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No Escape from War

Hezbollah and Israel Inch Toward Open Fighting

By Benedetta Berti / January 22, 2015

The Syrian civil war has left virtually no pillar of the Middle East undamaged. The most recent geopolitical victim, it seems, is the post-2006 relationship between Israel and Hezbollah, which was based on de facto mutual deterrence and resulted in an uneasy calm along the Israeli-Lebanese border. The reported January 18 Israeli airstrike against a Hezbollah–Iranian car convoy in southern Syria is the latest and boldest in a series of tit-for-tat operations that, since last February, have gradually eroded the old order and inched Israel and Hezbollah ever closer to a war that neither wants.

In the early days of the bloody internal conflict in Syria, both Israel and Hezbollah took active steps to protect their interests. Hezbollah invested substantial military and political capital to support its strategic ally, the Bashar al-Assad regime, and help preserve the status quo. Israel's reaction to the war focused on border defense and on ensuring that Hezbollah would not benefit from transfers of advanced weaponry, a strategy that was initially carried out by marking a clear "red line" for limited intervention in the conflict and, reportedly, by occasionally defending that line through unclaimed aerial strikes in Syria. For a couple of years, these strategies coexisted: Israel and Hezbollah treated limited strikes carried out in Syria—which neither ever acknowledged—as being outside of the scope of the post-2006 rules of engagement and, therefore, not an open provocation.

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