

# Iran Is Smuggling Weapons Through Lebanon, and Israel Must Respond



Lebanese army soldiers take part in a military parade to celebrate the 74th anniversary of Lebanon's independence in downtown Beirut, November 22, 2017. Photo: Reuters / Mohamed Azakir.

*JNS.org* – A recent report by *Fox News* stated that Iran has begun using civilian flights to Beirut international airport for the trafficking of weapons to Hezbollah. This report, which may well have been leaked to Fox by an intelligence service, points to a highly dangerous development. If continued, it has the potential to place the 12-year-old period of calm between Israel and Hezbollah in jeopardy.

While Iranian arms-smuggling across the region is nothing new, Tehran's efforts have traditionally focused on moving the arms by land vehicles into Lebanon from Syria.

From Syrian airports, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) disperses the weapons by ground transport to Hezbollah depots and launch sites across Lebanese villages, towns, and cities. This is how Hezbollah's arsenal of projectiles — estimated at around 150,000 — has grown larger than that of most NATO armies. This arsenal is deliberately planted in the midst of civilian areas and pointed at Israel. Many of the projectiles are hidden in civilian buildings that house Lebanese families.

Other times, the weapons are produced in Assad regime factories in Syria and smuggled to Lebanon along the Iranian-run trafficking network.

On many such occasions, Israel, which monitors these activities very closely — and has developed an entire doctrine to interrupt the enemy's force build-up process — has chosen to intervene. Israel reportedly disrupted these weapons-smuggling runs in many instances through airstrikes across Syria. Nevertheless, some of the weapons got through.

Hezbollah's arsenal is currently made up mostly of short-range rockets, which have a range of 45 kilometers, but it also includes thousands of medium-range rockets that can go well past that distance, and several hundred long-range projectiles that place almost the whole of Israel in Hezbollah's sights.

It also probably has dozens of ballistic missiles and hundreds of drones.

To be sure, Israel has been busy building up its own forces. Israel's airstrike capabilities have grown to unprecedented levels, and the ground forces today are better prepared than ever before to seize Hezbollah's turf and destroy its fighting force, if called upon to do so.

Yet allowing an enemy as powerful as Hezbollah to build up its force even more would mean sitting back and watching an intolerable threat develop to Israeli cities and critical strategic sites. This would boost Hezbollah's confidence, emboldening it to take risks and thereby increase the chances of war.

An active Israeli defense campaign, by contrast, not only places limitations on this arms race, but indicates to the Iranian-Hezbollah axis how penetrated they have become by Israeli intelligence. This, in turn, strengthens Jerusalem's deterrence and decreases the chances of conflict. An enemy that feels it is being watched constantly feels less confident to attack.

Thus, over the past six years, Israel has relied on the highest quality intelligence and precision air power to consistently disrupt the Iranian-Hezbollah force build-up. This campaign grew in 2017, when Iran began trying to install its own military bases and arms factories in Syria.

The IDF confirmed in recent days that it struck some 200 targets in Syria over the past year-and-a-half alone in response to the Iranian takeover program. This confrontation came to a head in May of this year, when Iranian forces fired a volley of rockets at the Golan Heights from truck-mounted launchers. Israel's crushing response saw more than 50 Iranian targets in Syria destroyed. It represented the first direct exchange of fire between Israeli and Iranian forces in Syria.

The Iranians, sustaining a painful blow, then decided to step back and look for a new strategy. They remained committed to keeping the arms flow to Lebanon and Syria going, but looked for new ways to go about it.

The *Fox News* report on the use of Beirut airport appears to be part of a new Iranian effort to move weapons around.

The Iranians might be banking on the assumption that Israel will not act to intercept arms inside Lebanon itself for fear of setting off a war with Hezbollah. This is a dangerous assumption to make.

The Iranian assumption could be based on an informal understanding that seems to have been in place between Israel and Hezbollah, according to which Israeli airstrikes in Syria are one thing, something Hezbollah has learned to “live with.” Strikes in Lebanon, however, are quite another thing; they are a violation of Hezbollah’s own red line.

This arrangement seems to have come into place in April 2014, when Israel reportedly struck a Hezbollah weapons convoy on the Syrian-Lebanese border and the Lebanese terror organization responded by setting off bombs near an IDF convoy in Har Dov. Hezbollah’s response was essentially a message to Israel, saying: think twice before hitting targets in Lebanon.

As long as Israel was able to enforce its red lines in Syria, the arrangement seemed to have held up. But if Iran is now indeed trafficking rockets and missiles into Beirut’s airport through civilian flights, the calm that has been in place in Lebanon could be facing new risks.

If the Iranian-Hezbollah axis ignores the warnings, Israel may decide to act — and Hezbollah’s response remains unknown. Once again, Iran is playing with fire.

Despite its fundamentalist rhetoric, it seems unlikely that Hezbollah, for its part, would be interested in a new war with Israel. It’s just beginning to think about the end of the Syrian conflict — a war in which it has lost 1,800 armed members and suffered thousands of injuries. Hezbollah is just beginning to consider bringing its forces home to Lebanon and beefing up its southern Lebanese front with Israel.

Southern Lebanon is already filled to the brim with Hezbollah units that spend day and night keeping up war readiness, maintaining equipment and arms, and thinking about ways to attack Israeli civilians and soldiers. But Hezbollah’s leadership is well aware of Israel’s overwhelming firepower, and its ability to seize Lebanon militarily and deal an unprecedented blow to it.

It is this knowledge that helps keep the Lebanese-Israeli border quiet — at least for the moment. Iran's risky new moves throw a shadow over that calm.

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