

Will Hezbollah Fully Enter the War with Israel?

Last updated: November 24, 2023



In a video published by terrorist organization Hezbollah, Nasrallah is seen passing by with his back to the camera, in a preparation to the following day's speech

There have been a lot of speculation concerning the reasons for which the Lebanon-Israel front, destabilized by the Iranian-guided terrorist organization Hezbollah, is not yet becoming a full-scale war front much like the Gaza Strip. Questions are being raised on Hezbollah's calculus around its dilemma whether or not to fully enter the war, one step further than its current attrition policy of low-intensity assaults. Israel, for now, prefers to concentrate its war efforts in the south and retaliate to every provocation or attack made by Hezbollah. With the pause in the military activities in Gaza it seems that Hezbollah is going to stop its military activities as well and it looks as if Israel is going to

follow suit, yet Hezbollah is threatening to resume the fire and escalate further if and when Israel resumes its offensive against Hamas. This may lead to further escalation along Israel's border with Lebanon.

Since October 7, 2023, Hezbollah launched no less than 555 attacks on Israel - rockets fired on towns, cities, and military bases; attack drones; and anti-tank missiles that have already claimed multiple lives. **8 Israeli soldiers and officers were killed** as a result of Hezbollah's attacks, 45 injured; **2 Israeli civilians were killed**, 14 injured. For its part, **Hezbollah counts at least 85 eliminated**

operatives, while Israel seriously doubts this conservative estimate which possibly conceals a much larger number of neutralized Hezbollah terrorists.

Since the Hamas massacre, Hezbollah's goals were to help bring about a permanent end to the war while Hamas is governing Gaza. This will mean in the Iran led axis' eyes a victory, regardless of the number of casualties and the destruction suffered by the Palestinian population in Gaza. As part of this policy, it has been significantly intensifying its routine of border incidents that has gained traction in 2023.¹ Hezbollah aimed to contribute to achieving this goal by threatening the US and Israel that it may widen the war, while also showing solidarity with Hamas and the Iranian-led axis, gaining domestic support in Lebanon, and attempting to distract Israel from its war efforts in the south. Just one day after the onslaught, Hezbollah, together with the Palestinian terror organizations deployed in Lebanon (Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad), began launching trickles of mortar shells and rockets on Israeli population and IDF strongholds along the border, persisting with attacks under the threshold of a full-scale war, and seemingly aiming to test the willingness of the IDF to engage on the northern border. Civilians were instructed to evacuate their homes near the border.

For now, the IDF is retaliating with attacks on the squads that attempt to launch anti-tank missiles across the border, artillery attacks on the sources of rocket launches, and aerial strikes against Hezbollah infrastructures in southern Lebanon and is poised for a ground campaign in the area should it be required. It seems that Hezbollah is entering the war with measured steps and could go as far as opening a second front against Israel.

It should be noted that Hezbollah's conduct is linked to the directives coming from Tehran, as indicated by the two visits of the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, to Beirut during

the war. However, even among Lebanese factors that support Hezbollah and Hamas, there is no unanimity regarding Hezbollah's possible involvement in the war. Beyond that, there is clear understanding that a war like this will surely spill over into Lebanese soil, which will worsen the already precarious situation in Lebanon.

The prospect of Hezbollah dragging Lebanon into war with Israel is evoking resentment combined with prudence among Lebanon's internal political landscape as well as the non-Shi'ite population, in an already-divided and bleeding country. Despite Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's support for Hezbollah, calling all military factions in Lebanon to reunite behind it (October 24), interim prime minister Najib Miqati (Sunni), foreign minister Abdullah Bou Habib (Christian), Samir Jaja (Christian) and others appear to be making ultimate efforts to avoid war, and are pressured by the international community to do so. "Lebanon knows the cost of war", said foreign minister Habib in an interview.

Hezbollah is also upping the ante by claiming responsibility: Unlike its common practice in recent years, Hezbollah is now claiming direct responsibility for the shooting. In the March 2023 Megiddo attack, where a suicide terrorist penetrated through the border and blew himself up next to an Israeli vehicle, injuring one (an attack probably designated to cause many more casualties), an obscure, little-known group called "Wolves of the Galilee" claimed responsibility. I credit for the firing of 34 rockets into Israel during March was given to the Hamas branch in southern Lebanon, with Hezbollah's blessing and acquiescence. This time, however, Hezbollah does not shy away from **testing Israel's readiness for war.**

The concern by the possibility of a multi-front war has pushed Israeli decision-makers into a dilemma: whether to initiate a pre-emptive strike on Hezbollah, or wait for the terrorist organization to make the first move. Meanwhile, reportedly the

¹ See IDSF Research Department, "Hezbollah: On the Brink of Eruption?" August 2023, <https://idsf.org.il/en/papers/hezbollah-eruption-eruption/>

US has asked Israel to do the latter, for the time being, and focus on the Gaza Strip, while sending clear messages to Hezbollah not to intervene and to cease its provocations on the Israeli-Lebanese border, as stated by Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

Famously, President Biden warned “any party hostile to Israel” against taking advantage of the situation (“Don’t!”), ominously directing his words at Hezbollah as well as Iran.

Meanwhile, Israel is warning Hezbollah against joining the war. Prime Minister Netanyahu said, “if Hezbollah decided to fully intervene in the war, that

will make it miss the Second Lebanon War. It will be the mistake of its lifetime. We will strike it in forms it cannot imagine, and the consequences for it and for Lebanon will be devastating. We are ready for every scenario.” (October 23) Defense minister Gallant said that Hezbollah “has decided to join the fighting and is paying a price. We must be prepared and vigilant for every scenario – we are in for even more consequential challenges.” (October 21) In a recent press conference, when asked what will be Israel’s red line in Lebanon, Minister Gallant replied, “if you hear about Israeli strikes in Beirut, you’ll know Hezbollah crossed the red line.”

Next steps

Both Israel and Iran are carefully considering their next steps in Lebanon.

- **For Israel,** this is an opportune moment to take the Iranian wildcard off the table, under the umbrella of strong international support, and **remove the Hezbollah threat.** There is a strong understanding in Israel right now that **Israel, and in particular residents of the north, cannot live under the threat of Hezbollah, especially in light of the failure of the containment strategy in the south.** The idea that Israel can allow Hezbollah’s Radwan elite unit to keep menacing northern border towns much like Hamas’ Nukhba unit ravaged the southern border towns, no longer holds water. Additionally, the invaluable international support for Israeli action, can be leveraged for a joint Israeli-American coalition to save Lebanon from Hezbollah. One must bear in mind, that considering the aggressive declarations by the heads of Israeli political and defense establishment, and the fact Hezbollah is now the prominent political force in Lebanon, that **the next war will not look like any previous war, and Lebanon itself, including its strategic assets, will be legitimate targets in the war.**

- **For Iran, the dilemma on whether to force Hezbollah into intervention is critical.** If Iran loses Hezbollah, **it loses its insurance policy that to a large degree, deters Israel from attacking Iran itself and its nuclear facilities.** Israel knows that in case of an attack on Iran, Hezbollah will undoubtedly join the war and inflict a heavy toll on the Israeli home front. A scenario of thousands of rockets and precision missiles per day rained down on Israeli cities and strategic infrastructure is a heavy price that Israel is well aware of. On the other hand, Iran also knows that **the Israeli understanding that Hezbollah cannot be allowed to remain belligerent will behoove Iran to instigate a surprise attack itself, before Israel gets ahead of it,** to start a war under favorable conditions.
- **Hezbollah itself shows quite a reluctance in joining the war, to judge by the terrorist organization’s Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah’s two highly anticipated speeches,** his Friday sermons of November 3 and November 10, 2023. In the first speech, **Nasrallah distanced himself and Hezbollah from the Hamas attack in an attempt to make excuses for his**

indecisive moves, saying “the attack was 100% Palestinian”, and is completely unrelated to any other regional issue.

Nasrallah threatened that “another escalation on the Lebanon front is a real possibility”, and highlighted that Hezbollah joined the campaign from October 8, issuing a reaction in an intensity that “has not been seen since 1948” that “dragged one third of Israel’s army to the northern border.” He added, “What happens on the border looks modest, but it is important.”

He also warned Israel against launching a preemptive strike against Hezbollah. **“There is no war more just, than war against Israel,”** he added, and thanked the “Iraqi and Yemenite hands” that joined the war. Nasrallah also **echoed the words of Iranian Leader Khamenei by saying the United States will pay a price for their support of Israel.**

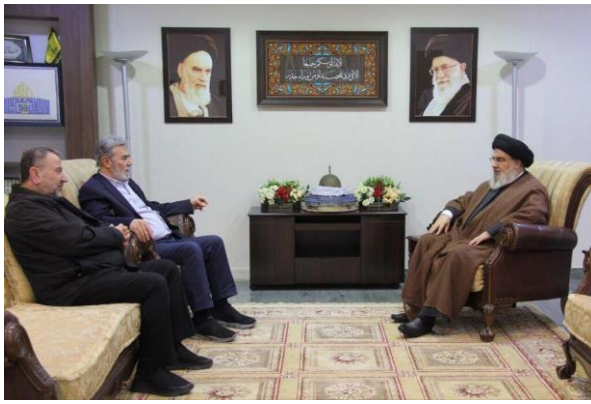
In his second speech, Nasrallah managed to raise a few eyebrows when blessing “our martyrs and your martyrs,” which begs the question whether Hezbollah and Hamas “martyrs” are not considered combatants who die for the same cause. He focused on Israel’s “cruel sense of revenge that has no moral, human, or other boundaries” and threatened, **“the Lebanon front is one of solidarity with Gaza, all options are on the table.”**

Notably, Nasrallah’s speeches sparked a wave of cynicism, criticism and mockery around the Arab world. His attempts to excuse his organization’s lack of bold action, empty messages, and clear bid to seek a way out of a commitment to a full-scale war with Israel, triggered critical

articles, stickers and posters, caricatures, and memes. Some depicted Nasrallah in an Israeli uniform, others as Iran’s lap dog, and his statement that “all options are on the table” were deliberately reinterpreted as “cucumbers” (the Arabic word for “options”, **خيارات**, is identical to “cucumbers”).

This cannot be decontextualized from **the cracks forming in Iran’s proxy array**, as illustrated by Hamas’ clear disapproval of Hezbollah’s delay in fully joining the war. Hamas’ senior official Ghazi Hamad said they “appreciate” Hezbollah’s attacks on Israel, but they certainly “expect more” of them. Hamas leader Haled Mashal said explicitly that Hezbollah should intervene, saying “this is a historic opportunity. You do not do history with limited and cautious steps. ... For the greater interest, we must join the campaign together, what we have thus far isn’t enough.”

In response, Hezbollah-affiliated pundits, and media openly slandered Mashal. Journalist Salem Zahran said, “Mashal is sitting in 7-star hotels and expects missiles to rain down on Lebanon.” Al-Mayyadin published a piece that said “Hezbollah has already spoken in fire for Hamas. ... Hezbollah prefers such criticism than criticism that it has dragged Lebanon into war. ... Hezbollah is first and foremost a Lebanese party that acts for the Lebanese.” However, **the final word in Hezbollah’s decision on joining the war will be Iran’s.** One cannot assume that a lack of signals indicating one way will have a clear, pre-determined result, as attested by Hamas’ October 7 attack.



Hezbollah Secretary General meets Iranian Foreign Minister Abdullahian (right) and Hamas number two Saleh Al-Aruri and PIJ Secretary General Ziad Nahale (left) in his Beirut bunker

For now, Israel is interested in focusing its energies on the southern front, while preventing a wide-scale escalation in Judea and Samaria and among the Israeli-Arab cities and villages. **“Isolation” between the fronts is a top Israeli interest**, preventing scenarios of coalescence between the fronts, much like the chain of events that led to the 2021 Guardian

of the Walls Operation. On the other hand, **Israel better initiate the next confrontation on its own terms, rather than being dragged into it.** Developments in the coming days and weeks will determine the course of the war on the northern and Iranian fronts.

Appendix A: Hezbollah’s rhetoric: Solidarity with Hamas, warning Israel

- Hezbollah officials continue to express support for Hamas and point out that their forces continue to be on alert, recruiting operatives to its ranks and coordinating their actions with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Palestinian organizations.
- Hashim Safi Al Din, the chairman of 'ezbollah's executive council, said in a speech he gave at a rally in solidarity with the Palestinians in the Dahia district in Beirut, that this campaign is a campaign of the entire nation and therefore everyone should join it in the defense of Jerusalem and the holy places. He pointed out that Netanyahu must understand that this war is not only for the residents of Gaza “and the "West Bank" but that the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the entire nation. He also stated that in this campaign, Hezbollah is not neutral and is on high alert and preparedness for any need.
- In a speech delivered by Naim Qassem, Secretary General of Hezbollah, at a rally in support of the Palestinian people held in the Dahia district in Beirut, he emphasized that Hezbollah is fully aware of its obligations and is fully prepared. According to him, Hezbollah continuously monitors developments, and that the secret talks behind-the-scenes, between international parties designed to ensure that Hezbollah does not intervene in the fighting do not affect the organization. Qassem also stated that they follow Israel's movements and when the time comes to act, they will do so.
- In an article in the Lebanese newspaper, "l-Akhbar", written by Ibrahim Al-Amin, who is a close associate to Hassan Nasrallah, he referred to the tensions in southern Lebanon and claimed that Israel's initiative to attack known Hezbollah positions on the border reflects the tensions Israel is experiencing

and is a clear message on its part that Hezbollah bears direct responsibility for all of the operation directed against it from the Lebanese territories. Regarding Hezbollah's announcement of October 10th that the attack on the bases in Biranit and Avivim is "only an "initial response" to the group's operations, and noted that Hezbollah is expected to act in accordance with the equation of symmetry that obliges the organization to carry out a military operation that will lead to the death of at least three Israeli soldiers, and Israel's response to this could lead to a more widespread conflict. In the context of the war in the Gaza Strip, he revealed that the Hamas leadership in Gaza informed the "resistance" factors outside the Gaza Strip that its rockets are capable of dealing with Israel for a long time and that it is prepared for extensive ground warfare.

- According to Lebanese commentators sympathetic to Hezbollah, the organization is on high alert and ready to intervene if the war in the Gaza Strip expands. In addition, it was noted that Hezbollah is not responsible for any military activity by non-Lebanese entities against Israel.
- Gebran Bassil, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement in Lebanon, which is close to Hezbollah, demanded that the Lebanese security forces not allow the Palestinians to fire from Lebanese territory at Israel due to

fear that Lebanon would be drawn into the conflict. He stated that they support the right of the "Palestinian resistance" to fight, but they are not interested in returning to the "Fatahland" period, as he put it.

- Hassan Fadlallah, a member of the Hezbollah faction in the parliament, stated that the equation they established according to which any aggression will be met with a response is still valid. He even noted that the way this equation is applied in the field "depends on the resistance and its leadership". He emphasized that any harm to civilians will not go without a price. As "for the "Al Aqsa Flood" operation, he said that they have the vision and plans in all areas, and they will not provide information to Israel regarding their activities.
- In response to the dispatch of American aircraft carriers to the area to aid Israel, Hezbollah published a statement in which it stated that it considers the US a full partner in the "Zionist aggression" and the killing, destruction and massacres against defenseless civilians. It was also stated in the announcement that launching aircraft carriers will not scare Hezbollah or the Palestinian organizations and they are ready for a confrontation "until a final victory and complete liberation is achieved." Hezbollah called on the Arab and Islamic nation to condemn the American intervention and its international partners.

Appendix B: A list of incidents on the border (as of November 24)

- A day after the terrible Hamas attack on October 7th, provocations by Hezbollah operatives riding motorcycles were seen near the fence near Metula. Later, Hezbollah fired several mortar bombs at Mount Dov.
- In addition to provocations on the border, on October 9th, a number of terrorists infiltrated from the Lebanese border towards the Western Galilee area in Israeli territory. IDF soldiers, a combat helicopter and an aircraft arrived at the scene and exchanged fire with the terrorists, two terrorists were killed, and another terrorist fled back to Lebanese territory. In the clashes with the terrorists, an IDF officer was killed, and five combatants were wounded. The military wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility. The IDF retaliated by firing in which several Hezbollah operatives were killed, which in response launched mortar bombs at two IDF bases in northern Israel, Biranit and Avivim.
- On October 10th, rockets were launched from the Al-Kalila area, in southern Lebanon, towards the Western Galilee. A total of 15 launches from the territory of Lebanon were identified. In response to the launches, IDF tanks attacked two Hezbollah observation posts. A few hours after the rockets were launched, the military wing of Hamas issued a statement in which it claimed responsibility for firing the rockets.
- Shortly after, Hezbollah launched an anti-tank missile at a military vehicle in the Avivim area. There were no casualties, and no damage was done. In response, a helicopter gunship attacked a Hezbollah observation post.
- On October 11th, another anti-tank fire was detected from Lebanese territory at a military position near Arab al-Aramshe on the Lebanese border. In response, the IDF fired artillery at areas on the Lebanon-Israel border.
- Against the background of the events, UNIFIL forces announced increased patrols in coordination with the Lebanese army to prevent rocket fire.
- On October 13th, an explosion occurred at the border fence, near kibbutz Hanita. The fence was slightly damaged. After an infiltration to the kibbutz was denied, IDF forces fired artillery to the Lebanese side. Hezbollah published a statement stating that in response, its operatives attacked a number of Israeli outposts. In response, an IDF UAV attacked Hezbollah targets in Lebanon.
- The Lebanese army said that a missile was fired from Israel that hit a civilian car belonging to a team of journalists and that journalist photographer Isam Abdullah was killed and five others were wounded. The killing of the journalist and the wounding of other journalists drew angry reactions. Najib Mikati, the prime minister of the transitional government in Lebanon, said that this is a new sign of disgrace by the "Israeli enemy" who continues his aggression against Lebanese territory. Hezbollah published a statement in which it condemned the "heinous crime" and noted that any harm to the security of the Lebanese people and its country will not go without a response and an adequate punishment.
- On the night of October 13-14th, it was reported that an intrusion by unidentified vessels was detected near the city of Shfar'am. Also, a shot was fired at an unmanned IDF aircraft which was hit. In response, the IDF attacked Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon. The next morning, IDF surveillance identified a terrorist squad that was attempting to infiltrate Israeli territory from Lebanon. An IDF aircraft attacked the

squad and killed several terrorists. The military wing of Hamas stated that it was a Nukhba unit (Hamas' ground commando unit) whose operatives blew up a section of the border fence between Lebanon and Israel, damaged the means of observation and penetrated into Israeli territory near the cooperative village of Margalioth. It is claimed that the IDF force suffered casualties. During the exchange of fire, an airstrike by an IDF aircraft was carried out against the members of the terrorist group and three of its members were killed.

- Ali Bracha, the head of Hamas National Relations Abroad, stated that the actions carried out by Hamas in Lebanon were in response to the call by Hamas' Military Wing Commander Mohammed Deif, with the aim of preventing Israel from isolating the Gaza Strip. He pointed out that if Israel tries to make a ground move in the Strip, the war will expand even more, because the allies of the "resistance" will not leave it an easy target for Israel and the American administration. He also mentioned the existence of a joint operations room for the resistance forces, which has been in operation since 2021, but did not specify its location.
- Later, about thirty mortar bombs were launched towards Israeli territory in the Mount Dov area, some of which landed in Israeli territory. In response, the IDF attacked the sources of the shooting. Hezbollah claimed responsibility for the shooting. At the time of the attacks, a terrorist group was identified that was suspected of intending to fire an anti-tank missile at Israel. An aircraft attacked the group.
- On October 15th, an anti-tank missile was fired at the town of Shtula, near the Lebanese border. A man was killed and three people were injured. In response, the IDF attacked the sources of the shooting with artillery fire. In response, another anti-tank missile was

fired at an IDF post on the Lebanese border. Hezbollah announced that as part of the reaction to the killing of the journalist Isam Abdullah and the wounding of other journalists, and to the damage to the house in Shebaa Farms, which caused the death of two civilians, its squad fired anti-tank missiles at an IDF center in the Shtula area. In another announcement, Hezbollah announced that the organization's combatants fired anti-tank missiles at an IDF 'Merkava' tank at the 'Nurit' outpost, which caused casualties.

- On October 17, an attack drone was intercepted after having crossed into Israel.
- On October 19, some 30 rockets were launched from Lebanese territory into Israel, 3 of which landed in the city of Kiryat Shmona, wounding three including a 5-year-old girl. An anti-tank missile was launched against Israeli troops.
- On October 20, some 20 rockets were launched from Lebanese territory into Israel, an attack drone was intercepted after having penetrated into Israeli territory from Lebanon. This attack alongside mortar fire on the Mount Dov area in the Golan Heights were retaliated by IDF artillery fire.
- Attacks by Hezbollah continued into the following days in a more sporadic fashion. On October 21, mortars were fired at the Mount Dov area, and an anti-tank missile was shot toward Israeli territory. The IDF retaliated by attacking Hezbollah targets in the village of Yaroun and eliminating the assailant. On October 22, Hezbollah launched another anti-tank missile into Israeli territory around Ziporen, and the IDF retaliated by targeting Hezbollah posts. On October 23, the IDF intercepted an attack drone that penetrated from Lebanon into the Galilee area.
- On October 24, a UAV struck two terrorist groups firing mortars and anti-tank missiles

- at IDF positions in Netua and Alkosh along the Lebanese border. Additionally, IDF forces targeted another terrorist cell in Lebanon attempting to launch anti-tank missiles into Israeli territory near Kibbutz Yiftach.
- On October 25, a terrorist squad attempted to launch anti-aircraft missiles from Lebanese territory into Israeli territory in the Mount Dov area. On October 26, in the aftermath of the preceding days, sirens were activated in various regions of the northern area.
 - On October 28, retaliating to the attacks from Lebanese territory, IDF warplanes targeted multiple Hezbollah military sites. This operation destroyed terrorist infrastructure, including a military compound and Hezbollah observation posts.
 - On October 29, a terrorist squad attempted to launch anti-aircraft missiles from the Lebanese border towards Israel, and another squad neared the Israeli border, aiming to harm civilians. An IDF-operated UAV intercepted a terrorist operating a drone heading towards Israeli territory. The IDF effectively neutralized these threats.
 - October 30 saw terrorists in Lebanon attacking several IDF posts along the border. The next day, IDF warplanes struck Hezbollah's infrastructure in Lebanon, obliterating weapon caches, positions, and sites used by the group.
 - On November 1, IDF forces attacked a terrorist cell planning to launch anti-tank missiles from Lebanon towards Israel in the Mis al-Jebel area. Simultaneously, another armed terrorist group was neutralized. The IDF also destroyed launchers used in earlier attacks targeting the Yiftach area.
 - On November 2, following intense rocket and missile fire by Hezbollah, the Israeli Air Force launched its most significant counterattack to prevent further assaults on Israeli civilians.
 - November 3 saw an IDF soldier moderately injured, and a reservist slightly hurt due to an unmanned aircraft strike at an IDF post in the Mount Dov area.
 - Hezbollah intensified its attacks on November 4 and 5, expanding to new civilian targets within Israel, triggering emergency alarms in northern townships.
 - From November 6 to 7, Hezbollah continued its offensive, increasing the scope to include Israeli and Arab townships, launching hundreds of missiles.
 - On November 9, terrorists fired at an IDF post in Metula, and Hezbollah launched mortars and anti-tank missiles into Israel. The IDF retaliated by striking the launcher responsible for these attacks.
 - Between November 10 and 12, Hezbollah extended its missile attacks to more northern townships, endangering over a million Israelis, including Jews, Muslims, and Christians.
 - On November 13, 18 anti-aircraft missiles were launched from Lebanon towards Al-Armasha in Upper Galilee, home to Muslim Bedouin Israelis. The IDF responded with artillery fire targeting the attack sources.
 - From November 14 to 17, IDF warplanes targeted Hezbollah infrastructure in Lebanon, including missile launchers. An IDF tank also engaged a terrorist squad launching anti-tank missiles from Lebanon.
 - On November 18, the IDF faced multiple attacks from Lebanon and detected hostile aircraft infiltration. In response, IDF tanks and aircraft targeted Hezbollah observation posts. On November 19, interceptors were launched against incoming hostile aircraft, protecting Israeli citizens.
 - On November 20, the IDF confirmed hits from hostile aircraft. On November 22, the IDF destroyed terrorist targets where Hezbollah had operated, using aircraft and artillery fire against a terrorist squad and Hezbollah military structures.