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Middle East

# Israel, Not Iran or Hezbollah, Wants a Wider War

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**Having painted itself into a corner by launching a war that has killed 40,000 Palestinians and failed to defeat Hamas, Israel has doubled down, provoking a wider war with Iran and Hezbollah to bring in the US against enemies it cannot vanquish alone.**

Within hours, Israel assassinated the political leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, and a senior military commander of Hezbollah, Fuad Shokr. That these executions, which took place on July 30 and 31, happened in Tehran and southern Beirut respectively signal Israel's willingness to violate Iranian and Lebanese sovereignty and provoke both actors in pursuit of its strategic aims, even if doing so risks wider war. Israel's attack was the second on Beirut's southern suburbs since October 7, following the assassination of Saleh al-Aroui, deputy chief of Hamas's political bureau. Despite this, Hezbollah has exercised restraint, evidenced in its avoidance of attacks on Israeli cities or civilians.

These assassinations also came a few days after an Israeli attack on Yemen's Hodeidah port that killed nine in retaliation for a drone strike launched by the Houthis, a Yemeni political movement allied to Tehran, that killed an Israeli in Tel Aviv. The Houthis, who continue to halt and seize ships passing through the Gulf of Aden, have threatened further attacks in response to the Israeli strike.

Accordingly, the G7 ministerial meeting held on August 4 expressed fears of "a regionalization of the crisis, starting with Lebanon" and called on all parties to avoid escalation. The United States, France, Great Britain, and other Western states have even called on their nationals to leave Lebanon as quickly as possible, and in Lebanon, outgoing prime minister Najib Mikati and several ministers of his cabinet held a series of meetings to assess the state of preparedness of the administrations in the event of a widening war.

These regional tensions are growing against the backdrop of Israel's genocidal war, which has claimed the lives of more than forty thousand Palestinians. Meanwhile the negotiations for a final cease-fire between Israel and Hamas have been postponed to August 15. After the assassination of its chief negotiator, Haniyeh, Hamas is rightly suspicious of the idea that Israel has any intention to enter talks in good faith. The group has insisted that it will not participate in talks unless Israel halts its operations in Gaza and has called for a return to the cease-fire deal proposed by President Joe Biden on July 2.

Israeli recalcitrance has only increased the risk of a wider war. However, the parties that would be implicated in such a confrontation are each guided by their own strategic concerns.

## Hezbollah: What Reaction?

Officials from Iran and Hezbollah have vowed to avenge the deaths of Haniyeh and Shokr. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, threatened Israel with "severe punishment," and Hezbollah's leaders made similar pronouncements. On its side, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his country was at a "very high level" of preparedness for any scenario, "both defensive and offensive."

The United States, for its part, has responded by committing to increasing its presence in the region so as to more easily offer support to its main ally. This includes more warships, "carrying ballistic missile defense" and "an additional squadron of combat aircraft." US officials have also announced that the USS Abraham Lincoln and the

USS Georgia, an aircraft carrier and submarine, will be dispatched to the region to bolster Israeli defenses.

Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, declared in a speech on August 7, a week after the assassination of Shokr, that the response to the aggression against Beirut's southern suburbs will surely come and will be harsher than the responses to past assassinations. He made clear that while the party will act "with courage," its actions will not be impulsive. Fear that a miscalculated response will provide Israel with a pretext for broadening the war explains Hezbollah's caution.

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Even prior to the assassination of Shokr, the Israeli occupation forces had been continually escalating their military actions against Lebanon throughout its territory and not limited to the border regions. It has killed more than four hundred of Hezbollah's soldiers in Lebanon and Syria, including many senior military officers, since October 7. Israeli attacks have also displaced more than one hundred thousand civilians and destroyed infrastructure and large areas of farmland along the southern border. Israel's objective is to force the party to withdraw its forces north of the Litani River, in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701 which ended Israel's 2006 War on Lebanon, without withdrawing its own forces from the border region or forswearing launching future attacks on Lebanon.

According to Nasrallah, it is "Israelis who have chosen to escalate the confrontation with Lebanon and Iran." As well as being grounded in the facts, statements such as these are intended as responses to the hostility of large sectors of Lebanon's population and sections of its political parties that accuse Hezbollah of taking the risk of setting the country ablaze. Although Nasrallah stated "sometimes the Palestinians [have] asked us to increase the pressure on Israel and intensify our attacks. We have always taken into consideration the internal situation [in Lebanon]," the aim of Hezbollah is not "to annihilate Israel now, but to prevent it from emerging victorious" by pursuing a "unity of fronts" strategy".

While Hezbollah's military capacities have increased significantly since the 2006 war, this has not coincided with a growth in popular support. In Lebanon, the party has become increasingly politically and socially isolated outside the Shia population. While 62 percent of Israelis support a "full force" attack on Lebanon, only 30 percent of Lebanese say they trust Hezbollah, despite the fact the vast majority of the population would describe Israel's war as genocidal. A recent survey showed that support for Hezbollah outside the Shia community is at one of the lowest points in its history.

The party has however succeeded in preventing sectarian tensions from flaring up in Lebanon, even after the bombing that killed twelve children in Majdal Shams, a town on the Syrian Golan Heights occupied by Israel and inhabited by a Syrian Druze population. Hezbollah has denied any responsibility or involvement in the attack, which Israel blames on it. The vast majority of the Syrian population in the occupied Golan heights have refused Israeli citizenship and suffers from numerous discriminations by the Israeli state. Weapons experts told Associated Press that evidence suggests a rocket from Lebanon, potentially fired accidentally, was responsible for the strike, which Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense mechanism detected but did not intercept. Regardless of the cause of the deaths, Israeli officials have instrumentalized this event to target the southern suburbs of Beirut and stoke sectarian tensions within Lebanon.

Preventing sectarian tensions from rising dramatically on the national scene has been one of Hezbollah's main achievements since Israel launched its genocidal assault on Gaza. The party has enacted a rapprochement with sectors of the Lebanese Sunni population, the vast majority of whom are supportive of the Palestinians. Since October 7, sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shias in Lebanon have reduced considerably. Moreover, Jama'ah

al-Islamiya (also known as the Muslim Brotherhood's Movement in Lebanon) has, under the umbrella of Hezbollah's political influence, participated in some military actions against Israeli occupation forces at the Lebanese border, while more and more Sunni sheikhs have openly supported the "resistance" during their Friday sermons, including senior figures from Dar al-Fatwa, the official body overseeing the religious affairs of Lebanon's Sunnis, which in the past had vehemently opposed Hezbollah.

Hezbollah will no doubt respond to the Israeli bombing of Beirut. But because of the delicate balance of sectarian interests within the country protecting its own civilians and military infrastructures, particularly the ones (re)built after the 2006 war, and because of the catastrophic consequences of a war for the Lebanese population, it will seek to avoid causing a wider conflagration.

## Iran

Hezbollah's main supporter, Iran, shares a similar position to that of the Lebanese party. It is also attempting to avoid a regional war, despite the assassination of Palestinian leader Haniyeh on its territory and numerous other Israeli attacks against Iranian assets across the region. Since October 7, Israel has killed more than twenty senior officials of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). But much like Hezbollah, Tehran moderated its responses.

Iranian Operation True Promise in April 2024, which fired more than three hundred drones and missiles on Israel, was essentially symbolic, seeking to avoid causing real damage. Iran launched the operation in retaliation for Israel's strike against the Iranian embassy annex in Damascus on April 1, which killed sixteen people, including seven members of the IRGC and the commander of the al-Quds force for the Levant, Mohammad Reza Zahedi.

The strike marked Iran's first direct attack on Israel since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. But Tehran gave its allies and neighboring countries seventy-two-hours' notice so that they would have time to protect their airspace, according to the country's then foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who died, alongside President Ebrahim Raisi, in a plane crash on May 19. Forewarned, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) played an important role in helping Israel to neutralize the attack by sharing information with the United States and Israel. The Saudi and Iraqi governments also authorized US Air Force tanker planes to remain in their airspace to support US and allied patrols during the operation.

In addition, Iran chose to attack Israel with drones, which took hours to reach their destination and were easily identified and shot down, and did not call on its allies (notably Hezbollah) to join in its attack. After the operation, Iran's Supreme National Security Council stated that no further military action was currently planned and that it considered "the matter closed." In other words, Iran carried out this strike principally to save face and deter Israel from following up on its attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus. In doing so, the Iranian regime clearly signaled that it wanted to avoid a regional war with Israel and the United States, which would have come to the aid of Tel Aviv. Iran did this primarily to protect itself and its networks of influence in the region.

Iran's strategic aims, particularly since October 7, have been to improve its political standing in the region so as to be in the best position for future negotiation with the US, and to guarantee its political and security interests. A full-scale Israeli attack on Lebanon, which would be particularly disastrous for this latter, would weaken Hezbollah and undermine Tehran's geopolitical influence in the region. It would also force Tehran and its allies to act in support of Hezbollah.

Iran's ruling class is therefore most urgently concerned with analyzing the different potential scenarios that would follow from a response to Israel's assassination. These include retaliations carried out only by Tehran, or a

coordinated response by the pro-Iranian regional network of influence with Lebanese, Iraqi, and Yemen allies of Iran being involved. The timing of such an operation is still being discussed. More recently, several Iranian officials stated that only a cease-fire deal in Gaza could stay the Islamic Republic's hand from responding to Israel.

Tehran had warned in April that any new Israeli aggression against its territory or interests would result in a direct, violent, and rapid response. Then the Islamic Republic suggested that it would not resort to strategic patience, deliberating over the most appropriate place and time to retaliate. In the face of Israeli aggression, however, Iran has sought to find the right balance when calculating its own response.

## Israel: The Main Actor Creating Instability and Insecurity in the Region

Israeli officials have threatened Hezbollah and Iran on numerous occasions with a wider war or military offensive. Israeli defense minister Yoav Gallant responded to Nasrallah's speech by stating that "it is possible that this battle will escalate into war. This is realistic, not theoretical."

Rather than being fearful of this possibility, Netanyahu's government has instead pushed Tehran and Hezbollah to escalate and expand the war. It is only the latter's restraint in the face of intense pressure that has rendered Israel's actions unsuccessful. Tel Aviv, recognizing its strategic importance to America, has attempted to drag the United States into the regional war that Washington has been trying to prevent and has thus far not given Israel the green light to conduct. But without US support, Israel's ability to deal with a regional confrontation would be greatly diminished.

US officials have used diplomatic channels and the support of its allies in the Middle East to pressure Iran and Hezbollah to consider very carefully their reactions. The United States has warned the party that a massive retaliation would only inflame tensions and risk leading to a direct confrontation between them and Israel, which would fight with the backing and support of Washington. In addition to this, US diplomats have made clear, through different intermediaries, that an Israeli response to any attacks from Iran or Hezbollah would be destructive for each country.

Despite nominally seeking to deescalate the situation, the US has in practice allowed Israel to act with impunity. It has provided Israel with all the military equipment it needs to carry out its genocidal war; occupy and colonize Palestinian lands; bomb Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria; conduct assassinations throughout the region; and escalate military operations against Iran. On August 13, the United States agreed to sell \$20 billion worth of arms to Israel. The bulk of this sum will go toward a contract for fifty F-15A fighter jets, scheduled to arrive in 2029 — a move that signals America's long-term commitment to Israel.

Stability within the region can, after October 7, no longer be attained without granting rights to the Palestinians. In the short term, this will mean a total cease-fire to stop Israel's genocidal war, the withdrawal of the Israeli occupation army from the Gaza Strip, the cessation of Israel's aggression in neighboring countries, including Lebanon, and a massive distribution of humanitarian aid to the Palestinians and others affected by Israel's aggression throughout the region. But in the long term, stability depends largely on ending Israeli colonization, occupation, and apartheid across Palestine.

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