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THE HEZBOLLAH THREAT

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Introduction

Israel is weighing its response to Hezbollah's August 27th rocket attack on Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights, which claimed the lives of 12 children and wounded 40 others.

The attack was the deadliest in over nine months of escalated conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, since the Iran-backed terror group joined Hamas's fight against Israel on October 8th, 2023.

This BICOM paper analyses the overall severity of the threat posed to Israel by Hezbollah, and provides essential context on its military capacity, ideology, history, and place within the Iranian 'Axis of Resistance'.

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Israel weighing response to Majdal Shams attack

Prime Minister Netanyahu visited the site of the Saturday August 27th deadly Hezbollah rocket attack in the Golan Heights. “Israel will not and cannot let this simply pass on by. Our response will come, and it will be harsh,” he said.

Netanyahu received a hostile welcome from many locals, angered by what they perceive as the government’s failure to bring security to residents of the north after over nine months of Hezbollah attacks.

Defence Minister Gallant also visited the site, before meeting with senior IDF officers¹ at the IDF’s Northern Command HQ to review Israel’s options in responding to the attack. Gallant also spoke with his US counterpart, Defence Secretary Austin.

In immediate response, Israel struck Hezbollah targets over the weekend and yesterday. On Monday August 29th, a UAV emanating from Lebanese territory was intercepted by the Israeli Navy's Sa'ar 6-class corvette in cooperation with the IAF in the area of Israel’s economic waters. This represents the second targeting by Hezbollah of an Israeli off-shore oil rig in a matter of days.

Also on the morning of the 30th, the IDF reported that “approximately 20 projectiles that were identified crossing from Lebanon fell in an open area adjacent to the Goma Junction in northern Israel. No injuries were reported, and in accordance with protocol, no sirens were sounded. Within several minutes of the launches, the IAF struck and destroyed the launcher used to fire the projectiles toward northern Israel in the area of Houla in southern Lebanon.”

The IAF also struck Hezbollah terrorist infrastructure in the area of Kfarhamam from which projectiles were fired toward Har Dov. A Hezbollah terrorist cell operating in the area of Meiss El Jabal was also eliminated by the IAF.

Israel will need to carefully calibrate between a forceful response which underlines that attacks of this kind cannot go unanswered, with a desire to prevent further escalation.

Among the possible responses being considered are:

- Targeting a strategic Hezbollah site: a weapons depot or military infrastructure;
- A strike on Lebanese civilian infrastructure, such as an energy depot or transport hub. An attack of this nature may prompt the Lebanese government to act to restrain Hezbollah. However, it also runs the risk of uniting Lebanon's various communities behind Hezbollah.
- An attack on Hezbollah sites in Beirut which, with the exception of the targeted strike on Hamas leader al-Arouri in January, have largely been avoided.
- Targeted assassinations of senior Hezbollah figures.

In over nine months of conflict since Hezbollah joined Hamas's attack on Israel on October 8th, despite significant damage, Hezbollah attacks and Israeli responses have been carefully weighted, with both sides understanding the 'rules of the game', whereby fatal strikes are reciprocated but with an emphasis on avoiding the escalation to all-out war.

The Majdal Shams rocket attack (27th July 2024)

On the afternoon of 27th July 2024, a Hezbollah rocket fired from Lebanon struck a football match in the Druze village of Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights, killing 12 children and injuring 40. Despite Hezbollah denials of responsibility, the IDF concluded that the attack was carried out by the Iranian-backed group, using an Iranian Falaq-1 rocket with a warhead of over 110 pounds of explosives, fired from southeastern Lebanon.

The attack on Saturday was the deadliest strike on civilians carried out by Hezbollah since the Second Lebanon War, and the greatest loss of civilians on the Israeli side since October 7th.

The initial Hezbollah denial is likely a result of their embarrassment at killing Druze children and an awareness that they have significantly escalated the simmering conflict by striking civilians. It appears likely that Hezbollah fired heavy but inaccurate rockets aimed at the IDF base on Mount Hermon, situated above Majdal Shams, and that one of the rockets overshot its intended target, causing devastation.

The attack in Majdal Shams will also raise tension inside Lebanon and Syria, which both hold significant Druze communities, and place Hezbollah in a difficult domestic predicament.

The Druze of the Golan have a complicated relationship with the State of Israel. Taken over in the 1967 Six Day War, many held onto their Syrian identity despite Israel formally extending its laws, jurisdiction and administration to the Golan Heights in 1981.

Druze of the Golan have the option of applying for Israeli citizenship, many more have done so in the last decade and half after observing at close quarters the regime violence during the Syrian civil war.

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Druze are traditionally loyal to their home country, hence residual loyalty of some Golan Druze to Syria, whilst many of their Druze brethren in the Galilee proudly serve in the IDF and are fully integrated into Israeli society.

Hezbollah's significant military threat

Hezbollah is thought to possess approximately 45,000 fighters, 5,000 of whom have completed advanced training in Iran and 20,000 of whom are organised in reserve units. In comparison, the Lebanese Armed Forces have 60,000 active fighters.

It also possesses an estimated 130,000 – 150,000 missiles. These missiles have a range and accuracy that can do significant damage to Israel's critical infrastructure – the country's electricity, air force bases, ports, radars – as well as urban centres. In a future war with Israel, experts estimate that Hezbollah could fire between 2,500 – 4,000 missiles a day consistently for 3 weeks.

Hezbollah's military capacity includes:

- **UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles)**, several of which have already penetrated deep into Israeli airspace, capturing detailed footage of the port of Haifa (and its sensitive sites such as chemical and oil storage facilities), and an IDF base 50 km from the Lebanese border. In late July, Hezbollah twice fired UAVs towards Israel's Karish natural gas field;
- **Iranian made Falaq 1 and Falaq 2 missiles.** The Falaq 1 (as used in the Majdal Shams attack) has a range of 10 km, weighs more than 100kg and possesses a warhead weighing 53 kg. It was used by Hezbollah and the Syrian army in the Syrian civil war and was launched at Israel dozens of times in June and July. In early June, Hezbollah said it fired the Falaq 2 at a military command centre in northern Israel. The Falaq 2 weighs 255 kg and has a warhead weighing 117 kg;
- **Yakhont ground-to-sea missiles**, which could threaten Israel's ports and off-shore gas installations;
- **Ground-to-air SA17 and SA22 missiles**, which have the capacity to undermine Israel's freedom of flight in northern Israel and Lebanon;
- **Iranian Fateh-110 long range missiles (with a range of 300km);**
- **Scud missiles (with a range of 500km)**, which could carry chemical warheads.

In the late 2010's, Iran launched a new initiative to fit GPS guidance packs onto 'dumb' medium range Zelzal 2 missiles (range 210km) of which Hezbollah is thought to possess 14,000, in order to transform them into something similar to a Fateh-110 missile. Relevant components were transported from Iran to factories in Syria and Lebanon, either by land, or by air via Damascus, using civilian aircraft.

In 2017, the Kuwait daily al-Jarida cited an official aide to Mohammad Ali Jafari, the commander of the IRCG, who claimed **Iran had established facilities for manufacturing and upgrading missiles in Lebanon and recently handed them over to Hezbollah.**

Israel's northern border – 7 October 2023 – to late July 2024

Hezbollah began firing missiles at northern Israel on October 8 a day after Hamas' attack. In the ensuing nine months, it launched more than 5,000 high-trajectory and direct-fire projectiles toward civilian and military targets in Israel, killing 30 people, including 19 soldiers and injuring dozens.

Hezbollah has fired Iranian-produced accurate Almas anti-tank guided missiles, which are fitted with cameras and can be guided on a television screen and the operator need not have a direct line of vision with the intended target, and the shorter range Burkan with its heavy payload. It has also struck Israeli forces using anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) from concealed launch sites – sometimes with set timers – less than three kilometres from the Blue Line international border, successfully downed five Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles, and routinely fired at IAF aircraft.

Approximately 60,000 – 80,000 Israelis living in 28 evacuated localities and the city of Kiryat Shmona, were displaced from their homes with Israeli leaders recently admitting they will not be able to return before the beginning of the school year in September 2024. Data from mid-May shows that approximately 930 homes within a 9 kilometre range from the border have been damaged. Israel's Nature and Parks Authority estimates that approximately 140,000 dunams have been damaged by fires from Hezbollah missiles since the beginning of 2024.

Israel has sought to degrade Hezbollah's elite, offensive Radwan force stationed along the border. An offensive force, the Radwan Unit was tasked with conquering the Galilee, in a playbook that Hamas implemented in the south (in December 2018, in Operation "Northern Shield"), the IDF exposed and neutralised six cross-border attack tunnels which had been dug by Hezbollah for this purpose. Reports suggest that out of 2,400 Radwan Force terrorists, only around 400 remain in the area, as do around 400 out of the 35,000 Hezbollah operatives who were recruited from villages in the area.

The IDF believes that Hezbollah and Palestinian organisations lost approximately 450 fighters including 15 commanders at the level of brigade commanders or above, which comprises over 50 percent of Hezbollah's total number of commanders in southern Lebanon. (Hezbollah formally announced the death of 360 fighters. While it does not report on its own wounded, the prevailing assessment is that 1,500 operatives have been wounded to varying degrees.)

The IDF has specifically targeted Hezbollah senior operatives such as Mohammed Nasser, the commander of Hezbollah's Aziz Unit, one of three regional divisions in southern Lebanon, Muhammad Shahouri, the commander of the elite Radwan Force; Taleb Sami Abdallah, the commander of the Nasser Unit, and Ali Jaafar Maatuk, battalion commander with the Radwan Force.

Hezbollah has gradually intensified its responses to these IDF strikes, launching salvos of 100 to 200 rockets at a time, sometimes up to 25 miles from the border, in response to every assassination.

According to media reports, **the IDF is using the attacks in south Lebanon to create a five-kilometre security zone stretching from the border into Lebanon.** According to these reports, Israel has aimed to distinguish between villages within which operatives have been present. 70 percent of the homes have been damaged in Yaarin, Ayta ash Shab, Marwahin, al-Dahira, Houla, Blida, Yarine, Al-Adaysa and other villages while homes in Christian villages like Marjaayoun, Kalia'a and others from where nothing has been fired at Israel have suffered virtually no damage.

The IDF has also sought to downgrade Hezbollah's military capacity and its rocket and missile-firing capabilities. In this context, it has carried out airstrikes along the Iraqi-Syrian border and the Syrian-Lebanese border to destroy Hezbollah air defence systems.

US and French attempts at brokering a sustainable ceasefire on the northern border failed to produce results. In mid-February, France submitted a proposal to Lebanon to secure a ceasefire and resolve Lebanon's border disputes with Israel. The proposal would have seen Hezbollah withdraw roughly ten kilometres from the Israeli border, and dismantle its military infrastructure within that zone. Some 15,000 Lebanese army troops would be deployed in the area to ensure compliance with the buffer zone. UNIFIL peacekeeping forces would later support both sides to resume negotiations on the points on dispute on their land border. Hezbollah has maintained it would not comment until a ceasefire had been affected in Gaza.

Background: Hezbollah: An Iranian allied 'Party of God'

Hezbollah ('Party of Allah' or 'Party of God') is the world's most heavily armed non-state actor and was founded in Lebanon in 1982 [1] with the help of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) which sent approximately 1,500 IRGC advisers to train Hezbollah members in the early 1980s. Now headed by Hassan Nasrallah, it constitutes a crucial part of Iran's regional Axis of Resistance that also includes groups in Syria, Iraq and Yemen and which surround Israel in what Iran terms a 'belt of fire'. In 2020, the US State Department estimated that Hezbollah received 700m USD a year from Iran.

Similar to the Islamic Republic, Hezbollah is ideologically committed to Israel's destruction, and gains domestic and regional legitimacy by positioning itself as part of the 'resistance' against the Jewish state, despite Israel withdrawing all forces from south Lebanon in 2000.

In March 2008, after Hezbollah's involvement in operations targeting British forces and civilians in Iraq, **the UK included the group's military wing to the Proscribed International Terrorist Groups** (after adding its External Security Organisation to the list in 2001). In 2019, the UK proscribed the entire organisation as a terrorist group. Other countries have also proscribed the organisation including the US since 1997, the EU since 2013 and the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) since 2016.

1 - Hezbollah first emerged in 1982 but did not coalesce into a centralised party until 1985. According to Hezbollah's deputy Secretary-General, Naim Qassem, the 1982-5 period was foundational "for the crystallisation of a political vision, the facets of which were harmonious with faith in Islam as a solution" and for the establishment of "an effective jihad operation," quoted in Levitt, 'Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of the Party of God' (Hurst, 2013). In 1985 Hezbollah announced its ideological platform.

In addition to its military component, Hezbollah has social, religious and political identities. According to Matthew Levitt, research fellow at the Washington Institute, these identities include: a social and religious movement, with an ideological affinity to Iran's revolutionary doctrine of velayat-e faqih; a pan Shia movement that has advocated for the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon; an Iranian proxy group that constitutes Lebanon's largest militia; and a global criminal and terrorist organisation.

With its substantial independent armed forces and political base within Lebanon's Shia community, **Hezbollah is a key political actor within Lebanon** and its operatives were implicated in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in a car bombing in 2005. Hezbollah leads the pro-Syrian March 8 faction, which also includes the Shiite Amal party and the Christian-aligned Free Patriotic Movement. In October 2016, the Lebanese government elected Hezbollah political ally Michel Aoun as President. while in May 2018 Hezbollah and its political allies won 70 of Lebanon's 128 parliamentary seats in the country's first parliamentary elections since 2009, which gave Hezbollah de facto veto power in the formation of the next government. In the following election, in May 2022, the bloc's candidates won 62 seats in the Lebanese parliament.

Hezbollah is generally **considered responsible for the large amounts of ammonium nitrate at the Port of Beirut which exploded on 4 August 2020**, killing an estimated 218 people (Lebanese group Maan which advocates for victims and survivors puts the death toll at 236, while the government's count of 191), injuring 7000 leaving approximately 300,000 people homeless. With suspicion falling on Hezbollah, the organisation was actively involved in demonstrations against the investigation into the explosion.

Hezbollah terrorist activities abroad

Since 1982 Hezbollah has built an extensive, \$1bn-a-year global network that relies on operatives and supporters predominately from the Lebanese Shia diaspora communities in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Hezbollah targeted Western interests in Lebanon, Europe and

South America through embassy bombings, hijackings and kidnappings.

Hezbollah has also operated on UK soil. In 1987 Hezbollah played a role in the Iranian leadership's assassination attempt of Amir Parvis, a former Iranian cabinet member and British chairman of the National Movement of the Iranian Resistance, who was injured by a car bomb in London. Two years later, Mustafa Mahmoud Mazej, tasked with assassinating Salman Rushdie, died when an explosive he was preparing detonated prematurely inside his London hotel room.

Most of Hezbollah's activities in Europe are focused on money-laundering, drugs trafficking, and other illegal schemes. Individuals and companies have been designated as Hezbollah terrorist entities for carrying out illicit business activity in Europe on behalf of Hezbollah. Operatives have been arrested in Lithuania and France and offices of a Hezbollah-linked charity blacklisted in Germany have been raided. In January 2016 law enforcement and judicial authorities from France, the US, Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, supported by Europol, took action against a prominent Lebanese crime group suspected of being involved in financing terrorism through Hezbollah's military wing. The group was responsible for the laundering of profits from cocaine sales throughout Europe. In July 2012, Hezbollah was responsible for a terror attack against Israeli tourists on a bus in the Black Sea Port of Burgas, Bulgaria.

Hezbollah in Iraq and Syria

Hezbollah had extensive links to Iraqi Shia militias during the 2003-9 Coalition occupation of Iraq during which time 179 British soldiers were killed by Iraqi insurgents. In 2005, Hezbollah's Unit 3800 began efforts to support the operation of the Shia 'Special Groups in Iraq' and the Mahdi Army, one of the largest and most lethal groups in Iraq. According to a 2010 US Defence Intelligence Agency report, Unit 3800 and Department 9000 of the IRGC-Quds Force's Ramadan Corps were providing "the training, tactics, and technology to conduct kidnappings, small unit tactical operations, and employ sophisticated improvised explosive devices IEDs" (47 UK soldiers were killed in Iraq due to IEDs while Hezbollah-trained Iraqi operatives kidnapped five British citizens in an attack on the Iraqi Ministry of Finance.) [2]

2 - UK military deaths in Iraq, July 7 2016, BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-10637526>

Unit 3800 – which also conducted training missions in Syria, Yemen and Iran – drew on expertise from Hezbollah’s Unit 1800 which provides support to Hamas as well as Hezbollah’s own special operations community within Lebanon. In August 2010, the Obama Administration reported that Hezbollah was “the most technically capable terrorist group in the world” which provides material, financial, and political support to “several Palestinian terrorist organisations, as well as a number of local Christian and Muslim militias in Lebanon.”

Hezbollah also played a key role in the Syrian civil war on behalf of President Assad because it considered Syria a vital strategic country for the group, through which weapons and ammunition flowed from Iran, and through which its soldiers travelled for training in Iran. Between 2011–2017, 1,700 Hezbollah fighters were killed and 7,000 wounded in Syria. Hezbollah fighters were significantly involved in some of the civil war’s most intense battles in key strategic areas.

Hezbollah’s involvement in the Syrian civil war provided it with sophisticated military experience. The group’s military planning cooperation with Russia and the Syrian regime gave it experience in simultaneously commanding artillery groups, tactical units and intelligence units for key battles; improved its drone capability as well as the lethality and targeting of short-range missiles; improved its command-and-control architecture, and helped it learn how to fuse intelligence sources to generate more targets and maintain logistical support in battle. It also provided battle experience and ability to operate with offensive mobile capacity.

The 2006 Second Lebanon War and its aftermath

Despite the IDF’s 2000 withdrawal to the internationally recognised Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon, in 2006, a Hezbollah raid resulted in eight Israeli soldiers killed and two captured and triggered a 34-day conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.

During the war Hezbollah fired 4,000 missiles at northern Israel, whilst Israel – which was yet to develop a missile defence system – used air and ground forces to try and destroy the launchers. Forty-six Israeli civilians and 121 soldiers were killed,

while 1200 Lebanese were killed, with the IDF estimating that 600–800 were Hezbollah fighters.

The war ended with a UN-backed ceasefire, which called for the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, ensuring that there would be “no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese state”. It mandated a strengthened UN force, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL II), which numbered approximately 13,000 soldiers, and required the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to deploy on the border in place of Hezbollah.

In 2016 Iran launched a highly ambitious plan to fill the void created by years of war and turmoil in the Middle East and create a zone of direct influence stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean that it could also use to transfer sophisticated weaponry to its proxies, including Hezbollah. While Israel launched a campaign to push back on this Iranian strategy, and carried out hundreds of strikes in Syria (and sometimes Iraq but not Lebanon) as part of its “campaign between the wars,” Hezbollah succeeded in significantly increasing its military arsenal.

Recommended readings

- Hezbollah as a Criminal Organisation, Matthew Levitt, *Fathom Journal* – [Read here](#)
- “ Hamas was expecting Hezbollah to follow... Hezbollah and the Iranians were planning to overwhelm Israel”, *Fathom Journal* – [Read here](#)
- Iran’s Precision Missile Project Moves to Lebanon, *Washington Institute* – [Read here](#)
- What Iran’s Drones in Ukraine Mean for the Future of War, Michael Knights, Alex Almeida, *Washington Institute* – [Read here](#)
- Podcast, Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule – Origin Story: Wild, Wild West Beirut & Undermining Stability in Lebanon, *Washington Institute* – [Read here](#)
- Iran’s System, Regional Strategy and Security Doctrine, Chapter 2 of Countering Iran’s Regional Strategy, *Washington Institute* – [Read here](#)



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For more information please contact:

Richard Pater
richardp@bicom.org.uk