

Is an All-Out War in the North a Precondition for Evacuated Israelis to Return Home?

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Since the outbreak of the war on October 7, underway along the Lebanese border as well as inside the Gaza Strip, the Israeli media has highlighted the determination of people evacuated from northern communities not to return to their homes until the security situation improves. This is mainly due to fears of a ground attack against their communities. Surveys conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) reflect these sentiments, but also indicate that – contrary to the public and media discourse – the public in general and residents of the north in particular do not view a widescale war against Hezbollah as a precondition for creating a situation that would allow them to return to their homes. The assessment is, therefore, that an integrated response is needed: a continuation of the aggressive military activity that is part of the current fighting, coupled with significant improvements to security in northern Israel, led by enhanced civilian protection and defense means – alongside a diplomatic move whereby Hezbollah agrees to distance its operatives from the border with Israel. This article examines the gap that exists between the media and public rhetoric and the IDF activity in Lebanon.

Since October 7, 2023, and alongside the war in the Gaza Strip, Israel is fighting a secondary campaign on the northern border. In effect, this is a mini-war that has evinced a clear trend of escalation since the conflict began, even if it remains limited for the time being. This situation could lead to escalation that would spark an all-out war with Lebanon, resulting from a deliberate decision, escalation dynamics, or a miscalculation by any of the parties involved. At the same time, at this stage and despite the frequent threats by Israel, Hezbollah remains committed to the operational equations that it has forged with Israel (apart from specific incidents, such as the killing of senior Hamas figure Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut, which prompted a rare response), apparently out of a desire to avoid all-out war for the time being.

The main short term dilemma facing Israeli decision makers relates to the need to improve the security situation and the sense of security among Israel's northern residents who were evacuated from their homes, to allow them to return to their communities – even though Hezbollah has vowed to continue firing missiles as long as the war in Gaza rages. Moreover, as long as the fighting continues, evacuated communities help at least to partially contain the current conflict, since they significantly reduce the risk of Israeli civilians being struck by Hezbollah anti-tank fire or rockets.

Alongside the obvious tension between the need to ensure the security of the population and the desire to avoid all-out conflict, the system must also address the challenge of allowing residents to return to their homes – something that does not depend on military parameters alone but also includes a sense of personal security. The Israeli media is dominated by voices of civilians and community leaders from the north who argue that the state can no longer count on the doctrines prevalent before October 7 when it comes to readiness to face Hezbollah or to the organization's commitment to its operational equations. Moreover, these voices insist that people will not return to their homes until Hezbollah fighters have been driven back a considerable distance from the border – as part of a political agreement, as the result of military action, or both.

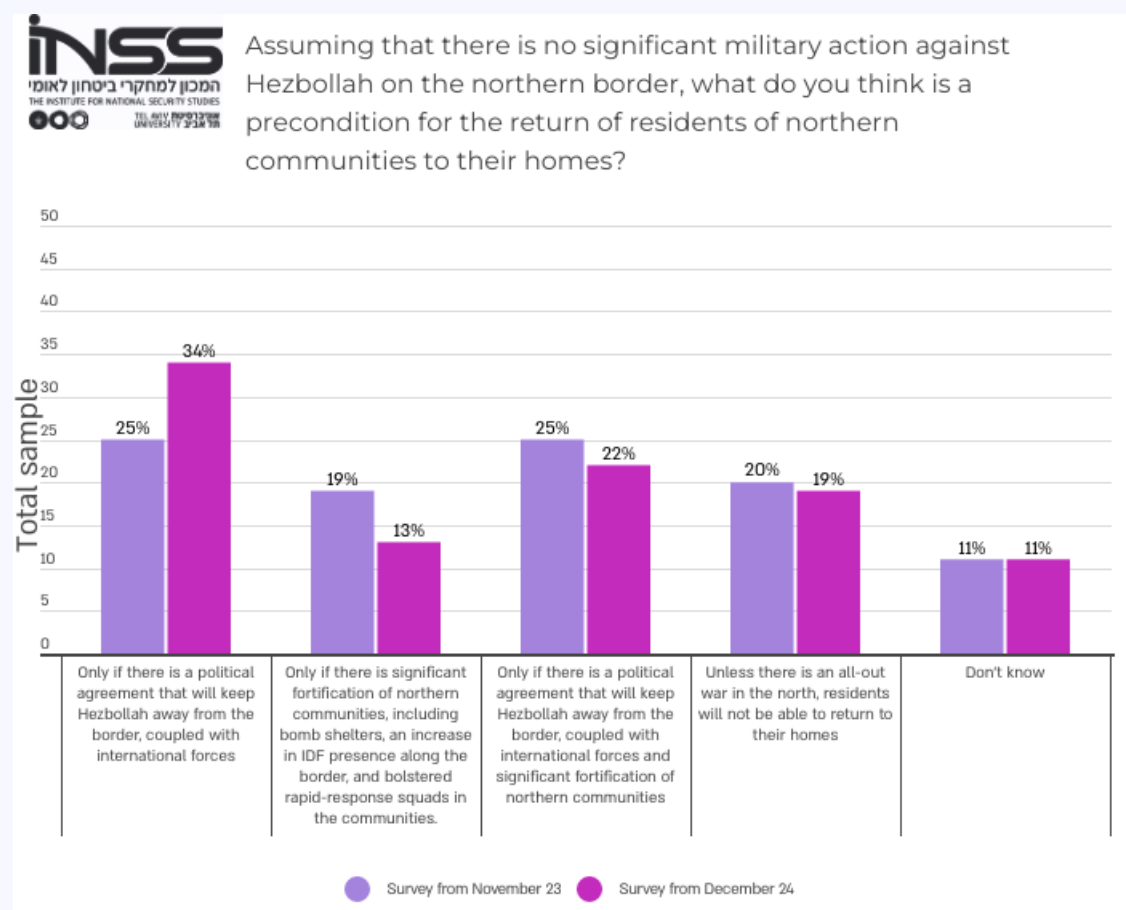
This article examines several conceptual gaps related to the return of the evacuees, the IDF's activity on the northern front, and the degree of public support for launching an all-out war in Lebanon.

Is War Indeed a Precondition for the Return of the Northern Israel's Evacuated Population?

Public opinion surveys conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS)¹ examined responses to the question: What is necessary for residents of northern Israel to be able to return to their homes? Only a minority of respondents (around 20 percent) in the general survey and among residents of northern communities argued that residents will not be able to return to their homes until the IDF launches a significant campaign against Hezbollah in the north. This

¹ The online surveys were based on a representative sample of the adult Jewish population of Israel and included some 500 respondents. The surveys were conducted weekly between October 12 and December 31 by the Data Analytics Desk at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) with the Rafi Smith Institute. The surveys contained a number of constant questions, as well as varying questions on a number of issues. The maximum margin of error for the sample is +/- 4 percent, with a 95 percent confidence level.

appears to contradict the media's coverage of the issue, whereby the evacuees' return is dependent on an all-out military campaign. Moreover, support for the possibility of a political agreement as a means of allowing residents to return to their homes rose from survey to survey, in parallel with a drop in willingness to make do with added fortification for homes in the north. On November 19, for example, 25 percent of respondents said that residents of the northern communities should only return to their homes once a political agreement is reached that will keep Hezbollah fighters away from the border and there is an international presence there to guarantee the agreement. In contrast, on December 24, around one third of respondents – 33.8 percent – expressed their support for this option. However, it is important to note that among residents of the north, this response was far less popular – 14 percent in favor on November 18, and 18 percent on December 24.



IDF Activity in Lebanon

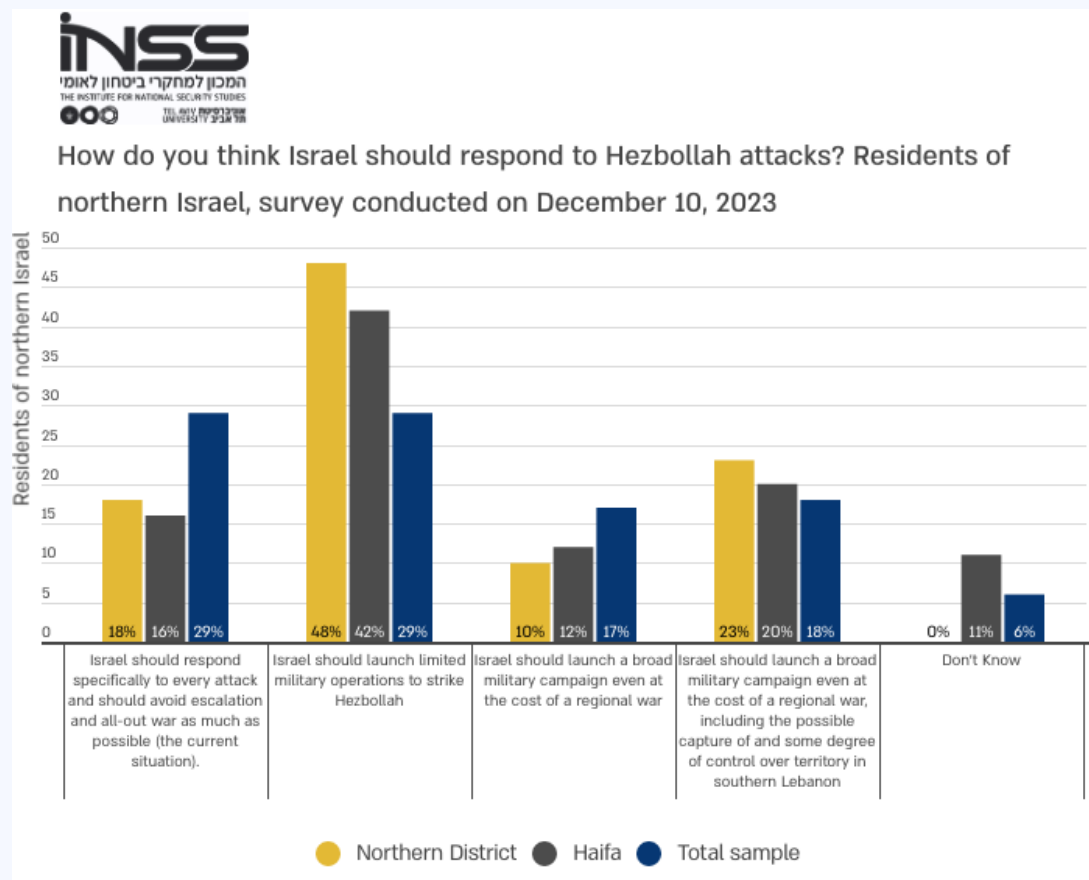
Much of the public and media discourse portrays Israeli operations on the northern arena as insufficient to create a new and improved security reality along the border. Many people have hinted that this can only be achieved through an all-out military operation. However, in many cases the IDF has gone on the offensive and exacted a significant price from Hezbollah, with the goal of depleting the military capabilities that it has developed over many years and restoring Israeli deterrence vis-à-vis the organization. According to the IDF, the army has conducted hundreds of attacks in southern Lebanon since October 7, some of them deep into Lebanese territory. As a result of these Israeli attacks, much of Hezbollah's infrastructure has been destroyed, along with many of its military positions along the border. In addition, the organization claims that as of early January, more than 150 of its operatives have been killed. The Shiite villages close to the border from which Hezbollah operates have also suffered much damage. According to foreign sources, the IDF has carried out targeted killings and attacks in Syria against Hezbollah operatives and members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and maintains freedom of operation in Lebanese airspace. In addition, [Israeli media reports](#) suggest that Hezbollah has begun to withdraw – or at least conceal – members of the Radwan Force who were deployed close to the border – due to concern over possible IDF strikes. The killing of senior Hamas official Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut on January 2 was also an offensive move that violated every existing operational equation, and forced a response by Hezbollah.

The acceleration of IDF operations in recent weeks reflects increasing boldness and willingness to score victories over Hezbollah, which is paying a significant price given the setbacks to its capabilities. This could help restore Israeli deterrence. At the same time, there are increasingly loud voices in the media from within the Israeli political and military leadership threatening an all-out war, while highlighting the determination to forge a better security situation on “the day after.” The message is also heard by the public, which is not necessarily aware of the cumulative achievements that Israel has secured on the northern border since October 7.

Support for Broader Activity – But Not Necessarily War

The surveys show that many of the respondents who live in northern Israel may be calling for an expansion of IDF military activity, but they do not necessarily support the initiative to launch an all-out war. In the December 10 survey, respondents were asked: “How do you think Israel should respond to Hezbollah attacks?” A clear majority of respondents said that Israel should escalate the scope

of its responses to Hezbollah attacks. Just 29 percent of respondents said that Israel should maintain the current level of response. The rest of the respondents believe that Israel should select one of three more belligerent responses.



An analysis of the responses according to area of residence reveals that like the general population in Israel, residents of Haifa and northern Israel want to see an intensification in IDF operations. That said, unlike the total sample and possibly given the fact they will bear the brunt of the price if the campaign is expanded, a significant portion believe that any such operation must be limited in scope to strikes on Hezbollah. The proportion of respondents who supported a broadened military campaign, even at the cost of regional war, is lower among the northern population than among the total sample (10 percent compared to 17 percent). In contrast, residents of the north who support a wider military campaign even at the cost of a regional war also support the capture of and some degree of control over parts of southern Lebanon in larger number than the total sample (23 percent compared to 18 percent). Therefore, a significant percentage of the population of northern Israel and Haifa expressed willingness for the IDF to launch a more aggressive and proactive campaign, but without risking spiraling into a regional war. If there is such a danger, they prefer that it be accompanied by a

buffer zone like the one that formerly existed. And still, the most-widely supported option among the northern population is that Israel initiates limited military action to strike Hezbollah – in other words, that it continues to act as it has in practice, rather than the *modus operandi* proposed in the media.

Concern over a possible regional war is also reflected in responses to questions about the level of home front preparedness for war. On October 22, respondents were asked: “To what extent do you think that the Home Front Command is ready for an attack on Israel’s northern border?” Around half of respondents (46.4 percent) believe that the home front is not sufficiently protected or not protected at all from such an attack. This corresponds to the indices on this issue that were measured before the war. This position reflects a realistic assessment of the price that the home front – which is not adequately defended – will have to pay if there is an escalation of hostilities on the northern border and is likely the basis of concern over this eventuality. This is also the argument made by the top IDF echelons, especially in the Home Front Command, about the need to improve defenses against missile threats in the north. At the same time, there is a high degree of trust in the IDF’s ability to win a war in the north. This question was asked several times, and in most of the surveys there was an extraordinarily high level of trust, reaching close to 90 percent. Notwithstanding the trust that the IDF enjoys, the public is aware of the high price that such a campaign would take from the home front, so nobody is eager for it to happen.

In conclusion, the surveys show that the Israeli public – especially Israel’s northern population – may wish for a harsher IDF response to Hezbollah attacks, but do not see such a war in the north as a precondition for evacuees to be allowed to return to their homes. From the perspective of the Israeli public, the response needed to create a situation that would restore security to the north is a combination of more aggressive military action from the IDF in the current conflict and a significant improvement to the elements of security – primarily between protection for residents – alongside efforts to secure a political resolution that will see Hezbollah forces agree to distance themselves from the border and ensure quiet along the Israel-Lebanon border. Israeli security officials and the media would be well advised to present the public with a more accurate picture of the nature and extent of IDF operations in the north, which would narrow the gap between the public rhetoric over the importance of an all-out war to allow residents to return to their homes and the public’s views, as reflected in these surveys.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen