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Israel vs Hezbollah: Strategic stakes and regional implications

With war looming on the horizon, Israel's potential conflict with Hezbollah is seen as a strategic move to address long-standing security concerns, with significant geopolitical implications involving the US, Iran, Russia, and other major powers raising the specter of a far-reaching regional crisis.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.

— Former US secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld

As [tensions escalate](#) between Hezbollah and Israel, analysts are meticulously wargaming potential conflict scenarios. For Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his religious-nationalist coalition, a confrontation with the Lebanese resistance movement is more than speculation – it is a strategic consideration. This coalition views a potential war as a means to address longstanding security concerns and strengthen its political position.

A key part of Tel Aviv’s strategic thinking is the hope that the US might be forced into taking a more active role in confronting Israel’s adversaries – Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran – thereby neutralizing threats that have persisted for decades. This concept of “clearing the decks” of regional enemies remains a central theme in Israeli strategic discussions.

Historical roots of Israel’s strategic confidence

For the occupation state, this potential conflict is a “war of choice” driven by historical and ethnonationalist motivations. But it is also premised on past Israeli military advantages that are long gone in today’s missile-laden West Asia.

The Six-Day War of 1967 fostered a belief in the invincibility of the Israeli military, the superiority of Zionism, and the manifest destiny of its ‘chosen people.’ It was with similar hubris that Adolf Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa against the Soviet Union in 1941. Fast forward eight decades, and today, Israelis are informing US officials “[that it can pull off a ‘blitzkrieg’](#)” in Lebanon.

In 1967, the psychological impact on neighboring Arab states was profound due to the decisive defeat of their armies. This sentiment persisted until 2006, when Lebanon’s Hezbollah emerged politically victorious, shattering the perception of Israeli invulnerability and altering regional power dynamics.

Further shaping Israeli delusions of military superiority is the ethnonationalist rhetoric prevalent in Tel Aviv’s policy decision-making circles, embodied by [extremist ministers](#) like Betzalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir, who have revived the ideologies of the once-banned [Meir Kahane](#). While a few sober military voices in Israel advocate for a diplomatic solution to the northern border crisis, hubris and ethnonationalism currently dominate the discourse.

Strategic imperatives for Hezbollah and Iran

Conversely, for Hezbollah and Iran, this conflict is a “war of necessity,” something neither can publicly admit nor provoke directly. Both have been marginalized and sanctioned by the US on Israel’s behalf, causing untold domestic pressures and economic hardships – an untenable situation that demands a direct challenge of Israeli policies.

But reversing sanctions cannot happen at the negotiating table. Israelis are arrogant and obstinate; they will not negotiate in good faith. Take, for example, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iran nuclear deal. When former US president Barack Obama finalized the agreement, Netanyahu whined that Israel needed “[compensation](#).” Obama offered Israel a military package, but as soon as he left office, Netanyahu, Jared Kushner, and AIPAC manipulated the “[very stable genius](#),” former president Donald Trump. JCPOA was annulled. The compensation package, by the by, was not returned to US taxpayers.

Iran–Hezbollah must drag Israel to the edge of the precipice. Tel Aviv must stare into the abyss and realize that with a gentle push by the region’s Resistance Axis, it will lie mangled at the bottom of the chasm. Iran–Hezbollah, however, cannot push it over the edge, as this could lead to a nuclear nightmare. Today, in its “war of choice,” Israel has already [hinted](#) at using “unprecedented” and “unspecified” weapons against Hezbollah, implying a possible nuclear threat.

The Axis must instead show Israel a path back from the edge: a treaty that settles outstanding concerns. Tehran offered Tel Aviv and Washington a “[Grand Bargain](#)” in 2003 but was rejected. A new grand bargain is indispensable for Israel and the Axis of Resistance, yet the *conditio sine qua non* for a lasting treaty is Israel’s military defeat by the Axis.

The threats and counter-threats are flying, each aiming to gain “leverage” and deterrence.

Earlier this month, Iranian foreign affairs adviser to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Kamal Kharrazi, said that were Israel to launch an all-out offensive against Hezbollah, the Islamic Republic and other factions of the Axis of Resistance would support Lebanon with “[all means](#)” necessary.

Iran has previously warned that it may be compelled to [revise its nuclear doctrine](#) in response to Israeli aggression. It is suspected that Iran may have already [crossed the nuclear threshold](#). Even without nuclear capabilities, Iran has the ballistic missile and warhead capabilities to destroy Tel Aviv, Haifa, and other major cities. Israel is a “one-bomb country”: it is minuscule, and its population is concentrated in a few central hubs. Iran and the Axis do not have any need for multiple nuclear warheads.

As General Hajizadah explained in a speech, the Khorramshahr missile can deliver 80 warheads. If the IRGC launched 100 missiles, that’s 8,000 warheads on major Israeli cities. Israel would be foolish to trust in its integrated air defense system after the IRGC’s successful [strikes](#) on 13 April.

2024 is not 2006

Comparing the potential 2024 conflict with the 2006 Israel–Hezbollah war is a popular frame of reference, but both sides have learned lessons since then. In particular, there have been significant advancements in [military technology and tactics](#) over the past 18 years.

Hezbollah has developed new tactics and weapons, such as the [Almas Anti-Tank Guided Missile](#) (ATGM), which has proven effective against Israeli military assets. Additionally, Hezbollah’s [air defense capabilities](#) have posed new challenges for Israeli drone offensives.

The Israeli air force ruled the skies in 2006, but whether it can do so in 2024 is unclear. Hezbollah has air defense capacity (such as the [Sayyad-2](#) medium-range surface-to-air missile). It is not known if it has newer models, like Iran’s Khordad-3. This could be a surprise.

Israeli intelligence assessments of Hezbollah’s capabilities are likely to be imprecise. Past successes against groups like the PLO and Black September are no longer relevant. Recent failures, such as Tel Aviv’s [inability to foresee](#) Hamas Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on 7 October, underscore the limitations of Israeli intelligence.

US involvement

This has been Israel’s objective since 9/11: have Americans fight Israel’s wars. Although Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Charles Brown stated that the US *may* be [unable](#) to assist Israel, this must not be taken as a serious military assessment. It is a political statement on behalf of the Biden Administration, which does not want to join a major war until after the 5 November election. Netanyahu, however, knows that Israel controls Congress and American media. Congressman Thomas Massie is the exception, among 435 Representatives and 100 Senators, who AIPAC has not bought. Once war begins, Israel’s minions in the White House, media, and Congress will campaign for US military participation. As Netanyahu said, “I know what America is. America is a thing you can move very easily; move it in the right direction.” He is correct.

If the US intervenes – a high-probability event – Hezbollah and Iran will (reluctantly) welcome it. For the Axis to secure a “Grand Bargain,” it must inflict catastrophic damage on US land-based and sea-based assets in West Asia. Washington will only abandon Israel if ships, bases, and hundreds (or thousands) of American lives are destroyed because of Israel.

Russia

Russia is a wildcard, a “known unknown.” The US security apparatus warring against Russia and supporting Israel is top-heavy with Zionists/neo-cons. Iran’s enemies and Israel’s enemies are nearly congruent: Victoria Kagan née Nuland; Kagan family (Robert, Fred, Kim, their [ISW](#)); Antony Blinken (grandson of a founder of Israel); Avril Haines (Director of

National Intelligence); deputy director CIA David Cohen, Alejandro Mayorkas (Secretary of DHS), and more. It behooves Russia to punish its tormentors by damaging the only country to which they are loyal: Israel.

Moscow has been chafing at US support for Ukraine. Elena Panina, Director of the Institute of International Political and Economic Strategies, wrote on her [Telegram channel](#) in December 2023, “The best option for Russia is to respond to America in a similar way: with a hybrid war far from its own borders. The most obvious at the moment is a proxy attack on American forces in the Middle East.” In May 2024, Putin said the same thing. Terror attacks in Belgorod and in Sevastopol on a religious holiday may tip the scales in favor of Iran, especially if the US jumps into the fray. Defeating the US will increase popular support for Russia among global Muslims and help eject the US from West Asia – a goal supported by Russia and China. Iran is “too big to fail”: Moscow has made military and economic investments and alliances with Tehran, particularly after the Ukraine War began, and is on the cusp of signing a new comprehensive cooperation agreement with Tehran. The Kremlin cannot allow Iran to be defeated and the republic to collapse. It will most likely provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance support through Russian satellites and aircraft in Syria. Russia allows IRGC to use its Humaymim/Khmeimim air base in Syria because IDF tries to prevent supplies from Iran from arriving at airports in Aleppo and Damascus. Russia could (if not already, given recent air traffic between Russia and the air base) deliver air defense batteries, missiles, and more for the Syrian Army and Hezbollah.

Unknown unknowns

The factors outlined above, along with China and North Korea’s investments in and relationships with Iran, complicate any predictions about the looming war between Israel and the Lebanese resistance. While their direct military participation is unlikely, these nuclear powers could supply Iran with essential weapons and ammunition. The “known unknowns,” a few of which are noted, are enough to complicate wargaming, but the “unknown unknowns” may render such scenarios moot.

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