

Twenty years after withdrawal, Israel, Hezbollah brace for war

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In this May 13, 2020 photo, the Israeli military conduct a drills in northern Israel. Twenty years after Hezbollah guerrillas pushed Israel's last troops from southern Lebanon, both sides are gearing up for a war that neither seems to want. (AP Photo/File)

Sidon: Twenty years after Hezbollah guerrillas pushed Israel's last troops from southern Lebanon, both sides are gearing up for a possible war that neither seems to want.

Israeli troops are striking Hezbollah targets in neighboring Syria and drilling for what could be an invasion of Lebanon. Hezbollah is beefing up its own forces and threatening to invade Israel. The bitter enemies routinely exchange warnings and threats.

"We are preparing seriously for the next war. We're not taking any shortcuts because we understand we have to be extremely strong to defeat the enemy," said Col. Israel Friedler, an Israeli commander who has been overseeing a weeks-long exercise simulating war with Hezbollah at a base in northern Israel.

Hezbollah emerged as a ragtag guerrilla group in the 1980s, funded by Iran to battle Israeli troops occupying southern Lebanon. A protracted guerrilla war, characterized by roadside bombs and sniper attacks, eventually forced Israel to withdraw in May 2000. With the exception of an inconclusive, monthlong war in 2006, the volatile frontier has largely remained calm.

Since then, Hezbollah has evolved into the most powerful military and political entity in Lebanon. The party and its allies dominate Lebanon's parliament and are the main power behind Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government.

"Domestically, Hezbollah has emerged to become the preponderant force in Lebanon," said Hilal Khashan, a political science professor at the American University in Beirut. But regionally, he said, "the position of Hezbollah is precarious" due to Israeli pressure, domestic turmoil and problems for its Iranian benefactors.

The group can ill afford another massive clash with Israel. The Lebanese economy is in shambles, around half the population is now estimated to live in poverty, including in Hezbollah strongholds, and the group's finances are suffering because of US sanctions imposed on it and Iran.

The group also suffered heavy losses in the Syrian civil war, losing some 2,000 fighters while battling alongside the forces of Syria's President Bashar Assad. Once seen as a liberation movement, Hezbollah is now seen by many in Lebanon and the region as an Iranian pawn.

Qassim Qassir, an expert on Hezbollah, says the group has no interest in going to war but has been preparing for battle for a long time. "The battle will not be a battle of missiles only," he said, a reference that Hezbollah might try to invade parts of northern Israel.

In a region filled with adversaries, Israel considers Hezbollah to be its toughest and most immediate threat.

During the 2006 war, the group launched some 4,000 rockets into Israel, most of them unguided projectiles with limited

ranges. Today, Israeli officials say Hezbollah possesses some 130,000 rockets and missiles capable of striking virtually anywhere in Israel. They say it has sophisticated anti-tank missiles, night-vision equipment and cyber warfare capabilities.

Hezbollah operates along the border, in violation of the U.N. cease-fire that ended the 2006 war. It also has established a presence in southern Syria, near the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, providing an additional front in a future war.

Most critically, Israel believes Hezbollah is trying to develop and build precision-guided missiles.

Sheikh Ali Daamouh, a top Hezbollah official, claimed the Israelis are afraid of Hezbollah's missile program.

"The Israelis should be worried and scared because the resistance now has the will, intention, capabilities and force to make Israel face a great defeat in any coming confrontation," he said.

That confrontation may come sooner than anticipated. Israel has acknowledged carrying out scores of airstrikes in neighboring Syria in recent years, most of them believed to have been aimed at stopping Iranian arms shipments or missile technology for Hezbollah.

Syria has accused Israel of carrying out at least seven airstrikes in the past two months alone, believed to have targeted Iranian and proxy interests. Israeli warplanes and reconnaissance drones have been flying low over Lebanon on almost a daily basis in recent weeks.

Israeli officials say that neither Iran's troubles, including the coronavirus crisis, plunging oil prices and U.S. sanctions, nor Lebanon's domestic problems have changed Hezbollah's behavior.

They point to a recent attempt by Hezbollah to fly a drone into Israeli airspace and an incident last month in which alleged Hezbollah operatives damaged a fence along the Israeli-Lebanese frontier.

- AP