

Israel-Hezbollah Attacks: Danger of a Wider Conflict

Introduction

On 25 Aug, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) carried out [a series of airstrikes](#) in Southern Lebanon claiming that Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed militant group in Lebanon, had been preparing to fire a large number of rockets and missiles into the Israeli territory. IDF spokesman, [Daniel Hagari](#), said the Israeli military had acted in self-defence to eliminate imminent threats from Hezbollah.

Shortly after the Israeli strikes, Hezbollah launched an attack in reaction to the killing of Fouad Shukur, one of its main Commanders, in Beirut's Southern suburbs in July. As per reports the Hezbollah fired over 320 Katyusha rockets on IDF sites in Northern Israel and the Golan Heights. Attacks have continued ever since, with the last being on 07 September, when the IDF struck a Hezbollah rocket launcher and its airstrikes also struck the [Bint Jbeil District](#). Hezbollah launched about 30 Katyusha rockets from Lebanon targeting the Mount Neria IDF Base[1]. Despite the fact that neither [Israel](#) nor [Hezbollah](#) seems willing to wage a full-blown armed conflict, the spectre of an Israel-Hezbollah war still looms.

De-escalation remains challenging in this volatile region with deep-rooted enmities and competing geopolitical interests. Furthermore, the Gaza War with, the protracted low-intensity conflict between Israel and Hezbollah has become increasingly intense and violent over the past few months.

There is no doubt that post 07 Oct strategic landscape in this region has been largely painted by Iran who are now exploiting the conflict. In fact on 08 Oct 2023, Hezbollah started firing [rockets](#) and [artillery](#) at Israeli positions in the [Shebaa Farms](#), which it said was in solidarity with Palestinians. Israel retaliated by launching [drone strikes](#) and artillery shells at Hezbollah positions near Lebanon's boundary with the [Israeli-occupied Golan Heights](#)[2]. The purpose of this 'Support Front', was to burden Israel—militarily, economically, and societally—with a two-front war. But the situation became complicated after 27 Jul 2024, when a rocket fired by Hezbollah [struck](#) a soccer field in Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights and killed twelve children. The Israelis retaliated by assassinating Shukur in Beirut and then claiming the attack.

Each tit-for-tat exchange and retaliatory strike bring the existing conflict closer to the dangers of an outbreak of a wider conflict. As per reports, approximately 96,000 individuals have left their homes in northern Israel, while in Lebanon, approximately 1, 11,000 individuals have been displaced.[3]

It seems clear that while the Israelis have not deterred Hezbollah from firing but at the same time Israel's demonstration of force has prevented the Hezbollah from launching more significant attacks on critical Israeli targets and infrastructure. Further, Israel which is already involved in a full-scale offensive may not like to get drawn into a battle with the Hezbollah. Particularly since the last conflict did not result in it achieving its strategic goals.

Even though Lieutenant General Hezri Halevi, the Chief of IDF, during a visit to Golan Heights on 06 Sep has stated that 'The IDF is very focused on fighting Hezbollah' and 'we are also preparing offensive moves'; it is felt that all sides including Iran would like to keep the conflict heated without letting it boil over, but the question remains as to how long this can be contained.

Israel and Hezbollah have conducted periodic operations against each other in the 1980s and 1990s despite the presence of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and Hezbollah succeeded in forcing the Israeli military to withdraw from Lebanon in 2000.

After 2006, an uneasy deterrence prevailed. Israel occasionally attacked Hezbollah fighters and Iranian arms shipments headed to Hezbollah and other groups in Syria, and there were intermittent rockets, drones, and other stand-off attacks back and forth across the border. The border was the calmest it had been in decades, with both sides eager to avoid another all-out war. But post 07 Oct the situation is delicate.[\[4\]](#)

Hezbollah

The Hezbollah was established in 1982, at that time, Israel's forces had occupied Southern Lebanon, during the country's civil war. Destroying Israel has been a part of its core ideology since its founding. Today Hezbollah functions not simply as an armed non-state group but as a 'State within a state'.[\[5\]](#) Hezbollah exerts substantial political influence in Shia-majority regions of Lebanon, fully engages in Lebanon's democratic institutions, and has participated in elections since 1992. It has members in the Lebanese Parliament and Cabinet. As a non-state actor, Hezbollah has grown into one of the most influential political forces in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's dominance in Lebanon extends beyond its role as a political-military organisation; it exerts considerable [influence](#) over the Lebanese government, shaping key decisions and policies to a significant degree while at the same time relying on violence. Its reliance on Iran is evident by the close links Hassan Nassarallah maintains with the Iranian leadership.[\[6\]](#)

Hezbollah today is considerably stronger than it was in 2006 when it fought Israel and is generally regarded as [one of the most powerful and violent non-state actors](#). As per reports, Hezbollah since the Second Lebanon War has with backing from Iran, significantly expanded in terms of size, capabilities, structure, and military experience. Hezbollah is currently estimated to have around 30,000 active fighters and a reserve force of 10,000 to 20,000 additional combatants.

Israel assesses that Hezbollah now possesses between 1,30,000 and 1,50,000 surface-to-surface rockets and missiles, a tenfold increase compared to its 2006 inventory. Further, Hezbollah's experience in support of Bashar al-Assad in Syria has given it access to capabilities and competencies used by conventional armies. Hezbollah's evolving military capabilities are now further complicating the regional security matrix.[\[7\]](#)

But a reason for not wanting to trigger an all-out conflict with Israel could be that as Hezbollah seeks broader popularity in Lebanon, triggering a war could undermine support, outside its core constituency. The group is burdened with navigating Lebanese domestic woes: an economy and currency that collapsed almost five years ago, with foreign aid being cut.[\[8\]](#) Provoking a war with Israel for the sake of Palestine will compound Lebanon's problems.

Iran has invested enormous resources in cultivating militant groups across West Asia. The Hezbollah is undoubtedly one of its most potent militias and has been used to train and coordinate a wider network of militias in Syria, Iraq and other areas. Iran sees investing in asymmetric warfare through these groups as beneficial. There is no doubt that the cause has been given greater impetus following the large-scale destruction by Israel in Gaza.[\[9\]](#)

Hezbollah also possesses more advanced propaganda capabilities. During the War in 2006, it primarily relied on TV, satellite, and radio, but today it uses the internet and various digital media platforms while conducting its information operations.^[10]

The question now foremost is that if Hamas, which is considered less armed and trained in comparison to the Hezbollah, can unleash brutality and killing greater than the more formidable Hezbollah.

Conclusion

Israel faces numerous challenges in a potential war with Hezbollah. The considerable growth in Hezbollah's military capabilities and its propaganda activities indicate that a full-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah could be both protracted and violent. There is also a dilemma. A war with Hezbollah, will broaden the fighting but would take its focus away from Gaza. But avoiding a war with Hezbollah, could risk a more serious conflict in the future with a better armed and capable Hezbollah.

Despite the regular exchange of missiles, rockets and air strikes, both sides have contained hostilities without crossing the line into full-scale war. But there are fears that the situation could spiral out of control and could escalate into a broader confrontation to include Iran.

Iran's calculated strategy is to 'Empower Proxies' in the form of Hezbollah, Hamas Houthis who are now targeting shipping in the Red Sea and militias in Syria and Iraq influence operations with a degree of plausible deniability. The proxies all see Israel as their principal adversary.

The deeper involvement of these protagonists in any fighting would have a fallout on Israel's war in Gaza. The only way to de-escalate tensions is a ceasefire and hostage release deal in Gaza, as Hezbollah has said it will only stop the hostilities 'when Israel's aggression in Gaza ends'.

What stands out is that over the years both Iran and Israel have been calibrating risks while targeting each other. While Israel may seek to weaken Hezbollah's military capabilities and target its leadership but it will encounter challenges if a conflict presently breaks out on its border with Lebanon. But conversely, if the growing capabilities of the proxies are left unchecked it will also have an impact on the wider region. Unfortunately, the region's fault lines are tearing open and the world cannot afford to contend with accelerating tipping points leading to conflicts.

Endnotes

[1] "Lebanon's Hezbollah Says Fired 320 Katyusha Rockets Targeting Israel Bases." The Hindu, August 25, 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/hezbollah-launches-wide-scale-attack-against-israeli-positions/article68564790.ece>.

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[3] Reuters. "Israeli Officials Say They Seek to Avoid All-out War in Lebanon Retaliation." Deccan Herald, 29 Jul 2024. <https://www.deccanherald.com/world/israeli-officials-say-they-seek-to-avoid-all-out-war-in-lebanon-retaliation-3127241>.

[4] Jones, Seth G., Daniel Byman, Alexander Palmer, and Riley McCabe. “The Coming Conflict with Hezbollah.” CSIS, 21 Mar 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/coming-conflict-hezbollah>.

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[6] Khatib, Lina. How Hezbollah holds sway over the Lebanese state | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, 07 Jul 2021. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state>.

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[8] Jones, Seth G., Daniel Byman, Alexander Palmer, and Riley McCabe. “The Coming Conflict with Hezbollah.” CSIS, 21 Mar 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/coming-conflict-hezbollah>.

[9] Maloney, Suzanne. “Iran’s Order of Chaos.” Foreign Affairs, 20 May 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/irans-order-chaos-suzanne-maloney>.

[10] Clarke, Colin P. “How Hezbollah Came to Dominate Information Warfare | Rand.” Rand, 19 Sep 2017. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2017/09/how-hezbollah-came-to-dominate-information-warfare.html>.

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