



## Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria March 3-17, 2023

### Overview

- ▶ On March 13, 2023, a powerful IED exploded near the Megiddo Junction in northern Israel. It damaged a vehicle and seriously wounded the driver. Investigation revealed it was similar to IEDs which had been used to attack IDF forces in south Lebanon. The terrorist who placed it was pursued, caught and shot to death near the border on his way back to Lebanon. He apparently infiltrated into Israel several days previously.
- ▶ Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah claimed Israel no longer engaged in aggressive action in Lebanon because of the "balance of deterrence." He said Hezbollah would support Suleiman Frangieh in the Lebanese presidential elections.
- ▶ Friction continues between Lebanese army forces and civilians on the one hand, and the IDF on the other because of IDF infrastructure activities along the border. Hezbollah claimed to have exposed an "IDF recording device" hidden in a fake rock in the Tel al-'Abed region.
- ▶ The mayor of the Christian Lebanese town of Souk el-Gharb authorized the opening of a branch of Hezbollah's al-Qard al-Hasan Bank.
- ▶ The prime suspect in the murder of a Fatah activist in the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp was turned over to the Joint Palestinian Security Force by operatives of the extremist Palestinian organization Asbat al-Ansar.
- ▶ Despite expected support from Hezbollah and Amal, Suleiman Frangieh has not yet announced his candidacy in the Lebanese presidential race.
- ▶ According to reports from Syria, there are almost 3,000 Hezbollah operatives in the country, most of them low-level, now that the high-ranking operatives, fearing for their lives, have left.
- ▶ The airport in Aleppo reopened two days after an attack attributed to Israel.
- ▶ There was an explosion near a weapons factory in eastern Syria, which killed at least four people. The source of the explosion is uncertain.

## Terrorist Attack in Israel Originating in Lebanon

► On the morning of March 13, 2023, a powerful IED exploded on the shoulder of the road near the Megiddo Junction in northern Israel. It damaged a passing vehicle and critically wounded the driver, a 21 year-old man from the Arab village of Salem in the Jezreel Valley. Investigation revealed the IED was unlike the ones used by the Palestinians but similar to those used to attacked IDF forces in south Lebanon.



**The scene of the explosion at the Megiddo Junction (Magen David Adom, March 13, 2023).**

► Once the unusual nature of the IED had been determined, roadblocks were erected throughout northern Israel and IDF special forces, the Israeli Security Agency and the police began searching for the terrorist who placed the device. Some hours later a suspicious vehicle was halted near Ya'ara, a moshav near the Lebanese border. The driver exited the vehicle with his hands raised, while the terrorist remained inside wearing an explosive belt ready for detonation. He posed a danger to the forces and was shot and killed. Other weapons were found inside the vehicle.

► According to the initial investigation, the terrorist had apparently arrived from Lebanon several days before the attack and it is still unclear how he entered Israeli territory. After he detonated the IED he hitchhiked, stopped a vehicle and asked the driver to take him to the north. The attack is still under investigation, including Hezbollah's involvement in planning and carrying it out (IDF spokesman, March 15, 2023). Hezbollah has complete control over every facet of life in south Lebanon, and the possibility that someone could cross the border into Israel without its knowledge is extremely small.

► Even before the incident was made known in Israel, a network calling itself "the Galilee Forces – the Lone Wolves" claimed responsibility. The network said in an announcement that one of its "lone wolves" had placed the IED at the Megiddo Junction in "the north of occupied Palestine," adding that the device exploded near a vehicle and the "wolf" escaped (Galilee

Forces Telegram channel, March 13, 2023). Videos were posted to the Telegram channel by the network's "combat information," a term familiar from Hezbollah operations. The channel also posted pictures of important sites in Israel, such as the Knesset building, the Kirya in Tel Aviv and the Ben-Gurion International Airport, as well as pictures of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with his family, with the caption, "the next targets."

► After the official announcement from the IDF spokesman, the network formally claimed responsibility for the attack. They claimed Israel's announcement was incorrect and an attempt to project "business as usual" despite the seriousness of the situation. They challenged Israeli intelligence to tell the truth about the operative, which was that he had been neither captured nor killed. (Watan, March 15, 2023).



**Right: The network's claim of responsibility (Watan, March 15, 2023). Left: The Network logo, from its video (Galilee Forces Telegram channel, March 13, 2023).**

► A UNIFIL spokesman reported they had not identified a recent border crossing from Lebanon into Israel (al-Nashra, March 16, 2023). Sources in Lebanon stressed the IDF's "intelligence failure" and claimed the Israeli security forces did not know whether or not Hezbollah had been involved in the attack. They also claimed Israel was trying to deflect attention from its internal crisis by turning it into an external confrontation, and threatened Hezbollah would respond if Israel took any action along the border or in Lebanon itself (al-Akhbar, March 16, 2023).

## Hezbollah and Lebanon

### Nasrallah' speech relating to Israel

- ▶ On March 6, 2023, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech marking the "day of the wounded and imprisoned operatives of the resistance" [anti-Israeli terrorism]. Regarding the situation in Israel he said, "All indications point to the end." He claimed that passing a law "imposing the death penalty on terrorists" would only increase the Palestinians' determination and "bravery." As to the situation along the Israeli-Lebanese border, he said that in recent weeks the "Zionist enemy" had been trying to move the border by several meters, but they had been prevented by young men who confronted the IDF. He added that in the past Israel had customarily killed, blown up and wounded [Lebanese] without restraint, but today did not dare open fire because of the "balance of deterrence." He added that the balance had been put in place by Hezbollah operatives and was not supported by any external factor "except for Iran and Syria [sic]." Regarding the Lebanese-Israeli maritime border, he said Lebanon had the right to produce oil and natural gas, and that in a case of delay, the "equation" was clear. As for Lebanon's presidential crisis, he said they has spoken with Gebran Bassil, president of the Free Patriotic Movement, but he was not interested in running, and therefore Hezbollah's candidate would be Suleiman Frangieh, head of the al-Marda Party (al-Mayadeen, March 6, 2023).
- ▶ On March 3, 2023, Assad Mahmoud Saghir, aka Haj Saleh, the commander of Hezbollah's Unit 9000, died of cancer. He was buried in the village of al-Kharaib, northeast of Tyre. Unit 9000 is responsible for the security of Hezbollah activity in Syria (al-khanadeq, March 3, 2023).
- ▶ On March 10, 2023, Nasrallah gave a memorial speech for Saghir in which he related to local, regional and international events, and to Lebanon's reaction to events in the Middle East. He said Lebanon's future would be intertwined with Syria and "Palestine," and that he hoped for Lebanon as a neighbor of "Palestine" without the existence of Israel. Regarding the demonstrations in Israel, he said the consensus of Israeli society was that internal disputes and external threats would "lead to its death," and feared the destruction of the Third Temple [the State of Israel]. In Nasrallah's opinion, the events in Israel opened the door to great hopes, and the country's current situation was the result of "the firm stance of the regional resistance." He stressed that normalization with Arab countries would not protect Israel and could not stop the activities against it (al-Mayadeen, March 10, 2023.)

## Hezbollah's financial institution

► Following reports of Hezbollah's plans to open a branch of its financial institution, al-Qard al-Hasan in Souk al-Gharb east of Beirut, George Elias Salibi, the town mayor, authorized permission for the branch. The local council opposed his decision (al-Nahar, March 13, 2023). Most of the town's residents are Christian, and al-Qard al-Hasan is under the control of the "social unit" of Hezbollah's executive council, which specializes in semi-banking activities, mainly giving loans and operating community mutual funds.<sup>1</sup>

## South Lebanon

### Friction along the border

► In the wake of a number of infiltrations from Lebanon along Israel's northern border, IDF bulldozers have been employed in activities to reinforce the border fence in and in Hula the areas of 'Ita al-Sha'b, 'Adisat al-Matala and Wadi Hunin. On March 7, 2023, the bulldozers operated in the town of al-Bustan (west of Zar'it). According to Lebanese reports, the activities provided an opportunity for young Lebanese to avenge the so-called "slaughter" they claimed the IDF carried out in 1948 and to observe Israel's "humiliation." Lebanese army soldiers and civilians gathered at the foot of Tel 'Abed, near moshav Margalioth, encircling the IDF forces engaged in the earthworks. One successfully yanked the magazine out of a soldier's weapon (al-Akhbar, March 11, 2023). The IDF spokesman confirmed that during the engineering activity in the Golan Heights, dozens of suspicious Lebanese gathered on the Lebanese side of the border, and one of them approached the force and took the magazine out of a soldier's weapon (IDF spokesman, March 7, 2023).

► Hezbollah issued a video showing a monitoring and recording device hidden inside a fake rock. It was found in the border area near Tel 'Abed where the IDF forces were working to close breaks in the fence and prevent infiltration (al-Akhbar, March 7, 2023). The device was found, according to Hezbollah claims, at a distance of about 60 meters from the border fence and about 40 meters from a UNIFIL post. It was located at a site often visited by people who come to look at the border area and Israel (Lebanon News, March 7, 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> For further information see the May 23, 2019 report, "Hezbollah's socioeconomic foundations: Al-Qard al-Hasan, a quasi-bank that provides interest-free loans, mainly to members of the Shiite community."





**Right: The listening device hidden in a fake rock (Twitter account of Ali Shoeib, March 6, 2023).  
Left: The magazine stolen from the IDF soldier (al-Manar, March 7, 2023).**

► During infrastructure works near the border near the village of 'Ita al-Sha'b, east of Zar'it, a Lebanese army officer shoved an IDF officer and uprooted an iron pole placed in the ground by the IDF. UNIFIL forces intervened to separate them (Twitter account of Ali Shoeib, March 5, 2023). The Lebanese army reported that one of its patrols forced an IDF patrol to retreat, claiming the Israelis had crossed the border. The local social networks posted pictures of the incident. One picture shows an Lebanese soldier aiming an RPG at an Israeli tank (Lebanese army Twitter account, March 5, 2023).



**Lebanese soldier aims an RPG at an Israeli tank (Lebanese army Twitter account, March 5, 2023).**

## Palestinians in Lebanon and Syria

► On March 12, 2023, it was reported that 'Asbat al-Ansar<sup>2</sup> operatives turned Khaled Alaa al-Din, from the Ayn al-Hilweh refugee camp, over to the leadership of the joint Palestinian security forces. Khaled al-Din was the principle suspect in the killing of Fatah operative Mahmoud Zbeidat. He was later turned over to Lebanese army intelligence in Sidon (Palestinian refugees' portal, March 12, 2023). The incident was preceded by contacts among the Palestinian forces, Palestinian embassy workers, Fatah and Hamas operatives, and 'Asbat

<sup>2</sup> The 'Asbat al-Ansar ("Congregation of the Supporters [of Allah]")

al-Ansar representatives with Hezbollah and Amal operatives, Muslim religious scholar Sheikh Maher Hamoud, and Amal Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri (al-Akhbar, March 11, 2023). On the night of March 1, 2023, after 'Asbat al-Ansar operatives broke their promise to hand over the killer, the Fatah movement recruited forces in the refugee camp and fortified their positions (Lebanese News Telegram channel, March 8, 2023). Clashes then broke out between Fatah operatives and Islamist groups. Vehicles and property were damaged in the refugee camp and the UNRWA schools were closed (NNA, March 2, 2023).

► The PLO's department of refugee affairs completed projects for the residents of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, led by Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas in response to a request from the Popular Committees. The projects were carried out in the Nahar al-Bard, Ayn al-Hilweh and Badawi refugee camps in north Lebanon, the Qasmia refugee camp in south Lebanon and the camps in Sidon. A generator was installed in the Badawi refugee camp to operate a pump to alleviate its water crisis, since the neighborhood does not receive services from UNRWA. In Qasmia roads were resurfaced and 800 liters of diesel fuel were supplied to heat educational institutions (PLO website, March 5, 2023).

## Lebanon, General Information

► Suleiman Frangieh, who is expected to run for president, has still not declared his candidacy, even though Hezbollah and Amal publicly support him. Lebanese sources noted he would declare it at the end of April 2023. However, Gebran Bassil, president of the Free Patriotic Movement, adheres to his position that removing Frangieh as a candidate is a precondition for any discourse on compromise or agreement regarding the presidential elections (al-Nashra, March 15, 2023).

► Riad Salameh, governor of the Lebanese Central Bank, who was supposed to be investigated by a European corruption committee, did not appear at the hearing. It was postponed to the following day but his lawyers demanded it be cancelled on the grounds that it was scheduled for the same day as the Lebanese investigation, which they claimed was a violation of Lebanese sovereignty. Salameh is to be investigated along with his brother, Rijal Salameh, and his assistant, Marian Hawayek, on suspicion of embezzlement, money laundering, illegal financial gains and tax evasion. Lebanon, which is prosecuting them personally, asked for them to be detained and for their bank accounts to be frozen (al-Nashra, March 15, 2023).

► The black market exchange rate for the American dollar reached 100,000 Lebanese pounds, the highest since the financial crisis began at the end of 2019. Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri accused the banks in Lebanon of smuggling funds out of the country, contributing to worsening the crisis. He said a political solution for the presidential crisis would be the beginning of a solution for all Lebanon's crises, and that responsibility for the crisis rested with the state of Lebanon and its banks, and it was unacceptable that depositors would have to bear the responsibility (al-Sharq al-Awsat, March 14, 2023).

## Syria

### Hezbollah activity

► According to reports from Syria, the number of Hezbollah operatives in the country is estimated as between 2,500 and 3,000, and they are situated mostly in the regions of al-Qusayr (northern Beqa'a Valley), al-Qara, Damascus and the Syrian desert. The sources reported that most are young recruits, since the high-ranking operatives have left Syria in fear for their lives. They also reported that high-ranking Hezbollah operatives, who initially participated in the fighting in Syria, currently supervised training the Iranian militias deployed there. According to military commentator Khalil al-Hilw, Hezbollah's role in Syria supplements the role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in supporting the Syrian regime, now that the Russian presence in the country has been reduced. Hezbollah also cooperates with the IRGC to establish local militias and has extended its social activities as well.

► According to the report, the Hezbollah units operating in Syria were the following:

- ◆ Unit 9000, a preventive security and transportation unit.
- ◆ Unit 8000, a military unit.
- ◆ Unit 4100, a response unit.
- ◆ Unit 4400, a transportation unit.

► The salaries of the Hezbollah operatives are paid in dollars, which provides them with a higher financial status than officers in the Lebanese army, because the value of the Lebanese pound is constantly declining. The basic salary is \$500 and can reach \$1,500 for officers or high-ranking positions (al-Hadath, March 4, 2023).

► Hezbollah reported the death of Riad Mustafa Saqer (Abu Mustafa) from the village of Hermel in the Beqa'a Valley in north Lebanon, who was "killed during jihad activity." No other



information was given (al-Markazia, March 12, 2023). He may have been a Hezbollah operative killed in one of the recent incidents or attacks in Syria.



**Riad Mustafa Saqer (Telegram channel of Hezbollah's combat information branch, March 12, 2023).**

## Other news

- ▶ On March 12, 2023, in an attack attributed to Israel, several sites in central and west Syria were damaged, and a Syrian army officer, two soldiers and two pro-Iranian militia operatives were killed. The targets of the attack were an arms depot belonging to pro-Iranian groups in the hilly area lying between the Tartus region in the west and Hamat in the center, and positions of the National Defense Forces. A military source reported that Syrian aerial defense intercepted some of the missiles (Syrian Human Rights Observatory, March 12, 2023).
- ▶ On March 9, 2023, the international airport in Aleppo was damaged in an attack attributed to Israel. Its facilities were disrupted and the airport was closed. In the meantime, the military airport at al-Nirb, southwest of Aleppo, was also attacked, and its aerial defense systems were activated (SANA, March 7, 2023). A Syrian military source confirmed that the attack had closed the airport in Aleppo for two days, after which the Syrian ministry of transportation announced the damage had been repaired and the airport was operative again (Syrian ministry of transportation Telegram channel, March 9, 2023).
- ▶ Under the aegis of humanitarian assistance for the victims of the earthquake in Syria, significant activity of Iranian militias was apparent in and around Aleppo, as was the movement of many convoys from Iran (al-Araby, February 20, 2023).
- ▶ Abd al-Bari Atwan, editor of the al-Ra'i al-Youm news website, said a Syrian response to what he called the "Israeli raids" was close and unavoidable, and might even come sooner than what many people expected. He also said it was liable to be a unilateral action or part of an approaching war in the Middle East (al-Ra'i al-Youm, March 7, 2023).

► At least four people were killed and eight injured in east Syria, when an explosion occurred near a factory for the manufacture of weapons in the al-Hamidiya neighborhood of Deir al-Zor, a region under the control of pro-Iranian militias. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the explosion was caused by a UAV attack near the factory and a truck loaded with weapons in the city, where senior Iran commanders and Hezbollah officers live (Sky News, March 8, 2023). According to official reports, the explosion was caused by a bomb planted in an abandoned structure (al-Watan, March 8, 2023).