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Israel has already lost a possible war with Hezbollah, its allies should now try to limit the damage



The chances of all-out war between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah are greater now than at any time in recent years but that doesn't necessarily mean such a clash is imminent. When it does take place, it has the potential to reshape the Middle East but not in a way that Israel intends.

The timing of the seemingly inevitable 'next round' between the two enemies depends on a complex and opaque set of circumstances. These involve not only the internal calculations of Israel and Hezbollah but also **regional**, Iranian, and even global, Russian, ones.

The result could be vastly more destabilising than the current Gaza conflict. Both the EU, on whose southern flank such a conflict would take place, as well as the US, where the Biden administration could use calm in the run-up to the elections, have an interest in stabilising the situation.

For the EU, a large-scale war could mean the renewed influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees, mainly from among the Syrians now sheltering in Lebanon. It also risks a more direct involvement, following Hezbollah's threats against Cyprus, a member state.

The Americans risk getting involved in a wider conflict with Iran, should Tehran come to the aid of Hezbollah. Also, the US will be wary of yet another conflagration in the Middle East that diverts resources and attention away from Ukraine, and as such play into Russia's interests.

How high the cost will be?

Efforts to stabilise the Israel-Hezbollah front are complicated by the changed circumstances in the wake of the attack by Hamas on Israel on 7 October last year.

The Israeli response in Gaza shows that this was a game-changer that is also likely to inform its strategy in the north and disrupt established patterns.

After 7 October, Israel made it clear it no longer regards Hezbollah's armed presence on its northern border as sustainable. It now views the threat of the armed group there in the same light as the one from Hamas in Gaza in terms of a potential surprise attack on its population.

It also seeks to end Hezbollah's attacks on northern Israel that the group says it is staging in support of the Palestinians in Gaza.

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Yet, Israel has very few options when it comes to military action, and the best way for its allies to dissuade it from launching an attack, is to emphasise how high the cost will be in military, civilian and economic terms. And also, how unlikely a successful outcome will be.

In Gaza, after almost nine months of fighting, the IDF, Israel's army, has **not succeeded** in crushing Hamas, a much smaller, more lightly armed and less professional outfit than Hezbollah.

Hamas is still capable of attacking Israeli troops and, more importantly in terms of a Lebanon scenario, of firing rockets into Israel.

Reaching a new balance of deterrence

Even a limited Israeli attempt to push Hezbollah away from the border is likely to result in high numbers of Israeli military and civilian casualties and heavy damage to its infrastructure because of Hezbollah rocket, missile and drone barrages.

That it is able to, and will, inflict much worse on Lebanon is in this case less relevant to its goals. It might think that this tactic of massive destruction worked in the inconclusive 32-day 2006 war, sometimes cast as the first round between the two sides.

Israel could at least claim to have made Hezbollah and Lebanon pay such a high price that a balance of deterrence had been established that has now held for almost twenty years.

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But reaching a new balance of deterrence is in this case made impossible by the likely aim of the operation; to push Hezbollah away from the border.

Were Israel to succeed in doing this, which itself is doubtful, the group would regard it as a new occupation of Southern Lebanon and a justification for not returning to a ceasefire.

The idea that UNIFIL peacekeepers or another international force could effectively patrol the South has been shown to be a pipedream.

That leaves several other, equally unattractive, options on the table, either for more limited or much more comprehensive actions. They all involve danger of military failure, regional and even global escalation and at the very least extensive damage and suffering.

A different Hezbollah from 2006

Israel is facing a very different reality and a different Hezbollah from 2006. The group has a much larger arsenal, as well as more combat experience after helping the Syrian dictator Bashar Assad win a civil war.

It has improved ties with Russia, apart from Iran, and it has much more control over the rest of Lebanon, and the Lebanese army.

Also, Israel has more to lose, with Hezbollah more than capable of hitting its gas production sites in the Mediterranean that have come online after 2006.



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On a military level, the IDF has been weakened by what some of its own officers have called 'becoming an occupation army', sapping its training and combat readiness.

If Israel were ever to attempt a military challenge to Hezbollah, it would certainly benefit from a longer period of preparation, incorporating the lessons learned from Gaza and upping its missile and rocket defences.

There's more at stake for Israel here than for Hezbollah. The actual destruction of the group seems unlikely. Although that's also the case for the overblown rhetoric of it being able to threaten Israel's existence.

But another inconclusive, or even failed war, with an increasing number of weaknesses exposed, would seriously harm Israel in multiple ways.

Apart from the immediate damage, it would undermine self-confidence and possibly also investors' confidence. It would lessen the country's importance to its allies, which partly hinges on its military prowess, and it could even dissuade Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, from seeking it as an ally and partner.

This could still be the case when it uses the 'off-ramp' that has emerged in recent days, of declaring an end to the intense phase of the war in Gaza, thus giving Hezbollah a way to end or taper off its attacks in the north.

Nobody will be fooled by the Netanyahu

government declaring victory. The whole episode, starting from the morning of 7 October 2023, will be seen as having laid bare Israel's inability to control its circumstances.

The only way to turn this into anything even remotely resembling a positive, would be for the country's leadership to recognise that it has run out of military options and that a completely different approach is now called for.