

Israel Dead Set on Beating Hezbollah Back

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

With prospects low for a near-term diplomatic breakthrough, the Lebanese group can decide how far this conflict escalates.

Nearly a year since Hezbollah began attacking Israel in support of Hamas, the medium-intensity conflict has reached an inflexion point. Hezbollah had hoped to limit the scope of the fight, preferring a war of attrition with defined guardrails. With nearly 70,000 of its citizens displaced from the north, however, Israel didn't agree and, for almost six months, has demonstrated a willingness to escalate and raise the cost for Hezbollah. At present, the trajectory of the conflict—already more violent in ways than the 2006 conflagration—seems likely to further intensify. The decisions made by Israel and Hezbollah in the coming days and weeks will have a significant impact on Lebanon, Israel, and the region.

Lately, Israel has crossed all ostensible Hezbollah red lines in its operations in Lebanon. Initially, Israel limited its targets to the south; now, it's striking Hezbollah assets throughout Lebanon—including those in the Bekaa Valley and north of Beirut. Once off-limits, Israel today is routinely striking senior Hezbollah leaders in Dahiya, a suburb of the capital. Then, last week, Israel detonated Hezbollah operatives' pagers and walkie-talkies, killing or maiming thousands of the group's members. In recent days, Israel crossed perhaps the last of Hezbollah's believed limits, hitting the organisation's missile arsenal, including some precision, long-range, and ballistic strategic projectiles.

Israel's stated objective for the escalation is to allow its citizens to safely return to their homes. There is a U.S. proposal on the table, proffered by White House Envoy Amos Hochstein, that would de-escalate the conflict and secure northern Israel. It would also give Hezbollah a win, namely delineating contested border points in Lebanon's favour (i.e., "liberating" territory) and ending Israeli overflights of Lebanon. Alas, Hezbollah has been unwilling to engage in a negotiated settlement. Instead, the organisation has linked any de-escalation to the signing of a formal ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which is regrettably a distant prospect.

Backed Into a Corner

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said Israel's exploding pager operation constituted a "declaration of war." In truth, Nasrallah declared war on Israel on 8 October 2023, when it started launching rockets into Israel. At any point, Nasrallah could have chosen to end the war, either by unilaterally stopping its attacks on Israel or by embracing the Hochstein mediation. By linking his campaign against Israel to Gaza, Nasrallah has seemingly backed himself and Hezbollah into a corner.

Meanwhile, after absorbing the Hezbollah onslaught for the better part of this year, Israel is upping the ante. A series of targeted strikes have decimated the upper echelon of Hezbollah commanders, including many of the organisation's senior "Radwan" special-forces officers. Hezbollah's communications and command-and-control have been disrupted, and now, Israel is targeting the militia's prodigious stockpile of rockets and missiles.

Israel's operations against Hezbollah personnel and assets have taken a significant toll. Beyond degrading the organisation's capabilities, they have eroded the confidence of Hezbollah's constituents. The mass exodus from south Lebanon on 23 September suggests residents of the south understand Hezbollah cannot protect them. Worse, it has become apparent that Hezbollah knowingly endangered its erstwhile supporters by deploying missiles in residential areas. The loss of Lebanese civilians—either from Israeli air strikes or by the secondary explosions of missiles stored in houses—is tragic. Regrettably, given Hezbollah's commitment to persisting in its attacks on Israel, the situation is likely to get worse for Lebanese and Israelis alike.

Absent a de-escalation understanding, Israel will undoubtedly continue its air campaign targeting Hezbollah missiles and personnel. The latest round of air strikes, which started in the south and have continued through the Bekaa, will ultimately cover broader geographic areas of Lebanon. In its efforts to degrade the substantial capabilities Hezbollah acquired since 2006—reportedly over 150,000 projectiles—Israel will increasingly seek out and destroy the militia's precision-guided and longer-distance heavier payload strategic missiles.

Bailout Unlikely

Already facing indisputable Israeli intelligence dominance and the loss of a not-inconsequential portion of its rockets and missiles, in recent days, Hezbollah reportedly requested Iran to attack Israel. Tehran has so far balked at bailing out its proxy, leaving Hezbollah to fend for itself. After the end of the UN General Assembly, Iran could change its mind and join the battle. Until then, Nasrallah has some decisions to make.

Hezbollah is now targeting Haifa and has fired a ballistic missile toward Tel Aviv—a significant though mainly symbolic escalation on the militia's part; more than a million Israelis are now under Hezbollah's fire. But the extent of the damage and loss of Israeli lives to date has been minimal, in part due to Israel's still effective layered missile defence. If Israel's targeting of Hezbollah's missile systems continues roughly apace—provided that Israel has the intelligence and sufficient armaments—at 1,500 to 2,000 targets per day, Nasrallah may have to choose whether to use or lose these assets.

Israel appears comfortable with its current operational plan, using air dominance to degrade the Hezbollah threat over time. However, should Hezbollah decide to use its strategic and/or precision weapons to target Israeli cities, infrastructure, or military bases, it would result in a further intensification of Israeli air and perhaps an initiation of ground operations.

Ground War III-Advised

Indeed, already, given Israeli operational successes and with Hezbollah command and control interrupted, there is a growing temptation to engage in a ground manoeuvre in south Lebanon. So far, recognising its ongoing air and intelligence superiority, Israel has resisted the temptation. But the Israeli army is currently calling up reserve troops

to the north.

Despite the seeming preparation of the battlefield, a ground invasion would be ill-advised. Israel has had several experiences with ground operations in Lebanon, and none have turned out well. In any event, Hezbollah is hoping for the opportunity to target Israeli troops in south Lebanon, a dynamic that would give the militia the initiative and level the playing field in what until now has been a campaign dominated by Israel.

With Israel and Hezbollah on the brink of full-scale war, it is difficult to predict what the coming weeks will bring. What is certain is that while both Israel and Hezbollah have agency, Hezbollah will ultimately decide the trajectory of events. Washington is keen on de-escalation, and the Biden administration is making efforts to “decouple” the conflict from Gaza to provide Israel and Hezbollah a diplomatic path to avoid a full-scale war.

Yet the chances for success on the diplomatic front appear remote. Whether by force of arms or diplomacy—or via a combination of both—Israel is not going to return to the pre-7 October status quo on its northern border. The choice is Hezbollah’s.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics. This article was originally published on Al Majalla’s website. ❖

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