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Hezbollah Fortifies Frontier Against Israel

Posted By [Mona Alami](#)

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NABATIYEH, Lebanon – In the mountains towering above this southern city, Hezbollah (Party of God) is building a new line of defense on lands where a fierce war was once fought between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel.

An asphalt road rising up from the sea seems to carve up the southern chain of mountains of Jabal Safi. Away from the southern city of Nabatiyeh and into the green hills of Nabi Soujoud a quarry suddenly appears, as if breaching the mountain flank, exposing its large, sandy belly to the blue skies.

In a small ravine where a river used to run, lies the entrance to four Palestinian bunkers. Located north of the Litani River, the bunkers are hidden away from the watchful eyes of the 12,000-strong multinational United Nations Interim Forces in Southern Lebanon (UNIFIL), deployed on the southern bank of the river and charged with monitoring the cessation of hostilities between Lebanon and Israel.

The bunkers were originally dug by the PLO when the group's militant fighters began establishing bases in Lebanon after the six-day Israeli-Arab war in 1967. The PLO's presence in the area, legitimized by the Cairo agreement, allowed Palestinian guerrilla attacks against Israel to be launched from Lebanese territory until the Israeli invasion in 1982.

"The PLO built 10-15-meter deep bunkers in the mountains and equipped them with running water and beds," remembers Kassem Nazr, a local farmer from the village Arab Slim who owns agricultural land in the area. "The *fedayeen* [Palestinian militants] blew up the mountain flanks, using dynamite sticks that were embedded in small holes in the rock, their traces appearing clearly in the white stone."

"The bunkers were destroyed by the Israeli army during successive invasions," he adds, denying rumors that Hezbollah might be using these bunkers in preparation for another conflict with Israel. Israel withdrew from South Lebanon in 2000, before occupying it again briefly in 2006 during what was known as the 33-day war.

The hills surrounding the quarry retain the names of many *fedayeen* as well as southerners and members of Hezbollah. "This valley was bombed intensely by the Israeli army during the 1970s when it was home to Palestinian fighters. And it is on this very mountain top that Sayyed Hadi Nasrallah, the son of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah [leader of Hezbollah] was killed in 1997," recalls Nazr.

"When we talk about Hezbollah's martyrs, we don't ignore other martyrs of the resistance in the region, and all the generations that refuse occupation," declared Nasrallah on Nov. 11.

Whether in the discourse of Hezbollah leaders or in death, the history of the Palestinians and Lebanese seems to be intertwined forever.

"Hezbollah adopted some of the military strategies used by the Palestinians, which were divided around two schools of thought: either resorting to fixed positions, such as bunkers, or relying on guerilla warfare. Hezbollah combined both," says Nicholas Blandford, a longtime Hezbollah researcher and a correspondent for the *Times*.

Like the Palestinians before them, Hezbollah chose to position themselves north of the Litani after being forced out of the southern borders by UNIFIL forces following the 2006 war. The new front-line stretches between the southern Lebanese Mediterranean shore and the Bekaa Valley to the east, cut by the Jabal Safi mountain range.

Telltale signs of Hezbollah activity abound in the region, where infrastructure is traditionally poor. Newly asphalted roads, seemingly leading nowhere, crisscross the mountain flank, sometimes delving deep into the woods. Hezbollah *chabab* (young men in Arabic slang), dressed in dark colors, their beards trimmed neatly, drive around the area, keeping a watchful eye on any strangers.

Recently, Hezbollah has been accused of creating a Shia-populated area connecting the northern bank of the Litani to the Bekaa Valley. According to Blandford, Christian and Druze owned land is being bought by a Shia businessman from the Tajedine family.

In the far mountain of the village of Kotrani, the local church rises high against the blue sky, but a new section has been built to the east, with brand new white buildings housing Shia residents.

Hezbollah entrenchment in this area is the result of careful calculation. "The topography of the area north of the Litani is ideal for guerrilla warfare because of the rude and steep nature of the terrain. Any land invasion would result in significant losses for the Israelis, as soldiers would have to venture into the valleys and wadis by foot and abandon their tanks, which can't be used on this particular terrain," says Amin Hoteit, former Lebanese army general and specialist in military strategy.

The general adds that the location of Mount Safi and its closeness to both Beirut and the Bekaa would also facilitate military supplies to the Party of God.

To overcome adverse geographical factors, Israel would have to rely on air power, which is now a risk considering that the extent of Hezbollah's anti-aircraft capability is still unknown.

Analyst and Hezbollah specialist Amal Saad Ghorayeb believes that Hezbollah's SAM-8 (surface-to-air missile) and anti-aircraft missiles leave Israel vulnerable. "In spite of the fact that Israel is building an anti-missile shield, this will not put an end to any significant rocket barrage," she explains.

Contrary to what Hoteit says, the analyst argues that she does not expect the war to be limited to the north of the Litani. "Nasrallah declared in a recent speech that in the event of a war, the resistance will reach as far as the Aqsa Mosque [in Jerusalem]," she adds.

According to Hoteit, this declaration points to the possibility of a concerted effort between Hamas and Hezbollah to wage a war on two fronts – Lebanon and Gaza.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made clear on Nov. 7 that he considered Hezbollah "the real Lebanese army, not a sideline militia as in the past." This statement, combined with Israeli's adoption of the Dahiya Doctrine in 2006 (stating that the Jewish state will use disproportionate force in the event of a conflict), does not bode well for Lebanon, Israel, or Hezbollah

The waiting game between Israel and Hezbollah has already started. Both parties are clearly aware that the future of two countries is at stake, keeping the specter of war at bay for now. However, small skirmishes along the volatile border could ignite the frontier yet again.

(Inter Press Service)