

Israel's Coming Northern War: A U.S.-Israel Strategy to Defeat Hezbollah



Gemunder Center Staff

Michael Makovsky, PhD

President & CEO

John Hannah

Randi & Charles Wax Senior Fellow

Blaise Misztal

Vice President for Policy

Jonathan Ruhe

Director of Foreign Policy

Ari Cicurel

Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

Yoni Tobin

Policy Analyst

Nolan Judd

Executive Assistant to the President & CEO

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I. Executive Summary

Much of the world’s attention has focused on Gaza since Hamas’s savage invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023. But Hamas is only one part of the larger Iran-led threat that has been gathering for decades. At the center is Lebanese Hezbollah, whose rockets, drones, precision missiles, and battle-hardened fighters make it Iran’s most vital and formidable proxy, and one capable of far worse than what Hamas unleashed.

Combining these capabilities into persistent aerial barrages and the threat of a horrific ground invasion, Hezbollah’s unprovoked decision to launch a war of choice on October 8 poses existential threats that drive a war of necessity for Israel. Hezbollah jeopardizes Israel’s basic sovereignty and foundational purpose as a safe Jewish homeland by creating a de facto security zone inside Israel and forcing over 60,000 civilians to evacuate the north indefinitely. Its arsenals threaten all of Israel with unprecedented physical destruction, including as a shield and enabler for Iran’s near-imminent achievement of nuclear weapons capability. And, if Iran crosses this threshold, Hezbollah’s second-strike retaliatory capability becomes a first-strike offensive force overnight. Underneath it all, the events and aftermath of October 7 make painfully clear how Israel’s military and technological power cannot reliably deter Iran’s lesser proxies, let alone Hezbollah at the very heart of its expanding “ring of fire.”

A northern war, involving Israeli ground forces, is therefore almost inevitable. Israel would seek to remove Hezbollah forces from the border so that evacuated Israelis can return home; to severely weaken and reduce Hezbollah’s massive arsenal of missiles, rockets, and drones that threaten to rain down destruction on all of Israel; and to open the way for military action against Iran’s nuclear weapons program. Further Israeli tactical victories against Hezbollah, a Gaza ceasefire, or a U.S.-brokered deal for the Israel-Lebanon border will at best delay this reckoning—one that since October 8 is no longer a question of “if,” but “when” and “how.”

Indeed, U.S.-led attempts to thwart this looming conflict by preaching “de-escalation” only have the opposite effect, emboldening Iran and Hezbollah to act more aggressively and recklessly by leading them to believe that Israel will have to fight alone. Tellingly, Hezbollah’s strikes on Israel have only gotten larger and deadlier the longer American officials have stuck to this line. Instead of seeking vainly to avoid war at all costs, U.S. and Israeli interests are best served by neutralizing the Hezbollah threat as quickly and thoroughly as possible. To accomplish this, the United States should fully back Israel before, during, and after a northern war with unwavering diplomatic support and military assistance.

A. Hezbollah’s Threat of Unprecedented Conflict

In the near term, Israel seeks to push back Hezbollah’s forces at least 10 kilometers from the border (the “Blue Line”), prevent another October 7-like invasion, and stop the incessant projectile attacks on its north. Israeli ground forces might still need to clear out that buffer zone, which could trigger a major Israel-Hezbollah war involving Iran and engulfing the region.

But even if it might avert an escalatory spiral, stopping Hezbollah's ongoing attacks and pushing back its ground forces would not address the larger and immediate strategic threats to Israel and the region from Iran's axis. Hezbollah's capacity to impose catastrophic damage on Israel's homeland has become an untenable threat since the horrors of October 7. Additionally, Israel now knows it must severely degrade Hezbollah in large-scale operations, either before or during a military campaign to keep Iran from crossing the nuclear weapons threshold. Any hints of Hezbollah's growing desire for de-escalation reflect its overriding need to retain these strategic arsenals and forestall a major Israeli operation, rather than any actionable impulse to stop posing existential threats to Israel.

Regardless of how it starts, a full-fledged war with Hezbollah could be unlike any Israel has fought before, especially since it will be inflicted on a country worn down by the shock and trauma of October 7, the ensuing months of a grueling war in Gaza, and the abrupt displacement of tens of thousands of internal refugees.

In stark contrast to every other Israeli conflict since Iron Dome and other advanced defenses first came online in 2011, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) cannot protect the country's vital assets and population centers from Hezbollah's ability to sustain heavy projectile fire across all of Israel, with little warning or response time. Hezbollah will exploit Israel's profoundly limited strategic depth with precision projectile swarms against the small handful of airbases, air and missile defenses, and critical infrastructure like seaports, airports, basic services, and heavy industry upon which Israel depends for its basic societal and economic functioning.

This will send hundreds of thousands fleeing to bunkers, shelters, and open roads, leaving the majority of the populace without electricity, communications, and possibly water for weeks or more while first responders are overwhelmed with casualties, infrastructural damage, and disruptions to communications and transportation. It also will lay Israel's major urban areas open to pulverization by thousands of heavy unguided rockets and missiles that could brutally alter its skylines, obliterate entire city blocks, and exacerbate physical and psychological chaos nationwide.

These threats will be worsened as Hezbollah continues tightening its operational coordination with Iran and the rest of its proxies to better target all of Israel and further strain its defenses with projectile attacks from all directions. And though its combat effectiveness has suffered from IDF operations since October 8, Hezbollah's Radwan special forces still pose the greatest ground threat to Israel on both offense and defense, including the ability to launch combined-arms assaults into Israeli territory that would make October 7 pale in comparison.

B. U.S. Policy Recommendations

Given the costs and risks of addressing these profound challenges, Israel's decision-making and outlook closely intertwine with diplomatic and material support from its American partner. Yet Washington's and Tel Aviv's perceptions of the nature of this threat do not align fully, as seen most recently in comments by President Biden's envoy that intensified conflict with Hezbollah will not help return Israeli civilians to their homes in the north.¹ With the chances of conflict growing by the day, shrinking the amount of daylight between these two partners is more vital than ever. The United States cannot simply await events to spiral out of its or Israel's control, nor can it gain anything from

trying to “manage” such escalation by restraining itself or its partner. At this point, it is abundantly in America’s self-interest to ensure Israel can conduct the shortest and most decisive campaign possible—including by standing shoulder-to-shoulder with its partner in the preparation, outbreak, and course of this conflict.

i. Proactive Support for Israel’s Legitimate Self-Defense

Beginning now, the White House, Pentagon, State Department, and Congress should aim to coordinate their messaging, making crystal clear that Israel’s decision to address the Hezbollah threat is consistent with U.S. interests, and with repeated American declarations of “ironclad” support for Israel’s self-defense and regional stability against Iran-led threats. President Biden should reiterate his “don’t” red-line from October which, while successfully dissuading Hezbollah and Iran from all-out intervention at the time, has since lost some of its force after countless subsequent attacks against Israel and U.S. forces. More broadly, the most basic diplomatic imperative for American and Israeli officials is to work together and remove any daylight in the bilateral partnership, even amid political and strategic differences and uncertainties in Washington and Jerusalem.

In parallel, the United States must lead an effort to discredit Hezbollah’s theory of victory in a major conflict. For all the physical devastation Hezbollah can inflict on Israel, ultimately it will rely at least as heavily on exploiting disinformation to win in the court of public opinion and isolate Israel diplomatically before the IDF can fulfill its goals. American officials should immediately initiate a robust public diplomacy campaign detailing Hezbollah’s and Iran’s systematic violations of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701 since 2006, Hezbollah’s pervasive and illegal use of Lebanese civilian infrastructure to shield its arsenals, the international community’s unbroken failure to hold them accountable for these actions despite overwhelming evidence, Hezbollah’s war plans to target Israeli civilians, its unprovoked war of choice since October 8 to support Hamas’s ghastly attack, and its categorical refusal to contemplate a negotiated ceasefire ever since.

Long overdue in its own right, the United States and its European partners also must shine harsh light on Iran’s illegal nuclear weapons activities, the protection of which ultimately hinges on Hezbollah’s ability to terrorize Israeli civilians. To reinforce this message, Congress should pass a resolution signaling America’s deep support for Israel’s right to act in self-defense in fulfillment of vital U.S.-Israeli common interests to counter Iran’s regional and nuclear aggression.

The United States also must work now to avoid or minimize some of the biggest strategic and operational challenges of an Israel-Hezbollah war by enhancing its arms transfers to the IDF, encompassing everything from air defense interceptors and combat helicopters to precision guided munitions (PGM), small-arms ammunition, and spare parts. Though U.S. resupply for its partner has been extensive since October 7, much work remains to be done before the IDF can reequip and refit to meet the Hezbollah threat—especially after the unexpected wear and tear of operations in Gaza, the north, and other fronts. Israel’s early warning of Hezbollah’s transition to a wartime operational footing offers a potential silver lining, as it simplifies the IDF’s operational planning and thus helps clarify its resupply priorities. Likewise, by moving interoperable platforms, weapons, and materiel closer to Israel, the recent surge of U.S. forces to the region helps simplify such transfers logistically.

One key way to expedite and ease this process is by prepositioning vital munitions for either country's wartime use in America's forward-deployed arms depot in Israel, known as WRSA-I.

In coordination with key Middle East partners, the United States also must proactively prepare to defend its own forces and assets in the region. Building on the remarkable Israel-U.S.-Arab-European defense against Iran's April 13-14 drone and missile assault, and backed up by U.S.-led show-of-force combined exercises, this should include public joint statements from the United States and its Arab partners underlining the inviolability of access to military bases in the latter's territories, their shared commitment to defend forces deployed to and operating from those bases, and their readiness to bolster those forces as needed to counter potential Iran-led threats. Recent surges of forces into U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM) area of responsibility also could help provide timelier intelligence cooperation with Israel on threats to both countries from Iran's axis, as the enhanced U.S. force posture brings with it greater intelligence-gathering assets.

The United States and Israel also must develop a shared sense, before major hostilities commence, of a desired end-state that fulfills shared interests in Israel defeating Hezbollah as decisively and rapidly as possible.

ii. Enable Israel to Win Decisively and Quickly

These preparations will support close, mutually beneficial bilateral coordination at the outbreak of hostilities, and will be crucial for U.S. actions to prevent Iran from quickly broadening the war. Backed by Congress, the White House's top priority at the outset of major war must be to make abundantly and immediately clear in public statements, and at the United Nations, that it views Israel's decision to act as consistent with U.S. interests.

Concomitantly, Iran's regime should be warned explicitly that military intervention by its axis against Israel, and/or against American troops, citizens, partners, or interests in the region, will be met by a severe U.S. military response, including against vital interests of the Iranian regime itself. As part of this policy, the United States should make clear it will view any Iranian projectile launch in response to Israeli action against Hezbollah as a potential attack on U.S. targets and will take all available measures to intercept or otherwise defend against such launches. American officials also should convey to the regime that any effort to exploit Israeli-Hezbollah hostilities as a diversion to escalate its nuclear weapons program could trigger U.S. military action, whether unilaterally or in coordination with Israel and/or others.

At the outbreak of conflict, American officials must continue countering efforts in international forums, media, and social media to delegitimize Israel's actions as inconsistent with international law, especially as the Gaza conflict highlights the tendency of such misplaced pressures to grow over time. Even if it already pre-supplied certain of Israel's defense needs, the United States also must conduct an immediate and comprehensive resupply effort, prioritizing air and missile defense interceptors, PGMs, and spare parts and ammunition. Consistent with existing operational planning, the Pentagon should be prepared to deploy Patriot air defense systems to Israel under U.S. control in a timely manner, to assist Israel's air defense and send Iran a clear message of U.S. commitment.

As feasible, and like it did right after October 7, the United States should rotate additional naval, air, and air and missile defense assets to the Middle East to help deter and deny Iranian escalation, and it must signal more permissive rules of engagement for these forces to defend themselves against Iran-backed attacks.

II. Strategic Context

A. Overview

Hezbollah's unprovoked October 8, 2023 decision to open a second front in support of Hamas poses a greater strategic challenge to Israel than the horrors from Gaza the day before. Hezbollah's continued attacks have forced tens of thousands of Israelis to flee their homes in the north indefinitely, for fear of an even worse October 7-style disaster, in turn creating a growing Israeli sense of urgency to halt this unprovoked aggression, push this threat away from the border, and enable its citizens to return home. Even if this immediate objective is achieved, Israel still must address the enduring dangers of Hezbollah's immense strategic arsenals and their ability to punish Israeli action against the increasingly pressing, existential threat of Iran on the nuclear weapons threshold.

B. Iran's Lebanese Cat's Paw

From its inception in the early 1980s, Hezbollah's mission channeled Tehran's desire to expel the United States from the Middle East and eliminate Israel. To this end, and to a greater extent than any of Tehran's other proxies, it has operated under Iran's direct tutelage and has been a major recipient of Iranian funds and weapons, enabling Tehran to establish a direct front bordering Israel. This initiated a pattern of Hezbollah attacks on Israeli forces and territory, followed by IDF responses to degrade Hezbollah's military capabilities.²

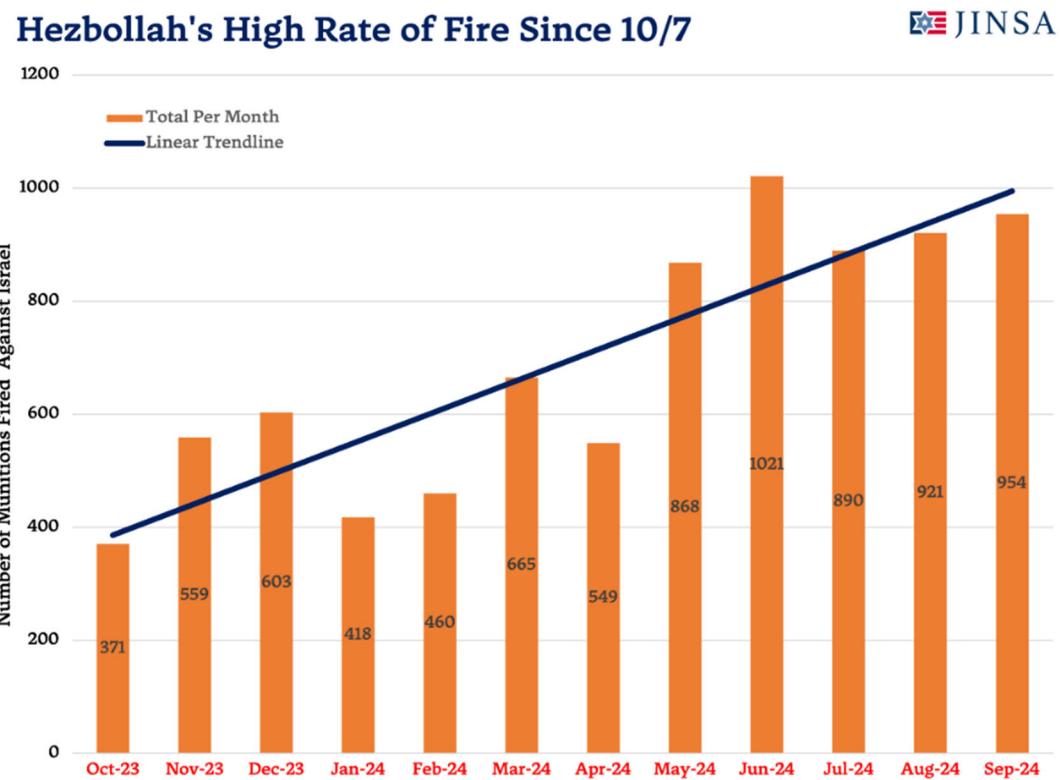
Before October 8, the largest such conflict occurred in 2006, when Hezbollah's kidnapping raid on IDF soldiers triggered a 34-day war. After Israel's initial air campaign failed to degrade Hezbollah's sustained heavy rocket fire against northern Israeli cities or deter further attacks, a halting and piecemeal IDF ground incursion likewise failed to fully solve the rocket problem, though at the cost of heavy Israeli casualties and growing international pressure to terminate operations. The latter was assisted by Hezbollah's astute manipulation of media coverage that generated false impressions of illegal Israeli use of force, perversely as Hezbollah abused international law to put Lebanese and Israeli civilians intentionally in harm's way.³

Though robust on paper in calling for Hezbollah's disarmament and inserting peacekeepers into southern Lebanon, the UN Security Council's ceasefire resolution (1701) has been implemented entirely in the breach ever since. With Hezbollah having lost most of its longer-range missiles and half of its shorter-range rockets in the conflict, Iran quickly launched a major years-long campaign to violate UNSCR 1701 and transform its proxy into the world's best-armed non-state actor. From just several thousand unguided rockets after the 2006 war, by 2023 Hezbollah held an estimated 150-200,000 rockets, drones, and missiles, including PGMs. In parallel, its active-duty ground forces roughly doubled in the decade following the war, to an estimated 25,000, including the creation of

Radwan special forces for more effective kidnapping and commando raids into Israel.⁴ Boasting of his group's amazing rearmament, leader Hassan Nasrallah stated bluntly in 2016 that "Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, are from the Islamic Republic of Iran."⁵

C. Nasrallah's October Surprise

Israel's strategy of responding to these threats with strategic patience became cost prohibitive following October 7. For all its shock and brutality, Hamas's assault was an actualized smaller-scale version of Radwan's well-known "Operation Galilee" plan to invade northern Israel, seize border towns, kill and kidnap civilians, and disrupt any IDF ground maneuver headed for southern Lebanon. Thus, Nasrallah's choice to send rockets and drones across the Blue Line in the immediate aftermath, and in explicit support, of Hamas's attack promptly compelled more than 60,000 Israeli civilians to flee a potential assault from the north, leaving ghost towns like those in the south around Gaza.⁶

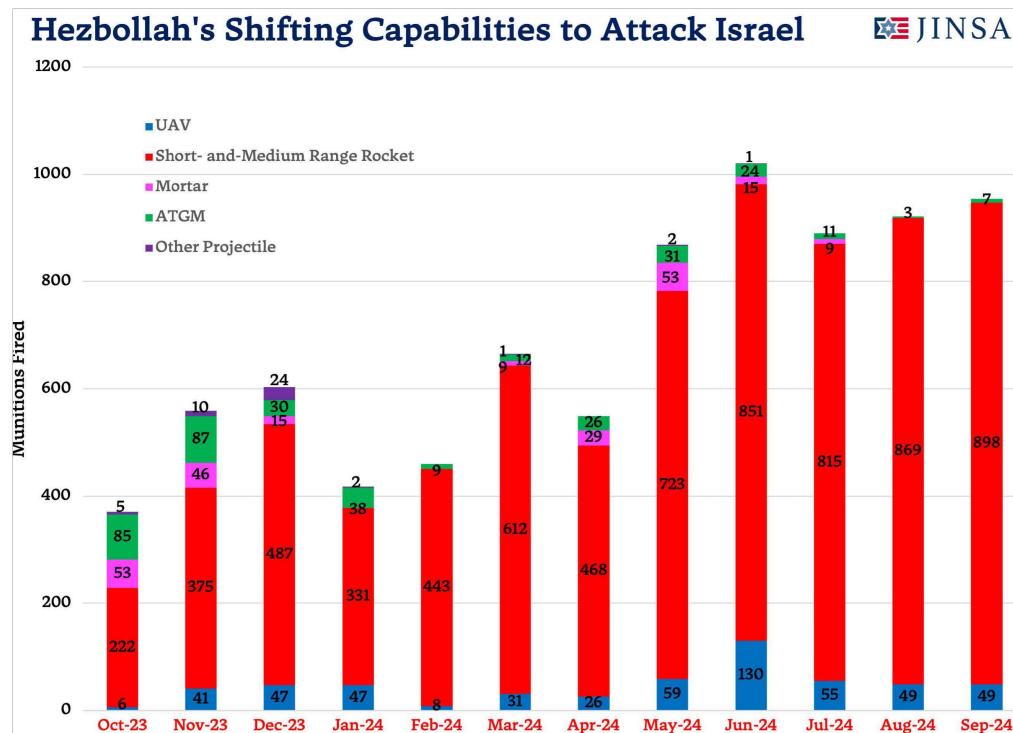


Counterfire by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) against these initial volleys set an evolving pattern of intensifying cross-border exchanges that continues to this day. Beginning just days after October 8, Israel surged significant ground forces northward to stave off a Radwan invasion and reduce projectile attacks along the Blue Line, particularly Hezbollah's surprisingly effective use of anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) against Israeli communities and IDF units along the border. The pace of Hezbollah attacks nevertheless rose steadily through the end of 2023, leading the IDF to adopt intensified "rules of the game" targeting Hezbollah's military strongholds, commanders, and operational and logistical links to Iran's Revolutionary Guard (IRGC), Hamas, and other proxies throughout Lebanon and into

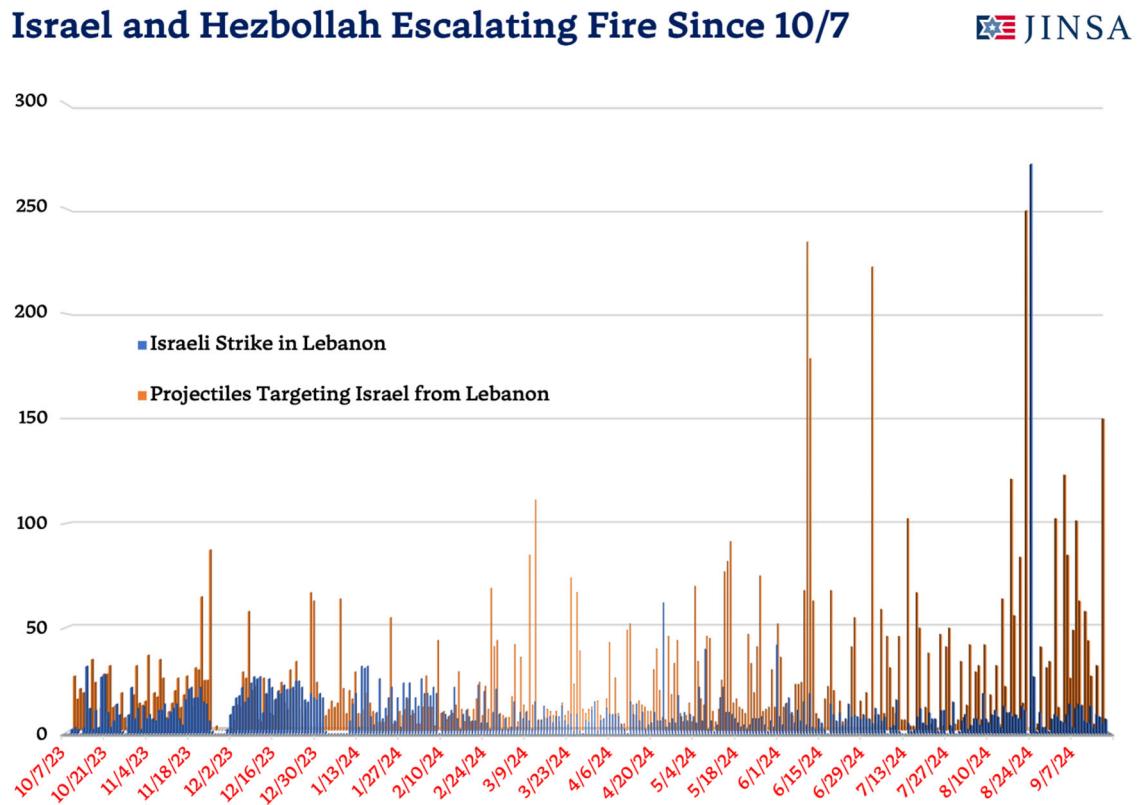
Syria. In late April, Israeli Defense Minister Gallant claimed that fully “half of the Hezbollah commanders in south Lebanon have been eliminated” since October 8.⁷

By summer 2024, Israel’s clear tactical advantage paradoxically worked at cross-purposes with its strategic prospects on the northern front. Its highly favorable casualty ratio of roughly 25:1 obscures its sharper qualitative edge in terms of degrading Hezbollah’s combat leadership. Yet while this compelled Hezbollah to reduce its footprint in southern Lebanon, after Gallant’s comments the group has since compensated by more than doubling its daily rate of fire, and by sending steadily more sophisticated drones more frequently, and farther, into Israel.⁸

Of the more than 8,270 projectiles Hezbollah has fired at Israel since October 8, over half have occurred since May—an 86 percent increase in the daily average rate of fire, according to JINSA’s Iran Projectile Tracker.⁹ Even much more full-throated Israeli threats, most notably IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Halevi’s warning in June that “we are nearing a decision point [for] an offensive in the north,” have been followed by larger and more potent Hezbollah attacks.¹⁰ The latter’s August 25 rocket and drone barrage was its largest of the war thus far, especially considering that IDF preemption eliminated much of what Hezbollah initially planned as a much larger strike package.¹¹



More than eleven months into the conflict, and even after its July strike on Majdal Shams killed a dozen young Israeli Druze civilians and raised the risks of an unintended escalation spiral, Hezbollah continues resisting proffered American diplomacy to silence its guns and pull back its forces more concertedly from the Blue Line. Iran and its self-proclaimed “axis of resistance” have insinuated themselves into the conflict in parallel with Hezbollah’s escalating attacks, including threatening to send reinforcements to Lebanon and press Israel on concentric fronts.¹² Moreover, any suggestions of Hezbollah’s readiness to de-escalate, and to counteract the growing odds of a major IDF operation, ultimately reflect its need to protect Iran’s nuclear program by retaining and rebuilding its strategic arsenals, rather than any newfound desire to reciprocate U.S.-led diplomatic outreach or stop threatening Israel.



Despite the IDF’s operational superiority, this ostensibly tit-for-tat status quo is actually a wasting asset for Israel, as Hezbollah continues eroding its deterrence, attriting its air defenses and other vital munitions, and compounding its citizens’ urgency to finally return home and end their uncertain and unviable internal displacement. In September 2024, Israel’s security cabinet made resolving this latter issue an official goal of the ongoing conflict.¹³ Thus there is an increasingly real near-term risk of unpredictable escalation into a full-blown conflict—all despite Israel’s, America’s, and Hezbollah’s separate incentives and preferences to avoid such a scenario, if only for now.

D. Catastrophic Threat in the North

Even if this undesirable spiral is averted in the near term through diplomacy or other means, it will not address the underlying problems in the north that seemed obvious yet avoidable enough before

October 8, but which immediately became clear and pressing on that day. Short of a nuclear Iran, Hezbollah is the greatest security challenge Israel faces, and the only one capable of threatening its basic strategic viability. After the 2006 Lebanon war, and alongside its own advancing nuclear weapons program, Tehran assiduously built Hezbollah into the world’s best-armed non-state actor, the centerpiece of its “ring of fire” girdling the region, and its ultimate insurance policy to keep Israel from striking the regime’s prized nuclear assets.

i. A Gathering Storm of Steel

Like no other threat in Israel’s history, Hezbollah is uniquely designed and equipped to exploit the country’s profound lack of strategic depth. Even in Israel’s costliest and most fraught conflict since independence, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, its adversaries had to break through formidable natural barriers and forward-deployed IDF formations on the Sinai and Golan frontiers, after which their spearheads would have been blunted further by echeloned IDF reserves before they could even hope to begin maneuvering into the heartland.

By contrast, Hezbollah’s striking power is meant to go over, around, and straight through Israel’s core defenses. It combines mass and precision to overwhelm and evade Israel’s limited air defenses and interceptors, inflicting catastrophic damage much more swiftly and directly on the country’s crucial, but vulnerably few, military assets and critical infrastructure, plus its densely-populated geographic center. The combined quantity, quality, and proximity of these capabilities far exceeds anything else confronting Israel today. Similar to North Korea’s development of massive conventional strike capabilities against South Korea and U.S. targets, Hezbollah’s military power reflects its importance in immunizing Iran’s most valued prize—its nuclear weapons program—from Israeli attack.

Oft-cited, round estimates of Hezbollah possessing 150-200,000 rockets and missiles do not fully capture this problem, even if this figure dwarfs the arsenals of all Iran’s other proxies combined—including Hamas’s 20,000 or so unguided, mostly smaller short-range rockets prior to October 7.¹⁴ Central Israel is closer to Hezbollah’s launchers farthest inside Lebanon, in the Beqaa Valley, than it is to Suez or Eilat, minimizing Israel’s early warning and maximizing threats from even Hezbollah’s smaller projectiles. The bulk of Hezbollah’s throw weight is its tens of thousands of artillery rockets, capable of massed salvo fire into northern Israel as far as the largest port and third-largest city of Haifa, plus thousands of heavier rockets that can reach the Tel Aviv conurbation that is home to nearly half of all Israelis.¹⁵

Hezbollah also has hundreds of tactical ballistic missiles that can hit almost anywhere in Israel—many of them precision guided, including Iranian variants with mobility, range, payload, and precision comparable to the vaunted U.S.-made ATACMS. And it has hundreds of attack drones of various ranges, whose variable trajectories and other characteristics already prove difficult for Israeli defenses to intercept.¹⁶ Hezbollah’s operational concept is to prioritize Israel’s highest-value strategic assets—in this case, airbases for conducting counteroperations—and its small set of critical infrastructure targets with these precision munitions, and to maximize their odds of evading and confounding IDF defenses by mixing them into mass barrages of more plentiful and expendable unguided rockets.¹⁷

The herculean joint defensive efforts against Iran's April 13-14 attack, while effective, are unlikely to be easily replicable in a major war with Hezbollah. Israel, the United States, and other partners were aided by the hours Tehran needed to carry out a massive long-range strike package of 350 drones and missiles. But Hezbollah can launch ten times as many drones, missiles, and rockets daily in mass swarms, and at much closer ranges, from the outset of major conflict, offering mere minutes' warning once the projectiles are airborne.¹⁸

Unlike other Israeli adversaries, Hezbollah also can target vital offshore energy infrastructure, commercial shipping, and naval forces with antiship cruise missiles like what it used to deadly effect against an Israeli Navy corvette in 2006, and similar to those now used by the Houthis against ships around Bab el Mandeb. Hezbollah also could launch drones at Israel's offshore natural gas rigs and storage, as it did in 2022, and it likely gleans useful Iranian and Houthi know-how to attack ships and other moving surface targets.¹⁹ Perhaps underappreciated, Hezbollah has tens of thousands of short-range mortars, plus ATGMs, whose trajectories complicate interception, and which threaten communities and IDF operations near the Blue Line. It also has some indigenous manufacturing capacity to replenish and expand its stockpiles, including converting unguided rockets to precision munitions, and Iran has stepped up resupply efforts via Syria since October 8.²⁰

ii. Unprecedented Military Threat to Israel

Hamas's prolific attacks, including its October 7 barrage of more than 2,500 projectiles, have never credibly threatened to overwhelm Israel's air and missile defenses and send its citizens underground for the long haul. In stark contrast, Hezbollah's capacity to saturate and evade IDF defenses means most Israelis will have to rely solely on bunkers, shelters, displacement, and other passive defenses in ways they have not since at least 1973, or possibly ever.

Assuming Hezbollah unleashed these capabilities with even moderate effectiveness in a major conflict, the impacts would be devastating. Strikes on Israel's few critical infrastructure targets like Haifa's seaport and industrial belt, Ben Gurion airport, power plants, offshore energy sites, desalination facilities, road and rail hubs, chemical plants, and refineries could kill hundreds of civilians and severely hinder basic services, leaving millions without utilities, severing vital trade arteries, inhibiting first responders, and sending much of the populace into bunkers for uncertain periods of time—at least several weeks, but likely even longer.²¹ Nor could Israel draw emergency power from neighboring grids, leaving it utterly dependent on minuscule coal and diesel reserves as backup for the shutdown of its natural gas production and import sites. By targeting Israel's profound lack of strategic depth—specifically, this small handful of incredibly high-value assets—Hezbollah could bring much of the country to a standstill, essentially leaving its large urban areas frozen in place to absorb thousands of heavy unguided rockets and missiles.²²

Accompanying cyberattacks with Iranian assistance could magnify these problems by interrupting Israeli communications, transportation, hospitals and emergency services, pipelines, water and wastewater facilities, and other critical infrastructure sectors. Cyberattacks also could support Iranian and Hezbollah information efforts to foment further instability in the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel's Arab communities, in order to stretch the country's security services even more thinly.

Making matters worse, there is prevalent concern inside Israel that many towns and cities lack adequate bunkers, safe rooms, and municipal shelters to weather the heavy barrages that Hezbollah plans to rain down indiscriminately on civilian targets. Mass private purchases of backup generators since October 7 underline these larger fears and expectations that any major conflict with Hezbollah will inflict devastating physical damage and disrupt everyday life indeterminately. Preparing for the immediate effects of such a conflict, the director of an Israeli hospital noted gloomily that “we expect thousands of casualties over here. Our reference scenario is a war of at least 60 days with very powerful missiles landing around us every four minutes.”²³

More broadly, Israel’s basic economic and societal functioning would be brought to a halt like it never has in any previous conflict since 1948. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of civilians would effectively be living in shelters—not coming and going routinely as in recent wars—throughout Israel’s northern half, with pervasive uncertainty as to how long these conditions might endure. This chaos would be compounded by hundreds of thousands more civilians trying to flee the north like in 2006, but this time under even more trying conditions. In June 2024, one Israeli utilities chief estimated the country would become unlivable within 72 hours if Hezbollah struck the national power grid, in no small part because most of the country’s drinking water comes from energy-intensive desalination plants.²⁴ And even if Haifa port and Ben Gurion airport remained semi-functional, this same uncertainty—and the associated insurance premiums—would deter ships and airplanes from using these facilities that account for nearly 100 percent of the country’s trade flows, and thus its very economic viability. Earlier this year the IDF estimated that 40 percent of Israel’s total workforce would be out of commission for an entire month in a major conflict with Hezbollah, including fully 70 percent in the country’s north, producing projected economic losses of at least \$8 billion (two percent of Israel’s GDP).²⁵

In one fundamental similarity to Hamas, Hezbollah has every incentive—and even greater ability—to drag out any major conflict for weeks, and possibly months. By borrowing a page from Hamas and dispersing its offensive and defensive capabilities throughout Lebanon, Syria, and possibly farther afield, Hezbollah can increase strains on the IDF and its resources, weaken Israel’s economy by prolonging wartime mobilization, fray the country’s social and political fabric, and amass evermore international pressure to terminate IDF operations prematurely.

These material and psychological effects would be compounded viscerally by Hezbollah’s use of heavy rockets and drones to essentially carpet bomb area targets like the Tel Aviv metropolis, taking down skyscrapers and obliterating whole city blocks across large conurbations with skylines resembling Dallas or Seattle, and with high population densities on par with the Low Countries or parts of India. Across Israel’s north, projectiles could trigger widespread forest fires that damage thousands of acres of agricultural land, trigger additional evacuations, and further strain first responders to an even greater extent than during the 2006 Lebanon war, Hamas’s use of incendiary balloons in southern Israel in 2018-20, and Hezbollah’s rocket fire in summer 2024. In stark contrast to prior conflicts, therefore, thousands of impact sites, mountains of rubble, and blackouts would literally scar and destroy many of the most important military and economic sites and facilities across the country. Successful Hezbollah precision strikes at the outset against Israeli Air Force (IAF) bases would

exacerbate all these dangers by limiting the IDF's ability to eliminate Hezbollah's launchers as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

Notably, Hezbollah amassed these capabilities in direct and transparent violation of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701, enacted to end the 2006 war with official Israeli, Lebanese, and Hezbollah approval. Without explicitly mentioning Hezbollah, the resolution called for disarming all non-state armed groups in Lebanon.²⁶ Instead, Iran aggressively expanded Hezbollah's arsenals by an order of magnitude in the ensuing years, including giving it categorically more sophisticated and potent weapons than it ever possessed prior to UNSCR 1701.²⁷

iii. October 7, Only Worse

In tandem, Hezbollah blew past another plank of UNSCR 1701 that called for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and UN peacekeepers (UNIFIL) to be the only armed force south of the Litani River. With LAF connivance and UNIFIL indifference, the Radwan special forces remilitarized southern Lebanon after 2006, to such an extent that they now pose the greatest ground threat to Israel since Egypt, Syria, and Iraq combined to field several hundred thousand troops, thousands of advanced tanks, and portable anti-tank and anti-aircraft launchers on the eve of the 1973 war.

The scale and immediacy of the danger was evident following October 8, when northern Israel was emptied of civilians fearing a potential invasion across the Blue Line that could make Hamas's ghastly eruption out of Gaza pale by comparison. Tellingly, the IDF more than tripled its ground forces along the Lebanon border to guard against a Radwan invasion, even as it prepared simultaneously for its largest-ever Gaza ground operation. Conveying the severity of this ground threat right after October 8, one IDF division commander said of Hezbollah, "had they been quick enough, we would have managed to stop them only at Haifa."²⁸

Several overlapping concerns are at work here. Estimated at roughly 2,500 well-trained soldiers, Radwan is the cream of Hezbollah's crop of active-duty formations and is widely considered much more capable pound-for-pound than the Hamas special forces that carried out the October 7 attack. Already in 2006, the IDF was surprised by Radwan's combat effectiveness in defending southern Lebanon.²⁹ And unlike Hamas, Radwan units forged valuable expeditionary experience in Syria, where they successfully coordinated combined-arms operations with IRGC advisers and Russian airpower to conduct sweeping cross-country offensives and grueling urban cauldron battles from 2015-19. Though it took heavy casualties, Hezbollah often assumed key command roles and outperformed its counterparts from other Iranian proxies and the Syrian Army in hard fighting against Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and the Free Syrian Army.³⁰

To a much greater extent than Hamas on October 7, Hezbollah can translate these experiences into ground maneuvers supported by its formidable rocket artillery, mortar, drone, and other short-range fires. Though Israel neutralized cross-border attack tunnels in 2018-19, and though ongoing IDF operations are countering Radwan's presence nearest the Blue Line, southern Lebanon's hilly and forested "aboveground tunnels" help cover and conceal incursions much better than the open and flat terrain surrounding Gaza. Many Israeli communities also abut the Blue Line or sit perilously close to it, whereas most kibbutzim and villages struck by Hamas in southern Israel were measurably more

distant from the Gaza border. Hezbollah conveys its intent to exploit these tactical advantages through the now-defunct tunnels and its open avowals to invade northern Israeli towns, kill and kidnap civilians, and disrupt IDF operations in a tellingly titled “Operation Galilee.” As then-commander of an IDF division guarding the north put it in 2022, Radwan “have tools that they did not have in 2006, chief among them a plan and the ability to attack our territory.”³¹

iv. All-Axis

Hezbollah’s centrality to Iran’s regional and nuclear ambitions means it would succeed where Hamas failed on October 7, in terms of triggering a full-scale multifront war by attacking Israel. The Iranian regime makes clear it will not stand idly by in a conflict that jeopardizes its trump card against Israeli military action on its nuclear sites. Notably, Iran’s recent threat to unleash an “obliterating war” if Israel launches “full-scale military aggression” against Hezbollah contrasts starkly with its absence of similar warnings about Hamas’s potential demise.³² Hezbollah is also operationally integral to Iran’s designs since the 2020 death of IRGC Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, after which it assumed the leading role in Tehran’s “unification of the fronts” campaign to better coordinate attacks regionwide. Even before then, Hezbollah military advisers and liaisons already led Iran’s efforts on the ground to train and equip proxy forces in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen that now embroil Israeli, U.S., and partner forces on multiple fronts. Since October 7, the Houthis and Iran’s Iraqi proxies have launched coordinated, if largely unsuccessful, attacks on Israel in support of Hezbollah and Hamas.³³

Hezbollah’s centrality to Iran’s axis raises the specter of a broader war that is far more complex and demanding strategically, operationally, and logistically than even the current multifront conflict. Iran’s audacious April 13-14 blitz clearly conveyed its newfound intent, if not capability, to target Israel directly, and it retains appreciable capacity to imperil U.S. and other targets throughout the Gulf, Iraq, and Syria. Other proxies warn they will reinforce Hezbollah in any major escalation, which likely includes stepped-up drone and missile attacks to supplement Hezbollah’s sizable projectile numbers, and could entail resumed strikes on U.S. forces and interests, too.³⁴ This would compound the strains on Israel’s self-defense, both in terms of the sheer added quantity of projectiles facing its air defenses, and by the need to stretch these limited resources ever further by dispersing them countrywide to defeat incoming salvos from multiple directions simultaneously.

E. Israel’s Strategic Calculus

For several interrelated reasons, Hezbollah’s war of choice is pushing Israel toward a war of necessity in two distinct senses, one in the short term and another in the medium term.

i. Short-Term: Restore Basic Sovereignty and Deterrence

Most immediately, tens of thousands of civilians who fled after October 8 still have no foreseeable timeline for repopulating Israel’s north and restoring security there more generally, even as the majority of those displaced by October 7 have since returned to their homes in the south. This points to a more fundamental imperative stemming from Hezbollah’s aggression. By attacking in the immediate aftermath, and in explicit support, of Hamas’s shocking assault, Hezbollah has helped put the very purpose of modern Zionism in question by jeopardizing Israelis’ ability to live safely anywhere

in their own homeland. As long as Hezbollah can credibly threaten an even deadlier version of Hamas's brutal offensive and sustain its Radwan forces remotely within reach of the Blue Line, Israel will continue to have "effectively lost its sovereignty," as Secretary Blinken stated recently. Already late last year, Israel's national security adviser made clear "we will have no alternative but to impose a new reality in the north" if this situation continues unresolved.³⁵

Israel's basic deterrence likewise will remain in doubt as long as Hezbollah persists with regular attacks that enforce a *de facto* security zone south of the Blue Line, divert attention from myriad other pressing threats, and steadily attrit IDF air defense interceptors and other crucial capabilities. By eroding the credibility of Israeli forces already reeling from the surprise of October 7, the cascade of ensuing Iran-led attacks, and the uncertain struggle to eliminate Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah's barrage of some 8,000 munitions (and counting)—more than double what it fired in the entire 2006 conflict—steadily raises risks of further aggression from increasingly emboldened enemies. The overt, direct, and large-scale nature of Tehran's April 13-14 attack reflects this growing, once-inconceivable belief that its axis now enjoys real deterrent and escalatory advantages over Israel.³⁶

ii. Medium-Term: Address Hezbollah-Iran Strategic Threat

Regardless of whether or how Hezbollah's attacks cease, its forces retreat from the Blue Line, and northern Israelis return home, Israel still must confront Hezbollah's role as the primary deterrent for an Iranian nuclear program that is close to crossing the threshold of weapons capability. Combined with reported recent efforts to shorten its timeframe to produce a nuclear weapon, and the growing potential for Russian assistance in its nuclear endeavors, Tehran's ability to enrich an arsenal's worth of weapons-grade uranium in mere weeks is pushing Israeli officials to revamp plans and preparations for preventing a nuclear breakout, including by coordinating more closely with their American counterparts.³⁷ Any potential Israeli action to neutralize Iran's nuclear progress most likely would entail operations to mitigate Hezbollah's most threatening missile, rocket, drone, and other retaliatory capabilities. Given the risks to its extensive political, economic, and social equities inside Lebanon, and given the destruction that has occurred in Gaza, there is a non-zero chance Hezbollah could be impelled by domestic pressures to avoid triggering a devastating war in response to an Israeli attack on Iran.³⁸

In this way, the profound threats from Hezbollah intertwine intimately with the equally dire, looming prospect of a nuclear Iran, and consequently impose even greater and more pressing demands on the IDF. Israel's imperative here gains further clarity when weighed against the alternative, in which Tehran achieves a nuclear umbrella that transforms Hezbollah's defensive mission into an offensive force that could be unleashed in a massive multifront attack on Israel at a time of Iran's choosing.

Israel has made plain its determination to address these existential imperatives one way or another, and sooner rather than later, but the sheer costs and risks involved are making U.S. support, or lack thereof, increasingly pivotal in its decision-making and potential timing. In the nearest term, negotiating at least a temporary cessation of hostilities—buying time for the IDF to rest, refit, and prepare civil defenses, and buying space for Israeli civilians to return home—depends directly on clear U.S. backing for Israel's right to resolve the situation less diplomatically if Hezbollah refuses. By minimizing Hezbollah's and Iran's willingness to court major escalation, and by helping Israel rebuild

fraying deterrence, such U.S. support also makes it less likely that current tensions abruptly trigger a major conflict. With or without a deal, robust American diplomatic and material support correlates closely with Israel's ability to exercise strategic patience and fully prepare itself to address the larger Hezbollah-Iran threat as decisively as possible, including mitigating regional and international blowback like that already being felt in Washington and Jerusalem over the Gaza war.

III. No Almighty, Only Alternatives

A. All Roads Lead to One Big War or Another

Combined with its urgency to address the festering sores of a depopulated north and incessant attacks, Israel's belatedly clear-eyed determination to resolve the untenable Hezbollah-Iran strategic challenge leaves it with only unpalatable options. Israel's self-conviction ever since 2006, that it could postpone having to pay the price of dealing with these threats, steadily added to the massive bill that has now come due. This situation is aggravated, and blame shared, by the international community's refusal since 2006 to enforce UNSCR 1701 and counteract many of Hezbollah's most dangerous capabilities well before they produced the current crisis.³⁹ The same applies to the painful absence of real, sustained pressure against Iran's blatant violations of its international nuclear safeguards obligations, to the point it now sits on the cusp of the ultimate weapon. The United States certainly owned part of these failures long before October 8. It has since compounded them by misreading the writing on the wall and seeking solely, and counterproductively, to try to manage and avoid any further escalation from all sides.

Having kicked these cans down the road for so long, one effect of October 7-8 has been to make Israel's strategic options increasingly narrow and pressing over time. This was readily evident in the Israeli security cabinet nearly deciding, right after October 8, to move north against Hezbollah first, while strategic surprise was still on the table, before turning to the south to deal with Hamas.

In either the immediate or medium term, therefore, every realistic planning scenario drives toward heightened conflict by one route or another. Equally important, the dynamics of a full-fledged Israel-Hezbollah conflict are inherently and precipitously escalatory, unlike Israel's relative ability to proceed at its own pace in Gaza. Israel's operational need to preempt Hezbollah's prolific launch and ground capabilities means it must try to maximize operational and tactical surprise, moving as rapidly and widely as possible from the very start of hostilities. Likewise, Hezbollah will simultaneously try to unleash as many projectiles and ground forces as possible before the IDF can eliminate or degrade them.

Scenario 1: Unintended Escalation Spiral

In this light, the current pattern of ever more brazen Hezbollah attacks steadily raises the risks of an unstable and unpredictable spiral into all-out war, with little warning. As it sends better drones farther into Israel, and fires larger rocket barrages, Hezbollah increases the odds of a random but devastating strike that kills and wounds large numbers of Israelis—at which point Israeli leaders may feel they have

no choice but to deal with this persistent threat much more firmly and promptly. This underlying risk was evident in the spate of heightened tensions following Hezbollah's lethal attack in July that killed a dozen young Druze in the Golan Heights. Even if Israel attempts to avoid full-scale conflict by tailoring such responses, Hezbollah could decide to escalate in turn, and so forth, generating an all-out war neither side directly intended.

Scenario 2: Gaza Ceasefire Solves Little

A ceasefire in Gaza will not solve most problems in the north, even if Hezbollah fulfills its pledge to halt attacks and begin discussing a diplomatic solution for the Blue Line. Radwan forces would remain untenably close to the border, and Nasrallah and Iran's other proxies would feel and act even more emboldened, claiming to have enabled Hamas's survival with months of unrelenting aggression. Given the tendency of low-level conflicts to gather their own momentum and logic over time, the odds of Hezbollah standing down with a Gaza ceasefire could steadily diminish—especially since a tenable and durable ceasefire in the south still appears distant. Either way, Israel's internal clock would keep ticking the longer attacks keep coming over the Blue Line. This pressure would be magnified through growing domestic pressure to return its displaced citizens to their homes in the north, possibly as soon as this autumn.

Scenario 3: Diplomacy Delays Larger Conflict

A U.S.-led diplomatic agreement could stop Hezbollah's projectile attacks and push Radwan back from the border, either partially or fully to the Litani, to enable the return of some or all displaced Israelis. At best an unsatisfactory stopgap solution, this would buy valuable, if still limited and uncertain, time and space for Israeli-U.S. preparations to address Hezbollah's rocket, missile, and drone arsenals, as well as the ticking clock of a nuclear Iran. At the same time, it would buy Hezbollah valuable time to rearm and refit after months of attritional warfare, while also creating informal but misplaced pressure on Israel not to jeopardize this diplomatic achievement by threatening Iran's nuclear weapons program.

Even this grace period easily could evaporate under any plausible deal, whether or not a Gaza ceasefire leads Hezbollah to end its cross-border attacks. After 18 years of conspicuous failure by the international community to carry out a UN resolution it wholeheartedly endorsed, Hezbollah's pullback from the border would either go unenforced or fall on the IDF to uphold, essentially inviting a swift return of at least limited conflict. This in turn raises the likelihood of far more intense hostilities at some point in the near term, either via inadvertent escalation from resumed low-level exchanges across the Blue Line, or Israel assessing that this still-unresolved situation has become unbearable and must finally be addressed with full-scale operations against Hezbollah's, and potentially Iran's, most dangerous capabilities.

Scenario 4: Iran's Nuclear Alarm Clock Goes Off

Intensified hostilities also could be spurred as Tehran edges toward the nuclear finish line. Even if Hezbollah's arsenals remain completely static, the immediacy of their threat to Israel still grows in proportion to Iran's rising ability to produce a nuclear weapon—thereby directly linking the two problems ever more closely for Israeli leaders and military planners. Indicatively, alarms from Israeli

officials about Tehran's work on the final elements of a bomb have risen recently alongside their sharpening warnings that Hezbollah's open-ended attrition battle and buffer zone in Israel's north must soon vanish.

Scenario 5: Hezbollah's Itchy Trigger Finger

Given each side's strong first-strike incentives in a major conflict, Israeli warnings and/or sudden upticks in ongoing tit-for-tat exchanges could convince Hezbollah it must use or lose its massive capabilities to preempt a perceived imminent, all-out Israeli attack. The fog and friction surrounding such high-stakes standoffs and risk-taking competitions can easily spiral out of control, even if this would end up forsaking Hezbollah's primary role as Iran's second-strike force. This possibility is abetted by Hezbollah's transition to a wartime footing across Lebanon, since this both increases its forces' readiness for escalation and raises its fears that Israel is aware of and could effectively preempt such actions, as was evident in the IDF strike on August 25.

B. If It's War, It's War

The same factors that narrowed possible solutions and paths forward in the years before October 8, and during events since, also make it likely that the resulting conflict will start abruptly, escalate rapidly, and generate strong international pressure for a ceasefire favoring Iran's axis. Hezbollah's massive strategic capabilities, Iran's nuclear advances, and each side's first-strike incentive now combine to risk rendering the options of limited war, or avoiding war altogether, counterproductive.

i. "Limited" War

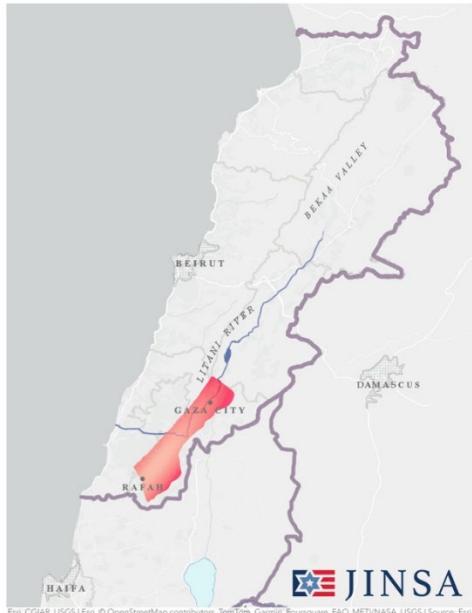
Israel could attempt to push Hezbollah's forces safely back from the Blue Line, up to and including the Litani, without seeking a more decisive and expansive conflict. A Gaza ceasefire could encourage this situation by ending Hezbollah's cross-border attacks without forcing its ground units out of southern Lebanon, just as a diplomatic agreement would struggle to dislodge Radwan from this sector absent active IDF enforcement. But even an intentionally limited operation to this end would most likely conflagrate, pushing Israel and its adversaries quickly toward full-blown conflict.

Israel's and Hezbollah's strategic incentives to dominate any military escalation, and execute a disarming first strike, work strongly against any initiative, by anyone, to contain conflict south of the Litani. Tehran and its proxies would be motivated to broaden a limited IDF operation, both to supplement Hezbollah's own massive retaliation against Israel and to disperse Israel's efforts away from delivering what they might perceive as a knock-out blow to Hezbollah.

Operational factors would further work against a contained conflict. Though the IDF might seek to reduce escalatory risk by implementing only air operations, one retrospective lesson from 2006 is the importance of a swift and effective combined-arms ground maneuver for even a limited, standalone goal to push Radwan behind the Litani. Yet through Hezbollah's eyes and the fog and friction of war, such a ground operation still could be indistinguishable from the opening gambit of a larger IDF campaign to neutralize as many launchers and other strategic targets as quickly as possible.

Given how Hezbollah has turned southern Lebanon into a kill zone several times larger than all of Gaza, and one equally riven with launchers, tunnels, and defensive strongpoints, IDF operations

GAZA STRIP IN RELATION TO LEBANON TO SCALE



would have to be larger-scale, more firepower-intensive, and more rapid than in 2006. This includes heavy tactical air support above and below the Litani to interdict reinforcements flowing southward, prevent Hezbollah from targeting IDF concentration points inside Israel, and isolate the battlefield by taking out launchers and other Hezbollah assets beyond southern Lebanon. Ground forces also would have to contend close-up with many of the weapons Hezbollah employs to good effect offensively since October 8—particularly mortars, rocket artillery, drones, and ATGMs—only now embedded in well-prepared, layered defensive fighting positions above and belowground. In addition to its own combat lessons from Syria and those of the IRGC Quds Force in Iraq, Hezbollah can draw on its extensive, and deadly effective, use of mines and powerful improvised explosive devices (IED) against the IDF in southern Lebanon in 1985-2000 and 2006.⁴⁰

This could easily spill over to Iran-aligned Syria next door, especially if Iranian proxies try to flow reinforcements to Hezbollah through that country. Moreover, Syria's dense network of air defenses could interfere with IAF support for the ground maneuver, thus compelling Israel to risk a broader conflict by expanding its campaign geographically beyond southern Lebanon. And the more Hezbollah suffers at the hands of the IDF, the more likely it would threaten to ramp up the conflict and try to force Israel to halt operations.

ii. Rendering Hezbollah Combat-Ineffective

Aside from the inherently escalatory dynamics of the current standoff, Israel's urgent and overriding need to address Hezbollah's strategic threats translates to more extensive IDF operations. This will be particularly true as the clock approaches zero for Israel on the Iran nuclear threat, since any military action there very likely would trigger maximum, immediate retaliation by Hezbollah. As with the ongoing debate over Gaza, there is still the question of Israeli objectives and, with it, the scope of IDF operational planning. At the very least, Israel would seek to render Hezbollah "combat ineffective" and remove its core capacity to overwhelm Israeli defenses, similar to Israel's oft-mooted goal in Gaza of preventing Hamas from being able to conduct another October 7-style attack. In this case, the highly escalatory nature of any conflict very well could lead it to target Hezbollah's ability to reconstitute as a functional military force in Lebanon.

This relatively constrained "combat ineffective" option still entails incredibly intensive, large-scale operations, perhaps unlike anything Israel has undertaken in its modern history. Israeli experts speak of the target set being 100 times greater than in Gaza, even after factoring in that the IDF is conducting its largest-ever campaign against Hamas. And because Israel's air defenses will afford it nothing like

the safety margin of conflicts past, the IDF will have to work through this mammoth target bank at strenuous pace, carrying with it heightened risk and wear and tear on Israeli forces. This will be felt by IDF ground forces as much as the IAF, in light of the urgent need to take out as many launchers as quickly as possible by every means available, and to forestall Radwan counteroperations. Such strains are aggravated by Hezbollah's effective dispersal of military assets throughout Lebanon, with geographic centers of gravity in the south, Beirut, and the far-flung Beqaa Valley. This is compounded by Hezbollah's anti-aircraft missile systems which, while often outmatched by Israeli aerial platforms, still could force the IAF to devote added time and effort to flying beyond range—a consideration entirely absent from Gaza, due to Israel's consistent air dominance in that highly cramped theater.⁴¹

Even as Hezbollah spreads its assets across an area 30 times larger than Gaza, Israeli ground and air forces will have to operate in a battlespace where Hezbollah surpasses even Hamas in terms of interspersing these capabilities among apartment blocks, schools, mosques, hospitals, and other civilian sites. Like Hamas, it intends to prolong and stymie IDF operations, and thus create more opportunity to delegitimize them through disinformation that disingenuously portrays any collateral damage as proof of Israeli unlawfulness and callousness.⁴²

iii. Preventing Hezbollah's Reconstitution

Israel might aim higher than rendering Hezbollah combat-ineffective, to prevent it fundamentally from reconstituting as a force deeply entrenched within, and oftentimes controlling, the Lebanese state. This would parallel the desired objective for Gaza, articulated by Prime Minister Netanyahu and other civilian officials, in which Hamas ultimately would be “destroyed” or “eliminated” altogether.⁴³ Such an objective would entail targeting Hezbollah's strategic depth more widely, including much of Lebanon's state infrastructure and Iran-led efforts to replenish Hezbollah via third countries. This could entail more extensive operations inside Lebanon, including potentially maneuvering on the ground north of the Litani, as well as farther afield. One potential target is the LAF. Less capable and nominally independent, the LAF nevertheless often coordinates, and even subordinates, its deployments and posture in line with Hezbollah's needs.⁴⁴ Even if the LAF would not seek out the IDF in combat, its units could perform prosaic but vital support functions to free up Hezbollah forces for frontline combat, and to aid in the group's post-conflict recrudescence.

Given its outsized roles in Lebanon's politics, economy, and society, Hezbollah also utilizes the country's seaports, airports, electrical grid, telecommunications, and other critical infrastructure to bolster its own military operations and resilience, take delivery of Iran-backed resupply, and potentially rebuild after a conflict. As seen in Israel's decade-long “campaign between the wars,” Hezbollah also has reserve forces and assets in Syria, as well as crucial lifelines via that country, for Iran and its proxies to replenish Hezbollah's manpower and materiel—and to further extend the scope of IDF operations.⁴⁵ Hamas has no such luxuries: except for certain tunnels to Egypt, Gaza has been effectively quarantined by Israel long before the current conflict. The more ambitious and demanding effort to prevent Hezbollah's reconstitution likely would entail follow-on operations, similar to the IDF's expectation it will continue conducting targeted strikes to forestall Hamas's reconstitution in Gaza for months and even years.

IV. America's Self-Interest in Israel's Success

The United States and Israel face an increasingly constrained strategic situation that narrows their art of the possible, and limits their policy options, to affecting the timing, extent, intensity, duration, and success of a war that no longer can be wished away. The Biden administration's clear preference to avoid any intentional escalation, while understandable in a vacuum, now has become entirely counterproductive in a context where Iran's axis increasingly believes it can isolate Israel, and undermine U.S. deterrence, by threatening further aggression.

Enduring U.S. interests in Middle East stability and balance of power, articulated by both parties for decades, will be gravely undermined in proportion to Tehran's belief that it can continue attacking Israel from all directions, advancing its nuclear weapons program, forcing further daylight into U.S.-Israeli partnership, and courting risk more generally. By the same token, these longstanding U.S. interests—and the value of U.S. commitments to its allies everywhere—will enervate the longer Iran's axis wages its ongoing war of attrition that eats away at IDF readiness, erodes Israel's social and economic fabric, sucks more U.S. resources and attention away from Asia and Europe, and ultimately threatens Israel's viability as America's primary security provider for the region.

Accordingly, at this point it is in America's self-interest to ensure Israel can conduct the shortest and most decisive campaign possible—including by proactively standing shoulder-to-shoulder with its partner in the preparation, outbreak, and course of this looming conflict.

Having already said consistently since October 7 that it supports Israel's right to defend itself against the growing crush of Iran-led aggression on multiple fronts, and having warned Tehran repeatedly against escalating similar attacks on U.S. interests in Iraq, Syria, the Red Sea, and elsewhere, any moves to then distance America from Israel at this crucial time would backfire stupendously. Failing to fulfill these pledges—including Defense Secretary Austin's recent vows of America's "unwavering commitment" to come to Israel's aid—would give Iran, Hezbollah, and others a glaring green light to pile on their attacks on Israel, further threaten crucial shipping lanes, and ultimately put the United States on the sharp end of an uncertain and uncontrollable escalation spiral that could drag it into yet wider Middle East conflict.⁴⁶ In the process, any remaining hopes of building a new U.S.-led regional security architecture would be quashed by letting Saudi Arabia and other Arab partners out to dry. At the same time, Russia, China, and others would be emboldened to test the sturdiness of bedrock U.S. commitments in Europe and Indo-Pacific.

Conversely, the more closely and clearly the United States backs Israel, Iran and its axis will be less likely to exploit hostilities by expanding their attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets across the Middle East, their Russian and Chinese enablers will pause before capitalizing on the situation and ratcheting up their own aggression, allies around the world will see the value of defense cooperation with the United States, and the international community will find it harder to delegitimize and pressure Israel to end its operations and agree to a ceasefire favoring Hezbollah and its backers.

V. Recommendations

A. Preparing for Major Conflict

Since October 7, the Biden administration has focused primarily on containing conflict with Iran and its proxies by explicitly conveying an overriding desire to manage or avoid escalation—at times by inserting conspicuous daylight into the bilateral relationship with Israel. Beyond the president’s salutary but fleeting decision, right after October 8, to draw redlines against Hezbollah and Iran piling on Hamas’s assault with more full-fledged intervention against Israel, the result has been steadily expanding Iran-backed attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets alike, now encompassing seven different fronts regionwide. Notably, Iran’s incendiary threat of an “obliterating war,” should Israel go into Lebanon, came just days after Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. C.Q. Brown cautioned publicly of the risks such a conflict could entail for the United States, and America’s inability to support Israel fully in this scenario.⁴⁷ Public U.S.-Israeli tensions, including demonstratively suspending certain U.S. arms transfers that would bolster Israeli readiness in the north, also encourage Hezbollah’s appetite for escalation in its ongoing attacks, as well as Hamas’s defiance that prolongs the Gaza conflict and encourages growing international pressure on both the United States and Israel more generally.

Drawing from these trends, American policymakers can best support the interrelated goals of enabling Israel to defeat Hezbollah swiftly and comprehensively, deterring Iran-led intervention that threatens U.S. and Israeli security, and mitigating international political blowback by unequivocally supporting Israel’s legitimate self-defense and military preparedness. As the adage from Sun Tzu has it, those confronting conflict must try to “win first, then go to war.”

i. Proactively Remove All Rays of Daylight

Starting now, the White House, Pentagon, State Department, and Congress should aim to coordinate their messaging, making abundantly clear that Israel’s decision to address the Hezbollah threat is consistent with U.S. interests, and with repeated American declarations of “ironclad” support for Israel’s self-defense and for regional stability in the face of Iran-led threats. Too often, strong verbal backing for Israel from one part of the U.S. government has ended up in direct tension with statements from other parts, undermining the gravity of the intended message. In the past, noticeable U.S.-Israeli disagreements that played out all too publicly have helped foster Hamas’s confidence in carrying out the unfathomable October 7 attacks, Iran’s massive April 13-14 projectile strike on Israel, and the serial attacks by its proxies on U.S. bases in Syria and Iraq since last fall.

Amid already-heightening regional tensions, President Biden should reiterate his “don’t” redline from October which, though it successfully dissuaded Hezbollah and Iran from all-out intervention at the time, has since lost some of its force after hundreds of ongoing attacks against Israel and the United States. Circumspection by Israeli officials to dial back their public airing of grievances with U.S. policy will be mutually-reinforcing here in terms of removing dangerous daylight.

Together, Washington and Jerusalem also should convey their continued interest in securing a mutual defense treaty (MDT), based on discussions that gained steam just prior to October 7. Resuming this

process would strengthen shared deterrence and signal America’s enduring resolve and commitment to Israel’s freedom of action against Iran’s axis.⁴⁸

With Gaza as a cautionary tale, the United States and Israel also must develop a shared sense, before major hostilities commence, of a desired end-state that fulfills shared interests in Israel defeating Hezbollah as decisively and rapidly as possible.

ii. Make the Case Against Hezbollah and Iran

The United States and Israel also must start poking serious holes in Hezbollah’s theory of victory for a major conflict. For all the physical devastation Hezbollah can inflict on Israel, ultimately it will rely at least as heavily on exploiting disinformation, to win in the court of public opinion and isolate Israel diplomatically before the IDF can fulfill its military objectives. Similar strategy underpinned its self-proclaimed victory in 2006, just as Hamas’s hopes for survival now depend largely on U.S. and international pressure driving Israel to wind down its Gaza operations.

Regardless of its outcome, the Biden administration’s concerted push for a ceasefire in the north—and with it, some semblance of long-overdue enforcement of UNSCR 1701—lays the groundwork for a wider information campaign showing how Hezbollah’s egregious violations of international law make a larger conflict much less avoidable and much more dangerous to civilians on both sides. Far too often, this latter element is overlooked by American and Israeli officials in wartime, let alone beforehand, leaving both to fight costly rearguard actions against mounting efforts to delegitimize and prematurely halt legal military operations. This is particularly evident in the current Gaza conflict, where President Biden’s initially clear articulation after October 7 of Israel’s right, and even duty, to defeat Hamas was lost as the United States and Israel failed to adequately stem the subsequent tide of international condemnation. A proactive information campaign also should play into Nasrallah’s crucial disincentives for a major conflict by amplifying voices across Lebanon—including in Hezbollah’s strongholds—with no interest in launching a war on Iran’s behalf that would further destabilize and impoverish a country already teetering on the brink of state failure.

With coordination and support from France and other partners supporting current ceasefire talks, the United States should immediately initiate a robust public diplomacy campaign detailing Hezbollah’s and Iran’s systematic violations of UNSCR 1701 since 2006, Hezbollah’s widespread illegal use of Lebanese civilian infrastructure to shield its arsenals, and the international community’s unbroken failure to hold them accountable for these actions despite increasingly overwhelming evidence. Emphasis also must be placed on the consequences of these years of inaction for Israeli and regional security—including Hezbollah’s expansion into an expeditionary force that served as the shock troops for Assad’s brutal war in Syria, and which now trains, advises, and equips Iranian proxies to launch attacks from Iraq and Yemen. American officials also must place the blame for the current crisis squarely on Hezbollah’s unprovoked war of choice to support Hamas’s ghastly attack, and on its categorical refusal even to contemplate negotiation ever since.

Working with Israel’s mountainous documentation, American officials also must reverse past practice by getting out in front of Hezbollah’s inevitable disinformation campaign that mis-portrays collateral damage in Lebanon as evidence of Israeli war crimes, and not as the tragic consequence of Hezbollah’s intentional and systematic violations of the law of armed conflict.⁴⁹ Concomitantly, more awareness

must be made of Hezbollah's war plans that indiscriminately and disproportionately bombard Israeli civilians by carpet bombing cities with heavy rockets, not unlike Russia's aerial punishment campaign against Ukrainian civilians. While long overdue in its own right, the United States and its European partners also must shine harsh light on Iran's illegal nuclear weapons activities, the protection of which ultimately hinges on Hezbollah's ability to terrorize Israeli civilians. To reinforce this message, Congress should pass a resolution signaling America's deep support for Israel's right to act in self-defense in fulfillment of vital U.S.-Israeli common interests to counter Iran's regional and nuclear aggression.

If pursued coherently and with alacrity, these steps could help coerce Hezbollah into a ceasefire for the near term. More importantly, they can begin to flip the script by isolating Hezbollah and Iran prior to a major conflict, proactively countering the foreseeable groundswell of censure on Israel and its U.S. backers, and reducing Israel's—and America's—need to fight Iran and its proxies on a distracting and draining political front beyond the battlefield. Any U.S. warnings to Iran during a conflict will immediately gain credibility if the United States begins to respond more consistently and forcefully to further Iran-backed attacks on U.S. forces or other assets in the Middle East. Iran should have no doubt of American resolve well before major conflict erupts.

iii. Reinforce Israel's Self-Defense

Given that full-scale war with Hezbollah would be Israel's worst since at least 1973, the United States can work now to avoid or minimize some of the biggest strategic and operational challenges of that conflict by enhancing its arms transfers to the IDF. Combined with the depletion of existing Israeli stocks in the munitions-intensive Gaza conflict, the scale of anticipated operations against Hezbollah creates acute IDF needs—well beyond those of current operations—for everything from air defense interceptors, combat helicopters, and PGMs to artillery shells, small-arms ammunition, and spare parts. Israel's early warning of Hezbollah's transition to a wartime operational footing offers a potential silver lining, as it simplifies the IDF's operational planning and thus helps clarify its resupply priorities. Likewise, by moving interoperable platforms, weapons, and materiel closer to Israel, the recent surge of U.S. forces to the region helps simplify such transfers logistically.

Curtailing or suspending U.S. arms transfers, in the mistaken hope of preventing escalation, will counterproductively worsen daylight with Israel, undermine the IDF's ability to fight a major conflict as quickly and effectively as possible, and thereby invite a broader Iran-led war that could drag in the United States. As 1973 showed, resupply is also much more fraught politically and operationally during wartime than pre-conflict.

The United States should expedite and ease this process now by prepositioning vital munitions for either country's wartime use in its forward-deployed arms depot in Israel, known as WRSA-I. In addition to expanding the depot's existing stockpiles of 155mm artillery shells, top priorities include precise Hellfire air-to-ground missiles and Tamir interceptors for Iron Dome batteries. Like ongoing military resupply for Ukraine, the United States can buttress its efforts by sending relevant Excess Defense Articles (EDA) to Israel, either directly from U.S. stocks or via third countries in exchange for the latter taking delivery of newer U.S. materiel.

Both before and during any major conflict, the United States can further support Israel's ability to plan and wage the most decisive and shortest possible campaign with robust intelligence-sharing on threats and capabilities from Iran, Hezbollah, and their larger axis. Recent surges of forces into U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM) area of responsibility also could help provide timelier intelligence cooperation with Israel on threats to both countries from Iran's axis, as the enhanced U.S. force posture brings with it greater intelligence-gathering assets.

iv. Boost Defensive Preparedness

The United States can draw directly from the experience of April 13-14 to mitigate Hezbollah's profound aerial threat, minimize the likelihood or destructiveness of Iran-backed intervention in a major conflict, and reassure Israeli and Arab partners. Featuring U.S., Israeli, Arab, and European systems, that night's coordinated theater defense was as unprecedented as Tehran's decision to fire over 350 drones and missiles directly at Israel from its own territory. Tactically and operationally, it also was more impressive and effective than Iran's all-out blitz, providing proof of concept for nascent Middle Eastern integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) against Iran and its proxies. Following the Abraham Accords in 2020 and Israel's reassignment to CENTCOM in 2021, longstanding bilateral cooperation now aligns more seamlessly with America's contingency planning for the Middle East, foremost plans to move U.S. air defense assets to Israel in an emergency. The two countries should exercise these plans visibly, to enhance readiness and signal as such to partners and adversaries alike. These exercises should be in parallel or paired with U.S.-led exercises to continue improving regional IAMD and build further on the experiences of April 13-14.⁵⁰

In coordination with key Middle East partners, the United States also must proactively prepare to defend its own forces and assets in the region—both to dissuade Iran and other proxies from intervention and to reassure Arab partners uncertain of American commitments to the region. Backed by U.S.-led show-of-force combined exercises, this should include public joint statements from the United States and its Arab partners underlining the inviolability of access to military bases in the latter's territories, their shared commitment to defend forces deployed to and operating from those bases, and their readiness to bolster those forces as needed to counter potential Iran-led threats.

In a long overdue move, and with clear signals of support from Congress, the Biden administration also must finally enforce and enact U.S. sanctions targeting major revenue streams for Iran's and Hezbollah's military aggression, foremost Iranian energy exports.

B. Supporting Israel at H-Hour

These preparations will support close, mutually beneficial bilateral coordination at the outbreak of hostilities, and will be crucial for U.S. actions to prevent Iran from seizing on the inbuilt escalation spiral between Hezbollah and Israel to quickly broaden the war. Simply put, U.S.-Israel interests in a short and decisive IDF campaign will align swiftly and completely the instant major conflict commences, and the extent and intensity of Iran-led intervention will diminish the more clearly and credibly it fears direct costs imposed by the United States. President Biden's warnings to Hezbollah and Iran, in word and deed, against full-scale intervention in the Israel-Hamas conflict last October highlight how firm and clear U.S. threats can dissuade Tehran and its proxies from escalation, at least

above certain thresholds. Conversely, distancing the United States from Israel will only raise the likelihood of a bloodier, wider, and longer conflict that increases risk to U.S. forces, assets, and other interests.

Backed by Congress, the White House's top priority at the outset of major war must be to make abundantly and immediately clear in public statements, and at the United Nations, that it views Israel's decision to act as consistent with U.S. interests, and with repeated American declarations of "ironclad" support for Israel's self-defense and for regional stability in the face of Iran-led threats. In this light, President Biden's "don't" redline and surge of two U.S. Navy carrier strike groups to the region last October are instructive for successfully pairing words with actions to dissuade Iran-led escalation. Should Israel also act against Iran's nuclear weapons program as part of a campaign to address Hezbollah's threats, American officials must convey unequivocally that such actions are in line with longstanding U.S. policy and interests as well. In all these respects, U.S. statements and warnings will be more effective and clearer if they build upon similar pre-conflict pronouncements.

In either scenario, the Iranian regime should be warned explicitly that military intervention by its axis against Israel, and/or against American troops, citizens, partners, or interests in the region, will be met by a severe U.S. military response, including against vital interests of the Iranian regime itself. Tehran must be under no illusion that it can unleash destructive retaliation against Israel, the United States, or U.S. partners in the region, without prompting a heavy American military blow that could weaken the regime's ability to survive. As part of this policy, the United States should make clear it will view any Iranian projectile launch in response to Israeli action against Hezbollah as a potential attack on U.S. targets, and will take all available measures to intercept or otherwise defend against such launches. Leveraging Tehran's abiding desire to avoid forceful U.S. military responses, American officials also should convey to the regime that any effort to exploit Israeli-Hezbollah hostilities as a diversion to escalate its nuclear program could trigger U.S. military action, whether unilaterally or in coordination with Israel and/or others.

C. Helping Ensure a Short, Decisive Conflict

It will be imperative for the United States to sustain strong verbal and material support for Israel throughout a major conflict, in order to bolster the IDF's ability to win quickly and decisively, minimize international pressure that otherwise worsens over time, and disincentivize Iran from courting a wider war. As it has done successfully with the resupply effort for Ukraine, Congress should ensure the White House sustains similar support for Israel, and the administration should coordinate closely with Congress to ensure expedient delivery of funding. Congress also should leverage its good offices to engage directly with allies and partners to provide required assistance to Israel and reinforce U.S. messaging to adversaries, particularly with respect to escalatory behavior.

In the immediate aftermath of a conflict's breakout, American officials must continue proactively countering concerted attempts in international forums, media, and social media to delegitimize Israel's actions as inconsistent with international law. This effort will be even more necessary and urgent than in recent conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon, given Hezbollah's prevalent use of civilian infrastructure to shield its military operations, the unprecedented intensity of the anticipated conflict,

and the profoundly negative consequences for both Israel and the United States of successful pressure to terminate IDF operations prematurely.

Even if it already pre-supplied certain of Israel's defense needs, the United States also must conduct an immediate and comprehensive resupply effort, prioritizing air and missile defense interceptors, PGMs, and spare parts and ammunition. These efforts must consciously avoid repeating the aftermath of the 2021 Gaza conflict or certain stages of current Gaza conflict, in which President Biden's full rhetorical support for Israel was directly undermined by halting and uncertain resupply of key munitions to Israel. As an operational backstop and another unmistakable signal of support, and consistent with existing operational planning, the Pentagon should be prepared to deploy Patriot systems to Israel under American control in a timely manner, to assist in Israel's air defense and send to Iran a clear message of U.S. commitment.

As feasible, and like it did right after October 7, the United States should rotate additional naval, air, and air and missile defense assets to the Middle East to help deter and deny Iranian escalation, and it must signal more permissive rules of engagement for these forces to defend themselves against Iran-backed attacks. The U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean should help ensure the security and freedom of movement of merchant ships that supply Israel with essential goods, thereby freeing up the Israeli Navy to counter threats to offshore energy infrastructure and for other defensive activities. The United States also should promptly deploy additional bomber and fighter aircraft to underscore American warnings that Tehran must avoid escalatory retaliation or widening the conflict. Alongside enhanced U.S. air defenses in the areas of responsibility for U.S. Fifth and Sixth fleets, fighter aircraft and certain naval platforms also could help intercept mass projectile attacks from Iran and its proxies aimed at Israeli, U.S., and/or Arab targets. Such actions also will help reassure Arab partners and encourage their participation in combined air defense efforts like on April 13-14.

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