

## Analysis: Hizbollah's quandary over Israel retaliation in Syria

Israel's air raids on Hizbollah targets inside Syria have landed one of its most dangerous foes with an agonising dilemma.



Israeli soldiers stand on top of tanks in the Golan Heights, Israel, near the Syrian town of Kan Arnaby. Photo: EPA

By David Blair, Chief Foreign Correspondent

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For years, the radical Shia movement has painstakingly amassed an arsenal of Iranian-supplied weaponry. Today, Hizbollah has tens of thousands of missiles carefully stockpiled in south Lebanon and readied for use against Israel.

If Hassan Nasrallah, the Hizbollah leader and a man who once basked in the adoration of the Arab world, is not prepared to launch his deadly armoury now, then when might he ever do so? He must decide whether to retaliate for the air strikes by bombarding Israel - and almost certainly starting a regional war - or sitting tight and risking the appearance of a paper tiger.

Israel clearly believes that Mr Nasrallah will choose caution. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, authorised the raids on Syria and then nonchalantly flew to China on a visit that will keep him away until Friday. This was not the behaviour of a leader who believes his country to be on the brink of war.

Israel has moved two of its five Iron Dome missile defence batteries near the border with Lebanon. But General Yair Golan, the head of Israeli Northern Command, told journalists that he did not sense any "winds of war". He spoke while joining the annual fun run for the Golani Brigade - again, hardly the behaviour of a general who thinks he is about to fight.

Instead, Israel senses the prospect of a strategic victory over Hizbollah. Mr Nasrallah faces his dilemma at a uniquely testing moment.

Hizbollah gets its weapons from Iran, but they must reach Lebanon across Syrian territory. If President Bashar al-Assad goes, so might this vital supply route.

The leaders of post-Assad Syria will almost certainly be drawn from the country's Sunni majority, who are not natural allies of Shia Hizbollah, and still less of Iran.

The fact that Mr Nasrallah has sent his men to Syria to fight alongside the current regime almost guarantees him the enmity of any future ruler.

The possible loss of his supply line will alter Mr Nasrallah's calculations.

When he started the last war with Israel in 2006, he knew that every missile he fired could be replaced by Iran - as indeed they were. This time, there might be no new supply of rockets down the road from Syria.

Fortunately for Mr Nasrallah, he has another option. Every so often, an incident lifts the veil on Hizbollah's covert campaign against

Israeli interests worldwide. In March, one operative was convicted in Cyprus for scouting out Israeli targets on the island.

As a middle way between doing nothing and firing off his arsenal, Mr Nasrallah could escalate his movement's efforts to attack Israeli tourists and diplomats.

That is hardly a rerun of the glory days of 2006, when he claimed to have taken on Israel and won. In his current predicament, however, Mr Nasrallah may have little choice.