

Does Israel face its Third Lebanese War?

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After the attacks by Hamas on Israel's southern border on 7 October 2023, Hezbollah in Lebanon on Israeli's northern border expressed its support for Hamas. Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran, began firing rockets into Israeli territories such as Shebaa Farms and the Golan Heights on 8 October. This escalation has led to increased tensions and conflict along the Israel-Lebanon border with wider regional and global consequences.

Since then Hezbollah has launched thousands of short to medium range rockets, ballistic missiles, and suicide drones against Israeli civilian and military targets. This is up to and including the most densely populated metropolitan area of Tel-Aviv. The distance from Beirut to Tel-Aviv is 346 km. Furthermore, short range anti-tank projectiles have destroyed hundreds of Israeli homes and agriculture closer to the border.

Israel was forced to evacuate over 60,000 citizens from a distance of 20 km from the border. This was from towns and farms of all religions: Jewish, Christian, Druze and Muslim. They haven't returned to their homes for almost a year and children haven't attended school. They are housed in temporary accommodation as internally displaced people. Similarly, over 100,000 Lebanese citizens with no connection to Hezbollah have fled their homes in Southern Lebanon.

Israel has repeatedly asked Hezbollah to abstain from such attacks. International efforts led by the United States and France to achieve this by diplomatic means have failed. The leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, frequently vowed the destruction of Israel. In response over the last eleven months Israel engaged a broad strategy to weaken Hezbollah's leadership and operational capabilities. Until two weeks ago the main military means were air strikes on Hezbollah's arsenals. Moreover, there were extensive intelligence efforts and a series of targeted strikes aimed at disrupting Hezbollah's command structure and supply lines.

Clearly Hezbollah's leadership were not accepting the message that Israel did not want war. So, on 17 and 18 September thousands of beepers and walkie-talkies used by Hezbollah exploded simultaneously across Lebanon and Syria. This operation was reportedly carried out by Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad. It had secretly manufactured the devices and integrated explosives into

them. The explosions caused widespread chaos and were described as one of the biggest security breaches Hezbollah has faced. The attacks led to a significant number of injuries and deaths.

Israel also engaged in specific targeted assassinations of Hezbollah military commanders to deter it and bring it to a cease-fire. This culminated on 27 September 2024, when the Israeli Air Force launched an airstrike on Hezbollah's headquarters in Beirut, assassinating its leader Nasrallah. On 30 September 2024 Israel launched a series of ground operations in southern Lebanon, targeting Hezbollah positions.

This ongoing battle with Hezbollah who refuses to enter into a ceasefire could lead to Israel's Third Lebanese War. The conflict in Lebanon has deep historical roots, with Hezbollah being a significant political and military force in Lebanon, backed by Iran. The current tensions are part of a broader regional conflict that has seen various escalations over the years.

Israel's First Lebanese War started in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon to expel the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which had been launching attacks into Israel. This led to a prolonged Israeli presence in southern Lebanon until 2001.

Israel's Second Lebanese War was in 2006. This conflict began after Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. The war lasted 34 days, resulting in significant casualties and damage on both sides. Tensions have continued, with periodic skirmishes and escalations. The probability of Israel's Third Lebanese War depends on the new leadership of Hezbollah, and its backer Iran. They have two options, to either continue attacking Israel or to enter into a ceasefire.

The conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon is different to that of the conflict with Hamas in Gaza and has wider regional and even global implications. A solution to Hamas and Gaza would need to consider a Day After with a Palestinian Question focus towards conflict resolution. Hezbollah and Lebanon are not essentially a Palestinian Question in conflict resolution.

For example the United States has a long-standing adversarial relationship with Hezbollah, which it has designated as a terrorist organization since 1997. On 23 October 1983, two truck bombs were detonated at buildings housing American and French service members. The first bomb targeted the U.S. Marine barracks, killing 241 U.S. military personnel. The second bomb struck the French barracks, killing 58 French military personnel. Bounties were placed on Hezbollah members involved; where some were assassinated recently by Israel.

The U.S. considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization due to its militant activities and its ties to Iran and Syria. U.S. intelligence officials have warned about the potential for Hezbollah to target American interests, both in the Middle East and possibly within the United States. This concern is heightened by Hezbollah's capabilities, its bellicose statements and its backing from Iran.

This has led the U.S to be a strong supporter of Israel in its military conflict with Hezbollah. This is despite public calls for caution and diplomacy. This overall support underscores the strategic alignment between the U.S. and Israel. Recently, U.S. officials have quietly backed Israel's military push in a complex and multi-front conflict, often referred to as a "ten-front war." That includes Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, attacks from Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the West Bank, covert and cyber from Iran, and economic and legal. This support includes significant military aid, with the U.S. providing a multi-billion U.S Dollar aid package to help Israel maintain its military edge.

The specific U.S support to Israel against Hezbollah also in part reflects Hezbollah's verbal threats against Cyprus, and shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean. That would impact nearby NATO allies, for example Greece. This threat highlights the delicate geopolitical position of Cyprus, which has close ties with Israel and is within range of Hezbollah's missiles.

Whether or not this is Israel's Third Lebanese War and if it will spread wider to include Iran is the big question. Currently, Israel is engaged in limited, localised and targeted ground raids in Southern Lebanon. Lebanese civilians are being warned not to use vehicles to travel south across the Litani river, which is 30 km north of the Israel-Lebanon border. The Lebanese army has pulled back troops stationed on its southern border to at least 5km.

If Hezbollah retreats across the Litani river and stops launching and firing missiles, suicide drones, rockets and anti-tank projectiles then Israel will cease its ground offensive. Israel's objective is not to invade or occupy Lebanon or even to destroy Hezbollah, as it has pledged to do to Hamas. Israel's sole objective is to allow displaced people to return home in the north of Israel.

The battle could be long if Hezbollah does not. It is known to have extensive arsenals, as well as tunnel networks, bunkers and other military infrastructure just over the border from Israel. It may take months if not years to neutralize such threatening capabilities and indeed turn Hezbollah's bellicose intentions.

The situation remains highly volatile, with both sides preparing for a potentially prolonged confrontation. Both NATO and the European Union should take precautions including evacuating their citizens from Lebanon, cancelling commercial flights overflying Lebanon and Syria and to their airports, increasing maritime security and defences in the Eastern Mediterranean and heightening domestic alert status against potential acts of terrorism by or in support of Hezbollah.