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Is Hezbollah Preventing a Widening War?

Fearing a widening war, U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken and special envoy Amos Hochstein, have fanned out across the Middle East in a concentrated push to prevent it.

Perhaps the greatest fear is that, knowing they will not apply their leverage to stop a wider war once it starts, the United States is desperately trying to stop it before it does. The public is being prepared for such an outcome with the appearance of the ominously familiar words “unprovoked” and “the right to defend itself.”

The risk of a widening war comes from conflict with Yemen’s Houthi in the Red Sea and Lebanon’s Hezbollah on the northern border with Israel. The northern border has recently been brought to a boil by increased shelling into Israel and Lebanon and, especially, the killing of al-Arouri, the deputy chief of Hamas’ political wing, deep inside Lebanon in a suburb of Beirut. UN international law experts, including the UN special rapporteur on human rights and counterterrorism, Ben Saul, have [suggested](#) that the killing breaches international law and constitutes an extrajudicial killing. Hezbollah carried out its promise to [respond on the battlefield](#) by [firing 62 rockets](#) that [extensively damaged](#) northern Israel’s Mt. Meron strategic base, the Air Force’s northern air control unit. Israel then responded with the killing of Ali Hussein Burji, the commander of an aerial drone unit who Israel says orchestrated the attack on the Mt. Meron base. Hezbollah, however, [denies the Israeli claim](#) that the commander was killed, claiming that the person who was killed was an ordinary fighter.

The war on Israel’s border could widen in two waves. The first could see it flow over the border into a full-scale war with Hezbollah. The second could draw Iran into the war. While

the former is dangerous enough in the region, the latter risks international calamity as [U.S. officials fear](#) it could draw the United States into the war.

But the leader of Hezbollah, Hasan Nasrallah, has recently been careful to explain Hezbollah's operating procedure to the world in what may be an attempt to sever its actions from Iran, preventing responsibility from being attributed to Iran and preventing a wider war. Nasrallah has [explained](#) that Hezbollah operates "in a way that abides by the Lebanese national interests," not in the interests of another. He [said](#) that Hezbollah has avoided war so far because it is "taking into consideration the Lebanese situation and national interests." He then went on to say that journalists and politicians misunderstand the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah, explaining that Hezbollah makes its own decisions, calling it a "master" who makes its own "decisions independently" and "not servants who obey regulations blindly." This careful lecture could be an attempt to stop the trail of attribution of responsibility at Lebanon and prevent a wider war with Iran.

Hezbollah could also be trying to prevent the war from widening locally into Lebanon. Both Israel and Lebanon claim to prefer a diplomatic solution. But both say the other is making that hard, and both say that time is running out. "We prefer the path of an agreed-upon diplomatic settlement," Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has recently [said](#). But Israel won't go back "to the prewar status quo in which Hezbollah poses a direct and immediate military threat to its security along the Israel-Lebanon border," according to Israeli officials. Gallant says that "we are getting close to the point where the hourglass will turn over."

Lebanon's Prime Minister Najib Mikati has also [said](#) that Lebanon is ready for negotiations on "permanent stability" on the border with Israel and "for a lasting peaceful solution." But he claims that the response is an ongoing war in Gaza.

On January 7, *The Washington Post* [reported](#) that U.S. officials "are concerned" that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may be determined to "see an expanded fight in Lebanon." The possibility concerns Washington for two reasons. They are worried that Israel could fail in its objectives and that the war could be devastating. Secret assessments by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency conclude that "it will be difficult for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to succeed." Their resources would be "spread thin" fighting Hezbollah and Hamas at once. Compared to Hamas, Hezbollah is an extraordinarily well armed and well trained military.

They are also worried because war with Hezbollah could metastasize into war with Iran. If that happens, it "could compel the United States to respond militarily on Israel's behalf."

“Compel,” though, is a strong description as the United States and Israel are not allies with treaty obligations to come to each others defence.

U.S. officials told *The Washington Post* that Hezbollah “wants to avoid a major escalation” and that Nasrallah “is seeking to steer clear of a wider war.” On January 5, following a speech by Nasrallah, *The Washington Post* said that the Hezbollah leader “hint[ed] that Lebanon might be open to negotiations on border demarcation with Israel.” U.S. officials believe that hint could only become a reality with the cessation of the war in Gaza.

In his speech, Nasrallah said, “We are now faced with a historic opportunity to completely liberate every inch of our Lebanese land.” That sounds like a threat of war and not an openness to diplomacy. But his next line, “But, of course, any talks on this level, any negotiation, any discussion, will not take place or reach a result until after the cessation of hostilities in Gaza,” suggests that the opportunity to establish Lebanon’s borders could be realized through negotiations and not through a wider war.

The volatility on the Israel-Lebanon border presents the danger of a widening war, first to Lebanon, then, potentially, to Iran and beyond. There is the hopeful possibility that Hezbollah, while engaged in fighting with Israel, may be trying to prevent both ways of widening the war.

Ted Snider is a regular columnist on U.S. foreign policy and history at Antiwar.com and [The Libertarian Institute](http://TheLibertarianInstitute.com). He is also a frequent contributor to [Responsible Statecraft](http://ResponsibleStatecraft.com) and [The American Conservative](http://TheAmericanConservative.com) as well as other outlets. To support his work or for media or virtual presentation requests, contact him at tedsnider@bell.net.

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