

Hezbollah's Deadly Rockets Aren't the Most Serious Threat to Israel's Northern Border

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The 30,000-strong militia has ground forces massed along the frontier, preventing evacuated Israelis from returning home and increasing the risk of a war that both sides would rather postpone for now.

After nearly 10 months of constant rocket and drone attacks across the Israel-Lebanon border, Israel and Hezbollah stand at the brink of full-scale war for the first time since 2006. But more dire than Hezbollah's rocket arsenal is the threat that it will launch an Oct. 7-style ground incursion into Israel.

The immediate crisis is a result of what Israeli officials say was a Hezbollah rocket attack that [killed 12 Israeli Druze youths \(https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-07-30/a-cratered-field-a-mangled-fence-clues-emerge-from-strike-that-killed-12-children-in-golan-heights\)](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-07-30/a-cratered-field-a-mangled-fence-clues-emerge-from-strike-that-killed-12-children-in-golan-heights). Since the day after Hamas' Oct. 7 massacre, Hezbollah has been firing rockets into Israel almost daily. While the majority of the strikes have used anti-tank guided missiles, the group has also used longer-range, more powerful munitions provided by Iran. That was apparently the case on July 27, when Hezbollah is accused of firing an Iranian Falaq-1 rocket toward the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights and striking a soccer field and playground in the Druze community of Majdal Shams. (Though Israel released data on the rocket and its trajectory that tie it to Hezbollah, the group has issued a rare denial of responsibility for the attack.)

Three days later, an Israeli airstrike [killed \(https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-07-30/israel-says-it-killed-hezbollah-commander-in-beirut-strike\)](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-07-30/israel-says-it-killed-hezbollah-commander-in-beirut-strike) the Hezbollah military commander Fuad Shukr in Beirut. And the day after that, an explosion widely attributed to Israel [killed \(https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-07-30/iran-says-hamas-leader-ismail-haniyeh-was-assassinated-in-tehran\)](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-07-30/iran-says-hamas-leader-ismail-haniyeh-was-assassinated-in-tehran) the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh at a guesthouse in Tehran. The region is now on pins and needles awaiting reprisals from

Iran, Hezbollah and perhaps other Iranian proxy groups, risking escalation and wider war.

And yet there is hope for de-escalation. The factors that have prevented Hezbollah from opening a full-fledged second front for Israel since October still hold true. Lebanon continues to suffer a devastating economic (and political) crisis, and most of its citizens **don't want** (<https://mondediplo.com/2024/08/02/lebanon>) Hezbollah to drag the country into what would probably be a terribly destructive war. And while Iran is happy to fight to the last Arab proxy, its leaders **don't want** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/22/opinion/iran-war-middle-east.html>) war to spill over their own borders.

But it's too early to count on cooler heads. The Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has pledged to continue firing rockets into Israel until the fighting stops in Gaza. And even if a cease-fire deal is reached and the rockets stop, more than 60,000 Israeli civilians displaced from their homes along the border with Lebanon will not return until the threat posed by Hezbollah ground forces is dealt with. My recent visit to Israel's evacuated northern border drove home the extent to which residents of the area fear an Oct. 7-style raid, distrust their leaders' security guarantees and will resist returning to their homes without a more convincing answer to the threat.

They have good reason for concern. The Hamas massacre came straight out of Hezbollah's playbook. The Israeli military has been actively training for years to counter a Hezbollah plot to overrun Israeli communities, kill and kidnap civilians, and undermine Israel's sense of security. Part of what was unexpected about Oct. 7 was that it happened on the southern rather than the northern border. Moreover, after its 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah built an arsenal of some 150,000 rockets, deployed forces throughout southern Lebanon and otherwise violated a U.N. Security Council resolution meant to prevent further conflict.

Israelis displaced from the north are beginning to learn just how close to disaster they also came on Oct. 7. As Hamas terrorists streamed across the southern border that day, only two Israeli battalions comprising about **600 personnel** (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/only-600-israeli-soldiers-were-guarding-gaza-border-on-october-7-report/) were covering the entire northern border. Today some 40 battalions defend that border, but such a deployment is difficult to maintain over the long haul.

Israeli officials are under tremendous pressure to return their citizens to the sovereign territory Hezbollah has effectively depopulated for most of a year. They have indicated that if Hezbollah doesn't agree to retreat from the border, Israel will clear it by force.

U.S. diplomatic efforts have focused on getting Hezbollah to pull all its forces at least 10 kilometers from the border. This would put most of its missiles out of range and make an Oct. 7-style surprise attack much less likely.

Some within the Israel Defense Forces advocate neutralizing the Hezbollah threat now, while the group has a relatively small share of its extensive forces sitting on the border, Israeli troops are fully deployed in the north and civilians are already displaced from the area. But most Israeli officials understand that a war with Hezbollah today would be like no war Israel has ever fought. They would prefer to let the current war end, send exhausted reservists home, allow displaced families to leave the hotel rooms they have lived in for many months and take a couple of years to restock munitions and plan for a war with Hezbollah. But if Israeli civilians are unable to return to their homes soon, the war may come much sooner than they would like.

Across the country and its political spectrum, Israelis agree that they can no longer live with a gun to their heads, not from the south or from the north. The idea that enemies sworn to destroy them can be allowed to amass massive arsenals on their borders is no longer tenable. That means that Israel will ultimately have to address both Hezbollah's rocket stockpile and its 30,000-strong standing militia. And it's the latter that's more likely to drag Israel into a war that most Israelis and Lebanese don't want.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, director of its Reinhard Program on

Counterterrorism and Intelligence, and creator of the podcast *Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule-season-2>). This article was originally published *on the Los Angeles Times website* (<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-08-06/israel-hezbollah-rockets-lebanon-oct-7-war-iran-hamas-gaza>). ❖

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