

Analysis Israel Is in No Hurry to Do the Saudis' Bidding in Lebanon

The Israeli army is not about to cross the border despite the Saudis' anger at Iranian meddling and the Syrian drone that Israel shot down in the north.

The first leader to exploit claims that Saudi Arabia is trying to push Israel into a new military confrontation in Lebanon is also the most devoted reader of Israeli and foreign news reports – Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah.

In a speech broadcast Friday on Lebanese television, Nasrallah claimed that the Saudis had declared war on Lebanon and Hezbollah, and warned Israel not to intervene lest it pay a heavy price.

To viewers in Israel, Nasrallah seemed unusually stressed, and his tone sounded almost plaintive. His concerns about future Israeli moves didn't match his past swaggering declarations in which he described Israeli society as a flimsy "spiderweb" that would collapse under Arab pressure. It seems the crisis created by the Saudis in Lebanon, with the forced resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, caught the Hezbollah chief off guard.

Nasrallah isn't the only leader who seems to have slid into something now over his head. The Saudi gamble is a big one and there's no guarantee that the kingdom's aggressive stance will end in success, despite the enthusiastic support of U.S. President Donald Trump. In a statement, the State Department was much less enthusiastic. It called for Hariri to be restored to his post and warned other countries – namely Iran, but also Saudi

The Washington Post has provided extensive details on Hariri's resignation; it emerges that Hariri indeed served as a Saudi puppet. The resignation letter was dictated to him at a morning meeting in the royal palace, to which he had been summoned unexpectedly. He was later transferred to a villa in the Ritz-Carlton compound in Riyadh, in which Saudi princes and tycoons are being held following this month's purge. There, Hariri is under the surveillance of the Saudi security services.

Israel, other than a public verbal assault on Iran a week ago, isn't commenting on

Hariri's resignation. No official has responded to accusations that this was a Saudi-Israeli move against Iran and Hezbollah. And no steps have been taken to increase vigilance along the northern border, which would have suggested that the Israel Defense Forces was preparing something.

For now, it seems it's the Saudis who may seek such a scenario, while Israel has no interest in a military confrontation. One should note that Saudi Arabia has counted on Israeli military action twice in the past, first hoping that Israel would attack Iran's nuclear installations, and then counting on the IDF's intervention against the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. Both times it was disappointed, but vigorous Saudi actions are fueling tensions in an arena where Israel and Hezbollah are often only two mutual missteps away from war.

The Saudis' steps were received with some surprise by Israeli defense officials and with even greater surprise by cabinet members who don't follow the minutiae of daily developments. The basic regional instability, the number of players involved and the fast pace of events make it hard for analysts to forecast a few steps ahead.

Still, there may be deeper causes for the surprise afflicting the Israeli side, such as the procrastination in defining intelligence priorities and the intense focus in recent years on collecting operational intelligence at the expense of analyzing long-term processes.

The Syrians get bold

On Saturday morning, an Israeli Patriot missile shot down a drone that entered the demilitarized zone, contravening the separation agreement with Syria after the Yom Kippur War. The IDF believes it was a Syrian drone that was shot down only after the hotline with the Russians was used, to verify that it wasn't a Russian one.

According to initial assessments, the Syrians sent the drone to gather intelligence on Israel and test the rules of the game along the border. This has been a recurring event recently, stemming from the Assad regime's rising confidence after the stabilization it has achieved in the civil war and after the routing of the Islamic State by the U.S.-led coalition.

In a strong statement, Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said Israel held the Syrian regime responsible for every firing incident or any infringement of Israeli

sovereignty along the border. He called on Assad to restrain all groups operating in his territory, saying that Israel would not allow “the consolidation of a Shi’ite axis in Syria that would constitute a forward position” for Iran.

This follows Israel’s threats to foil Iranian military moves in Syria. It also follows the BBC’s publishing of satellite photos showing, according to Western intelligence agencies, Iran establishing a permanent military base near Damascus.

Meanwhile, at a summit in Vietnam, Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin lauded the American-Russian-Jordanian agreement following the partial cease-fire in southern Syria. According to the agreement, there will now be a reduction and later a withdrawal of foreign combatants from the region.

For Israel, this is a positive declaration, but it must be backed by details and action. For now it seems Iran has no intention to leave Syria or withdraw militias linked to it.

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