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www.afgazad.com

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Mohamad Hasan Sweidan

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Israel's new quagmire: a ground invasion of Lebanon

The occupation army has twice been ejected from Lebanon by Hezbollah. Two decades later, it is eyeing yet another ground invasion of its northern neighbor, this time against a much more sophisticated adversary.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

On 26 September, the Israeli army announced the conclusion of a brigade exercise simulating a ground operation in Lebanon, several kilometers from the shared border. In the past two days, several Israeli military officials, including Chief of Staff Herzi Halevy and Northern

Commander Uri Gordin, have spoken about the occupation army's readiness to execute ground operations in Lebanon.

But how can Tel Aviv realistically conceive of launching ground troops into a country that has not once, but twice, managed to expel occupation forces, to engage in combat against an adversary - Lebanese resistance group Hezbollah - that is far better armed and organized than in years past?

Features of the Israeli strategy so far

Since the start of its recent escalation with Lebanon, Israel appears to be executing its war on five simultaneous tracks. First, it seeks to strike Hezbollah's command and control system, mainly through targeted assassinations against key resistance military leaders, the most recent target being drone unit commander Abu Saleh Sorour.

Second is to directly strike Hezbollah's military capabilities based on an existing bank of targets established by Tel Aviv: Last Monday, the Israelis announced that they had successfully struck [1,600 resistance military targets](#), including weapons depots, missile stores, and launching pads. Notably, they claimed the same kinds of successful strikes in the July 2006 war, which turned out to be grossly inaccurate.

Third, Israel aims to apply internal Lebanese pressure on Hezbollah by harming its constituents, supporters, and even detractors. Tel Aviv has intensified its bloody targeting of civilian populations and areas in the past two weeks, killing over 728 civilians, injuring thousands, and displacing nearly 390,000 people, according to official Lebanese government data.

Fourth, is an attempt to influence the broad, general Lebanese environment to turn against the resistance through systematic media campaigns - in cooperation with Lebanese media outlets and personalities who parrot Israel's intimidation narratives in order to tame and curb Hezbollah's actions. The fifth and final track, so far, is the growing threat and preparation for an Israeli ground invasion of Lebanon - albeit a limited one - with a goal to confirm Israeli field superiority by controlling Lebanese areas, even for short periods.

Hezbollah's reactions?

Naturally, the resistance intends to thwart Israel's strategies through a set of interconnected steps. After each assassination, Hezbollah confirms that its command and control system remains unaffected, then launches a controlled escalation to confirm its readiness in the face of enemy shocks. This was evident on 24 September, when Hezbollah launched a [300+ missile](#) strike the day after Israel's air campaign, essentially to confirm that its missile capabilities were locked and loaded, ready to go.

As in past Israeli confrontations with Hezbollah, the latter's support base remains largely consistent and supportive of the resistance's escalatory plans. Separating Hezbollah from its incubating environment is an Israeli strategy that has repeatedly failed, mainly because the resistance's rank and file originate from this very society.

Finally, Israel's goal of turning Lebanese public opinion against the resistance has not advanced, to date. Rather, Israeli aggressions have increased national cohesion, particularly after the occupation state's [pager terror attack](#), except in some limited cases.

The fifth track: ground invasion of Lebanon

In recent days, discussions about the possibility of an Israeli ground incursion into Lebanon have increased markedly. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has boasted that military operations against Lebanon will continue “at full strength to ensure Hezbollah is “significantly weakened,” and has rejected international calls for an immediate ceasefire.

The army's chief of staff also instructed Israeli forces to prepare for a possible ground attack for the purpose of establishing an Israeli buffer zone in southern Lebanon. Operationally, the occupation army is preparing for this possibility by running training drills and summoning [two reserve brigades](#) to the northern front.

According to Western and Israeli sources, there are several scenarios for a possible Israeli ground invasion of Lebanon, with each scenario offering different strategic objectives and risks:

First, is a limited ground action inside Lebanese territory with the aim of striking specific Hezbollah targets near the border, such as missile launch sites, or clearing an area to prevent the resistance from carrying out attacks on Israel. This would be a short-term action used to pressure the party in ceasefire negotiations. At this point, if Tel Aviv chooses the option of ground action, this will be the most likely scenario.

Second, is a limited ground incursion to push resistance forces to retreat from the border, specifically to reduce the range of anti-tank guided missiles that Hezbollah possesses. Israeli military commanders have indicated this option would serve to create a “security zone” extending 8 to 10 kilometers inside Lebanese territory. Notably, this scenario increases the likelihood of prolonged fighting and higher Israeli human and military losses.

Third, is a complete ground invasion of Lebanon - the most extreme scenario - with the goal of destroying Hezbollah's capabilities. Currently, this scenario remains highly unlikely due to its extremely high-risk profile - and given that Tel Aviv's near-term goal is not to destroy Hezbollah but rather to alter the security challenges on its border with Lebanon.

Attack where?

An Israeli ground attack - limited or expansive - is expected to focus on specific geographic areas in Lebanon, mainly the south, where Tel Aviv wants its Hezbollah-free buffer zone, or the Bekaa region that flanks the Syrian border. Israel envisages a scenario similar to the status quo in southern Lebanon in the 1990s, in which it maintained a security zone to limit Hezbollah's access to the border - before being purged by resistance commandos in 2000.

Conversely, a limited Israeli ground action in the Bekaa would be to impact and tighten Hezbollah's logistical and weapons supply routes from Syria, either by cutting off land routes between Lebanon and Syria or by cutting supply lines between the Bekaa and the south. The groundwork there will be a continuation of Israeli air strikes in the Bekaa, which targeted four main border crossings with Syria - Al-Arrayedh, Mutariba, Saleh, and Qabsh.

Most western analysts are not optimistic about the Israeli army succeeding in executing ground operations in Lebanon, given Hezbollah's enhanced and sophisticated capabilities to confront such an action. In a *Washington Post* article, writer Max Boot says this wild option "would be another quagmire for Israel." From Tel Aviv's perspective, the best-case scenario would be that its air campaign succeeds in halting the Lebanese support front for Gaza and allows displaced Israeli settlers to return to their homes in northern Israel.

But with no imminent resolution of its conflict with Lebanon likely - given Netanyahu's refusal to entertain a northern ceasefire, let alone a Gaza one - the possibility of an Israeli ground action in Lebanon increases, despite the extraordinary risks for the occupation army. From its recent battle history with Lebanon's resistance, in which Israel has lost face, Tel Aviv knows well that its air superiority is matched only by Hezbollah's ground advantage.

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