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Hezbollah and the 2023 Israeli War on Gaza

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Professor of Political Science, Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. Author of *Hezbollah: Socialisation and its Tragic Ironies*.

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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Hezbollah's silence about its politico-military intentions in the ongoing war in Gaza has disappointed the movement's supporters, irritated its enemies, and kept observers wondering. The question on whether the Islamist movement will intervene more directly in the war has been heavily woven into analyses of the current crisis. But the exercise of politico-military restraint is not strange to Hezbollah.¹ Since its birth in 1982, the movement has shown a remarkable capacity to carefully calibrate its responses to emerging threats. How has Hezbollah approached this war? What are its motives? Will it widen the scope of this war? Though no one can claim to have conclusive answers to these questions, as I demonstrate below, Hezbollah's actions are shaped by Lebanese limitations, its organic ties to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and external constraints imposed by its enemies.

The Resistance Axis and 7 October

On 7 October Hamas Movement struck Israel through an unprecedented air, land, and sea attack, killing 1,400 Israelis and foreign nationals. The attack caught Israel and the world by surprise. It is uncertain if Hezbollah was aware of the sophisticatedly prepared attack or of its timing, which came exactly 50 years after the October War of 1973 when Egypt and Syria surprised Israel. What is more certain is that Hezbollah did not participate directly in the attack, which suggests that it did not intend to start a war with Israel on this particular occasion. It is, however, highly plausible that Iran and Hezbollah – who support Hamas and Islamic Jihad as key members of the Resistance Axis – agreed on the strategic necessity for the attack and in this particular time.

Hamas and Hezbollah have common though not necessarily identical strategic perceptions and goals.² They both share an Islamist ideology, despite their different sectarian affiliations. Both armed movements have prioritised resistance to the Israeli occupation of their territories and identified the liberation of Palestine as their strategic goal. But divisions have also shaped the relations that bind the two actors. Envisioning the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in the Arab world, Hamas supported the popular uprising in Syria. To the contrary, Hezbollah perceived the fall of Bashar Assad's regime as a strategic threat to the Resistance Axis and intervened militarily in Syria to support him.³ This strategic divergence divided the alliance until relations began to thaw in 2018. By 2018, the Muslim Brotherhood's hope to capture power in the Arab world had faltered. Hamas, which has been demonised in several Arab countries, gradually began to slide back into the Resistance Axis.

Hamas's return to the Resistance Axis was shaped by developments in Palestine/Israel and in the region. Several wars between Hamas and Israel (2009, 2014, 2020, 2021) had failed to break the blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel. Hoping to break its regional isolation, in 2017, Hamas amended its founding charter and announced that it would accept the two-state solution and a Palestinian state according to the 1967 borders. But the prospects of a two-state solution had eroded. Israel's

1 Adham Saouli, "Hizbullah in the Civilising Process: Anarchy, Self-restraint and Violence," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 5 (2011), pp. 925 - 942.

2 Adham Saouli, "Hizbullah, Hamas, and the Arab Uprisings: Structures, Threats, and Opportunities," *Orient*, vol. 54, no. 2 (2013), pp. 37 - 43.

3 Raymond Hinnebusch & Adham Saouli (eds.), *The War for Syria Regional and International Dimensions of the Syrian Uprising* (UK: Routledge, 2019).



continued blockade of Gaza, its unrelenting expansion of settlements in the West Bank, its deepening control over Jerusalem (the US recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017)⁴ as well as increasing attacks on Al-Aqsa Mosque and the normalisation of several Arab states (UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and potentially Saudi Arabia) with Israel signalled what many Palestinians believed is the ‘liquidation’ of the Palestinian cause. The Hamas attack, which the movement dubbed *Toufan Al-Aqsa*, or Al-Aqsa Flood and which follows previous episodes of Palestinian revolts against attempts to suppress the Palestinian cause (1987 and 2000 intifadas), aimed to disrupt the current status-quo. And that it did.

Following the 7 October attack, Israel swiftly launched its ongoing bloody campaign against Gaza. Israeli airstrikes have targeted civilian infrastructure, including whole neighbourhoods, hospitals, universities, mosques, churches, and refugee camps. It has cut water, electricity, food, and medical supplies to the tiny enclave that hosts around 2.3 million people. At the time of writing the unimaginable death toll had reached 8,796, including 3,648 children,⁵ a number that is rapidly rising. The campaign, which was accompanied by dehumanising discourse spouted by Israeli officials (Israel’s minister of defence claiming that Israel is fighting ‘human animals’ is but one example),⁶ and which has aimed to ethnically cleanse north Gaza of its 1 million inhabitants, amounts to a war crime that can only be described as genocide.

The US, UK, and other European countries have emphasised Israel’s ‘right to defend itself’ and, despite the ongoing massacre in Gaza, key members of the western alliance have refused to call for a ceasefire. Fearing that Hezbollah and Iran might capitalise on the situation and join the war, President Joe Biden visited Israel to reassure it and deter common enemies. The US has also dispatched USS Gerald R. Ford, a carrier of ‘more than 75 aircraft and electromagnetic launch gear’ which carries ‘five destroyers with Aegis air-defence radars and missile interceptors’ to the eastern Mediterranean and a similar one, USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, to the Gulf. It will supplement its 30,000 military personnel with 2,000 marines.⁷ Israel, supported by the US, has identified the defeating and uprooting Hamas as its main goal, making the difficult choice of a ground invasion or long-term military blockade of Gaza very likely.

Restraint and Deterrence

Both goals would be very difficult for Hezbollah and the Resistance Axis to accept. Despite its promotion of the principle of *tawheed al-jabahat*,⁸ or the unifying of fronts (Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen), in its struggle against Israel, Hezbollah did not want a war at this time.

⁴ “Trump Recognizes Jerusalem as Israel’s Capital, Reversing Longtime U.S. Policy,” *Reuters*, 6/12/2017, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/32a29>

⁵ Child Casualties in Gaza a ‘Stain on our Conscience’: UNICEF,” *Aljazeera*, 25/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/p9i0m>

⁶ Israeli Defense Minister Announces Siege on Gaza to Fight ‘Human Animals,’” *Huffpost*, 9/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/2xra4>

⁷ “The Three Steps on America’s Ladder of Military Escalation,” *The Economist*, 25/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/4koye3>

⁸ “Will Israel face the ‘Great War’ on several fronts?,” *BBC Arabic*, 11/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/gvt3j>



The movement, and very likely Hamas, hoped that the October 7 attack would mobilise forces and unify fronts *within* Palestine, namely the West Bank. This did not materialise. And Hezbollah's vision of the "great war", what some of its pundits call *al-Munazala al-Kubra* in Arabic, has not matured yet. Hezbollah faces several constraints.

Domestically, Hezbollah faces pressure from its rivals and (probably) its allies who are not keen on drawing Lebanon into another potentially destructive war. Lebanon's economy is in a dire state following the popular uprising of October 2019. Its banking system is on the verge of collapse. High unemployment, poverty, and a Syrian refugee crisis have deepened the crisis. Its political system is in a state of paralysis; the country is currently run by a care-taker government and has failed to elect a new president since October 2022. Another pressure on Hezbollah is that a full-fledged war in would create a refugee problem for many Lebanese southerners who may have to flee to other, and probably less hospitable, areas of Lebanon. Neighbouring Syria, which has its own economic and political crises following a decade of war and destruction, is unlikely to offer a safe zone to which refugees can flee.

Regionally, the mobilisation of US forces acts as a deterrent. A choice to enter into a war with Israel and the US is not one that Hezbollah can take on its own; the decision at this level and scale is taken in Iran, by the Supreme Leader, Imam Khamenei. The decision for such a war, which will likely be long and destructive and involve war of attrition against US and western targets in the region, has not been taken yet. What will determine if Iran, Hezbollah, and their allies in the region will wage such a war are developments on the ground in Gaza. Though neither Hezbollah nor Iran have indicated clearly what they consider to be their red line, they have hinted that a full-fledged invasion that may lead to Hamas's total defeat would trigger a region-wide war. Towards the end of her visit to Lebanon, French minister for foreign affairs urged for Hezbollah to avoid this possibility.⁹

It is unlikely that Iran and Hezbollah would tolerate the defeat of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza for these movements are the only strategic allies they have in the occupied Palestinian territories.¹⁰ Such a scenario would diminish Iran/Hezbollah's strategic influence and their identity and reputation as members of the "resistance alliance" in the region. Hezbollah's legitimacy, which was damaged in the Arab world due to its support of Bashar Assad's bloody clampdown of the Syrian uprising, will further erode.¹¹

As such, Hezbollah is facing a difficult dilemma: widen the scope of the war and face the potential domestic and regional consequences or avoid the war and face Hamas's defeat and the erosion of the legitimacy and strategic influence of the Resistance Axis. This dilemma helps explain Hezbollah's behaviour in the war until this moment.

⁹ "The French Foreign Minister is in Lebanon...an attempt to keep Hezbollah out of the conflict," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 16/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/gm1si>

¹⁰ "Hezbollah confirms its readiness... exchanges of bombardment on both sides of Lebanon's southern border," *Al-Araby*, 21/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/3243w>

¹¹ Adham Saouli, *Hezbollah Socialisation and its Tragic Ironies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

To overcome the dilemma, Hezbollah has, for now, opted for the middle-range option: neither waging a full-fledged war nor keeping to the sidelines. It has been engaging in a war with Israel that is confined to around 5 kilometres on the Lebanese-Israel border. This has several aims. First, it keeps Israel alarmed and may contribute to deter a ground invasion whilst also relieving Hamas in Gaza.¹² Second, Hezbollah has been using this confrontation to flex its muscles, by using precision guided missiles; opening the front to other armed groups (such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and al-Fajr) to launch attacks on Israel; and psychological warfare. Regionally, Iran's allies in Iraq and Syria have targeted US troops 13 times.¹³ Iran's backed Houthis in Yemen have also launched a missile presumably targeting Israel which was intercepted by the US.¹⁴ Thirdly, Hezbollah is using the confined confrontation at the border to psychologically prepare the Lebanese for a possible war. Lastly, like the US, Hezbollah is using the time to set the stage for a regional war should that become necessary.

The International Relations of the 2023 War

It remains to be seen if such a war will take place. In its four-decade history, Hezbollah has managed to transform threats to its survival to advance its strategic goals, one of which is to liberate Palestine and weaken US influence in the region.¹⁵ Will the current conflict offer Hezbollah and Iran the opportunity to wage a long-term goal against Israel and the US in the region? Even if Hezbollah did not want a war, would the current situation push it towards a wider regional war?

Since it began its confrontation with Israel, Hezbollah has lost around 47 fighters,¹⁶ suggesting that the US intelligence-gathering through USS Gerald R. Ford that are then 'relayed to the Pentagon, the Israel Defense Forces and, perhaps, Arab allies' is having an effect. The U.S. has sent two more Iron Dome batteries to Israel, which could challenge Hezbollah's missiles and if that fails 'might attack Hezbollah positions in Lebanon'.¹⁷ Will these developments deter or encourage Hezbollah and Iran to widen the war against Israel and the US? It is unlikely that the US and Iran want to go that far; however, if Hamas's or Hezbollah's survival is at stake and, consequently, if Iran's influence in the region and its own Islamic regime is threatened, then regional conflagration will be likely.

The US and western responses have signalled that the ongoing war will not follow the pattern of previous ones, when Israel would wage an air campaign against civilian and military targets in Gaza until a point when the death toll is too high for western governments and societies to justify after which a ceasefire can be reached. The US is locating this war in broader international dynamics. President Biden has linked this war to the one in Ukraine, the issue of Taiwan, and the threat of Iran:

12 "Hezbollah confirms its readiness... exchanges of bombardment on both sides of Lebanon's southern border."

13 "The Three Steps on America's Ladder of Military Escalation," *The Economist*, 25/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/4koye3>

14 Since this article was written, the Houthis have sent further rockets and declared war on Israel

15 Saouli, *Hezbollah Socialisation and its Tragic Ironies*.

16 The Three Steps on America's Ladder of Military Escalation."

17 "Russia Says US Military Reinforcements in Mideast Risk 'Escalation!'" *The New Arab*, 23/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/6bglh>



'we cannot let terrorists and tyrants like Putin win', he said. The US, he is arguing, cannot afford 'to walk away from Ukraine' or 'turn our backs on Israel'. If it does, it will send the wrong signals to allies, including Taiwan, and enemies. Biden, Israel, and their Arab allies might perceive the removal of the obstacle of Hamas as an opportunity to make the India-Middle East-Europe rail corridor a reality and to create what Biden calls 'a better future for the Middle East'.

As such, the US will need to bolster its power in the region, support Israel to its defeat of Hamas, and deter Hezbollah and Iran. But this might threaten Iran, Russia, and China's interest in the region. Iran and Russia have already expressed their concerns.¹⁸ If the US and Israel are not careful in their next steps in Gaza, then the likelihood of war will be greater. Embroiled in the Ukraine war, Russia will be glad to see the US bogged down in an attrition war in the Middle East. Equally, China, concerned about Taiwan, will want to derail the India-Europe corridor, and exhaust the US and its allies in another war in the region.

These are critical moments in the history of the Middle East and the world. It will take a lot of wisdom to prevent a regional or even international war. Hezbollah's actions in the coming weeks or months will be determined by how Iran and the international rivals will play out this game.

¹⁸ "Russia Says US Military Reinforcements in Mideast Risk 'Escalation!'" *The New Arab*, 23/10/2023, accessed on 31/10/2023, at: <https://n9.cl/6bglh>