

## Israel, Hezbollah, and Arab Hostility

### Description

Israel is conducting extensive attacks against Lebanon for the sixth time in their shared history after months of a military back-and-forth with the Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah. In late September, Israel assassinated Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hasan Nasrallah, as part of a systematic offensive against dozens of Hezbollah military sites in Lebanon, reportedly to preempt Hezbollah's retaliation for Israel's July assassination of another senior leader, Fouad Shukr. Despite Israeli promises of a limited incursion, the escalation in the military pas-de-deux both have been engaged in since the Gaza war began on October 7 last year is expected to have severe humanitarian consequences in affected areas and beyond and to promote economic and political instability. Apart from the combat, the conflict highlights not only the enduring hostility between Hezbollah and Israel but also the limitations of relying on military force to secure Israel's long-term position in the region.

Israel's conflict with Lebanon is unique among those with the Arab states because Lebanon is unique. It has always been fundamentally unstable, having been created as a beachhead for French imperialism, with weak nationalist credentials. Due to its social, political, and military weaknesses, Lebanon suffered the consequences of the Arab-Israeli conflict, specifically Palestinian displacement, more deeply than others. Lebanon's weak sectarian government and ineffectual military unraveled in 1975 under the pressure of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict being fought on its territory, inaugurating a 16-year civil war. Despite its weakness, however, Lebanon has consistently frustrated Israeli designs to pacify the country.

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None of Israel's previous military engagements in Lebanon achieved meaningful progress toward a peaceful status quo. In fact, it could be argued that Israel's operations in Lebanon have laid the foundations for subsequent, more violent engagements. Jerusalem's security challenges that stem from across the Lebanese border and those in Palestinian territories, for that matter are political problems that do not lend themselves to military solutions. Israel needs to consider a paradigm shift away from its tendency to prioritize the use of its military in favor of a more comprehensive approach using political, diplomatic, economic, as well as military means to address security challenges. This approach must include acknowledging Arab territorial concerns.

## Decades of Strategic Failure

From its 1978 invasion of Lebanon to combat Palestinian guerrillas to its 1982 attempt to install a compliant Lebanese government, Israel has consistently failed in its efforts to pacify the country. In fact, its 1982 invasion, including attacks against Shia communities in the south, inadvertently strengthened Hezbollah, the militia established by Iran to fight on the Shia's behalf. By 1985, Israel was exhausted by intensifying Hezbollah resistance and withdrew to the security zone it had established along the border in 1978. With assistance from other resistance groups, Hezbollah [had done greater damage to Israel](#) in two years than Palestinian guerrillas had in a decade. In May 2000, under a persistent Hezbollah war of attrition, Israel abandoned its security zone, retreating to the UN-designated border. Moreover, its proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army, also collapsed, and Israel had effectively been ejected from Lebanon. In 2006, Hezbollah killed three Israeli soldiers and captured two others, demanding the release of Israeli-held Lebanese prisoners in exchange for returning the soldiers. As Israel responded with airstrikes, a [34-day conflict](#)—bizarrely referred to in Israel as the *Second Lebanon War*—erupted in which some 1,200 Lebanese died and 4,400 wounded, mostly civilians. Israel's reported 158 deaths were mostly soldiers.

Since Israel's last invasion of Lebanon in 2006, the border had been relatively quiet with each side anticipating a conflict but looking to put it off. Occasional Hezbollah rockets or drones into Israel did not lead to serious escalation, while [Israel reportedly violated Lebanese airspace](#) an estimated 22,000 times between 2007 and 2022.

In October 2023, Hezbollah began a campaign of attacks, in sympathy with the Palestinians, designed to distract the Israeli military from full focus on Gaza. Hezbollah's attacks resulted in the [evacuation of some 61,000 residents](#) of northern Israel; Israel's reprisals triggered an exodus of more than [100,000 Lebanese](#) from the country's south. Increasingly daring Hezbollah rocket attacks and Israeli retaliation have now escalated into a full-blown conflict, one that the Biden Administration desperately and vainly had tried to forestall.

Hezbollah which—despite its claims of victory—suffered a decisive operational defeat at the hands of the Israelis in 2006, has been reinforced with [more advanced weapons from Iran](#). Its new arsenal, if fully deployed, likely would result in [much greater destruction to Israel](#) in infrastructure damage and loss of life than in 2006. Although the current Israeli campaign has eliminated many Hezbollah leaders and diminished its operational capabilities, it is highly improbable that Hezbollah has lost the ability to severely damage Israel's northern settlements and displace their residents, the Israeli casus belli for expanding the conflict. Moreover, due to its participation in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime, Hezbollah's fighters are more experienced and battle-tested than they have ever

been.

As stated above, Israeli life is already dramatically affected with tens of thousands displaced from the north of the country with Hezbollah continuing to attack northern and central Israel; this is separate from those displaced from the south by the war with Hamas. The displaced are living in hotels, [subsidized by the Israeli national budget, already in deficit](#). If the past is any indicator, an Israeli operation to clear southern Lebanon of Hezbollah fighters and positions will only yield temporary benefits. There is no force likely to engage the militia that could compel Hezbollah to withdraw permanently from the border—not the Lebanese Armed Forces, which are too weak; not [UNIFIL, the UN Interim Force in Lebanon created in 1978, which is not an offensive combat force](#); and not Israel, which has failed to achieve this for some 40 years.

In my judgment, Israel's strategic failures in Lebanon have left it with its most deadly, determined, and militarily competent Arab foe ever, extra-motivated by the need to avenge Israel's assassinations of its top leaders, and benefitting from support of the lone state sponsor of terrorism in the Middle East, Iran. Israel's past military successes against Hezbollah have not eliminated the threat nor secured Israel's future. Jerusalem's vast military arsenal cannot overcome committed guerrilla fighters, indifferent to personal danger or to civilian casualties, or their steadfast state sponsor. Moreover, Hezbollah's weapons arsenal can reach deeper into Israel than in previous conflicts. In many ways, Israel's conflicts with Hezbollah and Hamas are similar. The fundamental problems are not military and are not solvable by military operations, which seem better suited to temporarily diminishing the threat, rather than eliminating it.

## A Necessary Paradigm Shift

Israel needs a paradigm shift in its approach to hostile neighbors, particularly Hezbollah. In fairness, Israel has few options to change the landscape in Lebanon—or in the occupied Palestinian territories, for that matter—apart from removing the *casus belli*: the continued occupation of Arab territories it has conquered. Hezbollah's given reason for its fight against Israel is that it continues to occupy Lebanese territory, namely [the Shebaa Farms](#) region, which Lebanon claims. Hezbollah also gives the liberation of the Palestinian-occupied territories—the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip—as a reason for its conflict against Israel, as demonstrated by its present engagement in support of Hamas.

Concerns over Arab territory must also be addressed head-on for Israel's own strategic benefit. Israeli leaders' argument that there are no consequences to ignoring Palestinian demands for their own territorial state is obviously in error, demonstrated not only by Hezbollah's joining the October 7

conflict but also by broader Arab reluctance to normalize relations with the Jewish state. Countries such as Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia which have frequent informal ties to Israel continue to refuse to normalize relations until the issues of its occupation of Arab territories and Israel's corresponding toxicity to their populations are resolved. As of early 2023, Muscat which continued to support the Arab Peace Initiative [could not accept normalization with Israel](#) just as Netanyahu's far-right government promised to further dispossess Palestinians, and it is difficult to imagine that it has moved closer to normalization with Israel a year into the Gaza War. Meanwhile, Doha which had called on Israel not to use the events of October 7, 2023, as a pretext for initiating a disproportionate war against Palestinian civilians in Gaza squarely [blamed Israel](#) for the escalation after October 7, 2023, and pointed to repeated raids on the Al-Aqsa Mosque under the protection of Israeli police as further provocation. In Saudi Arabia, the number of respondents in an [Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies \(ACRPS\) poll](#) who opposed normalization with Israel grew from 38 percent in 2022 to 68 percent in this year's poll. Separately, the ACRPS poll also indicates that the majority of respondents from countries whose governments have already signed peace or normalization agreements with Israel including Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco, as well as Sudan [oppose their countries' recognition of Israel](#).

While it would be naïve to conclude that Israel would defuse all of its enemies' motivations by returning all Arab territories it occupies, it would likely be facing significantly reduced hostility, if it no longer occupied them. Further, it would not stand alone in a conflict with Iran, for example if it demonstrated good faith in efforts to resolve outstanding issues with its Arab neighbors.

## Role of the United States

As an advocate of peace and the strongest power both politically and militarily with interests across the region, the United States should take a leading role in reinforcing its own policies of a two-state solution, security for all regional states within internationally recognized borders, and containment of Iranian regional hegemony. Unlike Israel, the United States has used distinct lines of effort including diplomatic, economic, and military approaches to pursue its regional interests. Washington should exercise its leverage over Israel to promote its own objectives. Fortunately, an excellent mechanism already exists in the Arab Peace Initiative, a Saudi plan [endorsed by the League of Arab States](#) that promised Israel full peace and normalization if it withdrew from all occupied Arab territories and accepted an independent Palestinian state. A revival of the initiative, possibly with an Arab League revalidation, might revitalize US efforts to promote peace in the region.

Israel has so far ignored this plan, which holds the promise of ending all Arab-Israeli disputes, preferring instead to develop bilateral relations with individual Arab states, a much more time-

consuming approach with no guarantee of future success. The United States could adopt a revived Arab Peace Initiative as its own, pressuring Israel to accept it, with carrots and sticks. Among the carrots could be promises of US-Gulf financial support to strengthen the Lebanese government and armed forces, to isolate Hezbollah, and possibly to work for an enlarged and more powerful UNIFIL with an expanded security mandate. Further, reconstruction of Palestinian infrastructure and society after Israel's devastation of Gaza and its decades-long neglect of Palestinian economic needs in the West Bank would also be underwritten by US-Gulf funding. Among the sticks could be a US signal that it would attach enforceable conditions on Israel's use of American offensive weapons, as it does for all other recipients of US arms.

In short, the United States should pressure Israel to take steps that are for its own good. US relations with Israel should be judged by the extent to which Jerusalem assists Washington in realizing US policy objectives in the region. Most observers would agree that Israel would need a new, forward-looking post-war government to consider a different trajectory than the one it is currently on, dominated as it is by strategically ineffectual military action. There would likely also need to be a strategic re-evaluation in the United States, which has so far been reluctant to place conditions on support to Israel. If Washington is serious about re-directing its resources away from this region and toward strategic competition with China and other near-peer competitors, it needs a Middle East region that is easy to exit, no longer requiring frequent US involvement.

*Amir Asmar was a senior executive and long-time Middle East analyst in the US Department of Defense, where he authored analyses and provided intelligence briefings to decision-makers throughout the executive and legislative branches. He is an adjunct professor at the National Intelligence University, and his writings can be found at the Council on Foreign Relations, the World Politics Review, the Atlantic Council, and other publications.*

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*Image Description: Bombings in South Lebanon (20 September 2024) ([Via Wikimedia Commons](#))*

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