

Lecture Series: The Middle East in Crisis

Israel - Iran: collision in Lebanon

Implications for UNIFIL and European Militaries in the Levant

On 17 July 2018, the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) hosted its second public lecture part of the Middle East in Crisis series. This series aims to provide knowledge and stimulate debate on the issues currently affecting the Middle East and analyse their root causes.

This second lecture was delivered by **Dr. Jean-Loup Samaan, Associate Professor in Strategic Studies at the National Defense College in Abu Dhabi** (United Arab Emirates). Dr. Samaan provided useful expertise and insights in order to better understand and contextualise the Israel-Hezbollah standoff on the border between Israel and Lebanon and the new elements of the Israel-Iran enmity related to the ongoing conflict inside Syria. Such new elements are particularly important as they have the potential to trigger a new regional conflict between Israel and Iran.

Dr. Samaan began by contextualising how Lebanon has been the theatre of the Israel-Iran confrontation at least since the 1980s. In particular, in the early 80s, Lebanon was characterised by an impoverished and marginalised Shia community, features exploited by Tehran to expand its influence across the Arab Levant. By deploying members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to Lebanon, Iran provided the support and training ensuring the creation of the Hezbollah group. The nascent Hezbollah substituted suicide bombing with more sophisticated tactics such as rocket launches and guerrilla tactics—developing as Iran's most powerful proxy and the most dangerous foe for the Israel Defence Force (IDF). A clear example of the IDF's struggle against the group can be drawn from the 2006 war with Israel in which the Lebanese militia was able to sustain a military confrontation with the IDF for 33 days—longer than any other regional state actor.

What emerged from the war was the current *status quo* of mutual deterrence, whereby Hezbollah refrains from attacking due to the potential impact of the Israeli Air Force over Lebanon, and Israel restrains its actions due to Hezbollah's capacity to hit anywhere inside the country in case of a new war. Such status quo is now threatened by the latest developments inside Syria. The war in Syria has enhanced Hezbollah's military capabilities, as the group's militants gained valuable experience on the ground, and rallied up its political base, as demonstrated by the result of the 2018 Lebanese elections. Another game changer is related to the opening of a new front on the Golan Heights along the Syria-Israel border.

As the forces loyal to Bashar al Assad—including Hezbollah fighters and members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—continue to fight rebels around the border town of Quneitra, Israel is increasingly worried about hostile forces approaching the strategic buffer zone it established in 1967. Dr. Samaan pointed out that the Netanyahu government has two red lines with regards to developments on the ground in Syria. The first one is the transfer of weapons from Syria’s or Iran’s military to Hezbollah. This has been enforced through several airstrikes conducted by the IDF inside Syria, targeting weapons deposits and convoys destined to Hezbollah. The second red line is related to preventing Iran from setting up permanent bases inside Syria. To this end the Israeli government is currently trying to lobby Moscow to force Iran to downscale its Syria involvement, and yet it is hard to predict how much leverage Russia will have over Iran in the coming months.

For Europe and Italy, preventing escalations between Iran and Israel in Lebanon is a primary concern due to Italy and France providing two of the largest military contingents of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). The UNIFIL mission tasks are to confirm Israel’s withdrawal from South Lebanon, restore peace, and ensure the government of Lebanon has effective authority in the area. However, the presence of UNIFIL can also have a positive impact on making sure no further escalation takes place. In concluding his lecture, Dr. Samaan argued that the countries involved in the peacekeeping mission along the Israel-Lebanon border are in a privileged position to channel messages of communication between the two sides, ensure the status quo between them is maintained, and UNIFIL mission can continue.