



Israel And Hezbollah Are Headed Toward A New War

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Storm clouds are gathering on Israel's northern border. There, intensifying attacks by Hezbollah, Lebanon's powerful Shiite militia, and targeted Israeli killings of high-value militants, are heightening tensions and raising the specter of a new conflict between Israel and the group that ranks as Iran's chief terrorist proxy.

Israel isn't itching for such an escalation, despite what some pundits have contended. Israel's current offensive in Gaza is complex, resource-intensive, and still far from over, and there are real world constraints on the country's ability to fight a two-front war. For its part, and despite all of its bluster, Hezbollah has made clear that it won't initiate large scale hostilities—at least for now. That doesn't mean another Israeli-Hezbollah war won't happen, though. To the contrary, Israel and Hezbollah are inexorably headed toward conflict, for at least two reasons.

The first reason is economic. Hamas' Oct. 7 terror campaign led to the mass displacement of some 200,000 citizens from southern Israel. Less publicized, but likewise significant, has been a parallel exodus of more than 60,000 residents of Israel's north, who—fearful of the possibility of a similar onslaught by Hezbollah—have fled cities and communities in the Golan and Galilee. As a result, life in the northern third of the country has ground to a halt, and the societal, economic, and strategic costs of this paralysis are steadily mounting.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last week told visiting Biden administration envoy Amos Hochstein that allowing northern residents to "return to their homes and live in safety and security" is an overriding imperative—and one that requires a fundamental change in the current strategic status quo on the country's northern frontier. "We will not stop until this goal has been achieved," Netanyahu made clear.

Whether this can be accomplished diplomatically is uncertain at best, because it would require a major revision of the prevailing balance of power between the two parties. It's useful to remember that the last Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, in 2006, ended via United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which established a demilitarized zone in south Lebanon. Nevertheless, in the years since, Hezbollah militants have steadily crept closer to the border with Israel, establishing emplacements from where they can now hold Israel's northern communities at risk.

As a result, to enable its northern residents to return home and restore some semblance of normalcy, Israel needs to establish (and then enforce) a new buffer zone in Lebanon's south. Doing so, however, requires pushing Hezbollah away from the border—something that simply isn't feasible without a serious, sustained force of arms.

The second reason Hezbollah and Israel are headed toward war is strategic. Oct. 7 exposed the hubris of Israel's security establishment, which had become convinced in recent years both that Palestinian terrorist groups were deterred by Israeli high-tech superiority, and that the Palestinians were moderating as a result of growing economic prosperity. In the aftermath of Hamas' offensive, those fallacies have been laid bare, and Israeli policymakers are now gravitating toward a new security concept which relies heavily on preemptive defense.

That reorientation, in turn, has profound consequences for how Jerusalem views the threat posed by Hezbollah—and what it's prepared to do about it. Up until now, Israel has focused tactically on the militia's growing stockpiles of advanced weaponry (including 150,000 or more surface-to-surface rockets and missiles, which are warehoused in multiple locations in southern Lebanon). It has done so via what has come to be known as the "campaign between wars," entailing surgical strikes on Iranian weapons shipments destined for the militia.

But Hezbollah's arsenal has managed to grow nonetheless, posing an increasingly serious threat to Israeli security. Eroding that destructive potential is central to Israel's post-Oct. 7 paradigm. The only question is whether to bite the bullet and do so now, or wait until sometime in the future, when Hezbollah's stockpiles are bigger still, and the threat posed by the group is even more severe.

A renewed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah is very likely a matter of when, not if. Clearly, policymakers in Jerusalem would prefer that fight take place after they have concluded their country's current campaign against Hamas. That, however, might not be an option.