

Middle Eastern politics & society

Hizbollah's new tactics spook Israel on Blue Line border with Lebanon



Each side accuses the other of stepping up provocations at one of the region's tensest frontiers

James Shotter in Dovev and **Raya Jalabi** in Kfar Shouba JULY 29 2023

The border between Israel and Lebanon has witnessed numerous bouts of tension since the Jewish state and the Iran-backed Hizbollah militant group fought a 34-day war in 2006. But the latest round has put officials in both countries on edge.

In June, Hizbollah took the unprecedented step of setting up two tents on the other side of the UN-drawn Blue Line that — in the absence of a mutually agreed border — separates Israel from Lebanon. One has now gone but, despite a flurry of international diplomacy, the other remains.

“I don’t think we’ve ever seen anything this brazenly south of the Blue Line before,” said an international official in the region.

In the weeks since, the tensions have continued. In early July, a rocket fired across the border from Lebanon drew return fire from Israel. A week later, on the 17th anniversary of the start of the war, three members of Hizbollah were injured after Israeli forces used an explosive device to drive them away from a fence separating the two countries.

Analysts say neither Israel nor Lebanon and Hizbollah — the country’s most formidable political and military force — want another war. In a rare display of pragmatism, Israel and Lebanon signed a deal last year [demarcating their maritime borders](#), paving the way for both to exploit gas resources beneath the Mediterranean.

But coming not long after Israel and Palestinian militants in southern Lebanon [exchanged rocket fire](#) and a roadside bombing in Israel that officials blamed on Hizbollah, the flare-up on one of the region’s tensest borders has sparked jitters in both countries.





Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah’s leader, said earlier this month that the tents — which Hizbollah says are on Lebanese territory and Israel insists are on Israeli land — were erected in response to Israel’s cordoning off of the village of Ghajar, a hamlet located where Syria, Lebanon and Israel meet.

The village lies in the Golan Heights territory that Israel captured from Syria in 1967 and annexed. It later expanded into southern Lebanon, then under Israeli occupation. When Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, the Blue Line split Ghajar in two, leaving the northern section in Lebanon and the southern in the Golan Heights. In 2006, Israeli soldiers took over the whole village again.

In the past year, Israel has reinforced a wall it built around Ghajar’s northern boundary, prompting renewed calls from Beirut and Hizbollah for its forces to withdraw.

Recent Israeli activities along the border have infuriated locals. UN soldiers had to intervene to stop an Israeli digger that had partially buried a farmer who was blocking it as it ploughed a trench through his land in Kfar Shouba.

“That day, they kept getting closer and closer to the Blue Line,” said Qassem al-Qadiri, the mayor of Kfar Shouba, one of the Lebanese villages at the heart of renewed tensions. “It was a kind of provocation.”

Earlier this month, Israel erected eight concrete panels against the Blue Line near his village. “Now they’re trying to build a wall on our land,” Qadiri said. “What’s next?”





An Israeli checkpoint at the entrance of Ghajar, one of the border villages at the heart of the latest tension © Jalaa Marey/AFP/Getty Images

Israeli officials see the latest tensions as part of a broader shift in Hizbollah’s behaviour. Over the past 15 months, they say, the group has become more aggressive, tampering with the fence on the Israeli side of the Blue Line and establishing 27 outposts close to the border — an area where only international peacekeepers and the official Lebanese army are allowed.

“We see provocations . . . occurring more frequently,” said an Israeli military official. “Hizbollah is trying to stretch the rope without breaking it.”

The incident that triggered the most concern in Israel was the roadside bombing in March, when a man slipped into the country from Lebanon and detonated an explosive near the Megiddo highway intersection. Although the attack only injured one, its significant departure from Hizbollah’s usual tactics sparked alarm.

Michael Milstein, a former Israel Defense Forces intelligence official, said Hizbollah’s shift in approach was driven partly by frustration at Israel’s reinforcing of its border infrastructure and Hizbollah’s desire to bolster its support in Lebanon at a time of economic crisis.

But he said Hizbollah had also been emboldened by the unrest over the [controversial judicial overhaul](#) pushed by Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, which prompted thousands of Israeli military reservists to threaten not to volunteer for duty. The turmoil prompted Nasrallah to say that Israel was “on the path to collapse, fragmentation and disappearance”.

“Two or three years ago, Nasrallah would never have thought about a move like [Megiddo]. The fact he is now ready to take such a risk reflects the state of Israel’s

[Mogridge]. The fact he is now ready to take such a risk reflects the state of Israel's deterrence in his eyes," said Milstein. "The question is what the next step will be. That's why Israel is so worried about the tents."

The tents are part of an continuing dynamic "in which Hizbollah is testing how it can shift Israel's red lines", said Mohanad Hage Ali, senior fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut. "Hizbollah thinks this is the right time to change the rules."



Gassem al-Qadiri, mayor of Kfar Shouba, says his region is becoming 'a political football' © Raya Jalabi/FT

Meanwhile, locals in the border region worry the tension could escalate. "We're a political football," al-Qadiri said. "In Lebanon, Hizbollah needs to remind the people that it needs its weapons to defend them. In Israel, Netanyahu wants to distract [attention] from internal issues . . . Tensions or even a war with Hizbollah would serve him well."

Diplomats and analysts are cautious about making such predictions, not least because of the scale of destruction a conflict between Israel and Hizbollah would entail. But they say events could take on a dynamic of their own.

"The danger is that there can be a miscalculation," said Kandice Ardiel, spokesperson for the UN's peacekeeping force in Lebanon, Unifil. "And when the miscalculation occurs, we have to take things seriously."

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