



Reactions to Israel's interception of Hezbollah espionage drones near the Karish gas field Updated to July 6, 2022

Overview

► On **July 2, 2022**, an IDF plane and gunboat intercepted three hostile drones launched from Lebanon towards the airspace over Israel's economic waters (IDF spokesman's website, July 2, 2022). Hezbollah claimed responsibility shortly after the Israeli media reported the event. Later, senior Hezbollah figures and the organization's media-affiliated outlets, the Amal movement and the "resistance axis" justified the launching of the drones, called it "successful" and claimed it helped Lebanon in the negotiations being carried out to delineate its naval border. The interception of the drones was called "trivial," claiming that more importantly, Hezbollah's message had been conveyed.



The Karish natural gas field (Paltoday, July 2, 2022)

► The Lebanese prime minister and foreign minister called the drone launch unacceptable and said it could endanger Lebanon; they were harshly criticized by Hezbollah supporters. The Hezbollah-affiliated daily newspaper *al-Akhbar* claimed the announcement had been made in the prime minister's name without his knowledge.

► Hezbollah's political opponents, especially Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces Party, distanced themselves from the event. They attacked Hezbollah for launching the drones and for making strategic decisions which would further Iranian interests to the detriment of the Lebanese government.

Reactions

Hezbollah and Amal

► On July 2, 2022, Hezbollah claimed responsibility for the event, stating that the Shaheeds Jamil Sakaf¹ and Mahdi Yaghi² squad launched three unarmed drones of various sizes on an intelligence-gathering mission to the disputed area of the Karish gas field. The mission was successful and the message was conveyed. (Hezbollah's information website, July 2, 2022).



Hezbollah's claim of responsibility (Hafi al-Qadmian's Twitter account, July 3, 2022)

¹ Jamil Na'im Sakaf was a founder of Hezbollah's aerial wing. He was killed in 1994 and for years Hezbollah kept his death a secret. In 2014 it was revealed that he had died during a training flight in preparation for a terrorist attack using a hang glider (memorial Facebook page of his brother, Imad Sakaf, February 18, 2022).

² Mahdi Muhammad Hussain Yaghi was a Hezbollah operative apparently killed fighting at the shrine of al-Set Zaynab south of Damascus, Syria in August 2013 (Facebook page of Sadal al-Wujoud). His brother, Ali Muhammad Hussein Yaghi, was an operative in Hezbollah's aerial force (Twitter account of Hyd4ar, December 3, 2020). According to reports from Hezbollah opponents, he was killed in while fighting in Dar'a in June 2017 (Itrasanti, June 5, 2017).



The two shaheeds for whom the squad was named. Right: Jamil Sakaf. Left: Mahdi Yaghi (Malek's Twitter account, July 2, 2022)

► Hussein Ziyān al-Dīn, aide in Hezbollah's unit for cultural activities, tweeted the following next to pictures of the shaheeds for whom the unit was named: "Jamil and Mahdi, smile, your names were the first on the Ababil's flight against the army of Abraha.³ Smile, you and the family of the shaheeds, because the time has come to look to the sky and see the messages of the kingdom of heaven for those who are on earth and are happy with them! #the_message_of_the_resistance_was_conveyed" (Twitter account of Hussein Ziyān al-Dīn, July 2, 2022).



Pictures from an exhibition of drones in the Hezbollah museum in Melita, south Lebanon (Hezbollah website, August 1, 2018)

► Sheikh Muhammad Yazbek, the Iranian leader's religious representative in Lebanon, said the event conveyed the message not only to "the Israeli enemy" but also to the American mediator that Lebanon's rights could not be ignored or dismissed (al-Nashra, July 3, 2022).

³ According to the story referred to in Qur'an Sura 105, al-Fil, in 571 A.D., about 40 years before Islam, Abraha, the commander of the army of the Kingdom of Aksum, modern-day Ethiopia, tried to destroy the Kaaba in Mecca, and en route to the site ababil birds dropped rocks on the army and foiled his plan (Wikipedia in Arabic). The drones launched by Hezbollah into Israeli territory in 2004 and during the Second Lebanon War in 2006 were called Ababil (al-'Ahad, July 3, 2022). According to Ziyān al-Dīn's metaphor, Israel is Abraha, the gas rig is the army, pumping gas is trying to destroy the Kaaba, which violates Lebanon's rights, so Hezbollah launched its own ababils to stop it.

► Sheikh Ahmad Qablan, the Jafari (Shi'ite) mufti of Lebanon, related to the event indirectly while consulting with Arab foreign ministers. He said history could not be created on paper or far from three information-gathering drones [sic], reminding the Arab foreign ministers of Arab history and that they were in the middle of a war they had started (al-'Ahad, July 3, 2022).

► Sheikh Ali al-Khatib, deputy chairman of the Shi'ite Islamic Council in Lebanon, said it was a shame there were people who dared to criticize the "resistance" [Hezbollah], since "everyone knew" it was almost the only card in Lebanon's hand with which to "liberate its natural naval resources" from the hands of the "Israeli occupation" (al-Alam, July 5, 2022).

Media personnel affiliated with Hezbollah and the "resistance-axis"

► Ibrahim al-Amin, the editor of the Hezbollah-affiliated daily Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar*, an editorial entitled, "The resistance entered the negotiations in its own way." The main points were the following:

- ◆ He claimed the IDF had not been surprised and had expected Hezbollah's action. However, the nature of the "message" had been unknown, or how or when it would be sent. The Israelis located the drones in the relevant region and then decided how to deal with them, assuming they were not armed and would not attack.
- ◆ Al-Amin added that in general, the Israelis could understand how Hezbollah thought, but sometimes they were led astray by assessments that internal Lebanese affairs or the cost of a possible confrontation would limit Hezbollah. In any event, what the Israelis did not know was the timing. The drones were launched around the time of the first "new" round of negotiations led by Amos Hochstein, the American mediator, and Hezbollah knew of all the messages passed between Beirut, Washington and Tel Aviv, and had directly been informed about Israel's position by Arab sources.
- ◆ Therefore, Hezbollah concluded that Israel, with American support, was maneuvering to force Lebanon to concede its rights, and decided to create a watershed incident in the existing conflict. That was because, al-Amin asserted, the Israelis and Americans were operating under the assumption that Hezbollah was officially and popularly under siege and that internal pressure would for it to distance itself from influencing the negotiations.
- ◆ According to al-Amin, Hezbollah consulted with official sources about delineating the border, but advised that Lebanon always had to act assuming it had the strength to

deal with the Israeli and American threats and make it clear to America and Europe that Lebanon's need for energy demanded stability throughout the Mediterranean area. A conflict with Israel would make the entire region insecure and no one could guarantee the security of commercial or other maritime traffic.

◆ He added that by launching the drones Hezbollah had carried out its threat to respond to an Israeli maneuver to enter Lebanon's waters illegally. If Lebanon did not initiate effective deterrence, Hezbollah would respond to stop Israel's activity, deter Israel and ensure Lebanon's rights.

◆ He then discussed the negotiations expected to be held, called on the Lebanese to be suspicious always of the measures taken by some of the country's leaders, because for various reasons they were concerned about American reactions, and summed up by saying that the United States and Israel understood Hezbollah was not making an empty threat, and should the negotiations fail, "we will all be facing a confrontation of a different kind" (al-Akhbar website, July 4, 2022).

► Ali Shoeib, a reporter for Hezbollah's *al-Akhbar* and al-Nur Radio, claimed that Hezbollah chose when Israel saw and did not see its drones, it depended on the target and the message being conveyed. For example, on February 18, 2022, a drone flew 70 kilometers into Israeli territory and returned safely, and Israel identified it, meaning it understood the message of the "resistance" (Ali Shoeib's Twitter account, July 2, 2022).

► Hussein Murtadha, a reporter affiliated with the "resistance axis," mocked the IDF spokesman in Arabic who published a picture of a green drone and wrote, "Save your money and feed your people." Murtadha wrote in response that green, first the color of buses and now aircraft, had influenced not only the terrorist groups in Syria but also the "Israeli lords." If Allah so wished, they would come in green through the air, on sea and on land, by bus, boat and aircraft. He also quoted an Israel report stating that the Israeli Air Force had found it difficult to intercept the drones over the Karish gas rig and one of its missiles had missed. His response was that the Israelis were still trying to understand what happened, because they had used their largest system to disrupt the drones' flight, and nevertheless, the aircraft of the "resistance" [Hezbollah] had overcome it (Hussein Murtadha's Twitter account, July 4, 2022).

Support for Hezbollah from Lebanese politicians

► Walid Jumblatt, chairman of the Socialist Progressive Party, after having met with Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, said that the drones launched by the "resistance" [Hezbollah] were only part of the "equation" (al-Manar TV, July 3, 2022).

► Émile Lahoud, a former Lebanese parliamentarian, said Lebanon had made one concession after another regarding its naval border, and now Israel was trying to impose its conditions. He said Israel had so far been successful, which was what had caused Hezbollah to send its drones. Its objective had been to send a message to the enemy and everyone else concerned (al-'Ahad news website, July 4, 2022).

► The Lebanese union of parties and national forces expressed support for the "resistance" [Hezbollah] activity and said the flight of the drones over the Karish gas field strengthened Lebanon's position in the negotiations for rights to its natural resources and to force the enemy [Israel] to stop drilling until an agreement had been reached (al-Alam TV website, July 5, 2022).

The Lebanese government and reactions to its position

► Abdallah Bou Habib, the Lebanese foreign minister, met with Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati to discuss the situation in south Lebanon, the drones and the reactions they prompted. After the meeting he said the action had been undertaken outside the sphere of the Lebanese government's authority or diplomatic context. He reiterated the government's support for the efforts of American mediator Hochstein and demanded the negotiations be carried out faster. He added that as far as Lebanon was concerned, any action undertaken outside the sphere in which the negotiations were being held was unacceptable and could endanger Lebanon, and should not be carried out.

► He said they urged all the actors to behave in a spirit of national responsibility and to commit themselves to past declarations, that everyone, with no exception, had to support the country in the negotiations. He called on Israel to stop its ongoing violations of Lebanon's sovereignty at sea, on land and in the air (al-Nashra, July 4, 2022). The day before, he said the United States embassy had forwarded its protest regarding Hezbollah's launching of drones over the Karish gas field (al-Nashra, July 3, 2022).

► Ibrahim al-Amin, *al-Akhbar's* editor, wrote an editorial entitled "The inferiority of some [of Lebanon's] leaders won't help the enemy." The main points were the following:

◆ He compared the situation of the Lebanese leadership today with their situation during the Syrian presence in Lebanon, when they were forced to do the Syrians' bidding publicly and then, behind closed doors, rushed to explain their true positions to foreign ambassadors.

◆ Al-Amin said Hezbollah had launched the drones after having been made aware of Israel's answer to Lebanon's proposition before the American embassy had formally transmitted it and realized there was too great a gap between the Israeli and Lebanese positions. He claimed the Israelis and Americans understood the message Hezbollah had conveyed with the drones, and that their campaign of threats after the event did not necessarily reflect their true position.

◆ He said that on Saturday evening, before the campaign, Hezbollah had been told by European and other international sources that according to Israel, launching the drones was a dangerous escalation that was liable to disrupt the negotiations, but Israel wanted to contain the situation and wanted neither escalation nor another war, but rather to ensure the negotiations would continue until a solution had been reached.

◆ Al-Amin attacked the Lebanese prime minister and foreign minister for issuing their announcement, claiming they had agreed with one another that launching the drones served the Lebanese position, and nevertheless they made the announcement. He ended by returning to Hezbollah's position, which he said was the same as President Michel Aoun's, namely that Israel cannot produce gas before the confirmation of Lebanon's rights and before Lebanon produces gas; and to Hezbollah's threat, which was that Israel had to be prevented from violating Lebanon's rights, even if the entire world objected (al-Akhbar, July 6, 2022).

► The information office of the Lebanese Forces, following the statement of the foreign minister, said it had now become clear that even governments loyal to Hezbollah could no longer defend its actions, and given its past and present activity, it was obvious that Hezbollah was determined to keep Lebanon from making strategic, military or security decisions, damaging the country's credibility even further, and undermining the interests of the Lebanese people. Hezbollah, said the information office, served other interests and other strategies which were in no way connected to Lebanon or the interests of the Lebanese people (al-Nashra, July 4, 2022).

► According to the Hezbollah-affiliated *al-Akhbar*, Lebanese President Michel Aoun was surprised he had not been briefed about the announcement issued by the prime minister and foreign minister, despite the fact that the matter was subject to presidential authority (*al-Akhbar* website, July 5, 2022).

► Hezbollah supporters on the social networks condemned the July 4, 2022, announcement.

Hezbollah opponents

► Ghassan Hasbani, former deputy prime minister of Lebanon and Lebanese Forces parliament member, said he hoped the drone launchings would not turn into well-trodden paths that would force Lebanon into conflicts it wanted to avoid or to adapt to Eastern or Western measures at Lebanon's expense (*al-Nashra*, July 3, 2022).

► Parliamentarian Paula Yacoubian, non-aligned and anti-Hezbollah, said that launching drones over the Karish gas field, was perhaps a message to the response to the [Israeli] attack in Syria and to the official [Lebanese] position regarding negotiations for designating Lebanon's southern naval border, but it did not represent her or her party's representatives.

► Former Minister Richard Kayoumjian, responsible for foreign relations for the Lebanese Forces Party, said that in light of the American-mediated negotiations with Israel, Lebanon had to have an official position regarding Hezbollah's launching of drones over the Karish gas field. He called on the government to prevent Hezbollah from hijacking the negotiations after having lied about supporting the country in delineating the border. He also called on senior Lebanese officials to restore the strategic decision-making to the government, or to resign (*al-Nashra*, July 4, 2022).

► Anti-Hezbollah parliamentarian Pierre Bou 'Assi said Hezbollah's Iranian drones geographically flew over the Karish gas field, but politically they flew over the Baabda Palace [the Lebanese president's official residence]. He said their target was actually Paragraph 52 of the Lebanese constitution [which gives the president the power to negotiate and ratify international treaties] (*al-Nashra*, July 4, 2022)

► The Sayidat al-Jabal Association⁴ claimed that following the failure of the Iranian-American negotiations in Doha, the Iranians had timed the drone launchings for the eve of the visit of the American president to the Middle East. They had timed the drones to be launched a few hours after Hezbollah had leaked information about Israel's answer to the Lebanese

⁴ A Maronite cultural association whose objective is to strengthen the ties between Lebanon's Christian and Muslim population.

proposition for the naval border. According to the Association, that was proof Hezbollah did not support the decisions of the Lebanese government, but rather those of Iran, which wanted to delineate the borders of its influence in the Middle East (Janoubia, July 4, 2022).

► Anti-Hezbollah parliamentarian Raji al-Sa'ad said Hezbollah had contradicted everything it said about supporting Lebanon in delineating the border, everything it said was misleading, and it sent its drones to disrupt the negotiations and threaten Lebanese interests; it also threatened the approaching tourist season Lebanon was waiting for. He said arms should be only in the hands of the army (al-Nashra, July 5, 2022)