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Deadly Hezbollah Attack May Spark Full-Scale War

Yoni Tobin
Policy Analyst

Hezbollah's July 27 attack which killed 12 civilians—all children and teenagers—was its deadliest attack in the current conflict. Characterized by Israel's foreign minister as having "crossed all red lines," the strike's tragic outcome raises the risk of further escalation, potentially sparking an all-out war. The United States must signal its ironclad support for Israel's self-defense and support its partner in compelling Hezbollah to end its war of choice, including by expediting vital munitions.

What Happened?

- On July 27, Hezbollah launched over 30 rockets from southern Lebanon into Israel. One of the rockets, an Iran-made Falaq rocket with an 115-pound warhead, struck a soccer field in the northern Israeli town of Majdal Shams, killing 12 people and injuring over 40 civilians.
  - » The rocket attack killed eight children aged 13 or younger and four teenagers between the ages of 15 and 16.
- The strike marked the deadliest attack on Israeli soil since October 7, prompting Israeli leaders to vow a strong response against Hezbollah.
  - » Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cut short his trip to the United States to convene Israel's security cabinet on July 28. The cabinet voted to authorize Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant to respond to the attack in a scale and timing of their choosing.
  - » Netanyahu vowed that Hezbollah would "pay a heavy price … one that it has not paid so far" for its attack on Majdal Shams, a majority-Druze community with a population of over 10,000. Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz told *Axios,* "the Hezbollah attack crossed all red lines and [Israel will respond] accordingly."
  - » On July 28, Israel targeted at least eight locations in Lebanon, including targets "deep inside Lebanese territory." These included sites near Tyre, some 16 miles inside Lebanon; in southern Lebanon's Kafr Kila, Rab al-Thalathine, Khiam, and Tayr Harfa, and; the Hezbollah stronghold of the Beqaa Valley, over 60 miles inside Lebanon.
    - – Given the relatively limited extent of these kinetic operations, Israel's main response to the attack is expected to come at a later time.
  - » According to Israel's *Haaretz* outlet, the spiritual leader of Israel's Druze community stated on July 28 that U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein told him Israel would be starting "an extensive operation" inside Lebanon.



Source: Israel Defense Forces

Why Is It Important?

- Hezbollah's attack, although it did not differ categorically from its previous rocket attacks, was escalatory in effect by yielding the deadliest-yet attack on Israeli soil since the war began. The Majdal Shams attack threatens to rapidly shift the gradually expanded fighting along the Israel-Lebanon border into a full-scale war, should Hezbollah choose to escalate in response to Israel's expected military operation.
- Hezbollah started a war against Israel on October 8, the day after Hamas's brutal assault. The Iran-backed Lebanese terrorist group has been waging a low-intensity conflict ever since, launching rockets, drones, and missiles at Israel on a daily basis.
  - » Since October 8, Hezbollah has launched over 6,270 projectiles at Israel, including roughly 400 drones and over 200 mortars in addition to over 5,200 rockets fired, according to JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker.
  - » Prior to Saturday, Hezbollah attacks had resulted in 34 casualties. But, more seriously, they forced some 80,000 Israelis to flee their homes along the northern border, destroyed hundreds of civilian buildings, and caused wildfires that burned hundreds of acres.
- The longer this conflict has gone on, the more brazen Hezbollah has become. Despite regular Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon responding to its attacks, Hezbollah has not only remained undeterred, but has increased its attacks over the last three months.
  - » In the last three months, Hezbollah has launched over 2,680 projectiles at Israel from Lebanon, according to JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker, compared to 3,590 in the first seven months of the war. That amounts to a 71 percent increase in the average daily fire against Israel.
  - » Although Hezbollah has paid a much steeper price than Israel in this conflict in terms of personnel—with over 350 of its commanders and fighters killed—it clearly believes that it

is gaining a greater strategic benefit by tying down significant Israeli military resources in the north and keeping Israeli civilians from their homes.

  - » Neither Hezbollah nor Iran wants a full-scale war, but they likely believe that Israel does not either. Thus, they design their attacks to remain below the threshold that they think would force Israel to commence such a conflict.
  - » The ongoing Hezbollah escalation suggests that it believes that Israel's threshold for war has actually risen. This might be due to recent actions and statements by the United States that suggest it would not support Israel in a full-scale war with Hezbollah.
    - In early May, President Joe Biden publicly announced that the United States would be withholding shipments of certain precision-guided munitions "to send a political message to Israel," according to a *POLITICO* article, creating perceptions of daylight between the two countries.
    - On June 24, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q. Brown stated that if a full-scale war broke out between Israel and Hezbollah, the United States may have difficulty helping protect Israel as it did during Iran's April 13-14 attack.

- The Majdal Shams attack underscores the dangers of the terror group's willingness and ability to inflict major damage on Israel's population centers, which Israeli leaders have categorized as untenable.
  - » The strike was carried out using the Iran-made Falaq-1 rocket with a 115-pound warhead. Hezbollah has now used the Falaq-1, which Hezbollah first launched at Israel in January, dozens of times to assail northern Israel's residential communities.
    - The Falaq-1 can travel up to approximately roughly six miles, a range encompassing the Israeli city of Kiryat Shmona—population of 22,000 before the war—and dozens of other communities near the border.
    - The Iran-backed terror group also possesses the Falaq-2 rocket, which reportedly has a warhead weighing over 280 pounds.
  - » Hezbollah's heavy rockets—though not the most sophisticated projectile in its arsenal—are nonetheless difficult to intercept and can, due to their large warheads, create a large blast radius on impact.
    - Intercepting rockets like the Falaq-1 has proven a challenge for Israel, given their high rate of speed, their short flight distance, and the topography of the mountainous border region, all of which complicate Iron Dome's lock-on and interception efforts.
  - » The terror group's use of the heavy Falaq-1 suggests it may be seeking to inflict significant casualties or property damage in furtherance of its aim to make northern Israel unlivable. These tactics may also be part of an effort to escalate to de-escalate—as JINSA has noted, Hezbollah is likely seeking "to deter Israel from inflicting further damage on Hezbollah."
- In order for Israel to restore deterrence and security, it may feel compelled to respond to the Majdal Shams attack in a manner qualitatively or quantitatively different from how it has retaliated against Hezbollah thus far in the war, potentially cascading to an all-out war.
  - » Israel has yet to identify a solution for the safe return of its residents to areas near the Lebanese border, short of full-scale war or a negotiated settlement. Absent one of these options, Hezbollah can threaten to perpetually carry out Majdal Shams-style attacks with the over 65,000 short-range rockets in its arsenal, according to JINSA data.

» Israel has, thus far, largely struck inside southern Lebanon throughout its campaign, but has sporadically launched strikes at targets in Hezbollah's longtime stronghold in central Lebanon's Beqaa Valley, some 62 miles inside Lebanon.

– On July 28, Israel struck several sites in southern Lebanon, including targets near the central Lebanese city of Tyre—over two-dozen miles inside Lebanon—and at least one site in the Beqaa Valley.

– Israel's strike in the Beqaa Valley may signal Israel's increased willingness to strike Hezbollah targets in the region, which, given its location near the Syrian border, has long been used for weapons smuggling and storage.

» Israel may also feel compelled to strike senior members of Hezbollah's leadership; strike sensitive sites in the Beirut area or elsewhere; or increase the volume of its airstrikes.

– *Axios*'s Barak Ravid reported on July 28 that U.S. officials cautioned Israel against striking Beirut due to projections that in response, "Hezbollah would respond by firing long-range missiles at Israel, which would likely lead to even further escalation."

– Israel has yet to target Beirut in the war. Beirut's international airport is a potential high-value target, widely suspected to be a hub for weapons transfers to Hezbollah. Israel launched airstrikes against the airport during its 2006 war with Hezbollah, putting it out of commission.

– Israel could also choose to target air defense systems, radars, and command-and-control nodes across Lebanon.

» In such a scenario, Hezbollah may elect to escalate further by launching large barrages of long-range precision missiles into Israel, sparking an all-out war.

– Iran could, if it does not anticipate U.S. intervention, also simultaneously assail Israel by launching volumes of projectiles at Israel akin to its foiled April attack, along with potential involvement from Iraqi and Syrian proxies and the Iran-backed Houthis.

» Should the United States choose to establish a highly visible deterrent posture, such as re-stationing assets in the region, it could deter Hezbollah and Iran from escalating. The more the United States is viewed as willing to back Israel in a war with Hezbollah, the less likely full-scale war becomes.

- Likely, the Majdal Shams strike will further complicate protracted Western-brokered diplomatic negotiations to reach a negotiated settlement and prevent the situation from escalating into full-scale war.

» The negotiations, which have carried on for months and include French, Lebanese, and U.S. government officials, have yet to produce any framework for a deal. Talks have reportedly been stalled over Hezbollah's reticence to withdraw from border areas.

» Hezbollah's attack likely further impeded the talks' progress by causing even greater consternation among Israeli officials about any scenario—such as a poorly-enforced agreement—in which Hezbollah would maintain a presence near the border.

» In addition, the Biden administration's articulated fear of escalation and efforts to rapidly "defuse" the conflict may impel the United States to push for a rapid ceasefire with terms unfavorable to Israel, leading Hezbollah to dig in its heels and continue escalating.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States must expeditiously supply Israel with the weapon systems, including precision-guided munitions and other assets, needed to eliminate Hezbollah military assets in Lebanon and deter escalation.
  - » The hold-up of precision-guided munitions that Israel needs to successfully prosecute its campaign against Hezbollah has "immediate impacts on both Israel's material readiness and the perception of it by Israel's enemies," as JINSA has previously noted.
  - » As JINSA recently asserted, this holds particularly true given that Israel is currently waging "an unprecedented, prolonged, multifront, munitions-intensive conflict" across multiple theatres against Iran's "Ring of Fire" proxy network.
- The United States must stop signaling an overarching desire to avoid escalation between Hezbollah and Israel at any cost, a position which emboldens Hezbollah and its Iranian backers by creating dangerous perceptions of daylight between the United States and Israel.
  - » However, the inverse is also true. As JINSA Distinguished Fellow IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror recently said, "Hezbollah, for sure, will have less incentive to escalate the situation if Hezbollah knows for sure that Israel [would have full U.S. support] in a [full-scale war]."
  - » The United States projecting a unified front with Israel is a prerogative to changing Hezbollah's calculus. To be successful, U.S. efforts to de-escalate will require convincing Hezbollah it will pay a crippling price if it keeps attacking Israel.
    - – Recognizing this reality, U.S. envoy Amos Hochstein, lead U.S. negotiator in the talks, reportedly told Lebanese officials in June that if Hezbollah continued to stall negotiations and launch attacks against Israel, the United States would back a limited Israeli operation against it.
  - » As part of this effort, the United States should strongly consider temporarily redeploying guided-missile destroyers currently in the Gulf of Aden as part of the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group to the Eastern Mediterranean to bolster deterrence against Hezbollah.
- Instead, the United States must firmly back Israel, in both public statements and UN resolutions, in its self-defense actions against Hezbollah's acute and ongoing aggression.
  - » Where feasible, the United States should engage like-minded countries in diplomatic efforts to provide diplomatic cover for Israel's legitimate self-defense against Hezbollah.