

# The Potential for Escalation in the Hizballah-Israel Conflict

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jul 26, 2006

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



## Brief Analysis

The critical question of whether or not the current conflict in Lebanon will escalate to a broader regional war is being answered in two overly simple ways. One such analysis is that this is a “meltdown” with escalating violence and mounting pressures for further escalation. A second, equally simplistic view is that since no one has an interest in escalating to a regional conflict it will not happen. Both of these views do not account for the complex set of dynamics and the real possibility that accident and error can intervene.

### Not the First Crisis

This is not the first crisis involving military operations in Lebanon. Some of these, going back at least as far as the 1978 Operation Litani against Palestinian fighters, have escalated to serious combat. Nevertheless, even in the most serious of these cases, Israel’s 1982 Operation Peace for Galilee, which included major fighting in and over Lebanon between Israel and Syrian forces, the participants were able to keep the conflict limited. Later situations involving Israel against Hizballah in 1993 and again in 1996 also remained controlled conflicts, with essentially inconclusive outcomes. This history suggests that important forces worked to limit the scope and intensity of the conflicts. Nevertheless, the situation has evolved significantly over time, and the previous history cannot be depended upon to predict the future.

### The Current Scope of the Conflict

Despite media headlines of “rockets raining down” and vivid images of the inevitable results of civilians caught up in military operations, the conflict in Lebanon and Israel is limited. Neither Israel nor Hizballah is using all of its capabilities, the Lebanese Armed Forces are only tangentially involved, and no outside power such as Syria has intervened—though Damascus has reportedly placed its forces on high alert. To be sure, hostilities have come to northern Israel in a way unprecedented since the War of Independence. In that sense, the scope of the conflict has broadened compared to previous Israeli-Hizballah clashes.

The scope of the conflict also remains limited with respect to the goals of the two major participants, Hizballah and Israel. Hizballah appears to have gambled that it could control the consequences of its significant provocation of Israel. Despite the war talk of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah has not sought to expand the conflict beyond rocket attacks on northern Israel and defense of its positions in southern Lebanon. Hizballah is now probably hoping

that the international community will produce a ceasefire, allowing it to proclaim another victory over Israel and with its role in Lebanon further strengthened by a freshly burnished image as Lebanon's only effective defender.

However, the Syrian and Iranian role creates uncertainty concerning just how limited Hizballah's goals are. If Hizballah is acting as a willing agent for Damascus and Tehran, then it is their goals that matter, and in this case the goals are likely to have larger, region-wide implications. Is Hizballah fighting in a sense to save Bashar al-Asad from the Hariri investigation, or to enhance Syria's role in the region? Is Hizballah fighting to relieve pressure on Tehran's nuclear program? If the answer is yes, then the conflict will prove still more difficult to resolve and will likely last more than a few weeks. Syria and Iran have an interest in an extended conflict, if not one that escalates into a general regional war.

For its part, Israel's goals are limited but important. Militarily, it wants to achieve a significant and lasting reduction in Hizballah's operational capability in southern Lebanon. Politically, Israel wants to create conditions for the Lebanese government, possibly with assistance from international forces, to assert control over the area. Broader goals may also be in play, including reducing Iran's ability to strike Israel through its Hizballah surrogate, and reducing Hizballah's ability to directly or indirectly assist Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

The scope of the conflict is also limited geographically. The primary area of military operations extends roughly from the Beirut-Damascus highway to a line drawn from Haifa to Tiberias. Although this is not a small space, large parts of Lebanon will see only limited military activity. Even in Beirut, the focus of much media attention, Israeli strikes are focused on certain parts of the city associated with Hizballah activity, leaving the rest relatively free of damage. The same is true for Israel. While northern Israel is subject to rocket fire, most of the country is not, and even in areas under rocket fire damage is limited and spread out due to the inherent range and accuracy limitations of Hizballah's rocket systems and the necessity for Hizballah launch systems to remain dispersed and move rapidly.

#### The Dynamics of the Conflict

Once war begins, neither side controls the situation completely. Events create dynamics that shape the conflict in important and sometimes unexpected ways—much of leadership in a crisis situation entails controlling these forces. The current situation contains dynamics that can act either to escalate or restrain the level of violence.

At least three dynamics will be at work on Hizballah to escalate the conflict. First, Hizballah cannot afford to lose. If it sees that defeat is in the offing, it may attempt actions that would take the fighting to a higher level, such as attacking deeper into Israel, attempting border incursions, or targeting Israeli interests around the world. Nasrallah has repeatedly threatened "surprises" for Israel. These would almost certainly be actions that would escalate the conflict. Second, Hizballah could be pressured by its Syrian or Iranian allies to carry out actions that would expand the crisis. Third, Syria, Iran, and the Lebanese government could feel their own internal pressure to increase their assistance to Hizballah. The more Israeli operations succeed, the more the pressure will build on Damascus and Tehran to increase their involvement, and on Hizballah to expand the fight.

There are also escalation dynamics operating on Israel. Having gone to war and announced a set of objectives, Israel must achieve substantial success in achieving them. Just as Hizballah cannot "lose," Israel must "win." The logic of the situation requires Israel to expand its military activity if it believes its existing level of operations is not achieving the intended effects. Expansion could take multiple forms, and would most likely involve increased ground operations, perhaps up to the Litani River line. A second and related dynamic is the relationship between costs and results achieved. The difficulty of the fighting itself could produce pressure to escalate on the Israeli side. Hizballah is a determined and skillful foe, capable of inflicting casualties on even the best Israeli units, and it enjoys the advantages of fighting on terrain it has prepared for years. For Israel, mounting casualties and physical destruction could lead to increased pressure to expand operations and to more significantly degrade Hizballah's capabilities—

for instance, to send ground forces deep into southern Lebanon to control the territory from which rockets can be launched. Finally, there is the issue of time. All indications are that Israel feels it needs weeks to achieve its objectives, but as time passes, and if success proves elusive, then there will be increasing pressure to escalate.

There are also dynamics that could act to restrain the combatants. First among these is the rationality of the primary actors. None of the key actors appears to have a strong interest in a significantly broader or more intense conflict, although Hizballah and its partners may have an interest in an extended conflict. Even Hizballah has a stake in Lebanon that it would be loath to put at serious risk. Israel also has no interest in a regional war or even in a limited conflict with Syria. Although the specter of a regional war has been raised, the situation is a long way from that at the moment and the central actors appear to be acting carefully and with limited goals. Nevertheless, all sides will be weighing the potential risks of a broader conflict against the risks of defeat or failure.

The attention, and eventually the involvement, of outside forces—the United States, the UN, the European Union, Arab states—acts as a restraint on escalation. While this seems to most greatly affect Israel, it also applies to Syria and even Hizballah. Iran is less affected, but none of the parties will be able to operate without some consideration of the positions and actions of the outside world.

Both Hizballah and Israel face constraints on their military actions; neither can sustain the current high pitch of operations indefinitely. Hizballah is losing capability and firing off its stocks of missiles. At some point it will face choices about how much capability it wants to preserve to maintain its dominant position in Lebanon and for the next round of fighting with Israel. Nor is Israel free of constraints; the air and ground units involved in the conflict can only sustain high intensity operations for a limited period.

Finally, there is a basic military fact that constrains escalation. Hizballah does not have the military capability to pose an existential threat to the state of Israel. It can only make life more difficult for some Israelis with its rockets and terrorist attacks. In theory it can take the war outside the current theater of operations, to attack Israeli or allied targets around the world, but that would risk its entire position in Lebanon. Although Hizballah can keep the conflict going for an extended period—and Syria and Iran can work to sustain it with arms and other military assistance—Hizballah has probably done the worst it can do. Hizballah's military capability is likely to decline as it comes out to fight.

### Wild Cards

An event that produced mass civilian casualties in either Lebanon or Israel could dramatically increase pressure for escalation on one side or the other. Accidents are possible during military operations close to border areas, and in situations where targets are mobile and fleeting. Syria's extended border with Lebanon, the use of its road facilities to move weapons into Lebanon for Hizballah, and the proximity of the border to Israeli operational areas create opportunities for unintended clashes with Syrian forces even if neither Syria nor Israel seek a direct engagement. There is also the possibility of errors by leaders at all levels.

Then there is the possibility that Hizballah or its allies actually seek to escalate the violence, or may decide to do so as the situation develops. The deepest motivations of Hizballah, Syria, and Iran in this situation are not clearly understood. Syria in particular is capable of serious lapses in judgment that cause damage to the state, as demonstrated by the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Damascus will likely run many risks trying to manipulate the situation to its advantage, but the Assad regime has proven itself a poor player at this sort of game, making Syria the most likely source of actions that carry the fighting beyond Lebanon and northern Israel.

### Implications and Outlook

To a large extent, the struggle between Israel and Hizballah is a contest of wills. Neither side is free from the force of

public opinion. Because there are dynamics pushing for both escalation and working against it, any assessment of the likely course of events should be cautious. While rationality may prevail and the diplomatic processes might bring the conflict to a conclusion of sorts, the potential for escalation, especially within Lebanon, must be acknowledged.

It is also not certain that the conflict will have any conclusive end. Proxy wars can drag on for a long time. If Hizballah is acting to some extent as a surrogate for Syria and Iran, then some level of military activity could continue for months, with a reduction of the overall level of violence to some “acceptable” level, punctuated by periods of more intense fighting. That is a bleak outlook, but it fits the balance of capabilities and constraints that exists among the participants, none of which has the power to end the conflict decisively on its own terms.

Jeffrey White, a former government intelligence analyst specializing in military and security affairs, is Berrie Defense fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #1132

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

### TOPICS

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

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

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)