



Updated October 1, 2024

Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah: Conflict and Escalation

A day after Hamas (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, or FTO) led October 7, 2023, attacks against Israel that began their ongoing war, Lebanese Hezbollah (another FTO) started shooting rockets and missiles across Lebanon’s border into Israel in a show of solidarity with Hamas. Since then, Hezbollah and Israel have regularly exchanged fire across the border. Iran appears to regard Hezbollah as its most capable partner in its “axis of resistance” versus Israel. Debate persists about the degree to which Hezbollah acts independently or as Iran’s proxy. Amid fighting after October 7, some 60,000 Israeli and 95,000 Lebanese residents evacuated the border area, with displacement in Israel at least partly due to concerns about a possible October 7-style attack from Hezbollah.

Escalating Conflict

In July and August 2024, attacks by both sides escalated. A rocket attributed to Hezbollah killed 12 young people in the Golan Heights, Israel killed Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr in response, and the two sides engaged in a major exchange of fire. In September, a series of operations claimed by or attributed to Israel took a heavy toll on Hezbollah leadership and highlighted Israeli intelligence and military capabilities. On September 16, Israel’s cabinet added a goal of returning evacuated Israelis to its official war objectives. Operations since then include:

- The explosion of hundreds of electronic devices apparently used by Hezbollah members on September 17-18; those explosions killed dozens and wounded thousands (including some civilians), while injuring the Iranian ambassador to Lebanon.
- A September 20 airstrike in Beirut that killed Ibrahim Aqil, a commander of the group’s elite Radwan Force, and other senior leaders.
- Israeli airstrikes on hundreds of missiles, launchers, and other targets across Lebanon on September 23, which reportedly killed over 500 Lebanese, including civilians. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated Israel’s intent to “change the security balance” by “eliminating senior figures, terrorists and missiles.”

These and other attacks have displaced as many as one million Lebanese.

Then, on September 27, Israeli airstrikes in Beirut targeted Hezbollah’s headquarters, killing its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and other senior leaders. Nasrallah had led Hezbollah for 32 years, and had become one of the most prominent leaders in the Middle East in helping the group acquire significant military and political power in Lebanon while supporting Iran. His death raises questions about Hezbollah succession and capabilities and possible responses by Iran, Hezbollah, or other armed groups.

As of October 1, Israel’s military said it had begun “limited, localized, and targeted ground raids” into southern Lebanon against Hezbollah, with air and artillery support. An

unnamed Israeli official reportedly said that Israel does not intend to occupy southern Lebanon, but create a “security perimeter” for Lebanese or UN forces and facilitate the return home of Israeli evacuees. While supporting the dismantling of Hezbollah “attack infrastructure,” U.S. officials have reportedly urged Israel to avoid a major ground invasion, and warned that—as with previous Israeli operations in Lebanon in 1982 and 2006—conflict could become deadlier and more protracted than Israel anticipates.

Israel-Hezbollah: Selected Historical Events

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| 1982-1985 | Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon and related U.S. and French military involvement trigger resistance from some factions in Lebanon’s ongoing civil war. Elements from Lebanon’s Shia community—including some responsible for fatal attacks on U.S. and French installations—establish Hezbollah with help from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. |
| 1985 | Israeli military withdraws from central Lebanon, but maintains a zone of control in predominantly Shia-populated southern Lebanon with a Lebanese partner force. Hezbollah becomes the main node of resistance to the Israeli presence. |
| 1992-1994 | Hezbollah bombings of Israel’s embassy (1992) and a Jewish community center (1994) in Argentina kill 29 and 85 people, respectively. |
| 1996 | Hezbollah attacks on Israel and Israeli forces trigger the 17-day Israeli “Operation Grapes of Wrath,” which kills more than 200 Lebanese. |
| 2000 | Israel withdraws from southern Lebanon, leading Hezbollah to claim victory. Hezbollah maintains that Israel still occupies Lebanese territory in disputed parts of the tri-border (Israel-Lebanon-Syria) area. |
| 2006 | Israel and Hezbollah engage in a 34-day war after a fatal Hezbollah attack and hostage-taking on an Israeli military position. In the war, some 160 Israelis and 1,200 Lebanese are killed. After the war, UN Security Council Resolution 1701 calls for all non-Lebanese army forces to withdraw north of the Litani River; Hezbollah does not comply and starts to rearm. |
| 2011-Present | Hezbollah helps Iran defend regime of Bashar al Asad in the Syrian civil war. Territorial links from Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria facilitate greater Iranian weapons supply (including precision-guided missiles) to Hezbollah, provoking regular Israeli military strikes in Syria starting around 2012 to prevent or delay these transfers. |
| 2023-Present | Hezbollah commences cross-border fire with Israel after outbreak of Israel-Hamas war; as of early October 2024, around 1,500 Lebanese and over 30 Israelis have reportedly been killed in various attacks. |

Implications for Key Actors

Officials in **Israel** appear to be seeking to degrade Hezbollah's command structure, military capabilities, and perhaps will to fight. They may have judged inherent risks, including from a ground war or Hezbollah retaliatory strikes, to be preferable to a status quo that left Israeli evacuees displaced and Hezbollah expanding its arsenal. Israeli soldiers may encounter dangers and difficulties, and present threats to Lebanese civilians, while battling Hezbollah amid challenging terrain and the group's tunnels.

In addition to [declaring its readiness](#) to counter a ground invasion, **Hezbollah** may retain [some residual capacity](#)—to threaten strategic sites or population centers in Israel with missiles and drones. [Reports](#) suggest Hezbollah may have lost 20-25% of its rocket and missile arsenal (see **Figure 1**). The group has reportedly lost hundreds of fighters and most of its senior leaders over the past year in Israeli operations, and may have been infiltrated by Israeli intelligence. Hezbollah leaders have not departed from Nasrallah's insistence that Israel end fighting in Gaza before Hezbollah halts its fire against Israel. [Possible successors](#) to Nasrallah include the group's temporary acting leader Naim Qassem and senior figure Hashem Safieddine.

Figure 1. Hezbollah's Rocket and Missile Arsenal

Category	Model	Range	Diameter	Warheads	Arsenal
Short-Range Unguided Rockets	"Katyusha"	4-40 km	107-122 mm	6-20 kg high explosive (HE) or submunitions	
	Fajr-1 and Type 63 derivatives	8-10 km	107 mm	8 kg HE fragmentation	
	Burkan	10 km	—	100-500 kg HE	40,000-80,000
	Falaq-1	10-11 km	240 mm	50 kg HE	
	Falaq-2	10-11 km	333 mm	120 kg HE	
	Shahin-1	13 km	333 mm	190 kg HE	
Long-Range Unguided Rockets	Type 81	20.5 km	122 mm	39 submunitions	
	Fajr-3	43 km	240 mm	45 km HE	
	Fajr-5	75 km	333 mm	90 kg HE	
	Raad-2/Raad-3	60-70 km	220 mm	50 kg HE	60,000-80,000
	Uragan-type				
	Khalibar-1	100 km	302 mm	150 kg HE	
Short-Range Unguided Ballistic Missiles	Zelzal-1	125-180 km	610 mm	600 kg HE	
	Zelzal-2	210 km	610 mm	600 kg HE	20,000-40,000
	Fateh-110/M-800	250-300 km	610 mm	450-500 kg HE	
Intermediate-Range Unguided Ballistic Missiles	Scud-B/C/D	300-500 km	880 mm	600-985 kg HE	10-50
	Fateh-110/M-800	250-300 km	610 mm	450-500 kg HE	150-400
Short-Range Guided Ballistic Missiles					
Total					120,000-200,000

Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2024 (citing various sources).

Iran has pledged that Hezbollah would continue to lead Iran-backed resistance efforts, and said Iran would react to Nasrallah's killing in a time and manner it chooses. Previously, Iran promised to directly retaliate for the July 2024 killing (attributed to Israel) of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, but has not done so to date. Iranian leaders apparently face a challenge of how to support their partners in ongoing operations against Israel and other adversaries without initiating a broader war that could involve the United States and prove destabilizing to the regime. A weakening of Hezbollah, long considered to be Iran's closest and most powerful partner force, could affect Iranian leaders' decisions regarding efforts to increase deterrence by making changes to their nuclear program.

In **Lebanon**, a stalemate between Hezbollah, its political partners, and their rivals has blocked the election of a new president since 2022. It is unclear how, if at all, Nasrallah's death might affect Lebanese politics or power dynamics. The country now faces a humanitarian crisis on top of existing political and economic fragility.

Other Iran-backed groups in **Yemen (the Houthis)** and **Iraq** have shot projectiles at Israel, and Israel has struck Houthi targets in Yemen in response.

U.S. Policy and Possible Issues for Congress

Conflict escalation has uncertain implications for U.S. policy. In a statement after Nasrallah's death, President Joe Biden called it "a measure of justice," and pledged continued support for "Israel's right to defend itself against Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and any other Iranian-supported terrorist groups." He also ordered an enhanced U.S. military posture in the region to reduce the risk of broader war, and advocated de-escalation in Gaza and Lebanon through diplomatic means.

Diplomacy and U.S. support for Lebanese forces. U.S. officials continue to seek an arrangement that would keep Hezbollah back from the border so that Israeli evacuees can return, and reduce chances of a broader war. Media reports suggest that U.S.-French diplomatic proposals envision the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF, which Congress has supported for many years with \$100 million or more annually) and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) patrolling any Lebanese area from which Hezbollah withdraws. On September 30, Lebanon's caretaker prime minister indicated a willingness to have the LAF assume this role, though questions may remain about the LAF's ability to counter Hezbollah. In June, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu stated that any diplomatic arrangement "will include the physical distancing of Hezbollah from the border, and we will need to enforce it."

U.S.-Israel security cooperation and arms sales. For more than 50 years, the United States has been the main external source of political and material support for Israel's self-defense, with Congress enacting regular and supplemental appropriations (over \$12.6 billion in FY2024), and designating Israel as a major non-NATO ally. Since the outbreak of conflict in October 2023, Members of Congress have differed with one another and the Administration on the nature and timing of arms exports to Israel, with some Members advocating greater scrutiny or conditions, and others calling for the Administration to expedite Israeli requests given the country's security environment, in which threats could rapidly escalate.

Direct U.S. military involvement and protection of U.S. citizens. Various scenarios could lead to situations in which U.S. forces in the region authorized to assist with Israel's defense might become involved in conflict with Hezbollah or Iran, either within or outside of Israeli sovereign space. Some observers have commented on possible tension between Israel's insistence on maintaining independence of action and its appeal for U.S. help when it encounters certain threats. The two countries do not have a formal defense treaty. Congress might debate authorization of the use of military force and/or questions of strategy, operations, deployments, and appropriations, and whether U.S. actions to assist Israel's defense serve U.S. interests and comply with U.S. and international law. Additionally, reports indicate that the Administration has explored contingencies to evacuate tens of thousands of U.S. citizens in Lebanon. The State Department has urged U.S. citizens to depart Lebanon via commercial options while available.

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IF12770

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