



A Dangerous Tit-For-Tat in the Middle East

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In the last week, a series of moves between Israel and Lebanese-based terrorist group Hezbollah have raised the question of whether escalation toward general war has begun. But such a development would be in neither side's interest.

A low-intensity conflict has simmered along Israel's northern border since just after the October 7, 2023, Hamas campaign of terror, which killed around 1,200 Israelis in the country's south and sparked the current Israel Defense Forces (IDF) incursion into Gaza. Persistent, small-scale Hezbollah attacks have been met with counterstrikes, which have resulted in the death of around 130 terrorists to date. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Israelis have been evacuated from their homes in the north to protect them from possible rocket attacks (or a future Hezbollah incursion).

But the conflict began to escalate last week, when senior Hamas official Saleh al-Arouri was assassinated in a targeted strike in Beirut. The killing was carried out despite a warning issued by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah last August that he would regard any such actions as an attack on Lebanon itself. In an address last Wednesday, Nasrallah threatened revenge for the "major, dangerous crime," but did not call for all-out war.

Revenge arrived Saturday morning, when Hezbollah struck the airbase at Mt. Meron, the Israeli Air Force's northern air control unit, using anti-tank guided missiles. Israeli officials conceded that the attacks caused severe damage, while Hezbollah said the attack was only an "initial response."

On Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned Hezbollah that "no terrorist is immune" and that if Israel could not achieve pacification in the north diplomatically, "we will work in other ways." Those were demonstrated on Monday, when a senior member of Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force, Wissam Tawil, was killed by an Israeli UAV strike in southern Lebanon. The ball is now in Hezbollah's court; the Shi'ite militia needs to decide whether to end the escalation and revert back to lower-intensity conflict or begin to prepare for a general war.

Nasrallah has threatened that war with Hezbollah would be "very, very, very costly" for Israel. And indeed, Hezbollah is a more powerful force than Hamas, with 100,000 or more rockets and missiles that could rain destruction over all of Israel. Hezbollah could also bring to bear its arsenal of anti-tank, anti-ship, and anti-aircraft missiles, as well as a fleet of drones. Many of these weapons were supplied by Iran.

Hezbollah has an estimated 20,000 fighters (they claim 100,000) and the ability to operate with more strategic depth than Hamas. Hezbollah could also count on support from Iranian-backed Shiite militias in Syria. A recent Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) assessment found it would be difficult for Israel to prevail in a major conflict in the north while still being engaged in Gaza.

?But Hezbollah would also have to deal with the effects of a war on Lebanon itself. The country is facing economic strains, and not all Lebanese would respond favorably to being dragged into a new war. Iran may also be more interested in keeping Hezbollah in reserve for now, to build it up for a future conflict.

For its part, if war broke out, Israel would seek to cripple Hezbollah swiftly, to destroy the group's rockets from the air before they could be launched, interdict supplies and support from Iran coming through Syria, and decapitate the group's leadership. This last fact may be the strongest part of the deterrence equation, since if general war broke out, Nasrallah would be in Israel's crosshairs. So long as diplomacy is still possible, Israel would not take that step, but the mood in the country post-October 7 is similar to that in the United States after September 11, 2001, and if Hezbollah launched a general war, then all bets would be off.

Hezbollah — and by extension Iran — would also have to consider the possibility of U.S. intervention on behalf of Israel. America is already involved in multiple proxy wars with Iran, whether in Iraq, Syria or in operations in the Red Sea against Yemen's Tehran-backed Houthi rebels. While the Biden administration has no interest in seeing a wider war develop, it is reasonable to assume that the U.S. might conduct limited airstrikes against critical Hezbollah targets should the terrorist group initiate open hostilities with Israel, simply as a means of helping end the matter quickly. At the very least, Hezbollah cannot discount the possibility.

Though escalation to a general war is not in either Israel or Hezbollah's interest, that does not mean it will not happen. Wars are not always the product of strictly rational calculations. But if war does break out and the United States intervenes, would Iran then take direct action to support its Lebanese proxy? That would assuredly represent the next step on the escalatory ladder.