

Hezbollah Miscalculations and the Gaza War

by [Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

Oct 12, 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute's Rubin Family Arab Politics Program, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant.



Brief Analysis

The group might be content with its existing political gains from the conflict, but Washington should still try to shift its calculus given the grave risks of a wider war.

Since the Gaza war broke out, Hezbollah has been walking a fine line between limited responses and full involvement. The group seems to be pushing the limits a little further every day, signaling its readiness for war without breaking the tacit rules that it set with Israel after the 2006 Lebanon war. Yet this risky balancing act could collapse at any point, whether by miscalculation or a deliberate decision to shift strategies.

Thus far, Hezbollah has engaged in several [clashes \(https://www.foxnews.com/world/israel-responds-hezbollah-attack-lebanon-deploying-tens-thousands-northern-border\)](https://www.foxnews.com/world/israel-responds-hezbollah-attack-lebanon-deploying-tens-thousands-northern-border) along the border with Israel either directly or via cells from the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, a Hamas force that has been permitted to operate in south Lebanon [for some time now \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanese-social-media-reactions-rocket-strikes-israel\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanese-social-media-reactions-rocket-strikes-israel). The scope of these clashes has been carefully calibrated to stay within certain limits while still holding the threat of multifront escalation over Israel's head. Indeed, Hezbollah has not yet joined the war from a logistical standpoint: its units have refrained from launching missiles at Israeli infrastructure and civilians, its special forces have not infiltrated Israel, and its target set is still limited to military elements in the north. At the same time, however, the group has made sure to maintain an elevated threat level by conducting some type of significant operation every day since the Hamas attack.

The goal of Hezbollah's current strategy seems clear: reap the benefits of the Hamas-Israel war without losing the military presence it has steadily built up in Lebanon since 2006. Although the group believes that opening another front could temporarily overwhelm Israel per the "united front" strategy designed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), it also seems to realize that this approach would fail to defeat Israel in the long term—more likely, it would wind up destroying Hezbollah's arsenal and weakening its forces. A full-scale war that ends without

clear victory would also leave the organization with insufficient funding to restock its military or push a “victory” narrative to its core constituency in Lebanon; the leadership might not even be able to rebuild their strongholds in Beirut and the south.

In short, the costs of wider escalation could trump any gains. Inside Lebanon, every party and sect would blame Hezbollah for dragging Lebanon into another war, with serious repercussions on the group’s domestic political strategy, on-hand cash flow, and future economic prospects. Even its close allies have **stated their opposition** (https://twitter.com/Gebran_Bassil/status/1711823386869907581) to entering the war.

Similarly, Hezbollah’s patron in Iran has already gained much of what it seemingly sought from the Hamas attack and may stand pat—at least for now. The U.S.-backed Israeli-Saudi normalization process is frozen, weaknesses have been exposed in Israel’s intelligence and military strength, and one of Tehran’s proxies has made good on the regime’s longstanding threat: to cause serious harm inside Israel in retaliation for suspected Israeli operations inside Iran. The attack has also reenergized the regime’s resistance narrative throughout the region.

In Tehran’s view, more Palestinian casualties is a small price to pay for achieving these gains and increasing the leverage of its main military proxy, Hezbollah. The dilemma, of course, is that playing this card—i.e., opening a full-scale Hezbollah front—would leave Iran with no more high cards on the table. Yet Tehran does not share Hezbollah’s domestic Lebanese concerns and thus will not be limited by that factor. And if Hezbollah is ordered to join the war, it will not argue with Iran.

Currently, **Hezbollah media** (<https://twitter.com/2e3lammk2020>) are sending two main messages: that the United States has been tricked into entering the conflict, and that **American warnings** (<https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/11/politics/us-allies-warn-hezbollah/index.html>) will not derail Hezbollah. Yet the group has not called up its reserves or evacuated the southern suburbs of Beirut, despite asking residents in frontier towns to leave—a sign that it wants to keep any hostilities limited to the border for now. Moreover, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has been completely absent from the scene since the Hamas attack, which usually means the group has not yet decided how deeply to intervene in a given crisis. In 2006, Nasrallah was the first to announce the war and continuously commented on its progress.

As Hezbollah and Iran deliberate their next steps, showing strength and determination is vital. The only way to restrain them from escalating is to shift their thinking from confidence to fear, which requires demonstrating the seriousness of U.S. and Israeli military threats. Hezbollah needs to understand that it has already miscalculated the situation, and that its military assets can no longer be used to strengthen Iranian interests in the region.

In addition to heightening its border activity, Hezbollah has warned that it will join Hamas if Israel conducts a major Gaza incursion. Should that pledge prove sincere, the opening of a second front may be a question of when, not if. Even if an Israeli incursion does not trigger a Hezbollah war, other factors could lead to the same outcome, including the group’s current risky tactics, a fatal miscalculation or targeting error, or a shift in Iran’s strategy. The conflict might also explode to the regional level in other, unforeseen ways, potentially leading Hezbollah to believe it has no choice but to intervene.

In light of these risks, diplomatic messaging is insufficient—the group will not give credence to U.S. and Israeli warnings unless they are accompanied by visible military steps. The U.S. Navy has already **deployed two aircraft carrier groups** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/us-wartime-support-israel-first-steps-and-future-considerations>) to the vicinity, but allies should consider displaying an even stronger presence near the borders and coasts of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel, in addition to conducting military overflights near the Golan Heights and other potential ignition points.

Likewise, Iran and the IRGC need to be made aware of the risks to their own political and military infrastructure if

Hezbollah intervenes. The decision is in Tehran's hands—before the regime makes up its mind, Washington should make clear what will happen if it continues using Arab proxies to target Israelis and Americans.

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its recent study “[Cash Cabal: How Hezbollah Profits from Lebanon's Financial Crisis](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-from-lebanon's-financial-crisis) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/cash-cabal-how-hezbollah-profits-lebanons-financial-crisis>).” ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Will Hezbollah and Iran Expand War to Israel's North?](#)

Oct 12, 2023

◆
David Schenker,
Hanin Ghaddar,
Yair Golan,
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/will-hezbollah-and-iran-expand-war-israels-north)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[U.S. Wartime Support to Israel: First Steps and Future Considerations](#)

Oct 12, 2023

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/us-wartime-support-israel-first-steps-and-future-considerations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[The War Hamas Always Wanted](#)

Oct 11, 2023

◆
Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/war-hamas-always-wanted)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](/policy-analysis/military-security)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](/policy-analysis/israel)

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](/policy-analysis/lebanon)