war, there have been occasional border skirmishes between Israel and Hezbollah.

While Lebanon viewed this clash as a provocation against Hezbollah, Hezbollah did not respond. Its fighters were however placed on high alert. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, said he specifically ordered his fighters not to get involved. He feared that any intervention by Hezbollah would be seen as an attempt to create a conflagration on Lebanon's border with Israel.

Indeed, Israel's right-wing press called the incident a deliberate provocation by Lebanon aimed at engulfing the entire region in war, with the *Jerusalem Post* calling for Israel to hold not just Lebanon, but Syria and Iran "accountable" and make them "pay a price for the devious deeds".

The clash has raised tensions along Lebanon's southern border, already running high after months of heated exchanges between Israel, Hezbollah and the Lebanese government and increased political nervousness within Lebanon itself, which a visit two weeks ago by Saudi King Abdullah and Syrian President Assad sought to assuage.

Israel has for some months now been threatening its northern neighbours, following unsubstantiated claims by Tel Aviv and Washington that Syria has been shipping long range Russian Scud missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which could reach Israel's southern towns and cities and undermine Israel's military supremacy.

Earlier this year, Israel deployed its troops along its northern border and hinted at a military operation later this year. In May, Israel said that its missile defence shield known as the Iron Dome would be placed not in Israel's southern towns as a defence against Hamas' Qassem rockets, the ostensible purpose for which the Iron Dome was originally commissioned, but along its northern border.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak has made it clear on several occasions that Israel would hold the government of Lebanon accountable should tensions between Israel and Hezbollah escalate and that Israel would attack Lebanon if any rockets were fired into Israel.

"We will see it as legitimate to hit any target that belongs to the Lebanese state, not just to Hezbollah", he said last month.

Last Wednesday, Barak said in a radio interview that Israel had protested to both the United States and France over "the supply of sophisticated weapons to the Lebanese army" after the armed clash. This was in response to the US decision to provide \$100 million in aid to the Lebanese military for 2010.

The recent discovery of major off-shore oil and gas reserves in the eastern Mediterranean, where Israel is developing the Tamar gas field, has further fuelled tensions, as the land borders between Israel and Lebanon that in turn define the maritime boundaries that have never been delimited.

The ultimate target of Israel's political machinations and verbal and military assaults on Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria is Iran, the largest country in the region. Iran

holds the third largest proven oil reserves in the world and the second largest gas reserves. Iran occupies a key geostrategic position between Iraq and Afghanistan at the junction of the Asian continent and the Arab Middle East.



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