Israel wary as Hezbollah gains battle experience

TEL AVIV

BY ISABEL KERSHNER

Hezbollah's distracting and costly engagement in the Syrian civil war has offered some practical benefit to Israelis. It has also been a source of foreboding.

On the one hand, Hezbollah, the militant Lebanese Shiite organization that fought a monthlong war against Israel in 2006, is preoccupied with shoring up the government of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria in its struggle against rebel forces, and it is suffering losses. But Hezbollah is also acquiring battlefield experience, and the only way for Mr. Assad, a longtime Hezbollah ally, to repay the group is by supplying it with sophisticated weapons, according to Israeli military officials and experts — strengths that could eventually be used against Israel.

"Hezbollah has 4,000 to 5,000 soldiers today in Syria," a senior Israeli military officer told reporters at army headquarters here last week. "This is a major burden for Hezbollah but also a major advantage."

Speaking on the condition of anonymity in accordance with Israeli Army rules, he added, "I have no doubt that Hezbollah has gained much more self-confidence because of the Syrian experience."

Hezbollah fired thousands of rockets at Israel during the 2006 war, which began after Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers on the Israel-Lebanon border. More than 1,000 Lebanese and dozens of Israelis were killed in the fighting, which ended with a United Nations-brokered cease-fire. The war was deemed a failure by many Israelis, though experts say it restored a degree of deterrence.

Since then, Israel's border with Lebanon has been mostly quiet. But Israel is preparing intensively for another possible round of fighting with Hezbollah, which military planners here see as inevitable. In their view, the experience gained by Hezbollah's commanders and fighters in Syria is likely to make that next round more challenging for Israel.

"This kind of experience cannot be bought," said Gabi Siboni, director of the military and strategic affairs program at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University.

Mr. Siboni and other analysts said that Hezbollah's experience in Syria should not be overstated because the group was fighting rebel forces like the Free Syrian Army and jihadist groups, not a modern, regular army. Still, Mr. Siboni said: "It is an additional factor that we will have to deal with. There is no replacement for experience, and it is not to be scoffed at."

While the Israeli military used to plan for conventional armored battle — tanks against tanks — now its forces train to withstand fighters who have antitank missiles and secret underground hide-outs.

Over the last two years, according to military officials, much Israeli Army training has moved from the southern desert to the Galilee region in the north, where the terrain is similar to that of Lebanon and Syria.

At the same time, the Israeli military is conducting a mostly covert campaign to maintain a qualitative edge over Hezbollah and curb the buildup of the group's weaponry. Israel has refused to confirm or deny involvement in about half a dozen airstrikes over the past year, mostly in Syrian territory. But Israel's leaders have said they will act to prevent transfers of advanced weapons to Hezbollah from Syria, like accurate, long-range rockets and shore-to-ship or ground-to-air missiles. Israel is also concerned about Hezbollah's acquisition of unmanned aerial vehicles, or U.A.V.s, more commonly known as drones.

"A Hezbollah with modern surface-to-air systems, with modern U.A.V.s, with modern cybercapabilities, well, this is a different Hezbollah," the senior military official said, one that could have "much more appetite to taste another conflict with Israel."

Many Israeli analysts say that for Hezbollah, the disadvantages of its engagement in Syria outweigh the advantages and that there is an upside for Israel.

Fighting to help preserve the Assad government in Syria is "almost existential" for Hezbollah, said Ely Karmon of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya, Israel.

Under the Assad family's rule, all of Hezbollah's Iranian-supplied weapons passed through Damascus, Syria's capital. And the group, Mr. Karmon said, has "always needed the strategic umbrella of Syria."