

The Likelihood of the Conflict Between Israel and Hezbollah Expanding

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Although Hezbollah and Iran are not yet interested in a large-scale war, Israel's campaign against Lebanon could escalate under two main scenarios: (1) If Hezbollah continues to fight against Israel as long as the war in Gaza persists or if Iran requests that the Lebanese-based group becomes more involved in its campaign against Israel; (2) If Israel launches an extensive operation that ignores the "rules of engagement" with Hezbollah, aiming to change the security situation on the northern border and facilitate the return of the Israelis who were evacuated from their homes. For Israel, it is crucial to continue damaging Hezbollah's military capabilities until a ceasefire is achieved. At the same time, Israel must make an effort to promote a diplomatic arrangement with Lebanon to improve the security situation on the northern front and to enable the evacuees to return home, which would delay the possibility of a broader conflict until a more appropriate time.

Even though the ongoing and intense fighting on Israel's northern border since October 8 resembles a war of attrition, one question remains: Will it escalate into a full-scale war in which Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, will deploy all the weapons at his disposal and threaten the Israeli home front? Despite the war being limited in terms of the geographical areas affected and types of weapons used, the intensity and severity of the attacks have escalated, as well as the growing damage on both sides.

Hezbollah's modus operandi, which also influences the actions of other players from Lebanon fighting against Israel—Lebanese and Palestinians alike—in coordination with the Iranian-led axis of resistance, demonstrates that the organization aims to maintain a restricted low-level intensity in the conflict. This strategy is meant to keep the IDF occupied on the Lebanon border in what Nasrallah recently referred to as "the Palestinian solidarity front." Hezbollah seeks to impede Israel's efforts to achieve its stated goals in the war in the Gaza Strip and to bring it to an end. The organization, which is careful not to escalate the fighting against Israel, has been utilizing short-range weapons. However, in January 2024, it also started employing the Almas, an advanced antitank guided missile, manufactured by Iran, as well as the Burkan ballistic missiles and the Falaq, a short-range missile capable of carrying a large payload—causing more extensive damage. In recent weeks, Hezbollah has also increased its use of offensive UAVs, which also have a relatively limited range. Although the organization has not expanded the range of its missile attacks, it does so in response to an unusual

operation by the Israeli military. In its daily reports, Hezbollah claims that it only launches attacks against Israeli military targets and that it only deviates from that modus operandi in response to civilian casualties caused by IDF operations.

An analysis of the current balance of power between the warring parties shows that, despite the conflict's limited scope, Hezbollah can boast about several achievements, which Nasrallah highlights in his speeches. These include binding the IDF to the northern front in an effort to exhaust it; causing damage to IDF positions and bases; downing several Israeli UAVs; destroying infrastructure, civilian buildings, residential homes, and agricultural farms along the border; and causing Israeli fatalities, albeit in small numbers—21 Israelis have been killed so far, including 12 soldiers. However, Hezbollah's greatest accomplishment was actually the Israeli government's decision to evacuate 43 communities along the border (around 60,000 people) during the first few days of the war, resulting in the establishment of a nearly uninhabited stretch of land in northern Israel for the first time since 1948.

At the same time, due to the IDF's aerial superiority and active air defense systems, as well as its strategy of preemptive attacks, Israel has inflicted more damage to Hezbollah and the other factions involved in the campaign, and Israel is controlling the escalation. The IDF has conducted widespread strikes against infrastructure, military facilities, headquarters, and weapons depots belonging to Hezbollah, including multiple strikes deep inside Lebanese territory (in Baalbek and the Tyre region). According to the IDF's Spokesperson's Unit, over the past six months, some 5,000 targets in Lebanon have been destroyed, and Israel has thwarted many infiltration attempts and missile launches from its neighbor to the north. Hezbollah has suffered significant losses, with the organization reporting that more than 275 fighters have been killed, including senior officers and seven high-ranking members of the Radwan Force special operations unit, as well as several senior Hamas members. It is likely that the actual number is even higher. It appears that members of the Radwan Force have withdrawn from the border area and have also sustained losses due to frequent Israeli airstrikes in Syria targeting fighters and weapons en route from Iran to Hezbollah.

As for the possibility that Hezbollah will escalate the fighting as part of a planned strategy or as an opportunistic response to the fighting in the Gaza Strip, it is increasingly clear that the organization is not interested in doing so. This assessment is based on Hezbollah's limited military activity and on the public statements made by Nasrallah and other leaders. The factors restraining Hezbollah have not changed. They include Iran's position to safeguard most of the organization's capabilities for its own purposes and to wage a war of attrition against Israel to ensure its defeat in the war in Gaza. Additionally, American involvement alongside Israel and the concern of a regional war involving Iran and the United States also act as deterrents. Hezbollah is

also concerned about potential damage and losses, as well as the impact on both the loyal Lebanese Shiite population and the state of Lebanon as a whole should an all-out war occur (while the situation in Gaza serves as a stark reminder of Israel's destructive power and its willingness to use it). Furthermore, the element of surprise has been lost due to the IDF's planning and readiness on the northern front and the evacuation of Israeli communities along the Lebanon border.

Despite the apparent alignment between Hezbollah and the transitional government in Lebanon, Hezbollah's opponents within Lebanon have become increasingly vocal as the war continues. They argue that Hezbollah is dragging Lebanon into a war in which it has no interest, endangering the already struggling country. Lebanon has been in the throes of a deep economic crisis for many years, exacerbated by a political vacuum. Since May 2022, the country has been governed by a transitional government and has been without a president since October of that year. This criticism is shared by a large segment of the Lebanese population. Three months ago, a new Shiite political party was even launched in opposition to Hezbollah. Notably, leaders of all the Christian parties, including the largest one, the Free Patriotic Movement, which was previously aligned with the pro-Hezbollah camp, have publicly criticized Hezbollah. During an iftar meal on April 5, Gebran Bassil, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, stated that anyone who believed Israel could be defeated was wrong and emphasized that the Lebanese people were against war. At a press conference on April 10, he even called for international and regional actors to work toward a ceasefire in southern Lebanon, irrespective of the fighting in the Gaza Strip, directly opposing Hezbollah's position.

Dissatisfaction and criticism of the situation are particularly pronounced among residents of villages in southern Lebanon. Over 90,000 people have been forced from their homes and relocated to the north. Both those who have remained in their homes and those who have been displaced have sustained heavy damage to their property and are experiencing economic difficulties due to the conflict. Infrastructure has been destroyed, schools have closed, large agricultural areas and forests have been decimated, and more than 50 civilians have been killed. Furthermore, as *Asharq Al-Awsat* published on March 26, residents of the Christian village of Rmeish have objected to Hezbollah's use of their lands to launch attacks against Israel and tried to prevent Hezbollah from doing so. During a cabinet meeting of the transitional government on April 4, the prime minister announced his intention to declare southern Lebanon as an "agricultural emergency zone" and seek international aid. He relayed that the agricultural sector had suffered a significant blow from the war, with 75 percent of Lebanese farmers losing their income. The minister of agriculture estimated the damage at billions of dollars.

Nonetheless, we cannot rule out the possibility of a widespread war breaking out and potentially escalating into a full-scale conflict involving other members of the Iranian-backed axis of resistance. Such a war would be devastating and costly for all those involved. There are two main scenarios that could lead to this outcome. The first scenario is based on the assessment that the current dynamics of the fighting, which is continually escalating, could inadvertently result in uncontrolled escalation. This is especially true given that Hezbollah links the ongoing fighting on the Israel–Lebanon border with the Israeli campaign in the Gaza Strip. Nasrallah and other Hezbollah officials have repeatedly stated that they will only stop attacking Israel if Israel ends its war in Gaza. Additionally, if Iran demands that Hezbollah intensifies its operations in the event of expanding the direct confrontation between Tehran and Jerusalem. However, it should be noted that Iran was discouraged by Hezbollah’s limited involvement in the Iranian attack against Israel on April 13, indicating that the Lebanese organization aims to preserve its independent decision-making in accordance with the line that Nasrallah has presented in his speeches, whereby Iran can respond to any Israeli attack against it. During Iran’s missile and UAV attack on Israel, Hezbollah carried out limited attacks on Israeli aerial defense systems on the Golan Heights but claimed that it was a response to an earlier Israeli attack in southern Lebanon.

The second scenario depends on Israel’s decision to initiate a broader operation that would violate the “rules of engagement” in the fighting so far in order to change the security reality on the northern front. Alternatively, once most of the fighting in Gaza is concluded, Israel could prioritize removing the threat posed by Hezbollah on its northern border, or due to an urgent need, allow the evacuated Israelis to return to their homes in this area.

As long as the fighting continues and there is no ceasefire, it is crucial for Israel to focus on maximizing damage to Hezbollah and attempt to change the rules of the game that it is trying to control. At the same time, Israel must maintain an ongoing dialogue with the US administration to capitalize on the opportunity for advancing a political resolution, in line with the proposals discussed with American envoy Amos Hochstein.

The agreement being put together outlines a gradual solution. In the first stage, the fighting would cease, and Hezbollah would withdraw to positions several kilometers away from the border. There would also be greater supervision on the Lebanese side of the border to prevent Hezbollah operatives from returning to the border zone, allowing residents on both sides to safely return to their homes. In the second stage, negotiations would focus on the implementation of UN Resolution 1701 and the demarcation of the land border.

Hezbollah may be amenable to this proposal if there is a pause in the fighting in the Gaza Strip and if its implementation could lead to an improved security reality, enabling the return of the evacuees to their homes. In addition, to increase their sense of security, measures such as adjusting the IDF's deployment along the border, strengthening the security elements in local communities, and improving the passive defense for residents should be considered.

Given the conditions created by the war in Gaza, it is preferable for Israel to avoid a large-scale war with Hezbollah. Israel should postpone any attempts to remove the threat posed by Hezbollah until a later date. However, should there be further escalation in the direct confrontation between Israel and Iran, Hezbollah will likely be compelled to enter a campaign that could change the cautious and measured way it has handled the conflict with Israel thus far.

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