



ISRAEL, HEZBOLLAH, AND THE POTENTIAL FOR FULL-SCALE WAR

Dr. Debra Shushan, Director of Policy | Avraham Spraragen, Policy Associate

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What is Hezbollah? What is the history of its conflict with Israel?

Hezbollah was founded in 1982 in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon during its civil war. A Shi'a militant group whose name means "Party of God," Hezbollah has been closely [linked](#) to Iran's theocratic government since its inception, drawing inspiration from Iran's (Shi'a) Islamic Revolution and pledging allegiance to Iran's supreme leader. Iran's new regime provided funds and training to Hezbollah, seeing an opportunity to expand its regional influence. Hezbollah's 1985 [manifesto](#) claimed "the necessity of the destruction of Israel," calling it "the vanguard of the United States in our Islamic world" and "the greatest danger to our future generations and to the destiny of our lands, particularly as it glorifies the ideas of settlement and expansion, initiated in Palestine," pledging that "our struggle will end only when this entity [Israel] is obliterated."

Hezbollah killed over 300 people in a suicide bombing of US Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, and it has conducted terrorist attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets abroad. The State Department [designated](#) Hezbollah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997. Hezbollah has [participated](#) in Lebanese parliamentary elections since 1992 and first entered a governing coalition in 2005. It maintains an extensive network of social services that helps it build popular support.

Periodic clashes between Israel and Hezbollah followed the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon in 2000. Hezbollah utilizes Israel's continued presence in Sheba'a Farms and other disputed areas in the Israel-Lebanon-Syria border region to justify its ongoing operations against Israel and continued existence as an armed militia outside of the Lebanese Armed Forces. In 2006, Hezbollah launched a raid into Israel, killing three Israeli soldiers and capturing two more. Israel responded with a full-scale air and ground offensive [intended](#) to restore Israeli deterrence and degrade Hezbollah's military capabilities, among other objectives.

What is the current status of the hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah?

On October 8, the day after Hamas' attack on Israel, Hezbollah launched an opportunistic attack on three Israeli posts in Sheba'a Farms, claiming to be acting "[in solidarity](#)" with the Palestinian people. Since then, Israel and Hezbollah have traded thousands of rocket and missile attacks across the de facto Israel-Lebanon border on a near-daily basis. Over 150,000 civilians have been [displaced](#), including roughly [80,000](#) from northern Israel and [94,000](#) from southern Lebanon. Hezbollah rocket fire has ignited major [fires](#) in Israel's north, while white phosphorus [munitions](#) have allegedly produced substantial [damage](#) in Lebanese villages and olive groves. (The IDF has [stated](#) that it used the phosphorus shells to generate smokescreens rather than for offensive purposes.) Hezbollah's attacks have included rocket [barrages](#) against [northern towns](#) and drone strikes against Israeli [military bases](#); they have [killed](#) at least 19 IDF soldiers and nine Israeli civilians. Israeli strikes in Lebanon have killed at least 300 Hezbollah

fighters and 87 Lebanese civilians. An Israeli [airstrike](#) on June 11 that killed Taleb Sami Abdullah, the most senior Hezbollah commander assassinated since October 7, and three of his aides prompted Hezbollah to unleash its largest attack on Israel in a single day thus far. Hostilities have extended to Syria, where Israel's "[shadow campaign](#)" to disrupt Iranian weapons transfers to Hezbollah forces in Lebanon has killed dozens of Hezbollah officers and Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

What is the likelihood of a full-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah?

Preventing escalation of the Israel-Hamas war into a broader regional conflict has been one of the primary strategic goals of the Biden Administration since October 7. In addition to diplomatic engagement, the US acted to deter Iran and its proxies by sending aircraft carrier [strike groups](#) to the region. The tempo and intensity of attacks has nonetheless increased in the past several weeks, prompting some analysts to warn that full-scale war is "[becoming inevitable](#)." Hezbollah upped the ante since Israel and Iran traded attacks in mid-April (including Iran's unprecedented missile and drone strike on Israel) and again after Israel began its military operation in Rafah. This included [announcing](#) a general mobilization, which typically entails activating reserves, and deploying new heavy rockets and a drone system to target Israel's Iron Dome missile defenses. Yet, analysts [assess](#) that Hezbollah is keeping its attacks "below the threshold that would grant the Israelis international legitimacy to launch a full-scale campaign in Lebanon."

Despite the shared [interest](#) in de-escalation, extremists are demanding war. Itamar Ben-Gvir, National Security Minister in the Netanyahu government, [declared](#): "All Hezbollah strongholds should be burned. They should be destroyed. War!" Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich called for a strike on Beirut, "the capital of terrorism." Prime Minister Netanyahu [warned](#) of a "very strong action," and is now likely more [beholden](#) to his ultra-right flank after the departure of Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot from his coalition. Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary General recently [stated](#), "[W]e consider the liberation of Palestine a priority over everything else. If Palestine is liberated, the entire Arab region will be liberated... We aspire to liberate normal, upright human beings from the cancerous tumor which is Israel, and from its sponsor, the Great Satan."

The longer the current hostilities continue, ample opportunities for miscalculation on both sides could lead to full-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah, as it [did](#) in 2006.

What Israeli interests are at stake? How would all-out war with Hezbollah impact Israel?

Israel has a crucial interest in restoring security to the north and enabling its internally displaced citizens to return home and to begin reconstruction of the damaged towns and communities. Israel's war cabinet has considered military options for forcing the full implementation of [Resolution 1701](#), passed by the UN Security Council following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. This would include Hezbollah's withdrawal from the area between the Litani River and the [Blue Line](#), a temporary boundary between Israel and Lebanon set by the United Nations in 2000 following the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon.

A full-fledged war with Hezbollah is likely to be devastating for Israel, especially if it occurs while it is still battling Hamas in Gaza. Hezbollah has [amassed](#) more firepower since 2006

and its fighters are [battle-hardened](#) after years of combat in Syria's civil war. [Compared to Hamas](#), Hezbollah is "another scale, much closer to a regular army than a terror organization." Hezbollah has the capacity to strike far deeper and possibly [hit](#) any target in Israel with accuracy. According to a [report](#) by the Institute for Counterterrorism at Reichman University, Hezbollah could unleash massive barrages of 2,500 to 3,000 rockets per day at the start of a full-blown war. This would exhaust Israel's Iron Dome and David's Sling interceptors within a few days, exposing Israel to thousands of rockets and missiles without an effective defense. According to estimates, Hezbollah has as many as 150,000 [missiles](#) aimed at Israel. Israel's National Emergency Authority has [cautioned](#) that the Israel Electric Corporation is not prepared for attacks on its power grid, and the Health Ministry has warned that extended power outages could lead Israel's [health system](#) to collapse. The Reichman report also predicts that Hezbollah would attempt to incite uprisings in the West Bank and among Palestinian citizens of Israel. [According](#) to Eran Etzion, the deputy head of Israel's National Security Council during the 2006 war, "It's very hard to see how [a war against Hezbollah] can be won quickly, or at all... we will see [pictures] of mass destruction in very sensitive areas within Israel on a scale we've never seen before."

How would an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah impact Lebanon?

As strong as Hezbollah is, Israel is [stronger](#), and would inflict massive damage on Lebanon. Prime Minister Netanyahu has [threatened](#) to "turn Beirut into Gaza." The 2006 war, which lasted 34 days, had a profound [impact](#) on the country of 5.5 million people, killing nearly 1200 Lebanese (mostly civilians), displacing almost 1 million, leaving unexploded cluster bombs, destroying infrastructure and [agriculture](#), and costing an estimated \$5 billion in direct war damage and lost income and output. A new full-blown war could be even more "catastrophic" and Lebanon – which is in a state of [political paralysis](#) and has endured a debilitating [economic crisis](#) since 2019 – is in no position to [cope](#) with the fallout. While Gulf states supported Lebanese reconstruction efforts after the 2006 war, they may be [less interested](#) while facing pressure to contribute generously to Gaza reconstruction efforts. [Polling](#) conducted in November-December 2023 indicated that a majority of Lebanese prefer that their country "stay out of foreign war" and focus on internal political and economic reform – with a super-majority of Sunnis and Christians adopting that position. According to a Lebanese [official](#), Lebanon is "singularly focused on averting this conflict," which "would be unprecedented, with a broader geographical scope, multiple fronts, and extensive cross-border engagement."

What is the likely impact of an Israel-Hezbollah war on the region?

The Israel-Hamas war produced a [regional escalation](#) and has sparked fears of a broader regional war that would further pit Israel against groups supported by Iran, increasing the impact on the US and countries in the Middle East that are already drawn into the conflict. A full-blown war between Israel and Hezbollah would likely [lead](#) the latter's [allies](#) all over the region – including the Houthis in Yemen and Iran-linked groups in Iraq and Syria – to step up their own attacks against Israel. Given the strong historic and religious links between Hezbollah and Iran, and the former's role as an "insurance policy" for the regime in Tehran, Iran could intervene to safeguard its most important proxy. Moreover, escalating Houthi attacks in the Red Sea would increase harm to international shipping and the global economy.

What should the Biden Administration do?

1. ***Continue intensive diplomatic efforts to prevent all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah:*** The Biden Administration has been pushing for de-escalation at the [highest levels](#), including efforts by Secretaries Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin. In Amos Hochstein, President Biden has a skilled envoy who [mediated](#) an [agreement](#) establishing a permanent Israel-Lebanon maritime boundary in 2022. Administration officials should [continue](#) working with key players to develop an agreement that will enable the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1701, the return home of all displaced persons in Israel and Lebanon, and ultimately the demarcation of a land border between Israel and Lebanon.
2. ***Utilize diplomacy and deterrence vis-a-vis Iran and its regional proxies:*** Given Iran's influence over Hezbollah and other proxies, [indirect US talks](#) with Tehran are key to preventing miscalculation and a regional conflict – as is continued [pressure](#) on Iran through sanctions enforcement, seizure of weapons exports, and military pressure on Iranian assets outside Iran. While the Biden Administration should use its leverage with Israel to prevent escalation, the US should also continue signaling to Iran and Hezbollah that it will back Israel if they go on the offensive.
3. ***Facilitate a negotiated ceasefire in Gaza:*** As Secretary of State Blinken has [stated](#), achieving a ceasefire in Gaza is “the best way also to empower a diplomatic solution” to the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. While it will not fully or automatically bring down the temperature on Israel's northern front, a negotiated ceasefire in Gaza is a first step to ending regional escalation and should be leveraged to facilitate an arrangement between Israel and Hezbollah to end hostilities.
4. ***Build a better future for Lebanon – and limit Iran's role there:*** The ongoing political chaos and economic deterioration in Lebanon has created a vacuum that Iran and Hezbollah can exploit. The Biden Administration should lead allies in pledging to help Lebanon rebuild its economy and strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces – which would be [deployed](#) in areas from which Hezbollah withdraws in a negotiated deal.