

How Israel's Rafah Campaign Might Shape Hezbollah's Operations

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

May 16, 2024

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-ymkn-lhmlt-asrayyl-fy-rfh-twjh-mlyat-hzb-allh\)](/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-ymkn-lhmlt-asrayyl-fy-rfh-twjh-mlyat-hzb-allh)

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 U.S.-Israel rift over how to handle southern Gaza could embolden the Lebanese group to further accelerate its already heightened tempo of operations, though drawing clear deterrent lines could help limit the escalation.

Since his [first speech \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-did-nasrallah-really-say-and-why\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-did-nasrallah-really-say-and-why) on the subject last November, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has linked the Gaza war to his group's own confrontation with Israel, and this linkage is being reaffirmed by the militia's latest actions. As the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) make their initial moves on the southern Gaza city of Rafah, Hezbollah is announcing the use of new weapons in attacks across the northern border, calling for further troop mobilizations, and giving other signals of imminent escalation. Whether these early moves are real or largely symbolic, the risk is high that the group will try to exploit the Rafah campaign in order to deepen Israel's tensions with Washington and the wider international community. For its part, the Israeli government is caught in a difficult balancing act—it faces [rising pressure \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/northern-residents-plan-to-disengage-from-israel-in-independence-day-protest/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/northern-residents-plan-to-disengage-from-israel-in-independence-day-protest/) from displaced northern residents to counter the Hezbollah threat so they can go back home, even as many IDF elements may now be tied down in Rafah for weeks or months. All of these factors will heighten the danger of miscalculation and all-out war unless tough diplomacy is brought to bear on the situation.

Escalation Since April

Hezbollah has relied on its core fighting force since the Gaza war broke out in October, but once Israel announced the beginning of the Rafah campaign, the group [called \(https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/305063-report-\)](https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/305063-report-)

hezbollah-declares-general-mobilization-as-israel-seizes-rafah-crossing) for a general mobilization, which usually means activating its reserves. This could be just a rhetorical mobilization—rather than actually deploying all of its reserves to the battlefield, Hezbollah may simply be continuing its strategy of measured statements and actions in response to changing developments while steering clear of full mobilization and all-out war, at least for now. Yet regardless of the group’s intentions, changes on the ground over the past few days point to a growing risk of war whether the parties want it or not.

On May 13, the Lebanese television network al-Mayadeen **reported** (**<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/hezbollah-introduces--jihad-mughniyeh--heavy-rocket-to-al-ag>**) that Hezbollah had revealed the use of a new heavy rocket for the first time (the “Jihad Mughniyah”). It also noted that a new drone (the “Suhab”) was being used to target Israel’s Iron Dome defense system.

On May 8, an IDF sergeant was killed during a Hezbollah **strike** (**<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-announces-soldier-killed-in-hezbollah-attack-on-army-post-in-north/#:~:text=The%20slain%20soldier%20was%20named,the%20attack%2C%20the%20IDF%20added.>**) on a base in Malkia, while two other soldiers were killed at their post near Metula on May 6, bringing the IDF’s total death toll on the Lebanon front to fourteen since October. Nine Israeli civilians have been killed as well.

These developments are unfolding in the wake of last month’s **direct exchange of fire** (**<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/will-israel-temper-its-war-irans-regional-proxies>**) between Iran and Israel, which punctuated the significance and sensitivity of Hezbollah’s role as Tehran’s top regional proxy. The April 13 missile and drone attack on Israel exposed the **inadequacy** (**<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-sustainable-are-defense-and-deterrence-methods-light-irans-attack>**) of Iran’s military capabilities—if it hopes to pierce allied defenses in a potential larger operation or future war, Tehran would likely need Hezbollah to join in with its huge arsenal. This realization also means that Hezbollah’s weapons remain a major defensive shield and insurance policy for Iran, one that the regime is loath to expend on behalf of Gaza or Hamas. At the same time, however, Hezbollah likely felt it could not keep taking damage from Israel indefinitely. The group therefore seemed to choose the middle path of visibly but cautiously escalating after April 13, and Israel has followed suit.

For example, Hezbollah has been using its third-generation drones for the first time. On April 17, it launched a relatively precise drone strike on the border town of Arab al-Aramshe, wounding eighteen Israelis (mostly IDF reservists). This followed a similar drone strike near Beit Hillel and Kiryat Shmona the previous day. In both cases, the group used a more advanced type of Ababil kamikaze drone capable of singling out specific targets.

On April 22, Hezbollah **claimed** (**<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-hezbollah-launches-deepest-attack-into-israel-since-gaza-war-2024-04-23/>**) to strike a base north of Acre, its deepest attack into Israel since the Gaza war began. In addition to suggesting that more sophisticated weapons were being fielded, this incident also signaled that the group was ready to adopt new rules of engagement and widen the zone of hostilities. Significantly, all of this happened shortly after four IDF soldiers **were wounded** (**<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-military-official-says-four-israeli-soldiers-wounded-by-blast-lebanon-2024-04-15>**) while they were conducting a cross-border foray inside Lebanon.

Hezbollah’s Rafah Calculus

The onset of the Rafah campaign is vital to Hezbollah for two main reasons. First, international reactions to the operation have been very harsh due to the possible humanitarian consequences, leading Hezbollah to conclude that Israel may now be more isolated and vulnerable. Even the Biden administration publicly criticized the operation and halted the shipment of certain munitions to Israel—a decision that Hezbollah, Iran, and other actors likely read

as a shift in U.S.-Israel relations, even though most if not all weapons transfers have reportedly resumed (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/israel-weapons-transfer-1-billion/>). In a May 13 speech (<https://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/305182-nasrallah-says-us-france-acknowledge-south-front-to-stay-active-till-gaza-war-ends>) following the IDF's move on Rafah, Nasrallah reaffirmed the “categorical” connection between the Lebanese and Gaza fronts, noting that “the entire world is now talking about the right of the Palestinians to have a state” due to the collective efforts of Hamas, Hezbollah, and their allies in the “resistance.”

Second, although Israel may continue low-level military activity in Gaza for months to come, Rafah could spell the end of its main battle operations there. That means the IDF may soon be able to refocus more resources and attention on the Lebanon front with the goal of returning northern residents to their homes. Indeed, multiple indicators and statements (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-hezbollah-trade-heavy-fire-violence-escalates-2024-05-08/>) imply an Israeli escalation against Hezbollah after Rafah.

If Nasrallah suspects that Israel is preparing to attack Hezbollah next, he will be forced to choose between two undesirable options: enter a full-scale war or accept the conditions that U.S. and French diplomats have been proposing recently. The latter scenario would mean withdrawing from the border (or, at least, committing to do so on paper) while figuring out a new deterrence equation.

Accordingly, Hezbollah may feel compelled to flex its muscles during the Rafah campaign in order to impose conditions on Israel, Washington, and Paris. The group would likely prefer to go back to the pre-October 7 status quo without being forced to publicly retreat from the border (even though Israel would presumably never accept that condition). It also needs to make sure that the IDF is deterred from directly hitting Iran or drastically curtailing the Iranian presence and influence in the region.

U.S. Policy Options

In the early months of the Gaza war, the Biden administration's strong support for Israel, tough messaging to Iran and Hezbollah, and heavy deployment of warships and fighter jets to the region constituted a strong deterrent. Hezbollah realized the risks associated with challenging that stance. Today, robust U.S. deterrence remains crucial not only to preventing a wider war, but also to facilitating an effective ceasefire deal along the Israel-Lebanon border while potentially convincing Hezbollah to limit its escalation in the meantime. The group has already committed to stop its attacks once the Gaza war is over, so it is certainly amenable to the general idea of de-escalation.

To reach these goals, Washington should focus on several efforts:

- Avoid offering political or economic compromises (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-lebanon-agreement-may-not-be-worth-costs>) to Hezbollah and the many Lebanese state institutions it essentially controls. Indeed, U.S. officials should clearly and publicly state that no American-backed economic bailout will be forthcoming if the group escalates.
- Increase pressure on all the pillars of Hezbollah's power in Lebanon, including its military arsenal (by constraining the flow of weapons from Iran), its domestic political allies, and its hold over the Shia Muslim community.
- Coordinate public pressure and statements with European and Arab partners to present a united front.
- Maintain the heightened U.S. military presence in the region and conduct joint exercises with partner forces whenever possible.
- Repeat President Biden's “Don't” warning from April even more loudly and clearly, specifying that Iran and its regional assets might not be spared from the consequences if Hezbollah escalates. This message would have the added benefit of showing that the administration's current rift with Israel over weapons shipments will not apply in the event of any conflict against Hezbollah.

Indeed, the administration can continue advancing a ceasefire deal to prevent war while still making clear that it will have Israel's back if war breaks out. On May 14, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan **affirmed** (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?535604-1/white-house-daily-briefing>) that the United States will not let Iran and its proxies succeed: "Hezbollah is attacking every day...We are working with Israel and other partners to protect against these threats and to prevent escalation into an all-out regional war, through a calibrated combination of diplomacy, deterrence, force posture adjustments, and use of force when necessary to protect our people and defend our interests and allies."

Iran and Hezbollah need to hear such messages more often, particularly regarding Washington's willingness to combine diplomacy with the use of force. Despite the lack of progress in reaching a Lebanon deal, the process has reassured Hezbollah—perhaps too well—that preventing war is the international community's sole priority. It may therefore be useful to shake up this reassurance a bit by signaling that Israel would have full U.S. support if diplomacy fails, however undesirable the resultant conflict may be. If such warnings prove credible, Hezbollah may calculate that the risk is too great and scale back its near-term escalation accordingly. Indeed, the old Roman adage applies once again: if the Biden administration wants peace, it should prepare for war.

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Rubin Program on Arab Politics. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis](#)

May 16, 2024

◆
Michael Knights,
Amir al-Kaabi,
Hamdi Malik

[\(/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The Anti-Israel Surge by Iraqi Militants: Metrics and Trends](#)

May 15, 2024

◆
Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/anti-israel-surge-iraqi-militants-metrics-and-trends)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Brussels Conference on Supporting Syria: Complex Issues Surrounding "Early Recovery"

May 15, 2024

◆
Ibrahim Murad

(/policy-analysis/brussels-conference-supporting-syria-complex-issues-surrounding-early-recovery)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)