

MEMO

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Mounting Challenges on Israel's Northern Border

Israel is facing a continuously deteriorating situation on its northern border. On Jan. 28, Iran-backed Hezbollah terrorists launched their most recent attack – killing two Israeli soldiers and wounding seven more. Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has taken control of most Syrian territory on Israel's border. U.N. peacekeeping forces previously in Syria have been evacuated, while U.N. forces in Lebanon continue to demonstrate their inability to disarm Hezbollah or require it to abide by the terms of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701. In response to recent attacks, Israel has been forced to step up its own military actions and prepare for the possibility of future hostilities. The United States must help strengthen deterrence by ensuring Israel's qualitative military edge and its ability to confront mounting security challenges.

The Hezbollah attack marked a serious escalation on Israel's northern border and was widely praised by Lebanese and Iranian officials.

- On Jan. 28, Hezbollah terrorists ambushed two Israel Defense Forces (IDF) convoys traveling in unarmored vehicles on a civilian road. Using Russian-made Kornet anti-tank missiles, the terrorists struck the convoy from nearly three miles away. Two Israeli soldiers were killed and seven wounded, marking the first casualties on Israel's northern border in over a year.
- The attack came a week after Israel struck a convoy in the Syrian Golan, killing six Hezbollah operatives and one Iranian general. The group was reportedly planning cross-border attacks on Israel, following several earlier attacks in the area.



Israeli soldiers deploy along the Israel-Lebanon border following a Hezbollah attack.

- Several senior Lebanese government officials, including Prime Minister and acting President Tammam Salam and Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, praised the attack, according to Hezbollah media outlet Al-Manar.
- Stressing Iran's support for Hezbollah, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Gen. Mohammad Jafari declared, "We are one with Hezbollah. Wherever the blood of our martyrs is spilled on the front line, our response will be one."

Over the last year, the security situation on Israel's northern border has dramatically deteriorated.

- In 2014, al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and other Syrian Islamist groups strengthened their presence along Israel's northern border. In August, rebel groups seized the Quneitra border crossing and much of the province, capturing and briefly holding dozens of peacekeepers from the U.N. Disengagement Observer Forces (UNDOF). By mid-September, the Assad regime had lost 80 percent of the province and UNDOF had redeployed indefinitely inside the Israeli border.

- Hezbollah also escalated its attacks. On Mar. 18, Hezbollah set off an explosive device at an Israeli army post on the border between Lebanon and Israel in Shebaa Farms, wounding four Israeli soldiers. On Oct. 7, Hezbollah set off another explosive device in the same region, wounding two soldiers.
- On Aug. 31, the Israeli Air Force intercepted an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that breached Israeli airspace above the border with Syria, reportedly belonging to the Syrian military. On Sept. 11 and 15, multiple mortar shells exploded on the Israeli side of the border. A week later, a Syrian Su-24 jet infiltrated Israeli air space and was shot down by Israeli Patriot surface-to-air missiles.

Hezbollah is a radical Islamist terrorist group that poses a direct threat to U.S. interests in the region and Israel.

- Hezbollah, a U.S.-designated terrorist group since 1995, has killed more Americans than any terrorist group – with the exception of al-Qaeda. This includes 241 U.S. servicemen in the Oct. 1983 U.S. Marine Corps barracks bombing in Beirut.
- The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has consistently failed to prevent Hezbollah activity in southern Lebanon. With the support of Iran and Syria, Hezbollah has amassed an arsenal of more than 100,000 short and long-range rockets, threatening all major Israeli population centers.
- Iran and Syria routinely transfer sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah, including hundreds of M-600 Syrian guided rockets. With a range of 185 miles and accuracy measured in feet, these rockets represent a significant strategic improvement of Hezbollah’s capabilities.

The United States must continue working with Israel to ensure its qualitative military edge and ability to defend against growing threats.

- The U.S. must continue to ensure that Israel’s qualitative military edge is maintained. President Obama has repeatedly offered this assurance. “[W]e will help to preserve Israel’s qualitative military edge so that Israel can defend itself by itself against any threat,” he said.
- President Obama has requested \$3.1 billion in security assistance to Israel for FY16, in accordance with the 8th year of the U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Understanding on aid. Congress should support this assistance to ensure Israel has the means to defend itself against growing threats.
- Congress should continue vital funding for U.S.-Israel missile and rocket defense programs, such as David’s Sling and Iron Dome. David’s Sling – a short-range ballistic missile defense system – is designed to provide Israel and the U.S. military with effective and affordable protection against the threat of long-range artillery rockets and short-range ballistic missiles. The first David’s Sling batteries are likely to be operational within a year.