

ISRAEL ESCALATES ITS SHADOW WAR WITH IRAN

By Andrew Richards



Israel has carried out a series of attacks across the Middle East in recent weeks to prevent Iran from equipping its Arab allies with precision-guided missiles, drones and other sophisticated weapons that could challenge Israel's defences. The attacks represent a new escalation in the shadow war between Iran and Israel, which has broken into the open and threatens to set off a wider confrontation. (*New York Times*)

Why the recent attacks?

Enmity between Israel and Iran is nothing new, nor is the Israeli-Palestinian issue, yet both are often thought of as 'forever conflicts' that have no real hope of ever being

resolved. And this is what it can feel like when we hear of another flare in hostilities between these role players, claiming more lives.

In the most recent spate of violence, Israel hit targets in three separate countries – Syria, Lebanon and Iraq – in a period of only 18 hours. Lebanese president Michel Aoun called the strikes "equal to a declaration of war". So why would Israel make such dramatic moves if an expected outcome would be angering its Arab neighbours even more?

Israel is accusing Iran of trying to establish a secret supply route from Iran to the borders of Israel, through which it can funnel weapons to its 'proxies' that include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syrian forces and Iraqi Shia militias. It is Hezbollah in particular that threatens Israel most, as the political-militant group is able to strike Israel while hiding in Lebanon, ensuring limited response from Israel. The last time Israel confronted Hezbollah directly was in 2006 – the 34-day conflict led to the eventual deaths of 121 Israel soldiers and an estimated 800 Hezbollah fighters. That war also claimed the lives of more than 1,200 civilians, before ending in a stalemate with both sides claiming victory.

Hezbollah's command posts and missile development platforms are seen as threats to Israel, not only because Hezbollah is supported by Iran but also because it is believed that Hezbollah may be providing various Palestinian jihadist groups (including Hamas) with weapons meant to inflict harm on Israel. How far these supposed arms supply lines stretch and to what extent Israel is actually threatened is unknown. What is known is that Israel is willing to risk much in order to protect itself.

Who is Hezbollah?

The Shia Islamist political party and militant group, which is based in Lebanon, is a known 'proxy' of the Iranian government (a sworn enemy of Israel). Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Sheikh Naim Qassem has declared that "there is not a single point in the occupied territories [Israel] out of reach of Hezbollah's missiles." The *Jerusalem Post* reports that the group has amassed between 130,000 and 150,000 short-to-long-range rockets and missiles intended for attacking Israel, and some analysts suggest that the experience gained from fighting in Syria with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces would give Hezbollah some advantage in conventional warfare against Israel.

But Hezbollah does not act alone, and without the proper infrastructure to manufacture weapons arsenals, the real threat comes from Iran. Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah stated publicly in June 2016: "We are open about the fact that Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from the Islamic Republic of Iran."

Israel's position

INcontext International asked Dr Daniel Shayesteh, a former leading member of the Iranian Hezbollah, about the extent to which Israel has the right to defend itself against aggression from Iran and Hezbollah. Dr Shayesteh suggested two key reasons why Israel is bold enough to risk war even while the world is watching.

"I think it was in the 1990s that Israel bombed a nuclear facility in Iraq, and the Western world was happy that they did. Also, it was before the Syria-Iraq terrorist attack that Israel again bombed a nuclear facility in Syria, and no serious complaint [was made against] Israel by Western powers. It might be because there were many attacks by Iranian terrorists on Israeli and American buildings in Argentina, Brazil, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon during the 90s.

“On the other hand, the Western authorities know that Iran is behind Hamas and Hezbollah, who have made it clear that their goal is the destruction of Israel. Israel knows that Iran’s military improvement in the area results in the destruction of Israel. For this reason, Israel also, in a sense, does not care what others think. Of course, America’s support for Israel has also made her bold in her approach to her enemies – in particular, Iran.

“Another reason can also be the ‘green light’ that countries like Egypt and others in the Gulf show to Israel concerning Iran. Most Sunni Islamic countries are not happy with the progress of Iran in the area, and are happy that Israel is doing something.”

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

It has been seen multiple times that conflicts in the Middle East have brought thousands to the point of finding inner peace in Christ. Physical wars, which displaced millions, have been a vessel God has used (and continues to use) to bring people into relationship with Him. In a similar way, the current tension between Israel, Iran and proxy groups could be part of God’s answer to the prayers of those who “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Psalm 122:6).

In this context, the root of the word “peace” does not only refer to a state of absence of war – it also implies “being complete”. In essence, the word embodies the concept of wellbeing and the notion of “being paid for”. Praying for the peace of Jerusalem is therefore not primarily a prayer for the avoidance of war but rather for God’s intervention that will ensure eternity for the people He calls His own. Prayer is not only to be focused on the absence of conflict, but also for the people of Israel to be moved to seek inner peace with God through Christ Jesus. This relationship with Jesus will then stir people to seek peace with one another, rather than division and war. And it is in times of conflict that this peace with God might be found.

PRAY

- **For a de-escalation of tensions**
- **For wisdom for the leadership of Israel and neighbouring countries**
- **For believers to be peace-makers**

IMAGE SOURCE:

<https://image.cnbcfm.com/api/v1/image/105202402-6ED5-BL-War-inSyriaV2-051118.jpg?v=1529478224>