

THE JERUSALEM POST

Opinion

Northern gamble

By JPOST EDITORIAL

04/28/2015

While Israel is striving to enforce the most elemental redlines vis-à-vis Hezbollah and the Assad regime, it is playing an increasingly dangerous game.

Since Syria became engulfed in a bloody civil war in 2011, a deadly back and forth has been played out between Israel and forces loyal to the Assad regime. Israel has launched air strikes against missile depots, convoys, and other targets in Syria and Lebanon and Hezbollah or other forces loyal to the Assad regime have retaliated. And so far the situation has not spiraled out of control. But it is a dangerous gamble.

Israel's ability to influence the internal affairs of Syria, Lebanon, or other countries in the region is extremely limited. Jerusalem has focused, instead, on maintaining basic ground rules and redlines.

No transferring of advanced missiles and weapons systems or chemical weapons from Syria to Hezbollah is one of the rules the IDF has fought to enforce, including by the staging of air attacks on targets in Syria and Lebanon.

Advanced, more accurate, radar-equipped Yakhont missiles are one of the weapons that Israel has attempted to deny Hezbollah. They have a range of about 300 km., fly close to the sea or ground at Mach 2 to evade radar, and are usually armed with armor-piercing or high-explosive warheads. Placed near Israel's border with southern Lebanon, the Yakhont missiles' range would extend nearly all the way across the country.

Other potentially game-changing weapons that Israel has attempted to prevent from being transferred to Hezbollah include Russian-made anti-aircraft missiles and Iranian-made Fateh-110 surface-to-surface rockets.

An air strike last week on Syrian bases located on the Syria-Lebanon border that was attributed to Israel by Arab news sources seems to be part of this attempt. Advanced Scud missiles were reportedly targeted in that attack.

Another Israeli objective is to prevent Hezbollah from gaining a foothold in the Syrian parts

of the Golan Heights. An Israel Air Force attack in Quneitra on January 18 that killed the son of Hezbollah's late military leader Imad Moughniyeh and an Iranian general was part of that effort.

The air strike launched by Israel on Sunday evening on the northern Golan Heights near Majdal Shams that left four terrorists dead seems to be part of the same effort. The terrorists were reportedly attempting to plant IEDs near the border with Israel.

These IDF attacks, including on sovereign Syrian and Lebanese territory, are something of a gamble. Israel has permitted itself to launch these strikes based on the assumption that the Assad regime is too embattled to risk escalation. His military forces are weak and overstretched.

Opening up another front with Israel would jeopardize his regime. Israel is also betting that Hezbollah will not retaliate. Since the 2006 Second Lebanon War, when Hezbollah sustained major losses and dragged Lebanon into a destructive conflict with Israel, there has been relative quiet on the border.

But Israel's strategic assumptions might be growing outdated and its attacks on Syria and Lebanon might be getting riskier. That is the estimate of Dr. **Benedetta Berti**, a faculty member at Tel Aviv University and a research fellow at the **Institute for National Security Studies**.

Berti warned that the situation could easily deteriorate rapidly. If, say, Hezbollah's bombing attack in the Shaba Farms in March of last year had not just wounded IDF soldiers but had resulted in deaths, speculated **Berti**, this could have led to a major escalation. The danger of a sudden major loss of life on either side remains a real possibility.

Tuesday's incident, in which two projectiles fired from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights landed on Kibbutz Ein Zivan, should be a warning to the government that the situation on the border is fragile and could rapidly escalate. Fortunately, on this occasion there were no casualties.

While Israel is striving to enforce the most elemental redlines vis-à-vis Hezbollah and the Assad regime, it is playing an increasingly dangerous game of ping-pong that could eventually lead to all-out war. The truth is that Hezbollah's bellicose intentions, backed up by concrete actions like the building up of armaments and the encouragement of the Iranians, will eventually lead to a military confrontation with Israel. It is just a matter of time.

<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Northern-gamble-400493>