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<http://www.atimes.com/hezbollah-remains-potent-military-threat-israel/>

Hezbollah remains a potent military threat for Israel

By MANISH RAI

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he Israeli airstrike in the city of Palmyra in mid-March targeting a weapons shipment meant for Hezbollah was the deepest raid into Syrian territory since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. It clearly shows that Israel is determined to stop Hezbollah from acquiring weapons. Despite these measures, Hezbollah is still a potent threat to Israel. Situated along Israel's northern border, in Beirut's suburbs, and throughout the Bekaa Valley, Hezbollah maintains an advanced military arsenal exceeding that of many other countries. The Shi'a Islamist group is the most powerful military and political force in Lebanon and plays a critical role in the Syrian conflict.

Currently, southern Lebanon is a Hezbollah stronghold of underground bunkers, rocket launch sites, and interconnecting tunnels. The group doesn't have an operational airforce but it can be described as a medium-sized regular army rather than a militia. Moreover, Hezbollah enjoys the full support of the Lebanese army. Israel's working assumption is that the Lebanese army will play an active role against the Jewish state in the next war involving Lebanon, operating under Hezbollah's command. Here are factors that have led to Hezbollah's increased strength. <http://gty.im/508742124>

Acquisition of modern rockets and missiles — Israeli intelligence estimates that Hezbollah has an arsenal of some 150,000 rockets and missiles. The group has tactical ballistic missiles including Scuds, Fateh-110 Iranian surface-to-surface missiles, and M-600 missiles, a Syrian

modified version of the Fateh-110. Many of the missiles are capable of reaching all parts of Israel. While Hezbollah largely fired unguided rockets into Israel during the 2006 war, its weapons capabilities are said to have received a major upgrade. The missiles can hit targets in Israel with increased accuracy, including command posts, airfields, and major economic sites. Israeli military planners estimate that Hezbollah will be able to launch thousands of rockets and missiles a day in a future conflict, compared with the 2006 rate of about 100 per day. This new rate of rocket fire can overwhelm all of the Israeli anti-missile defence systems such as Arrow, David Sling, and Iron Dome.

Effective air-defence systems — Israel's air force has always had the upper hand in conflict, apart from the initial phase of 1973 Yom Kippur war. In the 2006 Lebanon war, the airforce destroyed Hezbollah's entire long-range missile capabilities within hours. But now Hezbollah has effective air-defence systems which will challenge the Israeli airforce for domination of Lebanese air space. Hezbollah has a Russian-made SA-17 Buk anti-aircraft missile battery which can directly threaten Israeli aircraft operating in northern Israel.

Valuable experience in the Syrian war — In fighting alongside Syrian government forces, Hezbollah has gained tactical battlefield experience and weaponry, making it a far more threatening presence for its enemies elsewhere in the region. Those close to the group say that for the first time Hezbollah can bring a war with Israel into Israeli territory. Hezbollah has improved its logistical operations and learned during the Syrian conflict how to use more sophisticated equipment, artillery cover, and reconnaissance and surveillance drones.

Ability to open a second front — Hezbollah has the capability to open a second front in the Syrian-controlled parts of the Golan Heights against Israel. This would place missiles out of range of Israel Defence Forces ground troops and could be hidden in the Syrian army's hardened shelters to protect them from air strikes. By dispersing weapons across the second front in Syria, Israeli jets would have to cover a much larger area to locate and destroy the targets, while also worrying about avoiding Syrian and Russian air defences.

To counter this threat to Israel's national security, a comprehensive hybrid strategy is required which would include both defensive and offensive measures. Israel should increase the capacity of its anti-missile defence systems and strengthen its civil-defence measures to reduce the effects of Hezbollah's rocket and missile attacks. IDF offensive operations should focus on eliminating the threat. This would likely mean destroying launch sites throughout Lebanon and seizing launch areas. An offensive strategy should, therefore, be devised aimed at acquiring territory to deny Hezbollah platforms to launch weapons. Moreover, the Israeli military has established what it calls the Gideon Doctrine, a five-year plan that proposes the rapid use of force against an enemy, throwing it off balance and dealing a crushing blow before it can recover can also be used as an offensive measure.