

Thirteen Years Since the Hezbollah-Israel War

by [Gadi Eisenkot \(/experts/gadi-eisenkot\)](/experts/gadi-eisenkot)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Gadi Eisenkot \(/experts/gadi-eisenkot\)](/experts/gadi-eisenkot)

Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, IDF (ret.), was a 2019 military fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On the anniversary of the 2006 conflict, a former IDF chief of staff assesses current power dynamics, risks, and opportunities along Israel's northern borders.

This March, Israel marked the seventieth anniversary of its ceasefire agreement with the state of Lebanon. On July 12, it will mark thirteen years since the outbreak of a war that began when Lebanese Hezbollah kidnapped two soldiers from Israeli territory and killed three others. Following thirty-three days of fighting, the balance of power on Israel's northern border was irrevocably changed, while a penetrating discourse was stirred up regarding the government's management of the conflict and the performance of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

This PolicyWatch will assess the war's strategic legacy through two lenses. First, it will examine how the hostilities and their aftermath have affected the military capabilities and strategic position of Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force in the context of their mission against Israel. Second, it will discuss Israel's strategic achievements and challenges since the war, and how the country should proceed in light of them.

THE POSTWAR BALANCE OF POWER

Shortly after the war, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah candidly told an interviewer, "We did not think, even one percent, that the capture would lead to a war at this time and of this magnitude...If I had known on July 11...that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not." Yet while the border has seen thirteen years of relative quiet and stability since then, the group has continued to expand its robust arsenal and develop what it views as three crucial power multipliers:

1. Precision capability for its missiles.
2. A second front against Israel from Syria.

3. An offensive plan to penetrate Israeli territory, both above ground and via tunnels.

The IDF has actively confronted these challenges in recent years, damaging the group's capabilities and greatly hampering its plans. To counter the improving precision of Hezbollah rockets, the IDF has attacked missile production plants and stockpiles while taking open and covert action against weapons transfers from the group's chief patron, Iran. And as Hezbollah and Tehran sought to establish a second front against Israel in the Golan Heights, the IDF struck deep along that frontier, establishing deconfliction mechanisms with Russian forces in Syria that allowed Israel to greatly reduce the capabilities of its enemies. Most recently, the IDF countered Hezbollah's plans for underground incursions into Israel by launching Operation Northern Shield.

NEUTRALIZING THE TUNNEL THREAT

In late 2014, the first hints of a secret Qods Force/Hezbollah project came to light—a flagship plan for developing a massive system of underground attack tunnels. As part of a wider potential offensive, this network could have allowed thousands of troops to rise up from tunnels that stretched from inside Lebanon into Israeli communities, helping Iran and Hezbollah notch a strategic military achievement and advance their shared goal of harming and ultimately destroying the state of Israel.

For years, the IDF labored to accurately assess the number and location of these tunnels using combined intelligence capabilities together with technological, operational, and combat engineering resources. The fruit of this labor was Operation Northern Shield, which started on December 4, 2018. When the operation ended on January 13, the tunnels were destroyed and the underground threat to Israel's northern frontier was neutralized.

Upon losing a tunnel system they had worked on for over a decade, the Qods Force and Hezbollah were clearly shocked—a reaction manifested in their denial of the project and their attempts to minimize the importance of a program that had been so central to their strategy. It is reasonable to assume that the exposure and destruction of this secret project has shown both groups the extent to which Israel has infiltrated their core secrets, likely strengthening Israeli deterrence in the eyes of Iranian and Hezbollah decisionmakers.

HEZBOLLAH SINCE 2006

In the years following the Lebanon war, Hezbollah focused on rebuilding Beirut's Shia district of Dahiya and the villages of south Lebanon, as well as bolstering its own military capabilities and processing the lessons learned during the conflict. By 2011, the turmoil in the Arab world and the deteriorating situation in Syria led Iran to demand that Hezbollah forces assist Bashar al-Assad's regime and support Iranian proxies in other regional struggles. An active combat role in Syria helped the group acquire valuable field experience in deploying formations at the company and battalion level.

The foreign interventions took a toll, however. After five years of fighting in Syria, some 2,000 Hezbollah operatives had been killed and 8,000 injured. Contrary to its past practice, the group resorted to using combatants as young as sixteen years of age, and many of these green recruits died in battle. In early 2018, Hezbollah began withdrawing forces from Syria, returning the majority of them home by year's end. The group soon encountered internal divisions and severe economic problems that led it to sharply reduce the number of units it fielded, the social welfare programs it sponsored in Lebanon, and the wages it paid to personnel.

Even so, the group's cooperation with Iran, especially the Qods Force, **[has only deepened](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-iran-dynamics-a-proxy-not-a-partner)** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-iran-dynamics-a-proxy-not-a-partner>).

Perhaps the best illustration of this merger came in 2016, when the commander of Hezbollah forces in Syria, Mustafa Badreddine, was executed shortly after meeting with Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani at an Iranian base near Damascus. The decision appeared to reflect the wishes of both Soleimani and Nasrallah; since then, the organization has functioned without an independent military chief of its own.

ISRAEL ACHIEVED MOST OF ITS STRATEGIC GOALS

The central dilemma facing the Israeli security cabinet on the eve of the 2006 war was defining the campaign's main target—was it the state of Lebanon, Hezbollah, or both? In the end, the IDF recommended six campaign goals, and the cabinet approved them:

1. Strengthening Israeli deterrence in the region.
2. Halting terrorism from Lebanon's sovereign territory.
3. Forcing the Lebanese government to take responsibility for the south.
4. Pressuring Hezbollah to return the kidnapped soldiers.
5. Causing significant damage to Hezbollah and its military capabilities.
6. Keeping Syria and the Palestinian territories out of the war.

Thirteen years later, it can be said that most of these goals were achieved. Israeli deterrence is still strong, as demonstrated by the years of relative quiet on Israel's northern border. The Lebanese government and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) have taken some responsibility for the south. More broadly, Hezbollah was dealt a forceful blow after years of Tehran casting the group as a model for extending Iranian hegemony in the Middle East.

At the same time, Hezbollah has significantly increased its military strength despite the blow it suffered, even south of the Litani River—a space it was supposed to evacuate in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Beirut and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have not fully established the sovereignty they are supposed to exert under that resolution, and the supervision exercised by UNIFIL is limited as well. On the political front, Hezbollah's influence continues to grow within Lebanon (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/lebanon>).

LOOKING AHEAD

Even in the face of major IDF accomplishments during the war, the fact that Hezbollah was able to fire an estimated 4,000 rockets and missiles at northern communities sent shockwaves throughout Israeli society, raising difficult questions about the military's level of preparedness. As outlined in a 2015 strategy document (<https://www.belfercenter.org/israel-defense-forces-strategy-document>), this resulted in reorganization of the IDF and refocusing of intelligence resources, along with heightened readiness for future action against Hezbollah and protection of the home front.

Today, Hezbollah is capable of launching missiles into Israel on an even larger scale than 2006. Yet Israel's defensive and offensive capabilities against the group have greatly improved, and the IDF enjoys major intelligence, aerial, and ground superiority—enough to ensure victory in a future conflict and make Iran and Hezbollah pay a heavy price.

Meanwhile, recent regional developments and heightened pressures on Iran have created an opportunity to roll back the Shia militia threat in the Middle East and bolster the state of Lebanon. In particular, Israel believes the following steps are crucial:

- **Strengthen existing international peacekeeping efforts.** The expected extension of UNIFIL's mandate this August, together with increased efforts toward operational enforcement of Resolution 1701 in south Lebanon, would improve regional stability and constrict Hezbollah's influence. Accordingly, the UN should reinvigorate the mandate of its peacekeeping forces in Syria and Lebanon by increasing the number of troops, expanding their authority on the ground, and placing stricter enforcement requirements on them.

- **Press the LAF and Beirut to take responsibility.** Because Lebanon’s military depends on foreign aid, donor countries can condition their contributions on the LAF becoming more active on two fronts: intercepting weapons transferred through Syria and increasing operations in Hezbollah strongholds south of the Litani River. Concurrently, the international community should pressure the civilian government to boost its sovereignty in the south and take full responsibility for what happens there.
- **Press Iran to withdraw.** The growing international pressure on Tehran has created an opportunity to push the regime into removing its forces from Syria and its “advisors” from Lebanon. Increasing the U.S.-led effort against Iran would also weaken Hezbollah’s strategic position, in part by limiting how much the group and its patron can influence Lebanon.
- **Monitor the Lebanon-Syria border.** In the interests of regional stability, international players should closely monitor this frontier to prevent the transfer of Iranian weapons to Hezbollah. This task is especially relevant in light of last month’s trilateral summit in Jerusalem between the national security advisors of Israel, Russia, and the United States.
- **Encourage Israeli-Lebanese engagement.** The Israeli government should increase its efforts to promote shared interests with Beirut, such as [drilling for gas in Lebanese waters \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/east-mediterranean-energy-and-middle-east-peace\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/east-mediterranean-energy-and-middle-east-peace) and regulating land and maritime borders (with the exception of the contentious Shebaa Farms).

In short, the 2006 war yielded important strategic achievements for Israel, and as long as these achievements are maintained, stability on Israel’s northern border is likely. Moreover, the current situation facing Hezbollah, Iran, and the Qods Force may provide a strategic opportunity to further weaken their influence in Lebanon. Whatever the case, Israel must maintain its readiness and military superiority, both as deterrents to delay the next conflict and as instruments for decisive victory should conflict arise.

Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, a military fellow at The Washington Institute, retired from the IDF in January after serving as chief of the general staff. ❖

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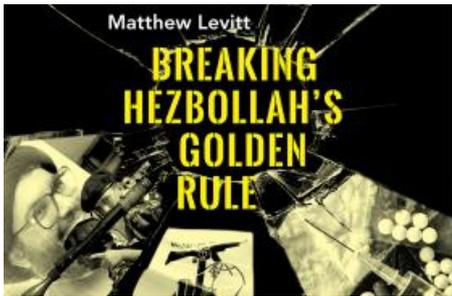
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