

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Babel: Translating the Middle East  
**“Lina Khatib: War Spreads to Lebanon”**

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FEATURING

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Jon Alterman: Lina Khatib, welcome to Babel.

Lina Khatib: Thank you for having me.

Jon Alterman: Were you surprised at how quickly the Israeli confrontation with Hezbollah has escalated?

Lina Khatib: Actually, it has not been a quick escalation, if you think about it. Hezbollah started launching rockets on Israel on October 8, 2023. It took almost a year for this escalation to happen. Hezbollah probably thought that it could go on indefinitely launching rockets at Israel with very few repercussions and, obviously, the calculations of both Hezbollah and Iran have been proven to be quite wrong in this regard.

Jon Alterman: What are the immediate effects of the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, who led Hezbollah for 35 years?

Lina Khatib: This has been one of the biggest blows to Hezbollah morally. He's been in charge for 30 years, but the cultivation of the image has really taken off since 2006, so we're talking about almost two decades of this person being presented as almost superhuman. His image had been tightly linked to that of Hezbollah itself, so that, in the eyes of many supporters of Hezbollah, Nasrallah represented strength, resilience, victory, and all those qualities that Hezbollah wanted associated with itself. At the morale level, having this figure eliminated is a huge blow.

Jon Alterman: So that's in the near term. What do you think the longer-term impacts are?

Lina Khatib: We have to remember that Hezbollah ultimately is an institution and not a kind of small, rogue group led by one charismatic guy. Although Nasrallah had all those qualities, his loss can be compensated for at the level of operations. So, I wouldn't dwell too much on Nasrallah himself. I would dwell on how Israel is trying to weaken Hezbollah as an institution. I think this is the bigger story here, and this is something that, of course, Israel is making a lot of progress toward; however, Hezbollah is not an organization that can be dismantled with just military attacks.

Jon Alterman: I want to come to the Israeli strategy in a moment, but I want to stay with the question of Lebanon and how this feels in Lebanon. How are Lebanese responding to the attacks on Hezbollah? My sense is that

some are celebrating it, while some are mourning it. How would you break it down?

Lina Khatib: The people who are against Hezbollah, and these are the majority in Lebanon, are not unhappy to see Hezbollah being weakened; however, they are not happy with the way Israel is doing it, because it is being done in a way that is bringing large-scale destruction to Lebanon, both physical and in terms of human casualties. This is something that people are not on board with. I wrote about this at one point by saying that people do not want to be liberated from Hezbollah at the hands of invaders.

They are feeling that they are kind of stuck in a really toxic dynamic. People are also worried about potential tension inside Lebanon between Hezbollah supporters and those who do not support Hezbollah, partly because of the large number of displaced people in Lebanon who are sleeping on the streets, literally. And there is potential for social tension to flare up further down the line if this continues for a long period of time. People are being cautious not to celebrate publicly.

Deep down, they are concerned. They're concerned about domestic stability more than anything else. Even Hezbollah's opponents recognize that Hezbollah, as an organization, cannot be canceled through military action. So, there is concern about the political future of Lebanon more than anything else.

Jon Alterman: What do you see as Hezbollah's next move, given what's been happening for the last month?

Lina Khatib: It's difficult to predict at this stage because Hezbollah is an organization that likes to save face. They do not like to be seen as having been defeated by Israel. So, they will try to find a way out that saves face.

I'm not sure that Hezbollah is there yet. Hezbollah, so far, has been able to operate in a decentralized manner with various small groups fighting Israel in the south without the need for central command coordination. This can go on for a while. Hezbollah is basically going to do this for as long as it feels it can.

Ultimately, I would say the decision is not really Hezbollah's. It's Tehran's decision. When Tehran starts feeling that the cost of

continuing down this path has become higher than the gain, then it will try to find a face-saving way for Hezbollah to stop, such as the scenario that unfolded in the Iran-Iraq War in the '80s. Eventually Iran at that time said, "We're just going to have to swallow the poison for the sake of the people in a way." This is the only scenario that I think Iran could use to say, "Okay, this is why Hezbollah can now stop." But sadly, we're not there yet.

Jon Alterman: What would that look like if Hezbollah lost its patron and decided to scale down an expansive organization? Would that be a dramatic move portrayed as a modest move? Would it look like a collapse with everybody seeing it as a collapse? How would that unfold?

Lina Khatib: This is the thing. Iran will not want it to look like a collapse. It will want it to be seen as a sacrifice for the sake of the people. In reality, it's a significant weakening of Iran's regional influence because Hezbollah is the most important asset for Iran in the Middle East. Then, there is the possibility that Hezbollah might find a compromise solution with the Lebanese state to turn it into an auxiliary military force, a bit like the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, which are technically an auxiliary force reporting to the prime minister's office. Now, the difference with Hezbollah is that it's regarded as a legitimate defense force by the Lebanese state, but it does not report to the state in any way. So, it's given exceptional status. If Iran is significantly weakened and still wants to have some influence in Lebanon, then it might have to accept this kind of lesser position for Hezbollah. From the Iranian perspective, this would be the best-case scenario further down the line, but not the best-case scenario for Lebanon or for regional stability.

Jon Alterman: Do you see a vacuum in Lebanese politics right now? If you do, who could fill that vacuum, and how would they fill it?

Lina Khatib: This is the thing. This compromise that I'm talking about can only happen if Lebanon resurrects the political process to elect a president and have a proper cabinet in place, not just the caretaker cabinet that we have now in Lebanon. This means there will be no vacuum. You can't just have the Hezbollah solution, which is the Lebanonization solution, without sorting out the bigger political picture because you need a cabinet and a president.

This cannot happen without international pressure. Iran is not going to just do this willingly. It will only accept doing this if it feels it has no other choice. Here we go to what the United States wants to do about Iran, which is at the heart of the matter.

I always say that Hezbollah has been feeling so comfortable in Lebanon because, in general, U.S. foreign policy has been very complacent regarding Iran's regional influence in the Middle East. This has allowed Hezbollah to grow in influence and even expand its activities into Syria. It has also allowed the Houthis and even the militias in Iraq to feel empowered. I think if U.S. foreign policy changes so that we have a linkage between the Iranian nuclear file and the file of Iran's regional interventions, so that Iran can see that the only way a nuclear deal can be resurrected is if Iran agrees to these compromises at the level of its regional involvement, then we can have the scenario that I talked about apply in Lebanon. But again, this requires Washington to change its Iran policy.

Jon Alterman: Is there a Gulf Arab state role here, and are Gulf Arab states willing to play a role here?

Lina Khatib: I think Gulf states have been hoping, for decades now, that the United States would develop a comprehensive strategy regarding Iran because even though Saudi Arabia, for example, has had bilateral diplomatic relations restored with Iran, the worry that Iran is a spoiler is still there deep down. Ultimately, Iran continues to support the Houthis. The Houthis are no longer attacking Saudi Arabia, but this is not a long-term solution. So, they are looking for a long-term solution beyond de-escalation. De-escalation is not the answer. De-escalation is just because they need to pursue their economic projects and don't want the headache of Iranian missiles landing on them, but this is not a solution. They definitely will be on board if Washington develops this comprehensive strategy that I mentioned.

Jon Alterman: If I could ask you to put yourself in the mindset of the Iranians, what choices do you think they have?

Lina Khatib: At the moment, the Iranians see that the costs are mounting; however, they don't yet feel pressured enough to radically change their behavior in the Middle East. They feel that they have incurred huge losses in the past and were able to withstand those losses and rebuild. They are still a bit hopeful that they can get through this.

An example is 2006. Although Hezbollah declared victory against Israel at that time, the reality is that the war ended in a stalemate. Hezbollah incurred huge losses, but it managed to recoup these losses eventually, and it managed to become even stronger militarily and politically afterwards.

Iran is not yet feeling the heat. The other issue for Iran is that it obviously wants to protect its nuclear program. Iran will feel it needs to change its behavior once its nuclear program is really threatened and its regional influence is no longer recoverable in the future after being weakened.

Jon Alterman: What would create that circumstance?

Lina Khatib: Diplomacy. When I talk about Iran, a lot of people assume that I'm calling for bombing Iran. I don't think that's the answer. I go back to the nuclear negotiations. The nuclear program is very important for Iran. If it feels that its regional investment in the Middle East is starting to wane, then that will make it adhere even more strongly to wanting a nuclear program in place, because it will feel that it needs something to build its projection of power on. If these two issues are linked, and Iran is presented with a concrete deal that says, "We will have a nuclear deal with you if you agree to moderate your behavior in terms of all these proxies you're supporting," this can be coupled with a process for Lebanon, as well as resurrecting the peace talks in Yemen with the Houthis.

It's actually very complicated. To really sort out Lebanon and Hezbollah, you need to sort out the Iranian issue, and to sort out the Iranian issue, you need to sort out its involvement in multiple countries and have all these processes run simultaneously. You can't compartmentalize the Yemen issue, the Lebanon issue, and the Syria issue anymore.

We're talking about a huge shift in the balance of power in the Middle East, and this is not going to be something that will happen overnight. None of what I'm talking about is something that can be achieved in a short period of time at all. It'll probably be something that the new U.S. administration will spend the duration of the administration working on.

But as an international community, we can't afford to live with the status quo. We've seen what living with the status quo has brought us. It's brought us instability that is only growing in the Middle East. It's now time for a reset, and this is what I'm talking about.

Jon Alterman: What does a nuclear deal look like in a time of renewed great power competition? We can't count on the Russians playing a constructive role and it may be a leap to count on the Chinese playing a constructive role. How much does that complicate what you're calling for?

Lina Khatib: They're not going to be actors you can depend on. One thing playing out in Syria at the moment is Russia's influence there and how important it is for Russia to have long-term influence in that region.

It's really unfortunate that Syria is, in a way, stuck between having to be under Iranian influence or Russian influence. Neither is a good solution, frankly. Under the circumstances, dealing with Russia is not about just the nuclear issue. Again, it has to be about Russia's influence in the region as a whole and that's a whole other headache for the United States, especially with Ukraine still going on in the background.

You might get a compromise from Russia on one thing, but Russia will want something else in return. I expect that in return, Russia will want to have a long-term presence on the Mediterranean and that sadly means a bleak picture for Syria, because it means continued Russian influence in Syria. Again, I'm not saying the future is positive. It's just a matter of what is the least bad scenario.

Jon Alterman: When we talk about least bad scenarios, one of them is that the conflict between Israel and Lebanon stays contained. Do you expect it to stay contained, or do you think we still have some expansion in this conflict to come?

Lina Khatib: It's highly likely that Israel is going to expand its military campaign. It's not likely that Hezbollah is able to do much more than what it has done simply because of the communications network compromise due to Israel's infiltration. Hezbollah will be very limited in being able to plan complex, large-scale military operations.

Israel is trying to inflict as high a cost as possible on Hezbollah and Lebanon, and it is going after Hezbollah's assets, even soft ones across Lebanon from what I can tell. This means an expansion of the military

campaign, which of course is bad news for Lebanon because many civilians are dying as a result of this. The infrastructure was already weak, and it's now being devastated, and the country is bankrupt. For Lebanon to recover from what has happened is already very difficult. With the expansion, it's going to be very, very, very tough for Lebanese recovery further down the line.

Jon Alterman: Overall, is it your sense that Netanyahu is calculating correctly or incorrectly as he thinks about military action in Lebanon?

Lina Khatib: I think he's calculating incorrectly because, for a while, Israel was quite strategic in its actions in Lebanon, although there sadly was collateral damage and the killing of civilians. However, when Israel was targeting Hezbollah commanders, killing around 500 in targeted attacks and the pagers attack, these things did not translate to wide-scale destruction in Lebanon.

Now we have a different scenario in which I feel that Netanyahu's ego is probably leading him to overextend. I think the ground invasion was not a good idea because even though Israel is saying, "This is easier than we expected," the fact is, Hezbollah still has very strong networks in the south and has a lot of experience dealing with ground fighting. This is something that Israel will find difficult to claim victory in.

Also, the attacks on the United Nations peacekeeping forces in Lebanon, attacks on rescue workers in Lebanon who are not affiliated with Hezbollah, and hitting civilian targets that are not all connected with Hezbollah. Things like planting the Israeli flag in the garden that Iran had given funding for after 2006. It's not necessary. It just provoked people in Lebanon. Even people who hate Hezbollah felt that it is insulting to have the flag of another country raised in Lebanon. There are many moves, both military and symbolic, being made now that are not boding well for the future. Netanyahu made a statement saying, "The fight is with Hezbollah, not the Lebanese people," but at the same time, he conducts acts that are alienating the Lebanese people who would have maybe agreed to having peace with Israel further down the line.

Jon Alterman: If there's one constructive thing that the United States can and should do in the near-term, what do you think it would be?



Lina Khatib: Definitely talk to Israel. Biden and Netanyahu are talking, but I feel that right now, Netanyahu is trying to do as much as he can, while he can, before the administration changes. I think the current administration is, frankly, being a bit too complacent, and this is something that Netanyahu is detecting.

Diplomatic pressure can increase on part of the United States, because this is the only thing that would stop this overextension that Israel is engaging in. Frankly, it is actually beneficial for Israel not to engage in overextension, so if the United States increases pressure on Israel diplomatically, this ultimately works in Israel's interest. The hope is that there will be people in the Israeli government that can see that and cooperate with the United States to start to have some checks on Netanyahu's behavior.

Jon Alterman: If you were advising the transition team that's preparing the next administration to come in, what should they do before the inauguration on January 20? What should they prepare to do immediately after the new president takes office on January 20 to try to encourage a reconstitution of Lebanese politics on more constructive lines?

Lina Khatib: Immediately, there needs to be signaling that there's going to be a shift in policy regarding Iran and a shift in the way the United States deals with the Israel-Palestine issue. Ultimately, these two files are now more interconnected than ever, and the only way for stability to happen in Lebanon or elsewhere in the region is for a new approach that looks at the linkages between the two files. So, this is something that should happen as soon as the new president is announced. What should happen after is for this to be put into action.

The old compartmentalization of these two issues has not worked, and the compartmentalization of the nuclear Iran file and the regional intervention file has also not worked. Now is the time for an interconnected U.S. foreign policy regarding the Middle East, and if Israel, Arab Gulf countries, and Lebanon hears this, and then action is taken to start implementing this new phase, this would be beneficial to everyone in the region. This would be very different from the 2006 scenario, in which the U.S. administration talked about the birth plans of a new Middle East, but ultimately, that only brought further devastation

to the region. It's time for the new administration to show that it has learned from previous mistakes.

Jon Alterman: Lina Khatib, thank you for joining us on Babel.

Lina Khatib: Thank you. Always a pleasure.

(END.)