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Preparing for a Middle East War

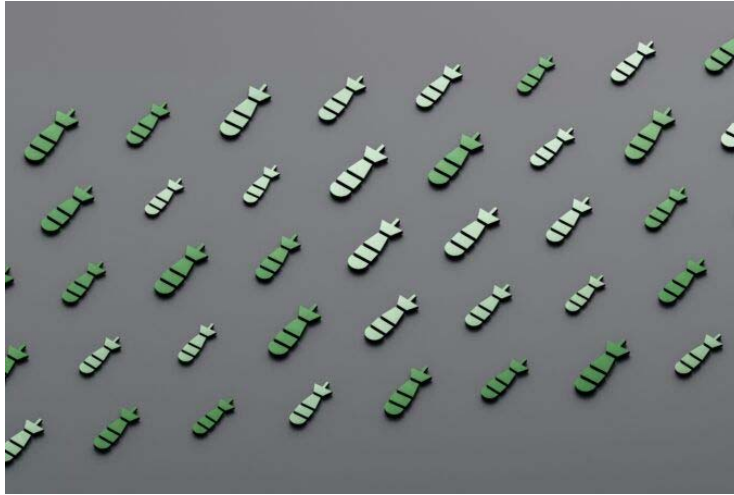


Image by Alex Shuper.

Can Israel Be Restrained?

Reports from the Middle East these days have two things in common: All the parties wish to avoid a war, yet all the movement is toward one, centered in Lebanon.

Israel's army is preparing to expand the war into Lebanon, where it would face a heavily armed foe very different from Hamas—many more fighters and a huge missile and drone arsenal that could overwhelm Israel's Iron Dome defenses.

But Israel may have the backing of the US in a war with Hezbollah, according to a CNN report. When top national security officials from both countries met in late June, CNN reports, "US officials made clear . . . that the Biden administration would offer Israel the security assistance it needs, . . . though the US would not deploy American troops to the ground in such a scenario."

Such thinking is deeply troubling. For while the Biden administration is anxious to avoid an Israel-Hezbollah war and has committed diplomatic resources to prevent one, Israel literally calls the shots.

Should the constant exchanges of fire across the Lebanon border escalate and the Israelis suffer significant casualties, the US would probably jump in with a great deal more aid. Biden, at the weakest point in his presidency, seems incapable of standing in Israel's way.

Already, one reliable report is that the hold the Biden administration put on delivery of 2000-pound bombs to Israel, which drew loud complaints from Netanyahu, is about to be lifted. Supposedly, Israel is wanting these bombs for possible use against Hezbollah. Whatever the case, lifting this minimal restraint shows that Israel still gets whatever it wants from the US.

And then there's Israeli politics and Netanyahu's ambitions. He's the ultimate political survivor, but can he get past the latest crisis—the Israeli supreme court's decision that the government must start recruiting ultra-religious young men for military service? Netanyahu's government depends on the support of the ultra-religious parties and the far-right members of his cabinet. Should either of these groups bolt, his leadership is in deep trouble.

As Ravit Hecht writes in Ha'aretz: “The two pillars upon which Netanyahu's political career rests – religious Zionism and the Haredim – are in a life-and-death conflict with one another, and feel mutually betrayed.” So far, Netanyahu's best answer has been more war.

Can Iran Be Restrained?

Iran, too, reportedly wants to avoid having to back Hezbollah in a full-fledged war, despite its recent warnings of an “obliterating war” if Israel launches a full-scale attack in Lebanon. Iran has plenty of reasons for not wanting a war: It will shortly elect a new president to replace the hard-liner Ebrahim Raisi, who was killed in a helicopter crash; its economy has a multitude of problems; and should war occur, its nuclear facilities, said by international inspectors to be expanding, would be fair game for Israel.

The turnout in the election, with only about 40 percent of eligible voters voting, was seen by some commentators as a rebuke of the regime. It was the lowest turnout since the 1979 revolution.

In the initial round, reformist lawmaker Masoud Pezeshkian won but failed to gain 50 percent of the vote over the hardline former nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili. A runoff July 5 seems likely, with Jalili favored to win because he can draw from another very conservative candidate who came in third.

A Jalili victory bodes ill for Iran's restraint in an Israel-Hezbollah conflict. He has a reputation for being strongly anti-Western and anti-Israel. He has long opposed a resumption of negotiations that might put the 2015 nuclear accord put back in place.

A face-off between Jalili and Netanyahu would be calamitous. Let's recall that in April, Iran attacked Israel directly for the first time. Imagine if Israel were to strike Iran's nuclear enrichment plants. Iran would have every incentive to complete a nuclear bomb program.

A Cease-fire in Gaza Is Crucial

The key to preventing an Israel-Hezbollah war is an Israel-Hamas cease-fire. Unless and until the Biden administration is willing to exert serious pressure on Netanyahu's government to accept a permanent cease-fire and bring the war with Hamas to an end, Hezbollah will have every incentive to make life very difficult for the Israeli Defense Forces.

And no one knows that better than IDF commanders, which is why they are arguing with Netanyahu behind the scenes for bringing the combat in Gaza to a close. But he won't, and it seems that once again he has trapped Biden into rejecting giving Israel an ultimatum.

An unnamed US defense department official says: "We have let Israel face zero consequences for crossing all of our red lines in Gaza so they are emboldened and know they will face no consequences for going into Lebanon, despite us saying, 'Don't go there.'"

Biden, says a State Department official, is "pushing to not engage [in a war] but our saying 'We will support Israel' I don't believe is helping."

Not helping is putting it mildly. US policy toward Israel amounts to a green light for a wider war.

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