

# How Will Hezbollah Respond to Israel's Drone Attack?

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Aug 28, 2019

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**With the IDF seemingly expanding its missile hunt to Lebanon and Iraq, the actions of Iran's proxies, their host governments, and U.S. officials will do much to determine if wider escalation is in the cards.**

Over the past week, the Israel Defense Forces have launched attacks against Iranian and affiliated targets in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In the latter strike, conducted August 25, two IDF drones crashed between residential buildings in the Mouawad neighborhood of south Beirut. According to Hezbollah, these "suicide drones" were armed with 5.5 kilos of C4 explosive; media reports indicate they deliberately targeted crates believed to contain machinery for mixing high-grade propellant used in precision-guided missiles. The previous day, IDF jets reportedly targeted an Iranian position in Damascus, thereby preventing an imminent drone attack on Israel being planned by members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force.

Although the Beirut attack did not cause any casualties, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah did not ignore the incident as he usually does with Israeli strikes on the group's assets in Syria. Instead, he vowed to down any Israeli drones over Lebanese skies.

Nasrallah also explicitly threatened vengeance for the Damascus strike, which killed two Hezbollah fighters. Accusing Israel of violating "the rules of engagement," he warned of a harsh, immediate response to the incident, presumably from Lebanon. Yet Hezbollah officials appeared to back down somewhat on August 27, telling Reuters that the group is preparing a "calculated strike" against Israel, "arranged in a way [that] wouldn't lead to a war that neither Hezbollah nor Israel wants."

For its part, Israel seems to be expanding its Syria strategy to Lebanon and Iraq, targeting Iran's precision missile assets in each country directly and forcefully. During his September 2018 UN speech, Prime Minister Binyamin

Netanyahu outed some of these facilities in Lebanon while leaving room for diplomacy to deal with this threat to Israel's security. As the Mouawad evidence shows, however, Hezbollah is still trying to upgrade its domestic missile arsenal with Iran's help, so Israel feels compelled to pursue military options. More IDF attacks can be expected, and Hezbollah's retaliatory options—"calculated" or not—are limited. In fact, such retaliation might open the door to more Israeli strikes, drawing Lebanon further into the Iran-Israel confrontation. The question is, will Hezbollah take that course anyway, and if so, in what form?

## THREE SCENARIOS

**T**hus far, Nasrallah has warned that Hezbollah will do the following: shoot down any Israeli drones it spots flying over Lebanon; launch retaliatory measures from Lebanon for the personnel killed in the latest Syria strike; and respond to the Beirut drone attack. Although each of these threats is rather general, acting (or not acting) on them would produce one of three scenarios, all of them problematic for the group's leadership:

**High-risk Hezbollah attacks on sensitive Israeli targets.** If the group retaliates against high-value military, economic, or symbolic targets inside Israel, it would register a powerful, hurtful blow against its enemy while pleasing its support base back home. Yet both effects would be short-lived, since Israel would almost certainly respond with larger and more devastating attacks, perhaps leading to a full-fledged war that Hezbollah may not be able to deescalate at the last moment.

Since most parties with a stake in the matter would seek to avoid such a conflict, its probability is low. Yet it could still come to pass if either side miscalculates events sufficiently. Moreover, Israel has wanted to [deal with Hezbollah's remaining precision missile facilities \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-to-lebanon\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-to-lebanon) in Lebanon for some time, and escalation (temporary or not) could provide an opportunity to do so. This might lead to full-fledged war as well—in this case between Israel and Iran, and maybe other countries if Tehran pushes its other foreign Shia militia proxies to join.

The potential consequences of any "all-out war" scenario are dire. Hezbollah would suffer heavy personnel and equipment losses that it currently [lacks the funds to replace \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-sanctions-are-hurting-hezbollah\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-sanctions-are-hurting-hezbollah). It would barely be able to compensate its constituency for their personal losses and reconstruction demands. The Shia community in south Lebanon, the Beqa Valley, and south Beirut would not be able to flee the next conflict as they did the 2006 war (since Syria is now off limits, and sectarian tensions would make it difficult to shelter in other parts of Lebanon). They would probably blame Hezbollah for causing the destruction by attacking sensitive Israeli targets. In short, Lebanon would be devastated, and reconstruction funding would not be as abundant as it was in 2006 given today's greater international pressure on Hezbollah and general donor weariness.

**No Hezbollah attacks at all.** The group may decide not to retaliate at all, instead adopting the approach so often used by the Syrian regime next door: that is, warning it will choose "the appropriate time and place" for retaliation, then letting that rhetorical threat drag on until everyone forgets. The problem with this scenario is that Hezbollah's support base will not forget. Nasrallah's domestic credibility stems mainly from his famous "fulfilled promise" (*al-waad al-sadeq*), an attribute he claimed after supposedly achieving the "divine victory" he promised early in the 2006 war. In other words, he has to fulfill his promises at some point, otherwise he will lose credibility.

Nasrallah already faces significant discontent at home for largely ignoring Israeli attacks on Hezbollah assets in Syria (Iran attempted to retaliate for such strikes in April-May 2018 and January 2019, but Hezbollah was not involved in those operations). If he does not respond forcefully to attacks in Lebanon, the distrust and criticism brewing among his constituency will boil over.

Failure to act would also erode whatever deterrence Hezbollah has left in terms of limiting Israeli military

operations. A few hours after Nasrallah railed against the Damascus strike, Israeli warplanes reportedly attacked a Beqa Valley base belonging to the Syrian-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. Although the facility was not Hezbollah's, it was inside Lebanese territory and very close to a location where Nasrallah's speech had been broadcast live to a large local audience. Not responding now would simply be too embarrassing.

**Limited Hezbollah response.** This is the most likely scenario, in part because the group's rhetoric so far suggests such a course, and also because it has launched limited strikes against Israel in the past. In 2015, Hezbollah personnel fired an antitank missile that killed an IDF officer and a soldier close to the border. The attack came in response to the assassination of seven Hezbollah members (including senior official Jihad Mughniyah) and an Iranian general on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights.

To respond proportionately to the Beirut drone attack, Hezbollah might send small explosive-laden drones into Israel, or use overseas terrorist networks to target Israeli interests. This outcome might satisfy Nasrallah's base and allow him to save face, without the risk entailed by entering a wider confrontation. Yet if Israeli operations inside Lebanon and Iraq have now become the new normal, then a limited Hezbollah response will only postpone future confrontation, at least as long as the group continues its precision missile project in Lebanon (Hezbollah's two other main threats to Israel—its cross-border tunneling project and its military presence near the Golan Heights—have largely been contained for the moment).

## **AVOIDING WAR ENTAILS A CLEAR U.S. RESPONSE**

**H**ezbollah's patrons in Iran understand the complexities of any retaliation in Syria or Iraq. In the former, Russia coordinates with Israel when the IDF needs to attack Iranian targets; in the latter, Baghdad still has significant military relations with the United States. In contrast, Lebanon is largely free of such great-power considerations, and it remains Hezbollah and Iran's strongest base, allowing them to carry out attacks from there without significant outside interference if they so desire. And if Lebanon turns into a battlefield, the fighting could easily expand to Iraq and the rest of the region.

Therefore, containing Hezbollah's responses in Lebanon requires a nimble U.S. approach that combines smart public and private messaging with clear demands to officials in Beirut. This includes the Lebanese Armed Forces, who already fired on Israeli drones earlier today and may try to disrupt further IDF operations against Hezbollah weapons caches. Active U.S. mediation is a must given Washington's relationships with Israel and Lebanon, and its longstanding assistance to the LAF. Since 2006, the U.S. government has provided more than \$2 billion in military assistance, and it should use this aid as leverage for warning the LAF not to fire on Israeli forces and communicating the consequences of Hezbollah's missile activities to Beirut. In particular, LAF officials should be reminded that they are supposed to be implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which prohibits militias like Hezbollah from possessing military capabilities in Lebanon. The stage is already set for serious discussion of these issues in the Security Council, which will soon vote on **whether to renew the mandate**

**(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/time-to-change-course-on-the-uns-lebanon-policy>)** of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

Meanwhile, the Trump administration needs to address the delicate situation in Baghdad, where U.S. officials are constrained not only by the volatile nature of local politics, but also by the widespread Iraqi conviction that Israel's **recent strikes there** (**<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/militias-are-threatening-public-safety-in-iraq>**) were authorized or facilitated by Washington—a claim that has touched a raw nerve of Iraqi nationalism. As such, the administration should tell Prime Minister Adil Abdulmahdi and President Barham Salih that the presence of Iranian-linked precision missile assets on their territory will inevitably spur Israel to launch more attacks. This in turn could increase the chances of the very scenario that Iraq's civilian and militia leaders have

said they want to avoid: dragging their country into an Iranian conflict with another power.

Finally, even if recent French efforts to jumpstart U.S.-Iranian talks do not bear fruit, Washington should recognize the heightened urgency of convincing Iran to contain its regional proxies. In messaging Tehran on this matter, U.S. officials should prioritize the precision missile facilities in Lebanon and Iraq, since that is the issue most likely to spark a wider conflict.

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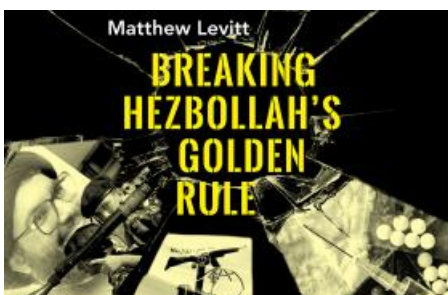
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