

Will Hezbollah Hold Back or Escalate?

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Articles & Testimony

The group's latest actions indicate that its strategy for the Gaza war has not changed: using limited and deniable border escalation to distract Israel without fully entering the conflict (for now).

As the Israel-Hamas war advances, the clashes along the Lebanese-Israeli border indicate that Hezbollah does not want to engage beyond the implied rules of conflict that were set with Israel after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war—at least, not yet. The group wants to reap the benefits of the war without risking the loss of its strategic position in Lebanon. But this calculated engagement could shift at any moment, and become a full-scale Hezbollah-Israel war due to miscalculations or a change in the Hezbollah and Iranian leadership's assessments. In any case, the Hamas attack of Oct. 7 and the aggressive nature of the war that has followed might eventually lead to the end of the 17-year-old deterrence approach along the Lebanese-Israeli border and shift both Israeli and the U.S. policies toward Iran and Hezbollah in the Middle East.

On Sunday, the cross-border clashes [intensified \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/one-killed-3-wounded-cross-border-hezbollah-attack-northern-israel-2023-10-15/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/one-killed-3-wounded-cross-border-hezbollah-attack-northern-israel-2023-10-15/) as Hezbollah fired guided missiles at Israeli military posts along the northern borders and targeted the town of Shtula, which is near Shebaa Farms—a disputed territory claimed by both Lebanon and Israel that has been specifically targeted by Hezbollah since the beginning of the war. At the same time, Hamas's al-Qassam Brigades said they had fired 20 rockets from Lebanon on northern Israel. In response, the Israeli army conducted airstrikes in the south of Lebanon, and the headquarters of the local U.N. peacekeepers were hit.

This escalation was immediately addressed by Hezbollah through a [statement \(https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/300974\)](https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/300974) by a spokesperson, Rana Sahili, assuring that the intensifying exchanges do not indicate a decision made by Hezbollah to fully enter the war. These are “only skirmishes” and “a

warning” to Israel, she said.

This immediate response shows that Hezbollah’s strategy hasn’t changed: a limited escalation along the borders, distracting Israel with the chances of a Lebanon war, while maintaining plausible deniability. The group has been targeting Israeli military personnel and positions in addition to radar and telecom poles—readying the border and its personnel for an escalation when needed.

Meanwhile, Iran has been leveraging its regional strength by dispatching Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian to [warn \(https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4606321-iran-fm-opening-lebanese-israeli-front-hezbollah%E2%80%99s-hands\)](https://english.aawsat.com/arab-world/4606321-iran-fm-opening-lebanese-israeli-front-hezbollah%E2%80%99s-hands) Israel of a “great earthquake” from Beirut, as well as several other regional capitals; reiterating the same threat of an open war “with all the resistance axis forces if Israel continues its attack on Gaza.” The absence of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah from the scene, leaving the Lebanese political space to an Iranian official, is very telling. In Hezbollah’s most recent war with Israel in 2006, Nasrallah was always the one to announce operations, targets, and victories, and his frequent public appearances indicated the progress and goals of the war.

Without a full-scale war—or a decision to go to war—a speech or a statement from Nasrallah could signal weakness or indecisiveness. Iran is still deliberating the next steps, and Nasrallah can’t appear indecisive; he will only be brought to the forefront once a decision is made. His absence, nevertheless, is domestically embarrassing. It is a predicament. But this is not the only Hezbollah predicament.

The group is playing a very risky game along the border, and it takes major self-control to maintain it. Discipline among its forces, readiness, and meticulousness are all essential elements in Hezbollah’s engagement. The group cannot afford to exhibit the rampaging indiscipline that Hamas projected during its Oct. 7 attack. This could badly influence Hezbollah’s legitimacy among its constituents and remind the world of its violent core and beginnings.

Any miscalculation could send the wrong signal and bring about an all-out war. This is exactly why Hezbollah has not called in its reserve forces yet—they could be a liability in this calculated but risky game. Another indication of the group’s strategy is its effort to evacuate residents of many villages and towns along the border, but not those far off. There was no systematized evacuation—or requests for residents to leave—in coastal towns such as Tyre or Sarafand, or in Dahiyeh, Hezbollah’s stronghold in Beirut’s southern suburbs.

Since 2006, Hezbollah’s strategy has been to maintain deterrence, grow its regional influence, and continue to [develop \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-lebanon\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-lebanon) a large stock of precision missiles. From the estimated 130,000 missiles that Hezbollah retains, a few dozen are precision-guided missiles. When its facilities in Syria became a target for Israeli airstrikes, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) decided to move most of the production facilities of these missiles to Lebanon, where Israel was more deterred.

If Hezbollah decided to enter the war, the group would likely launch thousands of its missiles per day and use the precision ones to target sensitive Israeli infrastructure. However, the threat of these missiles has been, so far, more powerful than the missiles themselves: If Hezbollah uses them, it will lose them, and it will take many years and incalculable effort and resources to restock its arsenal. Hezbollah would be more exposed without this major threat, and Iran would lose its strongest pressure tools in the next phase of the war.

Add to this the leadership dilemma that Hezbollah’s fighting force [faces \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community) today. All of the “victories” that the group had claimed in the past have been attributed to its late military commander Imad Mughniyeh, who was killed by a joint U.S.-Israeli operation in Damascus in 2008. Afterward, Hezbollah got overwhelmed in the Syria war and other regional conflicts under the leadership of the IRGC

Quds Force commander, Qassem Suleimani, without being able to declare a clear or satisfactory victory. Suleimani then was assassinated in Baghdad in 2020, leaving a huge gap in Hezbollah's military leadership and a fighting force with organizational and budget challenges.

In addition to this dilemma, a full-scale war would also mean a domestic loss for Hezbollah. It would expose its incapacity to protect and relocate the already frustrated Shiite community, challenge its vulnerable political dynamics inside an economically and politically shattered Lebanon, and reveal that the group entered a war of this magnitude without securing guarantees for the postwar reconstruction of its country.

After the 2006 war, the Persian Gulf states rushed to help Lebanon with reconstruction and compensation while Iran in particular helped Hezbollah recover militarily and financially. This time around, there are no guarantees that the Gulf countries would help rebuild, and Iran is not in a good enough financial situation to help. The result of such a war would be too devastating for Lebanon, and Hezbollah would be blamed for it for a long time, with serious implications for its domestic political strategy, alliances, and the next elections.

On the other hand, if Hezbollah joins the war with a full-scale attack on Israel, it could only hope to overwhelm Israel with another front, with no real guarantees of a success that it could spin into another victory. The question is whether Iran is ready to sacrifice Hezbollah's advantage and leverage in Lebanon, depleting its military power. It is unlikely that Iran would go in this direction unless this war turns into an existential conflict for the Iranian regime.

Hezbollah's organic military, ideological, and financial links to the IRGC make it very difficult for its leadership to say no to Tehran if the latter decides to launch a war against Israel from Lebanon or the Golan Heights. Hezbollah has shifted since 2006 from a Lebanese armed resistance group to Iran's main regional army, leading and training most of the IRGC's militias in the region, from Syria through Iraq to Yemen. Hezbollah's involvement could mean a regional war—an event that became more imaginable after Hezbollah and the Quds Force **established** (<https://www.vdlnews.com/news/262421>) a joint operations room in Beirut with Hamas and other Palestinian factions when Hamas's leader Ismail Haniyeh visited the city in April 2023.

Since then, both Hezbollah and Hamas have started a gradual **escalation** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-lebanon-border-tensions-hezbollah-provocation-idf-response-and-potential>) along the Lebanese-Israeli border—to test Israel's readiness and the international community's reactions, and to boost the concept of the “united front” against Israel. This also signaled Hamas's complete return to the Iranian fold, after a few years of friction during the Syria war. All of this culminated with the Oct. 7 Hamas attack against Israel.

So far, the so-called united front has not been fully activated against Israel, mainly because Tehran doesn't see an added value for this escalation yet. The Hamas attack that led to the conflict has already provided the Iranian regime with ample gains.

First, the Saudi-Israeli deal is now frozen until further notice, and the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi secured a **direct call** (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/saudi-arabia/2023/10/12/Saudi-Arabia-s-Crown-Prince-discuss-Israel-Palestine-conflict-with-Iran-s-Raisi->) with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to discuss the Israel-Hamas war. Second, after a number of Israeli attacks on its facilities in Syria, and covert attacks inside Iran, the regime can say that it finally responded and hope to deter Israel against more attacks. Third, the Hamas attack has exposed a shocking Israeli military weakness and intelligence failure, which Iran's domestic and regional media are still exploiting. Fourth, Iran energized the resistance rhetoric among many in the Middle East, which will boost Iran's standing in the Arab street.

For the Iranian regime, the war has already boosted its position and power in the region, and involving Hezbollah could risk all these advantages. Expending the Hezbollah card now might not add to these gains—on the contrary,

Iran would lose its strongest bargaining chip in a long conflict that could involve many actors.

The U.S. stance and warnings have also sent a strong message to Iran and Hezbollah. The arrival of the USS *Gerald R. Ford* carrier strike group to the Mediterranean, followed by the USS *Eisenhower* carrier, and the addition of more U.S. Air Force fighter jets to the region constituted a clear deterrent. Iran—along with Hezbollah and Hamas—has probably miscalculated the Biden administration’s response. The likely expectation was that with the Israeli hostages inside Gaza and the flawed diplomacy between this administration and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government, both Israel and the United States would be restrained.

Today, Tehran realizes the risks associated with U.S. involvement, and that in the case of a multifront war, the losses could eclipse the gains. But if the current strategy of limited response by Hezbollah got out of control, the regime in Tehran could see escalation as a way to project power, and an all-out war could quickly materialize. This could turn into an existential war for both Israel and Iran, with inevitable U.S. involvement.

Therefore, U.S. deterrence against Iran and Hezbollah will be crucial, requiring both military presence and diplomatic messaging. Displaying a stronger presence near the borders and coasts of Lebanon, Syria, and Israel could also help, but most importantly, Iran and its IRGC need to be made aware of the risks to their own political and military infrastructure if Iran’s calculations change and Hezbollah interferes.

In the long term, the risks that Hezbollah poses on the Lebanese and Golan borders should not be ignored, even if the group does not get involved in this war. Hezbollah could take advantage of the newly energized resistance narrative to fortify its influence in Lebanon and continue to improve its military power. The risk of an attack by Hezbollah on Israel—and to a certain extent the U.S. interests in the region—will only grow.

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its 2022 study ‘Hezbollahland: Mapping Dahiya and Lebanon’s Shia Community (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahland-mapping-dahiya-and-lebanons-shia-community>).’ This article was originally published on the Foreign Policy website (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/16/hezbollah-nasrallah-lebanon-israel-hamas-escalate/>). ❖

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