

14.1x31.07	1	1	עמוד	the jerusalem post - front	24/08/2017	59929410-9
המרכז הבינתחומי הרצליה - 84260						

Israel watches tag-team operation against ISIS nervously

ANALYSIS

• By ANNA AHRONHEIM

As Hezbollah and the Syrian and Lebanese armies enter the fourth day of a major offensive against an Islamic State enclave in the Qalamoun mountains of Lebanon, Israel watches nervously.

The Lebanese Army on Saturday opened its offensive against Islamic State on the northeast border with Syria near the town of Ras Baalbek, while Hezbollah announced its assault staged from the Qalamoun region on the Syrian side of the border.

While the Lebanese Army said that it was not coordinating with Syria or Hezbollah, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Jaber Ansari said that "the Lebanese military, backed by the Hezbollah resistance movement and the nation's support, have managed to score major victories against the [ISIS] terrorists."

Ansari, speaking at a press conference during a visit to Beirut after meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri on Tuesday, was quoted by Iran's Press TV as saying that he hoped "joint cooperation" between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah would continue "until terrorists are eradicated from the border region."

Lt.-Col. (res.) Mordechai Kedar of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies in Ramat Gan told *The Jerusalem Post* that Ansari's statement showed that the Lebanese Army is fully controlled by the Iranian-backed Shi'ite terrorist group.

Kedar, who was formerly in charge of the Syria desk for IDF Military Intelligence, said Israel stopped distinguishing between the Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah last year.

"The Lebanese Army is a wing of Hezbollah," he said. "All preparations by Israel for the next war take into account that the Lebanese Army is part of Hezbollah and

especially in terms of its campaign to prevent the transfer of advanced weaponry by Iran to the group in Lebanon.

Writing in the *Israel Hayom* daily, Shay said that "the takeover of the Syria-Lebanon border by the Syrian Army and Hezbollah constitutes another step in Iran's plan to create territorial continuity from Iran to Lebanon and presents a strategic threat to Israel."

Hezbollah is one of the most prominent terrorist organizations in the world, and while it has become bogged down fighting in Syria for President Bashar Assad, it has thereby gained tremendous fighting experience, as well as advanced weaponry.

Both France and the US have provided Lebanon with advanced weaponry, and this past summer the Lebanese Armed Forces received 50 armored vehicles, 40 artillery pieces and 50 grenade launchers from the US as part of an aid package to bolster the country against the threats posed by terrorist groups.

Saudi Arabia in March halted its military aid program to Beirut, after Lebanese President Michel Aoun defended Hezbollah's arsenal in an interview to an Egyptian TV channel, calling it "an essential component" of the means to defend Lebanon.

"Hezbollah weapons are not contradictory to the state but are an essential part in defending the country," Aoun told the Egyptian CBC satellite channel. "As long as a part of the territory is occupied by Israel, and as long as the army is not powerful enough to fight Israel, we feel the need to maintain the weapons of the resistance to complement the army."

Kedar told the *Post*: "The IDF has for years warned that everything that makes its way to the Lebanese Army will make its way to Hezbollah and Iran, but some countries like France and the US chose not to listen."

Israel and Hezbollah fought the 33-day Second Lebanon War in 2006, which came to an end under UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which called for the disarmament of Hezbollah, a withdrawal of the Israeli army from Lebanon, and the deployment of the Lebanese Army and an enlarged UN force in the country's south.

Since then, the frontier has been relatively quiet. Nonetheless, the IDF sees this border as the most explosive, and is prepared for an outbreak of hostilities at any time.

See ISIS, Page 10

ISIS

Continued from Page 1

therefore run by Iran."

According to *The Tehran Times*, Ansari also met with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut, discussing the offensive as well as Israel. He was quoted as saying "Iran has always tried to counter the expansionist policies of the Zionist regime" and that the Palestinian issue remains a priority for Tehran.

Photos have emerged on social media showing armored personnel carriers carrying a Hezbollah flag alongside a tank with a flag of Lebanon.

Dr. Shaul Shay, a lecturer at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya and former deputy head of the National Security Council, wrote on Wednesday that the "new alliance" between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces will have repercussions for Israel,