

## If War Comes:

### Israel vs. Hizballah and Its Allies

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#### Brief Analysis

On September 17, 2010, [Jeffrey White \(/templateC10.php?CID=17\)](/templateC10.php?CID=17) and Andrew Exum addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to mark the release of Mr. White's new Institute report [If War Comes: Israel vs. Hizballah and Its Allies \(/templateC04.php?CID=334\)](/templateC04.php?CID=334), an assessment of potential future conflict between Israel and Hizballah and its implications for the region. Mr. White is a defense fellow at the Institute and former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency's Office for Middle East/Africa Regional Military Assessments. Mr. Exum, a former U.S. Army officer who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, is a fellow at the Center for a New American Security. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

The past several months have seen much discussion of growing tensions between Israel and Hizballah, and many observers speculate that another war between the two entities may well occur in the near term. If so, it will likely have a transformative, even fateful impact on Israel, Lebanon, and the region as a whole.

Jeffrey White A war could result from a miscalculation or a deliberate decision by Israel or Hizballah. Such a war will likely be intense, destructive, and broad in scope, involving Israel, Hizballah, Lebanon's military, and possibly Syria, Iran, and Hamas.

All potential participants have been preparing for war. Israel is preparing its ground forces for action in Lebanon, bolstering its intelligence apparatus, and strengthening its defenses against expected strikes by Hizballah rockets and missiles. In a conflict, Israel's strategy will be essentially offensive, with its ground forces likely crossing the Litani River and driving into the Beqa Valley, its air force conducting offensive operations over Lebanon and probably Syria, and its navy operating aggressively off the coast of Lebanon. And while the Israeli military will take measures to reduce civilian losses, Hizballah's defensive concept and the nature of the fighting will result in civilian casualties among the Lebanese population.

Hizballah has also been preparing for war. It has built up its rocket and missile forces and air defenses, and now has four times as many rockets and more accurate missiles than in 2006. In a new war, the group would likely conduct

heavy and sustained rocket and missile attacks on both military and civilian targets in northern and central Israel, attacks that will have implications for how Israel fights the war, especially regarding offensive operations deep in Lebanon. Hizballah has also organized its forces to defend southern Lebanon -- its political base and primary rocket launching area -- and to prevent the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from pushing deep into Lebanon. In doing so, it has emphasized the importance of fighting in urban areas and villages. Hizballah will not easily cede ground in southern Lebanon and will likely try to make a stand there.

Syria and Iran are both prepared for war, though it is unclear whether they will provide Hizballah with more than communications, command, control, and intelligence assistance. If Hizballah appears to be losing, Syria and Iran may feel pressure to assist the group in order to keep it in the fight.

If Hamas joins the fighting, the Israeli military will likely take control of most, if not all, of Gaza following the conclusion of major combat operations in Lebanon. Such an occupation would entail "finishing the job" started by the IDF during the 2008-2009 war in Gaza.

Both sides plan to wage offensive operations and are prepared for a major war. As a result, a war is likely to escalate rapidly. Given the potential for escalation, the more flexible and adaptable side will hold an advantage. It is unclear, however, how the resolve of key leaders, the relationship among Hizballah, Syria, and Iran, the effects of international intervention prior to and during combat, domestic and international opinion, and the possible use of chemical weapons by Syria will affect the course of fighting.

At the war's end, the IDF will most likely control southern Lebanon and perhaps, as suggested earlier, all of Gaza, an outcome that is likely to involve heavy civilian casualties, political crises, and an urgent need for stabilization measures in Lebanon, Gaza, and possibly Syria. The war will be costly for all involved and could have a transformational effect on the politics of the region.

The United States should be prepared for such a conflict to escalate rapidly. It should not bank on diplomacy to head off or limit the conflict once it begins, and should look for opportunities to achieve long-term stability, which may mean giving the Israeli military sufficient time to inflict severe damage on Hizballah, and on Syria, if the latter becomes directly involved. If necessary, the United States should be prepared to deter Iran from becoming directly involved. Andrew Exum It is unclear how another war will secure for Israel a better peace than the one it currently enjoys along a tense, but largely pacific, border with Lebanon. No matter how bloodied Hizballah might be at the end of a protracted campaign, a future in which Israel once again occupies a large portion of Lebanon would be a strategic nightmare.

In 1993, 1996, and 2006, Israel pursued strategies reliant on brute force to degrade Hizballah's combat power through air, artillery, and (in 2006) ground combat operations, and to weaken Hizballah politically. In each case, Israel failed because it misunderstood the nature of Hizballah's political and military strength.

Hizballah has succeeded in combat by employing a "comprehensive" approach to warfare. In 1993, 1996, and 2006, the group utilized nonkinetic lines of operation such as propaganda and the provision of social services to ensure that its political position was strengthened, not weakened, despite the massive punishment absorbed by Hizballah's constituents during the fighting.

Israel is unlikely to break Hizballah as a military actor in Lebanon or weaken it politically. It is hard to envision an outcome in which Hizballah ceases to be the preeminent military actor in Lebanon, or in which its standing among its core Shiite constituency is in any way threatened. We might also note that previous Israeli punishment campaigns actually galvanized popular support for Hizballah's armed efforts.

A massive ground war waged in Lebanon might further isolate Israel internationally. Lebanon is not Gaza and it cannot be sealed off from Western and Arabic-language media. Furthermore, Israel is held to a higher humanitarian

standard by the international community than even the United States. The inevitable deaths of civilians and UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) peacekeepers, of which there are six times as many in southern Lebanon today as there were before 2006, could further undermine Israel's media image and its international standing. The Lebanese military will also sustain many more casualties because it will likely participate in the fighting, since the units deployed in the South consist largely of residents from that region who have a vested interest in defending their homes and villages.

Israel has two alternatives. The first is to maintain the status quo. Deterrence is a strategy for peace, and though Hizballah may not seek peace over the long term, the group is clearly trying to dissuade Israel from attacking Lebanon through the credible threat of force. Israel is doing much the same with regard to its own territory.

It would be foolish for Israel to carry out another punishment campaign against Hizballah and the Lebanese people. Such a campaign would not result in a better peace for Israel than the one it enjoys now and would in fact contribute to Israel's further isolation internationally. Rather, Israel should -- as it has done already -- continue to implement smart deterrence by communicating in advance what might happen if another conflict were to break out.

If war does occur, Israel should show restraint and pursue achievable objectives. This may mean a smaller, shorter war to degrade, rather than wipe out, Hizballah's military capabilities. A large war would not be good for Israel, Lebanon, or the United States -- but that may indeed be where the region is headed. This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Allison LeBlanc. ❖

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