Hezbollah excercise is maneuver orchestrated by Iran, Israeli analyst says

• By YAAKOV LAPPIN

A reportedly large Hezbollah military drill held in southern Lebanon is part of an Iranian-orchestrated preparation for a confrontation with Israel, a senior Israeli security analyst said.

Over 10,000 Hezbollah fighters participated in the terror organization’s largest military exercise to date last week, which included defensive tactics and “preparations to conquer the Upper Galilee,” Lebanese newspaper Al-Jounhoura reported Thursday morning.

“This is happening in full coordination with Iran,” said Dr. Ely Karmon, a senior research school at the interdisciplinary Center Herzlya’s Institute for Counter-Terrorism. “In his last two speeches, [Hezbollah chief Hassan] Nasrallah indicated that he would join an Iranian counter-strike if Israel struck Iran’s nuclear program.”

Karmon said Hezbollah was free to operate in the area of the Litani River in Lebanon. While it had secret bases further south, nearer to the border with Israel, the presence of UNIFIL forces restricted Hezbollah somewhat, he added.

“I assume the drill was held in the Litani area, where Hezbollah stationed new outposts. It bought land in the area from Sunni and Christians to control the territory,” Karmon added.

Iran could also be preparing Hezbollah for the possibility of ordering it to launch a provocation against Israel to preempt an Israeli strike, Karmon said.

“I wouldn’t belittle the claim that they will try and penetrate the Galilee. Even if they hold a small village for 24 hours, it would allow them to score points against the IDF,” the analyst added.

According to the report, some 2,000 elite Hezbollah fighters will continue training in Iran, a development that is indicative of the close cooperation between the two.

“Iran’s interest is Hezbollah’s interest. If Iran goes nuclear, Hezbollah can remain as a significant force,” Karmon said.

The training could also come in useful for the Iran-Iranian Hezbollah alliance, since Hezbollah can contribute a military force to defend a future Allawite enclave. The Allawite mini-state might be amalgamated to the Shi’ite-dominated region of the Bekaa Valley of northern Lebanon in the event that Syria collapses.

The force of 10,000 Hezbollah fighters could also be unleashed on the streets of Beirut if Sunnis rise up against Hezbollah, Karmon added.

Yoram Schweitzer, a researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, echoed Karmon’s caution against dismissing Hezbollah’s threat of seizing sections of the Galilee.

“They can send small assault teams into the Galilee... while everyone is busy with attacks in Lebanon,” Schweitzer said.

“They can try to plant the flag [in Israeli soil], as part of psychological warfare. I would suggest that the threat not be dismissed,” said Schweitzer, a former member of the intelligence community.

Schweitzer added that Hezbollah’s attempt to send a menacing message can also be understood as the product of a Hezbollah threatened by the rise of Sunni power in the region.

Last Friday, Nasrallah threatened to rain rockets onto Israel’s North as part of his public address on the Iranian-sponsored “al-Quds Day,” when Iranian leaders trumpet threats to annihilate Israel.

Nasrallah boasted of an ability to strike strategically sensitive sites in Israel, saying, “hitting these targets with a small number of rockets will turn... the lives of hundreds of thousands of Zionists to real hell, and we can talk about tens of thousands of dead,” he said.

IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Benny Gantz said Wednesday that “whoever thinks he can eliminate Israel and try to harm our state will discover the deadly force of the IDF.”

Jerusalem Post staff contributed to this report.