

to get in the foreseeable future. There are numerous signals that the invasion is imminent: Israel has called up reserves and publicly stated that they are preparing them for an attack on Rafah; they have warned the Egyptians that the current round of talks is the last chance for an agreement before an invasion; and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is due in Israel this coming week. In the past, Israel has taken action very shortly after Blinken's visits.

While the Biden administration maintains its public posture that they are trying to convince Israel to pursue alternative methods of "eliminating" Hamas, the recent approval of a huge amount of military aid to Israel shows where Biden's support is actually going. There is no regard there for Palestinian civilians, only an attempt to convince people that there is. Netanyahu has gotten that message loud and clear. Rafah is already besieged. A city that

was already crowded with 275,000 inhabitants now has over 1.4 million people crammed in it, and a heat wave is blistering the area. Israel has continued to bomb residential areas over the past few weeks, though few of these have made headlines in the United States. In recent days, the frequency of attacks has increased. When Israel launches its attack on Rafah, the civilian death toll will be off the charts; it's inevitable, given the conditions and the massive over-

crowding there. Civilians fleeing the area are also likely to be targeted by Israel, as they have been throughout the assault on the Strip. The results of this will undoubtedly be felt throughout the region and around the world. It seems very likely that an Israeli invasion will bring a response from the Ansarullah in Yemen (commonly called "the Houthis"), Hezbollah in Lebanon, and, quite likely, other militias throughout the region. Jan Egeland of the Norwegian Refu-

gee Council described what has already happened in Gaza. "Gaza has had a bigger bombardment than even Aleppo, even Raqqa, even Mosul," he said. The attack on Rafah promises to be the worst of all. It seems no government, least of all the one in Washington that has the power to stop it, is willing or able to do anything but watch it happen.

The article first appeared on Mondoweiss.

Siren call of an Israeli invasion of Lebanon



By Hussein Ibish
Researcher

OPINION

Although much of the world is breathing a sigh of relief that Iran and Israel appear unwilling to push their exchange of missile and drone attacks further, potentially plunging the Middle East into a wider war, the danger of another escalation has not passed. Rather, the concern has shifted to a possible Israeli offensive against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel has threatened this, and US officials and others in the region fear that such a plan has been in the works for months. For Israeli hawks, a major blow against Hezbollah has never seemed more opportune, but Washington dreads the prospect because the prime directive of American policy on the Gaza war has been containment of the conflict, particularly regarding Lebanon. The Biden administration's worry is that an all-out Israeli assault in Lebanon could end up dragging the US and Iran into not just a regional conflagration but a direct confrontation. Indeed, Washington fears that scenario may be just what some Israeli leaders want: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has for years urged but failed to effect US strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities.

Israel could launch a powerful assault on Hezbollah, hoping to damage and humiliate its most potent immediate adversary, and then withdraw behind a new buffer zone. Such a campaign is particularly tempting after the trauma of the October 7 attack by Hamas because, in contrast to the nightmarish quagmire now enveloping Gaza, Lebanon seems to offer the promise of a quick and decisive victory that can set the world aright for the badly shaken Israelis. But the assumption that such an invasion will enhance Israel's sense of power and security could prove a ruinous folly.

The Biden administration's diplomatic effort to manage this crisis has chiefly relied on heavyweights such as CIA Director Bill Burns, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan. They have focused on the most high-profile issues of captives, humanitarian aid, and a cease-fire, pursuing complex indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas. But a crucial role may now fall to the less well-known Amos Hochstein, who has taken the lead in trying to broker an understanding between Israel and Hezbollah that could prevent intensified hostilities. He is working with French President Emmanuel Macron to find such a formula. Hochstein achieved an extraordinary breakthrough in October 2022 between Israel and the Hezbollah-influenced government in Beirut over maritime boundaries that should allow both countries to exploit offshore oil fields without menacing each other. Because of that success and the ties Hochstein developed among the parties, including Hezbollah, the State Department energy adviser became the point person when the Biden administration sought to manage unrest on that border.

Hochstein's new brief is more challenging. For months, he has tried fruitlessly to achieve a limited pullback of Hezbollah's elite border force to about five miles into Lebanon. Israel was demanding a withdrawal of more like 20 miles to around the Litani River. Hezbollah flatly rejected the idea of redeploying from its southern Lebanese heartland. The group justifies maintaining its own private military — and therefore an independent foreign policy — by claiming that it is protecting southern Lebanon from Israel and trying to liberate small areas still occupied by its adversary, so Hezbollah's national power derives from its paramilitary presence there.

From the outset of the Gaza war, Hezbollah — with Iran's backing — has made it clear that it does not seek a broader war with Israel. Lebanon, mired in economic and political turmoil, is in no position to withstand an Israeli onslaught. Hezbollah could face a terrible backlash, including

within its own Shiite constituency, if it dragged the country into a point-less and devastating conflict. Tehran needs to ensure that Hezbollah's military capability remains intact so it can continue to serve as a deterrent against Israeli or US attacks on Iran itself, especially its nuclear facilities.

In any case, hawks in Tehran believe that the Gaza war has given their ally the upper hand and that the only way for Israel to alter the situation is to engineer a broader regional conflict. To preserve that advantage, they argue, Iran and its Arab-fighter clients should take care to deny Israel any opportunity to escalate and avoid overstepping.

Some Israeli leaders appear keen for such an opportunity. In mid-October, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and others reportedly began pressing for a major preemptive attack against Hezbollah. The group had launched rocket and artillery attacks on Israeli positions on October 8, "in solidarity" with Hamas's attack on Israel the previous day. "Our history, our guns, and our rockets are with you," a senior Hezbollah official proclaimed. Forceful objections from the Biden administration and the need to focus on Gaza prevented such an attack. But Gallant and a growing group within the war cabinet continue to push for a "northern campaign". Because of Hezbollah's attacks, Israel evacuated about 80,000 residents in the border region. A similar number of Lebanese self-evacuated from southern towns and villages.

The demand for war thus became centered on the insistence that these Israelis could not return to their home not just until Hezbollah ceased its cross-border barrage, but until Hezbollah's forces were driven from the area, to prevent its immediate recurrence. This demand may be framed as a new need for border security because of the October 7 attacks, but it smacks of rationalization. The Israeli calls for a war predated the evacuations anyway, but most importantly, relocating Hezbollah commandos would not address the primary threat of the group's massive arsenal of missiles, rockets, and drones. This force, estimated at about 150,000 projectiles, is capable of striking anywhere in Israel and probably of overwhelming its air-defense systems.

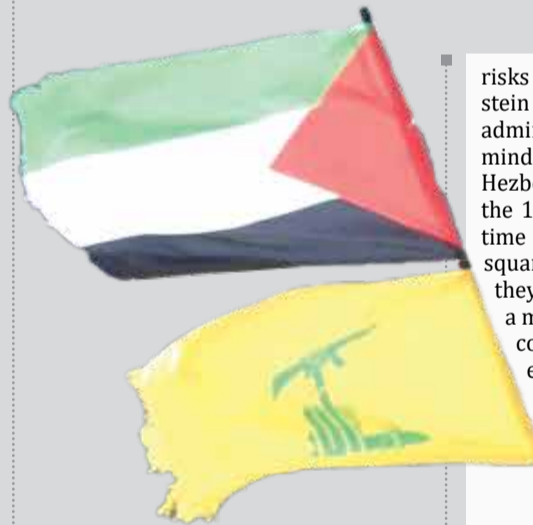
The conviction among some Israeli leaders that a decisive war with Hezbollah is inevitable and necessary explains Israel's ongoing strikes against Hezbollah; Israel claims to have eliminated fully half of the group's southern commanders. Such belligerence also explains Israel's strike on a diplomatic facility in Damascus that killed three Iranian

generals, key leaders in Tehran's regional axis. The Iranians clearly felt the need to retaliate directly against Israel for this attack on what diplomatic norms deem its own soil.

Iran's resolve to restore deterrence and bolster national morale took both the Israelis and the Americans by surprise, yet Iran was careful to telegraph the aerial attack well in advance. Almost all of its missiles and drones were shot down by US, Israeli, UK, and Jordanian forces. Israel's response attack inside Iran was also carefully calibrated. No one was killed in either attack, and both sides have been able to declare themselves vindicated and victorious. The most obvious aspect of Iran's relative restraint was that it did not unleash Hezbollah's daunting arsenal. This underscores the fact that Iran doesn't want Hezbollah drawn into conflict with Israel. But the constant threat of that arsenal remains the strongest argument of Gallant and his war party for an attack into Lebanon. Israeli leaders have a further incentive. The lack of clarity about an endgame in Gaza, and what an incontrovertible win would even look like, makes the prospect of a quick, decisive campaign against Hezbollah all the more appealing. The Lebanese resistance group is a much more conventional force than Hamas, and some Israelis argue that inflicting losses and degrading Hezbollah's military machine would be more readily quantifiable, providing a rapid, needed boost for Israel's battered national morale. In the long run, they say, degrading, deterring, and humiliating the formidable Iranian-backed group is much more important to Israel's national security than neutralizing Hamas. The logic of belligerence, however,



Hezbollah displays a Fajr 5 missile at a military parade in southern Lebanon. AFP



Lebanese soldiers stand on a hill that overlooks the Israeli town of Metula (background) as a man waves the Palestinian and Hezbollah flags, at the Lebanese side of the Lebanese-Israeli border in the southern village of Kfar Kila, Lebanon, on October 9, 2023. MOHAMMED ZAATARI/AP

risks obscuring its hubris. Hochstein and his colleagues in the Biden administration might do well to remind Israeli leaders that, ever since Hezbollah was founded, following the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, each time the Israel Defense Forces have squared off against the organization, they have consistently encountered a more disciplined, organized, and competent adversary than they expected. Much, therefore, rides on Hochstein's diplomacy to broker an Israeli-Hezbollah understanding. If that effort fails, President Joe Biden may be the only person alive who has any chance of saving Israel and Lebanon from a catastrophic and avoidable conflict.

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