

Israel-Lebanon Border Tensions: Hezbollah Provocation, IDF Response, and the Potential for Conflict

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Brief Analysis

Three experts discuss the worsening situation on the ground and assess whether a new war is likely in the near term.

On August 22, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Hanin Ghaddar, Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (IDF Res.), and Matthew Levitt. Ghaddar is the Institute's Friedmann Senior Fellow and coauthor of its recent paper '[Cash Cabal: How Hezbollah Profits from Lebanon's Financial Crisis](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-from-lebanon-financial-crisis) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-from-lebanon-financial-crisis>).' Orion is the Institute's Rueven International Fellow and former head of the Israel Defense Forces Strategic Planning Division. Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Fellow and creator of its [interactive map](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/>) on Hezbollah's worldwide activities. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Hanin Ghaddar

Hezbollah's border escalation with Israel is intended to restore its once-popular image as a "resistance" organization. The group has lost substantial domestic credibility over the past decade and a half due to a string of missteps, from using violence against fellow Lebanese in May 2008 to intervening in the Syria war, protecting Beirut's political elite during the 2019 protests, and hampering the judicial investigation into the 2020 port blast. These and other actions led Hezbollah and its allies to lose their parliamentary majority in the May 2022 election. To avoid further losses, they are now trying to regain the resistance narrative.

The group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, views Israel's recent internal crisis as an opportunity to provoke the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) without risking a larger conflict. Hezbollah does not have the capacity to fight another war right now due to its budgetary constraints and depleted fighting force. Yet Nasrallah believes he has enough insight into Israeli decisionmaking to escalate tensions in a calculated manner that improves Hezbollah's position in Lebanon. Meanwhile, Iran is using this opportunity to warn Israel that Hezbollah is still present and strong along its borders and might be used to attack Israel if the IDF decides to strike Iranian infrastructure (for instance, due to mounting concerns over Tehran's nuclear program).

The current void in Lebanese state institutions has essentially empowered Hezbollah to make security decisions on the border without consulting Beirut. Accordingly, the group has been working closely with Palestinian factions inside Lebanon to facilitate anti-Israel operations, including recent rocket strikes tied to Hamas cells, efforts to supplant traditional Fatah Party control over the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, and the takeover of UN Relief and Works Agency schools.

The additional Iranian support has emboldened Nasrallah to take greater risks that could lead to war, and Tehran appears to trust his decisionmaking inside Lebanon. Yet Iran still maintains control over Hezbollah's ability to pursue such a war, and the group's escalations still seem like calculated ones. The form and intensity of Israel's potential response may dictate the group's next steps.

Assaf Orion

The IDF is now the closest it has been to war with Hezbollah since 2006. Iran is pushing its proxies to be more aggressive as part of a broader strategy to mobilize the "axis of resistance" and activate multiple theaters against Israel. In that sense, Hezbollah's recent actions are Tehran's attempt to send a message to Israel. These provocations—which include firing antitank missiles at IDF soldiers, sabotaging the security barrier along the frontier, and sending an attacker across the border—have increased tensions significantly. Hezbollah claims ignorance on some of these incidents, arguing that independent actors are to blame. There has been little response from Israel so far.

Going forward, Israel can take several steps to prepare for and deter Hezbollah's provocations. The IDF should continue striking the group's arms transfers in and through Syria to prevent military buildup in Lebanon. Israel has been using more diplomacy than force to de-escalate the situation, while sending reinforcements to the north as a precaution.

Pushing for improvements to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon during next month's mandate renewal discussions can help as well. UNIFIL is only a small part of the solution, and changing its mandate is difficult because of UN bureaucracy and politicking between permanent members of the Security Council. Yet UNIFIL still helps keep the peace despite its struggles in carrying out its mission in Lebanon—for example, it serves a constructive liaison role, facilitates communication, deconflicts forces, and sometimes interposes itself as a buffer between Lebanese and Israeli troops along the border.

Critics blame the diminished deterrence against Hezbollah on several factors, including the volatility of Israel's current domestic upheaval, the perception that the IDF is weaker because of political repercussions on its reserves, and the previous government's conciliatory approach during the negotiations surrounding last year's maritime boundary agreement. The IDF is still highly capable, though distractions at home and in the West Bank could affect Israel's focus on countering Hezbollah's aggressiveness. Although neither side wants to start a war given the extreme costs, miscalculated escalation is becoming more probable. Hezbollah's near-border deployments add to the volatility, eroding Israel's margin of error were it to take military action.

Matthew Levitt

Over the past three years, Hezbollah has taken steps to change the red lines that govern its conflict with Israel. Nasrallah threatened to shoot down Israeli drones in Lebanese airspace and target Israel's offshore natural gas pipelines if it began extracting from the Karish field before reaching a deal with Beirut. He also warned that attacking any Iranian oil shipment would be considered an attack on Lebanese territory—a risky statement in the midst of Israel and Iran's tit-for-tat escalation against each other's shipping interests. Nasrallah's willingness to risk conflict is partly driven by domestic economic and political pressures. Yet the maritime border agreement and gradual decline in Israeli intelligence collection oversight have led him to believe he can predict Israel's response and change the status quo.

There is reason to fear that the latest Hezbollah threats are more than words. The group's efforts to stockpile missiles in preparation for a war have achieved a balance of deterrence sufficient to constrain Israel's response to aggression. Nasrallah also believes he has Israel's number after

successfully leveraging Hezbollah's willingness to use its enlarged precision missile arsenal and air defense systems. His correct calculations during recent escalatory events have emboldened him to take even greater risks, but it is increasingly possible that a miscalculation will lead to a war that neither side desires.

This summary was prepared by Kyle Robertson. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family. ❖

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