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Reinforcing U.S. Diplomacy to Stop a Hezbollah-Israel War

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Since the Hamas-led attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah has made five public appearances to address the group's own confrontation with Israel along the Lebanese border. Taken together, these speeches acknowledge a dramatic shift in the rules of engagement and deterrence that had governed the two adversaries since the summer war of 2006.[1] Moreover, they make clear that Hezbollah does not currently want war with Israel and that the group wishes to return to the prewar deterrence status quo, which would allow it to bolster its military infrastructure and fighting corps—and, in turn, keep serving its sponsor Iran. For U.S. policy, preventing a full-scale Hezbollah-Israel war is a priority and requires close consideration of the interests animating the Lebanon-based Shia militant group.

Setting aside for the moment Israel's various priorities and concerns regarding Hezbollah,[2] any effective diplomatic push must account for the multipronged threat Hezbollah poses—to domestic Lebanese cohesion and regional security as well as to security along the Israeli border. It must also consider Nasrallah's rhetoric, which, along with the group's limited military responses thus far, leads to the following conclusions:

- **Hezbollah is not ready for war.** This is true both militarily and financially. Over the past almost two decades, Hezbollah's fighting force has been stretched thin by regional wars and its finances crippled by anti-Iran sanctions. Unlike in 2006, today's Hezbollah lacks the budget for war and reconstruction, and the Gulf states will not be keen to rebuild Lebanon this time around.[3] Military limitations affect the group on both the combatant and command levels. On the command level, the loss of Hezbollah military leaders Imad Mughniyah (d. 2008) and his successor, Mustafa Badreddine (d. 2016), along with Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force head Qasem Soleimani (d. 2020), has left a void in military authority.

- **Hezbollah's base does not want war.** Amid a persistent and deteriorating economic crisis in Lebanon, Hezbollah's Shia constituents will not countenance a decision to go to war[4]—which will only worsen their conditions and erode the group's already fragile support. On the most basic level, residents of southern Lebanon know they will have nowhere to resettle their families in the wake of Israeli attacks. This contrasts with the situation in 2006, when displaced Lebanese were welcomed by their fellow nationals of other sects or else migrated to Syria. Such options are foreclosed today by sharper sectarianism and anti-Hezbollah sentiment in Lebanon, and by war devastation in Syria.

- **Hezbollah does not want to waste its capabilities on saving Hamas.** This assessment applies particularly to the group's precision-guided missiles and elite Radwan Force,[5] while simultaneously reflecting Tehran's calculation that it must preserve Hezbollah for more urgent purposes.[6] Moreover, the group and its Iranian sponsors have seen the destruction and casualties visited upon Gaza by Israel's U.S.-backed military response to the Hamas attack, and they want to avoid similar repercussions of a full-scale war.

The successive deaths of Hezbollah commanders Imad Mughniyah and Mustafa Badreddine and of Iran's Qasem Soleimani have left a void in military authority.

- **Hezbollah is highly exposed to Israel's intelligence and data collection activity.** This is evidenced by the targeted killing, over just two weeks, of three high-level commanders inside Lebanon and Syria: Hamas's Saleh al-Arouri in the Dahiya neighborhood of Beirut,[7] Hezbollah's Radwan commander Wissam al-Tawil in southern Lebanon,[8] and Qods Force Levant commander Sayyed Razi Mousavi in Damascus.[9]

According to multiple sources close to Hezbollah, the group's leadership is mostly preoccupied with identifying the sources of Israel's intelligence and patching vulnerabilities within its military and administrative ranks.[10] Hezbollah military units, for their part, are responding to Israel's actions in calculated ways that make clear they seek to avoid a larger war. Hezbollah's timidity, in turn, has emboldened the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to cross previous red lines, thus eliminating existing deterrence understandings along the border.

Despite Hezbollah's wishes to keep the current confrontation at a low simmer—and its rhetoric indicating that its attacks will end when the Gaza fighting ends[11]—war along Israel's northern front is becoming more likely. This is because Israel sees an opportunity to continue neutralizing its Hezbollah foe. Alongside the targeted killings mentioned earlier, the IDF has killed numerous lower-level Hezbollah military personnel and destroyed significant portions of the group's military infrastructure, mainly north of the Litani River.[12]

In pursuing the U.S. goal to avert war, President Joe Biden recently sent special envoy Amos Hochstein to both Israel and Lebanon, where he proposed establishing a land border demarcation similar to the maritime arrangement he negotiated in October 2022.[13] In the maritime deal, both sides prioritized economic interests over security preeminence—in part reflecting successful mutual deterrence—and both recognized the low costs entailed in the deal. But the October 7 attack upended Israel's calculations and priorities, and Israelis no longer regard their northern border as safe.

Area residents there have relocated and cannot return without security guarantees, amid the understanding that Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force is trained in precisely the infiltration methods that Hamas-led fighters employed across the Gaza border on October 7.[14] And Israeli officials in the post–October 7 climate have a greater tolerance for using military means to achieve their goals than before. If, for example, diplomacy fails to move the Radwan fighters to the desired roughly five to eight miles from the Israeli border,[15] then Israel could take matters into its own hands through airstrikes and other military means.

Elements of Current U.S. Diplomacy

U.S.-led diplomatic efforts to secure the Israel-Lebanon border are based on two lines of effort: (1) more clearly demarcating a border; and (2) implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701,[16] which ended the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war and mandated that the only armed personnel between Lebanon's Litani River and the Israeli border be the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and UN peacekeepers. The resolution, however, was never successfully implemented, and Hezbollah maintained its presence along the border. One must note, at the outset, a further challenge: even if these diplomatic goals are secured, Hezbollah must be prevented in the future from using its long-range and precision-guided missiles against Israel,[17] or eventually repositioning its Radwan Force along the border—as it did months after the initial implementation of UNSCR 1701 in 2006.

The Hochstein Initiative and Its Limitations

Such details inevitably lead to larger questions about Hezbollah's persistent threat to Israel, Lebanon, and the region. Despite losing its parliamentary majority in 2022, the group retains major economic and institutional leverage in Lebanon. Specifically, as

long as its officials control the country's security and military institutions, its borders with Syria, and other points of entry—namely, the Beirut international airport and national seaports—then the group can smuggle arms and weapons, thereby thwarting efforts to implement UNSCR 1701, which is binding but toothless when it comes to punishing violators. Hezbollah meanwhile can maintain its military readiness by training its fighters in regional wars. In the eighteen years since 2006, the Lebanese army and UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) have shown an inability to confront Hezbollah when the group redeploys along the border with the goal of ultimately confronting Israel.[18]

U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein's current proposal is aimed at developing a general regulatory scheme and at resolving thirteen disputed points along the border, and Lebanon has welcomed the initiative.[19] Hezbollah secretary-general Nasrallah, during Hochstein's visit to Israel, underscored the plan as "an opportunity to completely liberate every inch of our Lebanese land,"[20] but he also said that discussions could take place only after the cessation of the Gaza war.[21] Despite his implied willingness to talk later, the leader could merely be playing for time, with plans to reassess as needed.

On January 11, while in Lebanon, Hochstein met with caretaker prime minister Najib Mikati and emphasized the need to achieve a diplomatic solution on the border to prevent further deterioration. He stressed "the need to work on pacifying the situation in south Lebanon even if it is not possible to reach an agreement on a final solution at the moment."[22] His diplomatic push appears to be aimed, among other things, at allowing Lebanese to return to their evacuated communities in the south and Israelis to return to theirs in the north.

Hochstein elaborated the U.S. position during a January 28 interview on *Face the Nation*: "We have to make sure that Israelis and Lebanese can live in their homes with security. And that is not just a ceasefire, it requires a more intricate piece of the negotiations to ensure that the Lebanese army is in that area, that there [are] more parameters of security for civilians." He added, "Once we do that, though, we do need to start looking at how do we mark the border, an actual border, between the two countries so that we can have long-term security and long-term peace in an area that's seen so many rounds of conflict over the last several years."[23]

The Lebanese army, which has focused on preventing non-Lebanese groups such as Hamas and others from launching missiles against Israel, has not confronted Hezbollah south of the Litani River. To be sure, an LAF presence today—even one with larger numbers than two decades ago—will not guarantee security for area civilians.[24] Furthermore, given the high strategic value Hezbollah and its Iranian handlers place on controlling the border, LAF provision of security would entail steep, persistent challenges.

But leadership matters, as observed during clashes in 2023 between Hezbollah and Christian residents in Kahaleh, southeast of Beirut, and in 2021 in the Beirut neighborhood of Tayouneh.[25] The Tayouneh incident, for instance, highlighted potential capabilities of the Lebanese army when under competent command. In that earlier crisis, LAF soldiers shifted the on-the-ground dynamic when they honored commanders' orders to fire at Hezbollah militants seeking to attack the Christian neighborhood. Regrettably, the same dynamic did not play out in Kahaleh.

Hochstein's plan appears to be split into three phases: Phase 1—recognizing that Hezbollah will not negotiate until the Gaza fighting ends—would focus on stopping or at least limiting the current confrontations to within a few miles of either side of the border to reduce the likelihood of all-out war. Phase 2 would arise from these new rules of military engagement and start after the Gaza war, with an emphasis on resolving the disputed points along the border. This would pave the way for Phase 3, establishment of a full border demarcation deal. Here, absence from the talks of the disputed Shebaa Farms, annexed by Israel in 1981 but claimed by Lebanon as well as Syria, could pose a conundrum.[26] Namely, if the border deal is framed as a move to strip Hezbollah

of its justification to fight Israel, then the group can simply shift course and claim it is fighting for Shebaa Farms.

Even if Hochstein's plan succeeds in the short term, curbing Hezbollah in a more sustained way will require a Phase 4 that limits the group's influence inside Lebanon. Specifically, only by removing Hezbollah's influence over Lebanese military and security institutions can diplomacy secure the border and future peace. One applicable tool is UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004), which sought to fortify Lebanese sovereignty, and in doing so called for "all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon," "extension of the control of the Government of Lebanon over all Lebanese territory," and "the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias."[27] International commitment and pressure today could make implementation of UNSCR 1559 a reality.

Hezbollah could also be weakened in Lebanese politics by addressing the country's presidential vacuum. The term of former president Michel Aoun ended in October 2022, and the vacancy has yet to be filled. International actors must now insist that the new appointee demonstrate commitment to Lebanese sovereignty, not deference to Hezbollah. In turn, the long-awaited formation of a government and associated security appointments could follow, serving as the first steps on Lebanon's long road to true sovereignty. Key appointments will include that of army commander, head of general security, and central bank governor—the last with the power to limit Hezbollah's cash flow.[28]

Yet previous attempts to resolve the Lebanese national crisis were grounded in the expectation of good-faith compromise with Hezbollah. As a result, beginning with the 2005 Cedar Revolution—which sought to evict Syrian military forces from the country—and carrying through accords like the May 2008 Doha agreement,[29] Hezbollah only grew more powerful through talks and did not hesitate to use militancy to bend outcomes to its liking. This lamentable heritage shows the urgency of reducing Hezbollah's presence within national institutions now, which will correspondingly diminish the security risk it presents. Diplomatic pressure, sanctions, or even the threat of sanctions could force the parliament to convene and elect a president.

Alongside UNSCR 1559, one can dig deeper into the historical record for another unimplemented agreement that must be revisited in order to strengthen Lebanese sovereignty: the 1989 Taif Accord, which ended the fifteen-year Lebanese civil war. This agreement called for extending Lebanese sovereignty and authority in southern Lebanon, which was then still occupied by Israel, and "for the disarmament and disbandment of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias."[30] Some of the accord's terms, if fulfilled, could strengthen state institutions and limit corruption, the rotten core of Hezbollah governance. For example, terms aimed at securing reforms, judicial independence, administrative decentralization, a new nonsectarian electoral law, and the formation of a senate could eventually dislodge Hezbollah from its control over borders, institutions, and security decisions.[31] These tools will not stop the current hostilities immediately, but they could help guarantee security in the long term. A strategy that encompasses these tools, moreover, and highlights Lebanon's sovereignty could accomplish two important objectives: articulating clearly to the Lebanese political elite that the status quo is no longer acceptable to the international community, and initiating a process to heal Lebanon's political system, thereby containing Hezbollah's influence on security decisions.

The last few years have not been bright for Lebanon, in large part because of Hezbollah's dominance within the system.[32] Only by overturning the current political hierarchy—an effort that would require serious commitment from the international community—can the status quo be undone. Yet recent years have also shown that Lebanese domestic activism can bring about positive change. The 2019 protests, for example, helped drive Hezbollah from the parliamentary majority in 2022 elections, and a fragile yet determined parliamentary opposition helped prevent Hezbollah presidential favorite Sleiman Frangieh from taking power.

To summarize, any effective diplomatic effort to safeguard the Israel-Lebanon border would likely include a border demarcation initiative and must include efforts to implement UNSCR 1701, as the Hochstein plan does. But to truly guarantee security, a plan must also seek to contain Hezbollah internally, using all possible tools—including UNSCR 1559 and the Taif Accord—in addition to sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and strong political support for the opposition.

Tehran and Hezbollah

Even as diplomacy must strive to contain Hezbollah in the Lebanese context, it must also consider the group as a regional actor. Since the 2006 war with Israel, the group has undergone major changes in priorities, capabilities, and roles. Today, Hezbollah serves not only as an agent of "resistance against Israel" but as Iran's leading regional army, with expanding responsibilities since the 2020 targeted killing of Qasem Soleimani. Now it can rightly claim the title of protector of Iran's regional interests. This is why the attempt to contain Hezbollah in Lebanon must regard the group as an Iranian regional asset, with shifting priorities and strategies. Some context on its worldview:

- **Iran is using all its chessboard pieces to achieve its regional goals.** Along with Hezbollah, Tehran's partners and proxies include the Houthis in Yemen and militias in Iraq. Its premier goals are driving the United States from the region and making Israel unlivable. In the current war, Iran aspires to keep a distance from Gaza and the U.S. Middle East presence but to use its militia assets to secure a seat at the negotiating table when the dust settles.

- **Hezbollah and Houthi capabilities are key to Tehran's plans.** This explains the Iranian regime's pattern of drawing on its proxies to harass U.S. and allied forces in the region, all while resisting open declarations of war. Such an approach allows Iran to protect itself against direct attacks while maintaining military capabilities for future escalation.

- **Israel-Lebanon diplomacy could serve Iran's interests.** So long as Tehran does not make any commitments, diplomatic activity between Israel and Lebanon can be useful to the regime, buying time for its proxy Hezbollah to prepare for a next round of hostilities conducted according to Iran's prerogative. In recent statements, Iranian officials have stressed the need for "strategic patience" guided by a rational approach to moves by the "axis of resistance."[33] This means withholding action until Iran achieves sufficient uranium enrichment to produce a bomb (known as "breakout") or faces imminent danger.

Israeli attacks on Hezbollah, however, have complicated Tehran's efforts to uphold its proxy's image as a resistance group and its rhetoric avowing a resilient, united front. Since October 7, a strong case can be made that Hezbollah has lost more than Israel in terms of public support, legitimacy, and military infrastructure.[34] Hezbollah now seeks to freeze the conflict in place, allowing the group to secure its main priorities: continued power in Lebanon and the region.

Background on Hezbollah as a Resistance Actor

Ever since Israel invaded southern Lebanon in 1982, Iran has cultivated Hezbollah's resistance narrative through a focus on the group's military efforts against Israel and the flaunting of associated feats. Supported by Syria's Assad regime and Lebanon's Shia Amal Party, in the 1980s Hezbollah neutralized other Lebanese movements such as the National Resistance Front and Palestinian groups such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Yet Hezbollah did not participate in the Lebanese civil war and had yet to infiltrate national institutions or confront other Lebanese actors militarily. Management of postwar Lebanon thus fell in large part to the Syrian regime.

The group's mandate expanded dramatically in the first years of the new millennium: namely, in 2000, when it announced the liberation of southern Lebanon from Israeli forces, and in 2005, when Syrian forces withdrew from the country, facilitating Hezbollah's role in managing state institutions. In the 2006 war, however, Israel's ferocious response to Hezbollah's border provocations shattered the uneasy state of deterrence, prompting Hezbollah, at Iran's behest, to shift its efforts toward helping Tehran widen its foothold in four countries: Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, along with Yemen.[35]

Then, in early November 2023, in his first remarks after the outbreak of the Hamas-Israel war, Hassan Nasrallah characterized the conflict as a "purely Palestinian battle," implicitly placing in question Hezbollah's role in a purported united resistance front.[36] His language also reflected a struggle to balance the group's resistance identity with its political calculations and Iran's interests, while practically leaving Hamas to fend for itself. The fallout for Hezbollah has been unprecedented harm to its resistance identity and its regional legitimacy.[37]

Indications suggest that after the Gaza war ends, Iran will seek a return to its old deterrence scheme, advancing interests and influence through its regionwide proxies.[38] In doing so, it will seek to turn Arab public opinion in its favor by exploiting Palestinian suffering. By all accounts, Iran wants to avoid war with Israel for now. A return to the status quo ante, however, will be effectively impossible, given the seismic effects of the October 7 attack on Israeli state and society, the bolstered U.S. presence in the region, and U.S. and allied sparring with Yemen's Houthis. In this light, Iran's fears of miscalculating and squandering its regional assets present opportunities for Washington to impel compromise. They also present deterrence opportunities, as realized in the U.S. military response to the killing of three U.S. service members by Iran's Iraqi proxies in Jordan. Yet if the regime feels essentially safe, sensing that the international community will temporarily target only its proxies, then Tehran will push these proxies to do more, not less.

Hamas in Lebanon and Hezbollah's Plausible Deniability

Alongside its military-political base in Gaza and its political officials in Qatar, Hamas has been growing elsewhere in the region as well, including through the establishment of military infrastructure in Lebanon—thereby adding another layer of threat against Israel. This threat deserves attention, given that Hamas and Hezbollah have been closely coordinating their military operations in the country.

Background on Hamas-Hezbollah Relations

The origins of today's Hezbollah-Hamas connection lie in Iranian support, since 2017,[39] for strengthening Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad control of Gaza, including through fortifying their military capabilities. Hamas has returned the favor by becoming Hezbollah's main proxy inside Lebanon.

But Hamas-Hezbollah relations were not always so tight. Between 2012 and 2017, the Hamas leadership opposed the Syrian regime's fight against the rebels in the civil war, thus putting the group directly at odds with Assad-supporting Hezbollah. In an era of Sunni-Shia friction, moreover, Hamas's Muslim Brotherhood–rooted ideology sat uneasily with the Shia political Islamism espoused by Iran's leaders and proxies. Hamas's realignment with Iran can be traced to the rise in 2017 of a new generation of leaders in the group's military wing, especially Yahya al-Sinwar and Saleh al-Arouri.[40] This generation recognized that the IRGC and Hezbollah were here to stay, as was Assad, and also recognized the value of their support. The Syrian branch of the Brotherhood, meanwhile, had lost ground to more extreme groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State. Overseeing the Hamas rapprochement with Hezbollah was Arouri, who resided in Lebanon at the time of his death in January 2024.

On Lebanese soil, until the Gaza war broke out, Hamas limited its activity to the country's twelve Palestinian camps.[41] This involvement was largely political until August 2023, when Hamas—with Iranian support—carried out a military campaign to take over political decisionmaking within the camps, displacing the PLO. Heavy clashes in Ain al-Hilweh specifically resulted in the displacement of camp residents for weeks,[42] with Hezbollah calculating that Hamas control would reinforce its own position in the camps.

But the al-Aqsa Flood operation, as Hamas refers to the October 7 events, emboldened the group to launch its first rockets at Israel from Lebanon on October 10, marking the coming-out of its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, in the country. This came amid an ever closer Hamas-Hezbollah relationship that has evolved into an alliance, with reports indicating meetings between the leaderships, a joint operations room, and the "united front of resistance" declared by Nasrallah in April 2023.[43] A prime mover behind such efforts was Arouri, who helped rebuild trust with Hezbollah following the groups' differences over the Syrian war. Arouri also shared with other Hamas leaders in Lebanon the distinction of having been expelled from Turkey or Qatar. (Arouri moved to Lebanon from Ankara in 2018.) Two other such key figures are Khalil al-Hayya, who heads the group's Islamic and Arab relations office, and Zaher Jabarin, a Hamas deputy for the West Bank who supervises the prisoner dossier. The lower profile of these two figures, in the context of Arouri's death, should not suggest a diminished Hamas commitment to strengthening relations with Iran and Hezbollah. This is so even though the Hamas-Iran relationship remains marred by a deficit of trust.[44] For now at least, Tehran values the Islamist group as a Gaza-based strategic asset that helps expand its influence in the region, and thus the connection endures.

The fast-growing Hamas role in Lebanon has included a footprint beyond the Palestinian camps and training for some fighters at IRGC sites in Iran and Syria. Amid its uncertain trust in Hamas, Iran has granted Hezbollah full authority to control the Gaza-based group's operations in the country. Hezbollah's leadership, for its part, has repeatedly boasted about Iran's financial, military, and logistical support for Hamas.[45]

In a photo released in late October 2023, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (right) meets in Beirut with Palestinian Islamic Jihad head Ziad al-Nakhleh (center) and Hamas deputy chief Saleh al-Arouri. The Hamas deputy was killed in an early 2024 airstrike.

Hezbollah Media Relations Office/ REUTERS

A Connection with Lebanon's Brotherhood

Another component of intensified Hamas-Hezbollah coordination involves outreach to Lebanon's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (in Arabic, *al-Jamaah al-Islamiyah* or *Ikhwan*). This development has been facilitated by the collapse of Lebanon's Hariri political clan, punctuated by the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri in January 2020, and the associated withdrawal from the Lebanese political scene of Saudi and other Gulf sponsors. Recognizing the Sunni leadership vacuum, Hezbollah rushed to work with Sunni groups like the Brotherhood and recruited young, unemployed Sunnis to its (non-Shia) Resistance Brigades.[46] Since October 7, 2023, both the Brotherhood and the Resistance Brigades have claimed responsibility for attacks against Israel,[47] and Hamas has announced the establishment of its own brigade, Vanguard of the al-Aqsa Flood.[48]

Benefits for Hamas, Options for Hezbollah, and Israeli Deterrence

For Hezbollah, a Palestinian ally like Hamas could allow for burnished authenticity as an agent of "resistance," a status it forfeited while fighting in Syria and elsewhere. On an operational level, the alliance could allow the group to uphold plausible deniability when seeking to avoid responsibility for a missile launch or other attack against Israel.

As of early 2024, activity by Hezbollah and Hamas in southern Lebanon—including their buildup of military infrastructure[49]—hardly appears to indicate a willingness to abide by international resolutions, especially UNSCR 1701. And even if Hezbollah eventually agrees to halt or limit clashes along the border, its leadership could still employ its own proxies to attack Israel while maintaining plausible deniability. A serious follow-on risk could see Hezbollah and Hamas recruiting trained militants from elsewhere in the region to boost their fighting forces.

Diplomatic initiatives should consider this entire picture, examining Hezbollah's influence inside Lebanon, in the Palestinian camps, and even within Sunni Islamist politics.[50] What Hezbollah really wants, as suggested earlier, is to return to the pre–October 7 status quo, restore the old deterrence state, and buy the time needed to strengthen its Lebanese and regional influence, reinforce its own proxies and brigades (including Hamas in Lebanon), rehabilitate its fighting force, and ensure it is better prepared for the next round of fighting.

For Israel, the old deterrence model has now been proven ineffective, and Hezbollah must be forced to back off. But the question remains of how to do this, with what kinds of force, and when.

War Prospects and Scenarios

In the next phase of the post–October 7 conflict, Iran and Hezbollah will try to maintain calculated attacks against Israel from Lebanon, against the United States in Syria and Iraq, and against international trade in the Red Sea, hoping to sustain their influence and negotiating advantage. But the damage resulting from Israeli strikes against Hezbollah's military infrastructure—in addition to the targeted killing of high-ranking commanders—is becoming too embarrassing and harmful to bear, and the groups' leaderships worry about long-term damage if the Gaza war drags on or if Israel escalates.

Currently, the most likely long-term scenario absent a peace arrangement acceptable to both sides is one in which Israel conducts targeted attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanon—similar to the model of targeted attacks on Hezbollah assets in Syria. This would likely be a nightmare for the group, with deterrence and red lines collapsing under Israeli barrages. Continuous airstrikes on Hezbollah's military infrastructure—including weapon depots, smuggling routes, telecommunications networks, and military bases—would significantly degrade the group's capabilities. And Israel could employ intelligence tactics to kill additional Hezbollah,

Hamas, and IRGC leaders. But this scenario also holds the risk of unexpected, undesirable escalation by Hezbollah if its leadership feels the damage is too detrimental to ignore.

Such an unpleasant picture raises the prospect of all-out war, wherein Hezbollah will have no choice but to use its long-range and precision-guided missiles and its elite Radwan Force. Further escalation by the Houthis and by Iran-backed militias in Syria and Iraq could follow, notwithstanding the apparently de-escalatory Kataib Hezbollah statement after the killing of U.S. soldiers in Jordan.[51] The requirements from each side are firm. Israel cannot return its citizens to the north without security guarantees, and Hezbollah cannot make major compromises without securing significant gains to advance its regional role and Iran's interests. Such dynamics increase the likelihood of a widening conflict.

A Way Out?

An assertive diplomatic approach to the crisis at Israel's northern border could help avert a wider war and lay the groundwork for a less contentious future. Such an approach must include firm implementation of UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701 through a regulatory international force more robust than UNIFIL and explicitly empowered to punish violators. Any strategy to address southern Lebanon, and by extension Iran, must also consider and target all Hezbollah's pillars of power in the country—its military arsenal, its allies, and its hold over the Shia community. Over the past forty-two years, the group and its Iranian sponsors have invested major resources into building and reinforcing these pillars, but they are teetering today due to internal political crises and Israel's military campaign against Hezbollah's Lebanon-based military assets.

To limit Hezbollah's financial capabilities and break up its political alliances, the United States should resume consistent targeting of corrupt political figures in Lebanon with sanctions[52]—mainly those non-Hezbollah political actors who shamelessly enable and shield the group—as part of a comprehensive policy aimed at restoring political balance. Washington can also work with its European allies to increase pressure on Hezbollah and its partners. The European Union especially needs to dispense with its distinction between Hezbollah's military and political wings,[53] and to start blacklisting Hezbollah's allies and corrupt politicians. A European approach focused on ensuring stability by working through the same Lebanese political actors will no longer be sufficient.

The unfortunate institutional vacuum in Lebanon could perhaps have a silver lining, offering an opportunity to elevate officials who can restore the country's sovereignty and regain control over its security and military decisions. The next president, army commander, central bank governor, and head of general security could serve these roles—if the right people get the jobs. And such leaders could implement needed international resolutions for security and sustainable stability. Holding to account the Lebanese political class that props up Hezbollah institutionally is also a priority, as earlier in the context of sanctions. Stripping Hezbollah of its political power internally—and the protection furnished by allies and partners—is a necessary step toward limiting the group's influence within security institutions.[54] A focus on the military aspect alone will only yield temporary solutions at best.

As for providing alternatives to the Shia community, there has never been a better time to reach out to its opposition groups, grassroots movements, and business leaders.[55] Lebanon's Shia community embodies Hezbollah's main strength and main weakness alike. Without this community, the group cannot win elections, recruit fighters, or protect itself with a political and material support base, and that is exactly why Iran has spent as much of its resources since the 1980s on the Shia base as on Hezbollah's military strength. But the Shia community today has become deeply divided over

Hezbollah's mission. The elements of Hezbollah's Shia support—the resistance narrative, provision of jobs and services, and sectarian identity—are all crumbling today due to Hezbollah's political crisis, budget shifts, and the defeat of its resistance narrative.[56]

A robust U.S.-led diplomatic approach must finally consider Hamas's military growth within Lebanon and set punitive measures if Hezbollah seeks to claim plausible deniability by hiding behind Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, or other groups they influence. An initiative to permanently secure the Israel-Lebanon border requires a short-term strategy to limit clashes and maybe reach a deal to demarcate the border and implement international resolutions. But it should be coupled with a long-term strategy to target the other pillars of Hezbollah's power, contain Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon, and thereby curb Iran's key strength in the region. ❖

NOTES

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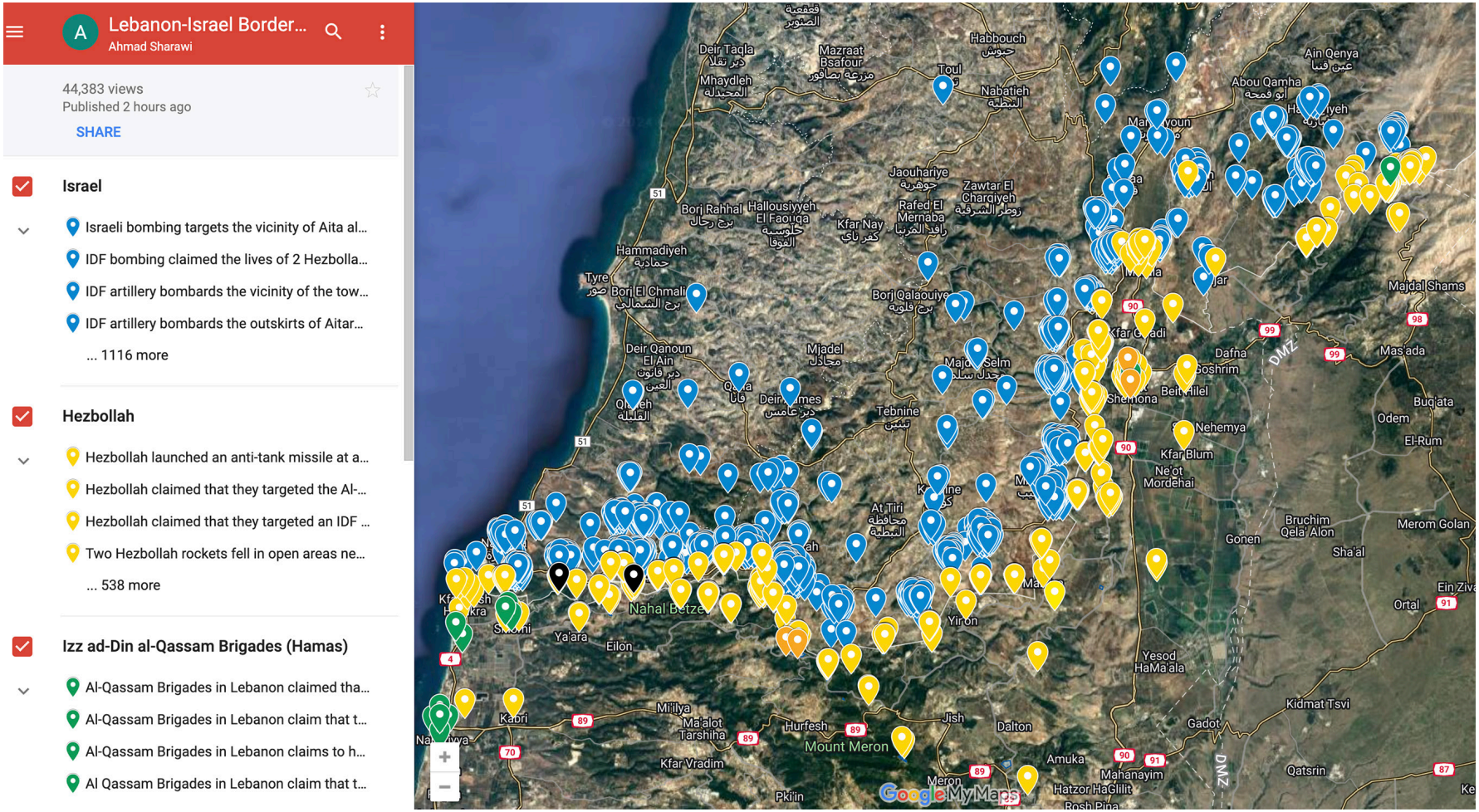

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