



New Rules in Israel's North

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Between mid-March and mid-April, Israel's northern frontier experienced its worst spasm of instability in over a decade-and-a-half. On March 13, an armed extremist connected to Hezbollah infiltrated the country and blew up a car at the Megiddo junction, some 50 miles south of the Israeli-Lebanese border. Three weeks later, over the Passover holiday, the Hamas terrorist group launched a salvo of 36 rockets from Lebanese territory against towns and civilian populations in the western Galilee, wounding several and damaging local infrastructure. Two days after that, rockets were launched at Israel from Syria as well.

Those incidents, experts told me during a recent fact-finding trip there, are emblematic of broader strategic shifts that are now underway along Israel's northern border—changes that suggest the old "rules of the game" between Israel and Syria, as well as Israel and Lebanon, are increasingly being revised.

One such shift concerns Hezbollah, the powerful Shiite militia supported by Iran which wields de facto control over southern Lebanon. In recent years, Hezbollah has succeeded in amassing a formidable arsenal of drones, rockets, and missiles, most of them of Iranian origin. Experts now estimate that the group has 150,000 or more rockets stored at multiple warehouses and depots in southern Lebanon, and there is every expectation that this arsenal will be employed in the event of a future conflict between the group and Israel (or as part of asymmetric retaliation for an Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities).

Israel has focused heavily on the threat posed by "precision guided munitions" and advanced weapons in recent years as part of its ongoing efforts to erode Hezbollah and Iranian capabilities—a strategy colloquially known in Israel as the "Campaign Between Wars." But although that campaign has yielded some significant successes to date, the massive stockpiles of rockets and missiles hidden among civilian infrastructure in Lebanon pose a real challenge for the Israeli military. Experts assess that the group would be capable of firing as many as 4,000 rockets a day at Israel in a future conflict. Observers also worry about what they describe as intensifying Hezbollah activity along the Lebanese-Israeli border, and a growing boldness on the part of the group in surveilling Israeli military positions and fortifications.

Another shift concerns the Syrian front, where the strategic situation has seen profound changes in recent years. Over the past decade, despite the ongoing presence of both Russia and Iran on Syrian soil, Israel has succeeded in maintaining its freedom of action against emerging security threats there. But, observers worry, that situation could soon change. Against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, Russia's longstanding strategic ties to Iran are expanding, with Tehran emerging as a major supplier of war materiel for the Kremlin's campaign against Kyiv. And as a result of those warming contacts, Israeli experts fear, Moscow might soon countenance significant changes to the current status quo in Syria, if Iran decides to expand its presence there or if the Russian government decides to look for ways to turn up the heat on Jerusalem in response to its growing support for Ukraine.

Finally, the country is now witnessing a "convergence of threats"—one in which the once largely distinct dangers to Israel posed by Palestinian irredentism and Iranian-sponsored radicalism have begun to bleed together. As proof, experts point to the fact that, in recent weeks, the Palestinian Hamas movement has used Lebanese (and Syrian) territory to launch attacks on Israel, a qualitatively new development. This signifies that the Palestinian "arena" and the expanded threat posed by Iran and its proxies are becoming increasingly intertwined—much to the Jewish state's detriment.

The aggregate result is a worrying new correlation of forces confronting Israel along its northern frontier. Israel's adversaries "are increasingly willing to take greater risks, they are becoming bolder," says Sarit Zehavi of the Alma Research and Education Center, a research institute tracking security trends and strategic dynamics in northern Israel. "As a result, we're likely to see more and more escalation, unless Israel manages to reestablish deterrence."

Here, the U.S. has an important part to play. "Sometimes, what takes place in Israel is a result of things that are happening far from our borders," notes Zehavi. And the receding profile of the United States in the region is currently creating a sense that America's allies, Israel chief among them, are increasingly vulnerable. The resulting situation "is dangerous for Israel, unless it improves for the better."

The logical conclusion of Zehavi's warning is important, and ominous: that, if the status quo persists, the end result could very well be a new war in Israel's north.