

The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

Tensions Grow Between Hezbollah and Israel in Southern Lebanon

Tensions have escalated in southern Lebanon this week, amid a tit-for-tat between Israel and Hezbollah. Israel accused Hezbollah fighters of crossing its border with Lebanon in the disputed Shebaa Farms area, which is claimed by both Israel and Lebanon. The Israeli military alleged that three to five Hezbollah fighters crossed the border before being repulsed by Israeli border guards. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned Hezbollah that it was “playing with fire” by inciting a border altercation. For their part, Hezbollah denied any of its fighters crossed into foreign territory, blaming the shots fired on Israeli forces seeking to claim a “false and mythical victory.” Tensions between Israel and Hezbollah have been especially high since late last week when a Hezbollah operative was killed by an airstrike in Syria that was attributed to Israel.

The incident between Israel and Hezbollah occurred in the vicinity of Shebaa Farms, also known as Mount Dov. The area is located near the intersection of the shared border between Israel, Syria, and Lebanon, and is adjacent to the Golan Heights. While Israel accused the Hezbollah fighters of carrying assault rifles, this claim was denied by Hezbollah, who said there was no exchange of fire, and the incident was precipitated by Israeli border guards being paranoid about Hezbollah’s response to the airstrike in Syria. Israel had been bracing for a response by Hezbollah in the aftermath of its strike on Damascus. As a matter of policy, Israel does not disclose their responsibility for airstrikes in Syria, but this particular attack has been widely attributed to Israel, who did not deny the allegations.

Hezbollah’s second-in-command Naim Qasim confirmed in an interview that Israeli strikes were culpable for the death of a member of his organization in Syria near Damascus last week. However, Wiam Wahab, a pro-Hezbollah Lebanese politician, said this week’s incident was unrelated to the strikes in Syria and was likely just a reconnaissance mission. Wahab added that a response to the strikes in Damascus was forthcoming, but the altercation in Shebaa Farms was not that response.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was bullish on the altercation, warning that any incursion into Israeli territory would be repelled by force, and that Lebanon and Hezbollah would be held responsible. Netanyahu also hinted at forthcoming security operations abroad, saying Israel would “operate in all arenas for defense, close to our borders and far from our borders.” Despite having great antipathy for each other, Israel and Hezbollah have generally respected rules of engagement where neither side deliberately targets the other. Israel has tried to avoid killing Hezbollah fighters in Syria, and Hezbollah has reciprocated by not targeting Israelis. Neither side wants to provoke a major conflict that draws Lebanon, Israel, and Hezbollah into a full-scale war. Despite the incident in Shebaa Farms this week, Hezbollah has said it will continue to respect the rules of engagement and would not directly target Israeli positions, although this decision could be reversed if Israel does not reciprocate the policy.