

While Hamas is preparing for an Israeli ground assault into Gaza, Hezbollah's movements on Israel's northern frontier bear close watching. Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi on Nov. 17 called on the Muslim world to retaliate against Israeli actions in Gaza. Naturally, many are looking in the direction of Lebanon, where Hezbollah, Iran's most capable militant proxy, could open a second front against Israel.

Though Iran would welcome the opportunity to demonstrate the spectrum of its militant proxy strength, especially after supplying Hamas with the long-range Fajr-5 rockets that have been targeting Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Hezbollah will likely be extremely cautious in deciding whether to participate in this war. The group's fate is linked to that of the embattled regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad; should Syria fracture along sectarian lines, Lebanon is likely to descend into civil war, and Hezbollah will have to conserve its strength and resources for a battle at home against its sectarian rivals. Indeed, Hezbollah has already been preparing for such a scenario by seizing control of villages along the Orontes River Basin in order to maintain connectivity with Syria's Alawite community.

At the same time, if Hamas is able to bog down Israeli ground forces by drawing them into a war of attrition in densely populated Gaza City, Hezbollah may see a political opportunity to burnish its credentials as the region's leading "resistance" movement. In this case, Hezbollah would likely monitor the situation until it could be assured that Israeli forces are sufficiently constrained on the Gaza front before it begins attacks on the northern front. Hezbollah is not looking for a major confrontation with Israel, and the tens of thousands of additional Israeli reservists called up compared to Operation Cast Lead suggest that Israel is already preparing for a two-front contingency. If Hezbollah does decide to participate in the war, it would be carefully timed to drive an already embattled Israel toward a cease-fire so that Hezbollah could claim a largely symbolic victory at relatively little cost. With Hezbollah uncertain how the Israeli-Hamas battle will play out, the group appears to be taking a cautious approach.

Stratfor has received indication that Hezbollah has prevented radical Palestinian groups in southern Lebanese refugee camps from firing rockets into northern Israel. In addition to an increase in the number of patrols by the Lebanese army and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, Hezbollah has been deploying numerous operatives in plainclothes along the border to monitor the situation.

Hezbollah has also installed cameras around the Ainal Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp near Sidon to monitor traffic from the camp to its outside environs. Whereas Hezbollah completely controls movement into and out of Palestinian refugee camps in the deep south, Ain al Hilweh lies completely within a Sunni neighborhood. For this reason, Hezbollah has rented a number of apartments around the camp, especially in al Ta'mir area, to keep a close watch there.

For now, Hezbollah appears intent on not allowing the battle in Gaza to spill into southern

Lebanon. It remains to be seen whether that calculus would shift should Hamas succeed in wearing down Israeli ground forces.

Israel appears to be positioning itself for a ground operation. The Israeli Cabinet on Nov. 16 approved Defense Minister Ehud Barak's request to call up 75,000 reservists, significantly more than during Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009. The Israeli army meanwhile has also sought to strengthen its presence on the borders with Gaza. Primary roads leading to Gaza and running parallel to Sinai have been declared closed military zones. Tanks, armored personnel carriers, self-propelled artillery and troops continue to stream to the border, and many units already appear to be in position.

During Operation Cast Lead, the Israelis transitioned to the ground phase around 8:00 p.m. on Jan. 3, 2009. Going in during dark hours allows the IDF to take advantage of its superior night-fighting equipment and training, including the use of night vision goggles and thermal optics.

The Israeli air force remained active throughout the night of Nov. 16-17, striking at targets across the Gaza Strip including key Hamas ministries, police stations and tunnels near the border crossing with Egypt. The IAF reportedly carried out strikes in Rafah's al-Sulan and al-Zahour neighborhoods, as well as east of the al-Maghazi refugee camp. According to IDF reports, the air force carried out a rapid and coordinated military strike, targeting approximately 70 underground medium-range rocket-launching sites in the less than an hour. The IDF claims direct hits were confirmed. The IAF will increasingly target Hamas militant defenses ahead of any ground invasion. Already the IAF has bombed militant defensive positions, particularly in the northern part of the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, Hamas and other militant factions in Gaza have been actively striking back at Israel. More than 80 rockets have been launched from Gaza over the past 24 hours. Of the rockets launched Nov. 17, approximately 57 landed in Israel. According to the IDF, a total of 640 rockets have been launched since Nov. 14, with 410 landing in Israel. A long-range rocket was fired from Gaza toward Tel Aviv at approximately 4:45 p.m. local time Nov. 17 but was successfully intercepted by the recently deployed Iron Dome anti-rocket defense system in the area. Hamas continues to target areas around Ashkelon, Ashdod and Beersheva, with the Iron Dome system intercepting five rockets over Ashkelon at 5:15 p.m. The majority of rockets launched from Gaza appear to be of shorter range than the Fajr-5. The IDF has stated its Iron Dome interceptors have so far successfully intercepted 90 percent of the rockets, though this may be an exaggeration.

One of the long-range rockets was intercepted by the newly installed Iron Dome battery in the Tel Aviv area. A Stratfor source has indicated that the rocket was not a Fajr-5, but was a locally manufactured long-range rocket in Hamas' arsenal.

If militants in Gaza are now able to locally manufacture their own long-range rockets that can target Tel Aviv and other major Israeli cities, it would be a worrisome development for Israel. Thus far, Israel has been able to focus its efforts on limiting the supply of these rockets to Gaza through interdiction efforts, such as the alleged Oct. 23 strike on the Yarmouk arms factory in

Sudan. But if Palestinian militants can manufacture long-range rockets in Gaza, it will be much more difficult for Israel to restrict Gaza's inventory of these rockets. Beyond rocket launch sites and caches, which Israel is currently targeting with its airstrikes, it would need to target production sites and those who would be responsible for manufacturing the rockets.

Furthermore, it will be significantly harder for Israeli intelligence to form an accurate picture of the number of these rockets locally constructed in Gaza. We have already seen that Israeli intelligence likely did not anticipate how many long-range rockets had escaped its first wave of strikes, and the fact that Hamas may have been producing these weapons could explain Israel's lack of complete information.

Hamas recognizes that these long-range rocket attacks have only increased the likelihood and intensity of an Israeli ground incursion. A significant ground force offers the Israelis the best chance of finding and neutralizing the factories making these long-range rockets as well as the shorter-range Qassams. Hamas and the other militants therefore are actively preparing their defenses for the anticipated incursion and are likely laying improvised explosive devices, setting up road blocks and defensive emplacements and sorting out their ranks and tasks.

Hamas has already announced that its Al Murabiteen units, consisting of five brigades spread across Gaza, will be concentrated in the border region to limit Israeli penetration into the Gaza Strip. Learning from Hezbollah's example in 2006, special units of Hamas are relying heavily on tunnels to maintain communications. Should Israel be drawn into more densely populated areas of Gaza in pursuit of weapons storage and manufacturing facilities, Hamas has also reportedly prepared its suicide bombers, known as Istishadiyeen, to raise the cost for Israel in an urban battle.

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