

SIMUL IN THE MIDDLE EAST: REGIONAL STRATEGIC RAMIFICATIONS OF ISRAEL AND HEZBOLLAH'S WAR

Boushra Jabar



BCSP

February 2025

SIMUL IN THE MIDDLE EAST: REGIONAL STRATEGIC RAMIFICATIONS OF ISRAEL AND HEZBOLLAH'S WAR

Publisher:

Belgrade Centre for Security Policy
Đure Jakšića 6/5 Belgrade
www.bezbednost.org

Author:

Baushra Jabar

Proofreader:

Nataša Šofranac

Design:

Srđan Ilić

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55042/HZRS2158>

February 2025



BCSP Belgrade Centre
for Security Policy

Content

Introduction	4
Background and Context	5
Historical Overview of Hezbollah in Lebanon	5
Hezbollah and the Middle East	6
Triggers of the Recent War	7
The Context of the War and its Ceasefire	7
Domestic Impacts	9
Lebanon: Humanitarian and Economic Crisis with Political	9
Israel: Security Concerns, Social Consequences and Political Impacts	10
Regional Implications	12
Syria and The Future	12
The Proxy Dynamics in Iraq and Yemen	13
Gulf States' Positioning	14
International Dimensions	15
Role of the United States: Protecting Its Influence and Brokering Peace	15
Russia and China: Balancing Alliances and Leveraging Influences	15
Policy Recommendations	17
For Lebanon	17
For Regional Actors	18
For International Stakeholders	18
Conclusion	19
Endnotes	20

Introduction

Since the conclusion of World War One and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire's order, the Middle East has become emblematic of wars, conflicts, invasions, and instability. Events in this region do not unfold in isolation. Domestic issues are intertwined with regional dynamics, and vice versa, with international stakeholders trying to preserve their interests and expand their regional influence. This implies that the consequences of developments in one country can resonate throughout the region, potentially triggering a domino effect.

When Hamas launched its attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, people across the Middle East held their breath, acutely aware that this event would resonate throughout the region, potentially altering or reaffirming the existing *status quo*. The nations of the Levant, particularly Lebanon and Syria, were expected to feel the repercussions most intensely, given their instability and proximity to Israel and Iran's influence over their regimes. It was, therefore, not surprising that Hezbollah began launching missile attacks on northern Israel just one day after Hamas's initial assaults, positioning itself as a "support front" for Gaza. This action was taken with the collaboration and endorsement of Iran, which, under the framework of the "unification of the arenas," aimed to consolidate its regional power through its proxies— including the Houthis in Yemen, Shia militias in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) presence in Syria. This escalation prompted an aggressive response from Israel, leading to a series of missile and drone strikes on Hezbollah that unfolded from October 2023 to early September 2024. The conflict between Hezbollah and Israel escalated into a war that lasted 72 days, resulting in significant repercussions across the region.

This report aims to explore the background of the Hezbollah-Israel conflict and the context surrounding their most recent war. It argues that the causes and consequences of this war have both domestic and broader regional and international dimensions. The report underlines the significant ramifications of this war by analysing the origins, progression, and outcomes of the conflict at both domestic and regional levels, as well as its international resonance. Additionally, it presents policy recommendations to address these challenges, particularly in Lebanon, focusing on containing Hezbollah and strengthening state governance.

Eventually, the report highlights two main findings: first, the conflict underscores the profound geopolitical interconnections within the Middle East, illustrating how instability in one nation can create a ripple effect throughout the region, ultimately impacting its overall stability. Second, it stresses the urgent need for carefully considered and well-informed policies to navigate the complexities and interdependencies inherent in the region.

Background and Context

To grasp the sequence of events that led to the recent Israel-Hezbollah war, as well as its aftermath and implications, it is essential to explore the history of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the broader Middle East. Moreover, by analysing the factors that triggered the recent conflict and detailing the ceasefire and its stipulations, we can better understand the interplay between domestic and regional events and the impact of various actors' actions on each other's activities and stances.

Historical Overview of Hezbollah in Lebanon

Hezbollah and Israel share a long and tumultuous history marked by conflict and hostility, which can be traced back to Israel's Operation Peace for Galilee in 1982. This operation aimed to secure Israel's northern borders by dismantling the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), expelling Syrian troops from Lebanon, electing its Christian militant ally, Bashir Gemayel, as the President of Lebanon, and facilitating the establishment of a friendly government that would sign a peace treaty with Israel.¹ While Israel succeeded in driving the PLO out of Lebanon, resistance continued, and Gemayel was assassinated before taking office. Amid the power vacuum created by the PLO's absence and the chaos of the civil war engulfing Lebanon, Hezbollah emerged as a Shia religious organisation with strong ties to Iran under *Velayat-e Faqih* (Islamic jurist).² Initially, Hezbollah operated covertly under the alias of the Islamic Jihad Organization in 1983, carrying out three major attacks. The first targeted the United States (US) embassy in Beirut.³ The second attack struck the quarters of American and French personnel serving with the Multinational Forces in Lebanon (MNF), resulting in the loss of 299 lives.⁴ The third assault was aimed at the Israel Security Agency building, leading to 28 fatalities and 40 injuries.⁵ Since that time, hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel have persisted.

During the Lebanese Second Republic, which emerged in 1989 after the end of the Lebanese Civil War, Hezbollah was the only militia that retained its weapons, reflecting the geopolitical and regional dynamics of the time. Despite the hope that Syria and Lebanon would soon join the successful peace talks attempts that occurred throughout the 1990s, hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel persisted. Eventually, Israel launched two significant military operations against Lebanon due to its conflict with Hezbollah.⁶ The first Operation Accountability was launched on July 23, 1993, and lasted seven days. Israel's primary objective was to target Hezbollah, prevent its use of southern Lebanon as a launch point for attacks on Israel, and displace the Lebanese population in hopes of pressuring the government to exert influence over Hezbollah.⁷ The second operation, known as Operation Grapes of Wrath, consisted of a seventeen-day assault aimed at ending Hezbollah's rocket attacks on northern Israel and forcing Hezbollah north of the Litani River. This confrontation became the bloodiest since the conclusion of the Civil War.⁸

Even after Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, the conflict continued.⁹ The cause was Shebaa Farms, a small, disputed territory located at the convergence of Lebanon, Israel, and Syria. This area covers approximately 22 square kilometres and has been a source of contention since Israel captured it from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War. While Lebanon claims it as part of its territory, Israel views it as part of the Golan Heights, and Syria's stance has historically been ambiguous. Consequently, Israel regards these lands as Syrian and refuses to withdraw, while Hezbollah considers them Lebanese and continues its fight against Israel under the pretext of liberation.¹⁰ The situation surrounding Shebaa Farms, particularly in light of Syria's hesitance to demarcate the border, underscores the depth of the conflict and the complex regional dimensions.

The tensions along the border continued to escalate, culminating on July 12, 2006, when Hezbollah attacked an Israeli battalion and kidnapped two soldiers. In response, Israel launched its second war against Lebanon, aiming to weaken Hezbollah's influence.¹¹ After 34 days of intense fighting, the conflict concluded with the passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701, which stipulated that only the Lebanese army should possess weapons and called for the deployment of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in the southern region to help limit Hezbollah's activities.¹² However, Hezbollah's power continued to grow in the years that followed. The Lebanese government was charged with monitoring Hezbollah's operations, disarming the group, and disrupting its supply networks. When the government attempted to take action in 2008, Hezbollah responded with civil unrest. From that moment onward, Hezbollah began to assert control over the state, effectively taking it over.¹³

Hezbollah and the Middle East

The conflict between Hezbollah and Israel is not occurring in isolation. Broader regional issues and geopolitical factors influence it. Central to Hezbollah's rhetoric against Israel is the Israel-Palestinian conflict, which they leverage to assert that they aim to liberate Palestine and dismantle the Zionist State of Israel.¹⁴

Two additional key variables contribute to this conflict: the Syrian and Iranian factors. Hezbollah relied on the support of the Assad regime and Iran to retain its arms. Following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, this coalition began to identify itself as the "axis of resistance" in response to being labelled the "axis of evil" by former US President George W. Bush.¹⁵ Hezbollah reaped significant benefits from the backing of these two nations and, in turn, extended its support to Hamas, which is also part of this broader alliance.¹⁶ However, Hezbollah recognised its obligations to this axis and understood that its strength was intricately connected to the strength of Syria and Iran.

When the wave of the Arab Spring reached Syria in 2011, Hezbollah did not hesitate to send its fighters to support the Assad regime.¹⁷ This backing of the Assad government and its military operations in Syria would later prove detrimental to Hezbollah.

It resulted in a significant loss of popularity among the Sunni population of the Arab world, transforming Hezbollah from a resistance movement in the eyes of the broader Arab Sunni population into a Shia militia allied with an oppressive regime to safeguard its interests.¹⁸ Furthermore, this intervention incurred substantial losses for Hezbollah and left it vulnerable to Israel's incursions. Nevertheless, Hezbollah's narrative remained aligned with its benefactor, Iran. Serving as Iran's proxy in the Levant, Hezbollah facilitates Iran's battles against Israel, the US, and the West, engaging in both confrontations and negotiations. Thus, it is essential to consider Hezbollah's alliances and connections when analysing its actions, presence, and future trajectory.

Triggers of the Recent War

In light of the geopolitical landscape and alliances, the recent war that erupted on September 17th between Hezbollah and Israel can be understood more clearly.¹⁹ This war, which escalated rapidly for 72 days, started as skirmishes on October 8th, 2023, just a day after Hamas launched its attack on Israel on the 7th. Hezbollah's strategy in opening a northern front against Israel was to support Hamas's rallying cry for "unity of the arenas." This was exemplified by Hezbollah's declaration that it would cease its attacks on Israel only when a ceasefire in Gaza was achieved.²⁰ Meanwhile, Israel's response extended beyond targeting Hezbollah in Lebanon; it included strikes in Syria and aimed attacks against Iranian forces, specifically the IRGC operating within Syria. This led to confrontations between Israel and Iran.²¹

Israel's decision to fight Hezbollah had both regional and domestic implications. On a regional level, the necessity to address Hezbollah's alliances and the presence of Iranian weapons on its borders compelled Israel to launch significant and strategic strikes in Lebanon and Syria to deter Iran. Moreover, the missile attacks from Hezbollah had rendered life in northern Israel intolerable, resulting in around 60,000 displaced people, at the time the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) was preoccupied with operations in Gaza.²² Consequently, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government faced domestic pressure to address the situation on the northern front, facilitate the return of displaced individuals to their homes, and deliver a decisive blow to the so-called "axis of resistance."

The Context of the War and its Ceasefire

In this context, the war between Hezbollah and Israel reignited on September 17 and 18, 2024, following the simultaneous explosion of thousands of pagers and hundreds of walkie-talkies used by Hezbollah members in two separate incidents across Lebanon and Syria. These events resulted in the deaths of dozens of Hezbollah members and left thousands injured.²³ This incident marked Hezbollah's most significant security breach since the onset of the conflict, highlighting the effectiveness of Israel's advanced intelligence and military operations. Additionally, Israel launched

an assassination campaign targeting key leaders within Hezbollah, culminating in the assassination of its long-standing Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, on September 27, 2024.²⁴ Subsequently, Israel initiated an aerial strike campaign aimed at bombarding Hezbollah's military, economic, and social infrastructure. Furthermore, Israel commenced its ground invasion of southern Lebanon on October 1st, intending to weaken Hezbollah's presence and drive it beyond the Litani River.²⁵

Eventually, the US envoy Amos Hochstein successfully facilitated an agreement between the Israeli and Lebanese governments on November 27, 2024. This agreement called for the implementation of UNSCRs 1559 and 1701.²⁶ Resolution 1559, established in 2004, aimed to ensure free and fair presidential elections in Lebanon and affirm the Lebanese government's sovereignty over its territory. It also mandated the withdrawal of foreign forces from Lebanon. It called for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias, such as Hezbollah and Palestinian organisations.²⁷ Resolution 1701, enacted after the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, built upon the foundation set by Resolution 1559. It emphasised the need for the Lebanese government to assert control over southern Lebanon, restrict Hezbollah's activities in the region, and ensure that it remains south of the Blue Line.²⁸ Consequently, the 60-day truce agreement is derived from both resolutions, with the addition of establishing an international committee to oversee compliance with its terms. The primary provisions of the agreement included the disarmament of Hezbollah north of the Litani River and the full deployment of the LAF across all Lebanese territory to prevent the smuggling of weapons to Hezbollah. Furthermore, the US granted Israel the authority to target any location in Lebanon that it suspects could threaten its security.²⁹

Ultimately, the effects of the recent war between Hezbollah and Israel, along with the ceasefire agreement, had significant repercussions both domestically and regionally, with international echoes.

Domestic Impacts

It is essential to acknowledge the domestic dimension of the Israel-Hezbollah war. One of the main reasons for Israel's decision to launch an intensive campaign against Hezbollah was based on a domestic dimension, where the Israeli government needed to secure the north so that the people could return to their homes. In this way, the government would loosen the pressure exerted on it. Moreover, the course of this war, its aftermath and its effect are felt domestically in both Lebanon and Israel. Hence, this section will examine the domestic impact of the war and the ceasefire on Lebanon and Israel.

Lebanon: Humanitarian and Economic Crisis with Political Repercussions

Lebanon has been grappling with an economic crisis since 2020, the most severe it has faced in a century, and now bears the consequences of the recent war. With more than 3,768 fatalities and 15,699 injuries reported, in addition to \$8.5 billion in damages and losses and 1.2 million people displaced, it is difficult to envision the country recovering without external assistance.³⁰

The need for aid is crucial for both political and humanitarian reasons. Many of the targeted areas and those who have been displaced primarily belong to the Shia community, which is closely associated with Hezbollah. It is essential to remember that the emergence of Hezbollah was rooted in the marginalisation of the Shia, who have historically faced poverty and systemic discrimination.³¹ The lack of engagement from the Lebanese government and the absence of official plans to integrate them into national structures have contributed to a perception that the Shia population is left to fend for themselves. This sentiment has, in turn, allowed Iran to exploit the situation.³² To prevent further destabilisation and ensure that Hezbollah's grip on the Shia community and, hence, Lebanon can be loosened, the Shia community must receive support from Arab nations and Western donations; otherwise, Iran may find a pathway to reassert its influence.

This leads to the political implications at hand. It is widely acknowledged that the Lebanese population is deeply divided. While some individuals outside the Shia community support Hezbollah due to their shared animosity towards Israel, a substantial number of Lebanese oppose the group's actions and activities. They hold Hezbollah responsible for essentially holding the country hostage and aligning it with Iran's interests. Notable examples of this include the group's involvement in the wars in Syria and Gaza.³³

Since October 7th of last year, a considerable majority of the Lebanese population has been urging Hezbollah to refrain from involving Lebanon in any reckless ventures. The rationale behind addressing Hezbollah rather than the state lies in the group's dual identity as a military organisation and a substantial political party, with significant representation in municipalities, the parliament, the cabinet, and the security forces. Many of its supporters hold positions in the public sector, and the group has developed its own financial, educational, and social institutions. As a result, Lebanon's state structure remains precarious, with Hezbollah having infiltrated key institutions and asserted control over them. Furthermore, Hezbollah maintains a network of political allies within Lebanon, supporting the group's activities.³⁴ However, in the wake of the recent conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, many of those political allies have begun to distance themselves from Hezbollah, advocating for the strengthening of the state and the establishment of a singular authority over matters of war and peace.³⁵

The revival of the Lebanese state hinges on a decisive political will, which must be reflected in unconditional support for the army and judiciary, liberating them from political constraints. Lebanese politicians must prioritise their country's and its citizens' interests over their agendas. This is an opportune moment for Lebanon to rebuild itself and counter the influence of Hezbollah, all while ensuring that the Shia population feels engaged and secure. The Lebanese public is weary of having multiple states within their state; they desire a strong national entity that protects and serves all its citizens. If the Lebanese state can stand firm and support its people, the populace will rally behind it, fostering a stable Lebanon free from the violent grasp of violent non-state actors that have plagued their lives for the past sixty years.

Israel: Security Concerns, Social Consequences and Political Impacts

The attacks by Hamas on October 7th, followed by Hezbollah's assaults on the 8th, the constant attacks from the Houthis in Yemen and the clashes involving Iran highlight the ongoing security challenges facing Israel. Although Israel retains its status as the dominant military power in the region, these incidents raise significant concerns about the effectiveness of measures aimed at protecting civilian lives. This situation emphasises the necessity to enhance the defence system and formulate new deterrence plans.

The multifront war that Israel has been enduring for the past year has significantly impacted Israeli society. While the public has primarily demonstrated resilience, the attacks have left many shaken, raising questions about their security and future presence in the region.³⁶ As a result, it is natural for divisions to emerge, particularly between the settlers on the far right and those who advocate for a more moderate approach—believing that Israel's future lies not in endless conflict with the Palestinians and its neighbours but in compromise and dialogue.³⁷

The political implications of the recent conflict between Israel and Hezbollah are closely tied to the consequences of Israel's war in Gaza. Public opinion in Israel is highly polarised. While a majority support the ongoing battles in this multifaceted war, there

are concerns regarding the direction these conflicts are taking and their future effects on Israeli society and the country's reputation abroad.³⁸ Consequently, Israeli leaders may experience a boost in popularity following their campaign against Hezbollah, particularly if the 60-day truce holds and the ceasefire is successfully implemented, allowing residents in the northern regions to return to their homes safely. However, it is essential to note that Netanyahu has been grappling with significant domestic discontent even before the Hamas attacks, and the multifront war has merely postponed the inevitable confrontation with the electorate in a general election.³⁹ Thus, despite Israel's notable successes in its conflict with Hezbollah, there is no assurance that the truce will hold, that the ceasefire will be honoured, or that the leadership will gain the anticipated support as a result.

It will be intriguing to observe how these evolving events shape Israeli society, which will undoubtedly be different from what it was before the Hamas attacks. If Israel hopes to secure its future, it must amplify moderate voices and promote peace within the region, fostering collaboration with moderate Arab counterparts to develop a mutual understanding that reduces tensions. However, true peace cannot be realised without addressing the Palestinian issue, which poses a significant challenge for Israel. As long as this issue remains unresolved, Israel's agreements with the Arab world will remain fragile.

Regional Implications

It can be asserted that few other conflicts have arisen from regional causes and have had as many regional implications as the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah. This conflict was ignited by the ongoing war in Gaza and the intricate web of alliances and interests in the region. Consequently, the ramifications of the war and the truce agreement will inevitably reverberate throughout the region, particularly its direct effect on Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The Gulf states will also feel the impact due to the geopolitical consequences of this conflict. In the following sections, we will explore the implications of this war for these countries, their regimes, and their structures.

Syria and The Future

The conflict between Israel and Hezbollah has significantly weakened the latter, and the repercussions were felt keenly in Syria. Hezbollah serves as Iran's most potent proxy, and its diminished strength signals a corresponding decline in Iran's influence.

The Assad regime narrowly avoided being overthrown following the uprisings in 2011, primarily due to the prompt intervention of Hezbollah and support from the IRGC.⁴⁰ This support held the ground until Russia deployed its air power, bombarding rebel-held areas and ensuring that Assad retained control over a significant portion of Syrian territory.⁴¹ However, the relationship between Iran, Russia, and the Assad regime has not always been harmonious. It was often marked by tensions and disagreements regarding their differing strategic goals, competition for influence, economic rivalries, and divergent perspectives on Israel and regional dynamics.⁴²

Following the intense battles of the first phase of the Syrian Civil War, a type of agreement emerged in 2018 among regional and international powers, including the US, United Kingdom (UK), Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Syria has effectively been partitioned into four regions. The first is governed by the Assad regime, which benefits from substantial support from Hezbollah, the IRGC, and Russia. The second zone, located in the northwest, is controlled by the Syrian National Army (SNA) under Turkish influence. The third region, in the northeast, is dominated by the Kurdish forces known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which operate under the primary international protection of the US. The fourth area, encompassing the Idlib region, is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a group affiliated with al-Qaeda, which has managed to maintain a foothold in this northwest arc despite the Assad regime's advances elsewhere.⁴³

However, in the aftermath of the war between Israel and Hezbollah, which led to significant losses for Hezbollah and a marked decrease in its strength, there was an expectation that the Syrian front at the Golan Heights would become more active.

However, the surprise offensive launched by Syrian rebels led by HTS on November 26th was unexpected, mainly as it originated from the north and northwest of Aleppo.⁴⁴

This development, coinciding with reports of an Israeli-Hezbollah ceasefire even before its official implementation on November 27th, underscores the interconnectedness of events across various Middle Eastern countries and their regional implications for domestic situations. Intelligence reports indicate that the rebels had been poised to initiate this attack in October, but Turkey had previously obstructed their plans. However, following the breakdown of negotiations between Turkey and the Assad regime, coupled with Hezbollah's diminished status, Turkey seized the opportunity to exploit Iran's vulnerability. This shift occurred amid evolving regional dynamics and Russia's engagement in Ukraine, leading Turkey to authorise HTS to proceed with its operation dubbed "Deterrence of Aggression."⁴⁵

Notably, these developments occurred during the US administration's transitional period before Trump assumes office in January. This situation indicates Turkey's intent to impose its terms and agenda on the region. Additionally, it coincided with heightened speculation about Trump's plans to withdraw American troops from the Kurdish areas currently under international protection. This context underscores the significance of geopolitical factors in shaping events in the Middle East, with all actors and incidents intricately connected.

In light of recent developments, Israel is closely monitoring the situation in Syria. Although it aligns with its interests to see the Iranian regime and its proxies weakened, there is also discomfort regarding the possibility of Islamist groups taking control and governing the country. The IDF has already seized the Syrian side of the buffer zone in the Golan Heights and advanced further through southern Syria, citing the urge to fill the vacuum and protect its land after the Syrian troops left their position.⁴⁶ Therefore, it will be intriguing to observe how Israel's decisions and stance will influence the trajectory of events in Syria and future alliances.

The Proxy Dynamics in Iraq and Yemen

The subsequent weakening of Hezbollah, coupled with the events in Syria, has brought Iraq—currently under the influence of Iran and its allied Shia military groups—into the forefront. As Hezbollah's influence wanes, discussions have surfaced regarding the potential for Shia militias to assume a more prominent role, effectively shifting the conflict from Lebanon to Iraq.⁴⁷ The evolving situation in Syria has further spotlighted the role of Shia Iraqi militias, particularly in their involvement in supporting the Assad regime, positioning Iran in opposition to Turkey.⁴⁸ However, with the collapse of the Assad regime, attention on Iraq increased to see whether Iran will intensify its efforts to solidify its influence there as its last stronghold in the Arab East or if that influence will also diminish. Much of this will be contingent upon the decisions made by the Iraqi government and its political parties.

This situation will undoubtedly impact the Houthis in Yemen, who operate under Iran's directives. To bolster Iran's position following Hezbollah's decline, they are intensifying their conflict with Israel, particularly in the context of ongoing events in Syria.⁴⁹ Also, Iran might tighten its grip on them in the hope of salvaging its regional presence. Moreover, the Houthis might as well use their agency to form regional alliances. The situation in Yemen will directly affect the Gulf countries and Iran. Therefore, any future actions taken by Iran and Gulf nations—whether in the Gulf, Iraq, or the Levant—amid the evolving dynamics of the Trump administration will be crucial. Yemen's future hangs in the balance, and this could lead to new confrontations akin to those in Syria or potentially pave the way for a negotiated settlement.

Gulf States' Positioning

The role of the Gulf states, particularly concerning the Arab-Israeli normalisation efforts, primarily exemplified by the Abraham Accords, is crucial for concord in the region. Trump will likely continue to pursue normalisation between the Gulf countries and Israel, with a particular focus on Saudi Arabia. However, it is well known that the Gulf nations have had their share of issues among themselves, especially concerning their support for various countries and Islamic factions. Qatar, at one point between 2006 and 2009, aligned itself more closely with Hezbollah and Iran and has consistently shown strong support for Hamas.⁵⁰ In contrast, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have taken firm stances against Iran and its proxies, evident in their military involvement in Yemen, their efforts to pressure the Lebanese government, and their eventual withdrawal from Lebanon following Hezbollah's assertion of control.⁵¹

Despite the intense warfare in the Levant, Gulf countries have sent signals to Iran indicating their desire to avoid conflict. This suggests a reluctance to engage in hostilities in the Gulf.⁵² However, their stance regarding Israel and the broader regional context is critical. Currently, Saudi Arabia remains committed to its assertion that progress in discussions with Israel cannot occur without tangible measures to protect Palestinian rights.⁵³

However, it is crucial for the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, to maintain a presence in the Levant by supporting Lebanon in its efforts to rebuild the country and counter Hezbollah. This involvement is essential for restoring balance to the region, which has long been dominated by Iran and cut off from the Gulf. Such an act will allow Saudi Arabia to regain its role as a middle power in the entire region.

International Dimensions

While domestic and regional actors influence the course of conflicts and experience their effects firsthand, international powers hold the most significant stakes and the capacity to build or disrupt peace and forge political and economic agreements. In the following sections, we will explore the international dimensions of the conflict by examining the interests and roles of the United States, China, and Russia.

Role of the United States: Protecting Its Influence and Brokering Peace

The significant role of the United States in the region is evident, as it consistently supports Israel both militarily and diplomatically while engaging in mediation efforts to establish ceasefires and broker peace agreements. This involvement reflects a broader strategy to preserve American interests, particularly ensuring a stable flow of natural resources and maintaining economic stability linked to oil prices and commerce. Consequently, the US seeks to foster alliances among its partners to collaboratively confront its adversaries, primarily China, Russia, and Iran.

Nevertheless, in general, the war in Gaza has undeniably presented significant challenges. For instance, the US encountered criticism from certain allies who perceived a bias and a lack of adequate involvement in tackling the underlying issues of the conflict. Consequently, the war has complicated US efforts to maintain stability in the Middle East, particularly regarding its broader objective of normalising Arab-Israeli relations through the Abraham Accords. Additionally, the conflict has sparked discussions within the US about the balance between support for Israel and advocacy for a two-state solution, revealing growing divisions in public opinion.

However, American diplomacy demonstrated effectiveness on the Lebanese front by successfully brokering a ceasefire in the Hezbollah-Israel war. Furthermore, it played a significant role in delineating the maritime borders between Lebanon and Israel. There is hope that the Trump administration will continue the constructive role that the US has played, mainly through the efforts of Amos Hochstein, in addressing issues related to Lebanon.

With the prospect of a second term for Trump, there is an expectation of escalation and cooperation in his approach. He will likely impose additional sanctions on Iran to curb its influence while attempting to address relations with Russia and limit China's power. This dynamic will significantly affect the Middle East, especially considering Iran's involvement, Russia's substantial loss of its ally and presence in Syria, and China's economic interests and investments in the Middle East. On the other hand, Trump's handling of the Middle East will also impact Turkey's role in the region and the US relationship with Turkey, given that it has fluctuated between cooperation and tension throughout Erdogan's tenure.

Russia and China: Balancing Alliances and Leveraging Influences

Russia and China have vested interests in the Middle East, albeit to varying degrees. Russia's involvement in the region has deep historical roots, tracing back to the Romanov and Soviet eras. In contrast, China's presence is relatively recent and primarily focused on economic relations and cooperation. Thus, it was unsurprising that China opted not to take a stance in the current conflicts and wars, preferring to remain on the sidelines. In contrast, Russia has sought to distance itself from the ongoing war against Hamas and Hezbollah, yet it cannot afford to stay passive while its interests and assets in Syria are under threat.

However, Russia's stance showcases its effort to balance its interests in the Middle East. Although it has a practical relationship with Israel, it also interacts with Hezbollah due to its connections with Iran and Syria. The conflict underscored Moscow's constrained ability to affect factors outside Syria and contribute to regional stability. Therefore, Russia's concentration on its own strategic goals in Syria weakened its capability to facilitate resolution in the Hezbollah-Israel conflict. Additionally, the war between Hezbollah and Israel highlights the shortcomings of Russia's diplomatic efforts in the region, especially in light of its more significant geopolitical issues, notably the continuing war in Ukraine. Furthermore, with the collapse of the Assad regime, Russia would have lost its main ally and is under threat of losing its direct presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. Hence, the coming days will show how Russia will readjust and forge its new policy in the Middle East.

Conversely, China's reaction was calculated. It emphasised the importance of stability in protecting its investments under the region's Belt and Road Initiative. In this context, China adopted a neutral mediation strategy, urging calm, fostering dialogue, and positioning itself as a potential impartial mediator. This approach underscores China's concerns regarding possible disruptions to energy supplies from the Middle East, which could adversely affect its economic growth.

Policy Recommendations

After outlining the historical context of the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel and exploring the causes and consequences of the war, its regional implications, and international dimensions, it is vital to draw lessons from this situation. Consequently, we must develop strategies that promote better engagement and understanding of domestic actors, particularly in Lebanon, and outline a course of action for regional players and international stakeholders.

For Lebanon

Lebanon, currently undergoing a 60-day probation period, urgently needs political, economic, and social stability to address its humanitarian needs and mitigate Hezbollah's domestic influence. The priority should be to strengthen the LAF and grant them comprehensive political support to effectively carry out their duties as outlined in the ceasefire agreement, particularly by deploying throughout Lebanon and taking control of Hezbollah's sites. To achieve this, a robust political will and supportive institutions are essential.

With the fall of the Assad regime and the weakening of Hezbollah, Lebanon faces a golden opportunity to restructure itself. This is a chance to strengthen its government and unite all its citizens under a cohesive state prioritising its people's social and economic interests. Thus, the parliament must convene to elect a President who embodies sovereignty and independence, one who is not under Hezbollah's influence and is willing to take decisive actions to safeguard Lebanon's sovereignty, stability, and unity. Following this, a government representing the diverse Lebanese factions should be formed while maintaining a clear vision and mission to implement the UNSCRs, mainly 1559 and 1701, deploy the army on the Israeli and Syrian borders and advance the country's progress.

This new government must avoid the pitfalls of previous administrations by engaging with Hezbollah on strategic defence matters. This time, the strategic defence should be exclusively defined by the LAF, with the approval of both the parliament and the cabinet. The newly elected President and government must collaborate to facilitate Hezbollah's transition from a military entity to a political party. However, these efforts necessitate a careful plan that includes the Shia community, humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and economic revival, all contingent upon combatting corruption and establishing a transparent political and economic system that allows for accountability and an independent judiciary. Given Lebanon's current political and financial climate, the success of these initiatives will also require international and regional support.

For Regional Actors

Lebanon urgently needs political and financial support from regional actors, particularly the Gulf states. Such backing is crucial for the Lebanese to confront Hezbollah without feeling overwhelmed or powerless. The challenge lies with Lebanese leaders, who often take their cues from the broader regional and international landscape. If they perceive Iran as a dominant force in Lebanon, they may once again yield to Hezbollah's influence. In contrast, if they believe that the Gulf states and their Western allies are sincerely committed to supporting Lebanon and will not allow it to succumb to Iran, they are more likely to take a stand against Hezbollah. Consequently, the Lebanese closely monitor Syria's events and anticipate how these developments will unfold within Lebanon.

The Gulf nations have expressed solidarity with the Lebanese people, although their relationship with the Lebanese state remains strained. Nevertheless, enhancing this relationship is essential. Arab countries must reassure Lebanese leaders of their support as they confront Hezbollah and work towards rebuilding their nation. Such support could foster a lasting ceasefire and present a glimmer of hope for the future.

Furthermore, once the situation stabilises in Syria, it is essential to apply pressure for the demarcation of the borders between Syria and Lebanon to resolve the issue of the Shebaa Farms. Hezbollah often uses this territory as a pretext to maintain its conflict with Israel. Consequently, it is crucial to urge Syria to accept the demarcation of not only its southeastern borders but also its northern and eastern borders, ensuring that smuggling activities are effectively prevented.

For International Stakeholders

Consequently, international players have a crucial role to play in sustaining the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah by supporting the Lebanese state and ensuring that both countries adhere to the UNSCR 1701. This underscores the necessity of establishing a monitoring committee and providing political and financial assistance to Lebanon, thereby strengthening its efforts against Hezbollah and Iran. Should Hezbollah regain its strength, it would enable Iran to maintain a robust presence in the Levant, particularly on Israel's borders.

Therefore, the US and other international stakeholders must closely monitor the developments in Syria and their implications for the Iranian regime and its influence, as this will impact not only Syria and its immediate neighbours but also the overall stability and trajectory of the Middle East.

Additionally, Lebanon must devise long-term economic and humanitarian strategies for its affected population and the nation. This endeavour can only be achieved with the support of the international community, particularly the US, UK, and France. Furthermore, depending on the approach of the Trump administration, engaging in dialogue with Iran might be beneficial, as it could help mitigate Iran's influence in the Levant through agreements related to Hezbollah's and the IRGC's activities. However, any accord between Iran and the West must not come at the expense of Lebanon's future.

Conclusion

Ultimately, geopolitics remains the central theme in the Middle East, where events are interconnected, and their repercussions are felt across several nations. What began as an incursion by Hamas into Israel has escalated into multifront wars involving seven countries to varying extents, even leading to the overthrow of a regime and paving the way for a new *status quo*. The rapid sequence of events in Syria—culminating in just 13 days from the ceasefire announcement between Hezbollah and Israel to the collapse of the Assad regime—illustrates how quickly the *status quo* can shift when one faction within the so-called “axis of resistance” is weakened.

The game is far from over. Iran remains a player, with its allies in Iraqi and Yemeni factions still in place, and Russia’s military bases continue to stand along Syria’s coast. The coming period will reveal how Iran and Russia will navigate their positions in the region and the strategies they will employ. It remains to be seen whether the Iranian regime can endure the weakening and potential collapse of its allies, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Assad regime.

Consequently, maintaining peace and preventing future conflicts, particularly along the Israeli-Lebanese borders, is of the utmost importance. To achieve this, the implementation of UNSCR 1701 is essential, along with efforts to limit Iran’s influence in Lebanon through Hezbollah. This endeavour requires domestic resolve and support from regional and international actors to empower Lebanon, reinforce its state structures, and enable its institutions to fulfil their intended roles.

Endnotes

- 1 Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Operation Peace for Galilee (1982)," <https://embassies.gov.il/MFA/AboutIsrael/Maps/Pages/Operation-Peace-for-Galilee.aspx>
- 2 Joseph Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents: From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 151–184
- 3 Central Intelligence Agency, "Never Forgotten: The Deadliest Day in CIA History," April 18, 2023 <https://www.cia.gov/stories/story/beirut-embassy-attack-40th-anniversary/>
- 4 Britannica, "1983 Beirut Barracks Bombings Terrorist Attacks, Lebanon," <https://www.britannica.com/event/1983-Beirut-barracks-bombings>
- 5 William E. Smith, "Middle East: New Bloodshed, New Hope," *Time*. November 14, 1983. Archived from the original on February 20, 2008. Retrieved May 26, 2010. <https://web.archive.org/web/20080220093314/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,952250,00.html>
- 6 Al-Jazeera, "The history of conflict between Hezbollah and Israel," September 18, 2024 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/18/hezbollah-and-israel-a-timeline-of-conflict>
- 7 Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 158
- 8 Fida Nasrallah, "Grapes of wrath in Southern Lebanon," *Mediterranean Politics* 1, No. 2, (Autumn 1996), 256-259
- 9 Augustus Richard Norton, "Hizballah and the Israeli Withdrawal from Southern Lebanon," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, No. 1 (Autumn, 2000), 22-35
- 10 Asher Kaufman, *Contested Frontiers in the Syria-Lebanon-Israel Region Cartography, Sovereignty, and Conflict*, (John Hopkins University Press, 2014)
- 11 Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 168-169
- 12 Chris Lawrence and Jim Clancy, "Lebanon Truce Holds Despite Clashes," *CNN*, August 14, 2006, <https://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/08/14/mideast.main/index.html>
- 13 Robert F. Worth and Nada Bakri, "Hezbollah Seizes Swath of Beirut from U.S.-Backed Lebanon Government," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/middleeast/10lebanon.html>
- 14 Alagha, *Hizbullah's Documents*, 39–62
- 15 Nabih Bulos, "What Is the Iran-Backed 'Axis of Resistance' and What Does It Mean For Israel?" *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 26, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-09-26/axis-of-resistance-explained-iran-israel>
- 16 Benedetta Berti "Assessing the Role of Hezbollah in the Gaza War and Its Regional Impact," *Terrorism Monitor* 7, no. 4, reposted by The Jamestown Foundation Global Research and Analysis, March 2009, <https://jamestown.org/program/assessing-the-role-of-hezbollah-in-the-gaza-war-and-its-regional-impact/>
- 17 Mohanad Hage Ali, "Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship," Series on Political Islam, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/research/2019/05/power-points-defining-the-syria-hezbollah-relationship?lang=en¢er=middle-east>
- 18 Lizzie Porter, "How The Arab World Turned Against Hezbollah," *Prospect*, October 5, 2020, <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/40656/how-the-arab-world-turned-against-hezbollah>
- 19 Kat Lonsdorf and Itay Stern, "From Pager Blasts To Nasrallah's Killing: 12 Days That Transformed A Bloody Conflict," *NPR*, September 29, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/09/29/g-s-1-25348/israel-hezbollah-lebanon-hassan-nasrallah-timeline>

- 20 ABC News (Australia), "Hezbollah Vows to Continue Attacking Israel Until Gaza Ceasefire," September 23, 2024
- 21 Center for Preventive Action, "Confrontation With Iran," *Council on Foreign Relations*, December 09, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/confrontation-between-united-states-and-iran>
- 22 Jason Burke, "Israelis Displaced By War Split Over Prospect of Hezbollah Ceasefire," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/25/for-many-in-northern-israel-the-proposed-ceasefire-with-hezbollah-brings-hope>
- 23 Charbel Mallo, Tamara Qiblawi, Jeremy Diamond, Lauren Kent, Rob Picheta and Christian Edwards and Helen Regan, "Israel behind deadly pager explosions that targeted Hezbollah and injured thousands in Lebanon," *CNN*, September 18, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/17/middleeast/lebanon-hezbollah-pagers-explosions-intl/index.html>
- 24 Kara Fox, "Israel Has Killed Multiple Hezbollah Leaders. Here's Who They Were – And The Key Players That Remain," *CNN*, October 23, 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/30/middleeast/hezbollah-leaders-assassinated-israel-intl/index.html>
- 25 Josef Federman, Matthew Lee and Abby Sewell, "Israel Begins Ground Offensive Against Hezbollah In Southern Lebanon," *AP*, October 1, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-gaza-news-09-30-2024-83ea5f243688f309754ec74850de4238>
- 26 Willem Marx, "Israel and Hezbollah Have A Ceasefire Agreement. Here's What It Says," *NPR*, November 28, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/28/g-s1-36146/israel-hezbollah-lebanon-ceasefire-middle-east-crisis>
- 27 UN Security Council, Resolution 1559, Middle East, S/RES/1559, (September 2, 2004), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n04/498/92/pdf/n0449892.pdf>
- 28 UN Security Council, *Resolution 1701*, Middle East, S/RES/1701, (August 11, 2006), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n06/465/03/pdf/n0646503.pdf>
- 29 Reuters, "Israel-Hezbollah Ceasefire: What Does The US-Brokered Truce Include?" November 26, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/what-does-us-brokered-truce-ending-israel-hezbollah-fighting-include-2024-11-26/>
- 30 Reuters, "Costs of Israel-Hezbollah Conflict on Lebanon, Israel," November 27, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/costs-israel-hezbollah-conflict-lebanon-israel-2024-11-26/>
- 31 Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005)
- 32 David Hirst, *Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of The Middle East* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2011)
- 33 MaryClare Roche and Michael Robbins, "What the Lebanese People Really Think of Hezbollah," *Foreign Affairs*, July 12, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/what-lebanese-people-really-think-hezbollah>
- 34 Lina Khatib, "How Hezbollah Holds Sway Over the Lebanese State", Research Paper, *Middle East and North Africa Programme*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state/02-influence-through-state-institutions>
- 35 Hesham Shawish, "Are Lebanese, Syrian Leaders Distancing Themselves from Hezbollah," *BBC Monitoring*, October 24, 2024 <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/b0002nea>
- 36 Elliott Abrams, Linda Robinson, Ray Takeyh, and Steven A. Cook, "One Year After the October 7 Attacks: The Impact on Four Fronts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 2, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/article/one-year-after-october-7-attacks-impact-four-fronts>
- 37 Laura Silver and Maria Smerkovich, "How Israeli Society Has Unified, and Divided, in Wartime," *Pew Research Center*, June 20, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/06/20/how-israeli-society-has-unified-and-divided-in-wartime/>

- 38 Yasmeen Serhan, "How Israel and Its Allies Lost Global Credibility," *Time*, April 3, 2024, <https://time.com/6963032/israel-netanyahu-allies-global-standing/>
- 39 Sergio Cantone, "Can Netanyahu Maintain Support At Home As Israel Fights On Multiple Fronts?" *Euro News*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/10/07/can-netanyahu-maintain-support-at-home-as-israel-fights-on-multiple-fronts>
- 40 Marisa Sullivan, "Hezbollah in Syria," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 2014, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf
- 41 Robert Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein, "Russia's Intervention in Syria: Historical and Geopolitical Context," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, September 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/report-1-hamilton-stein-miller.pdf>
- 42 Sarah Dadouch, "Amid Syria's War, Iran And Russia Compete For Influence And Spoils," *The Washington Post*, May 20, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syria-war-russia-iran-influence/2021/05/19/7d26851e-a9d1-11eb-bca5-048b2759a489_story.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- 43 Mariano Zafra, Prasanta Kumar Dutta and Anurag Rao, "Syria's War Reignites," *Reuters*, December 4, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/SYRIA-SECURITY/MAP/akpeexemjpr/>
- 44 Reuters, "What Is Happening in Syria and Who Is Fighting?" December 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/who-is-fighting-syria-why-2024-12-02/>
- 45 Ömer Özkizilcik, "What Does Turkey Gain from The Rebel Offensive in Syria?" *Atlantic Council*, December 5, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-turkey-rebel-offensive/>
- 46 Jon Donnison, "Israel Seizes Golan Buffer Zone After Syrian Troops Leave Positions," *BBC*, December 8, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c77jrrxn07o>
- 47 Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, "Could Iraq Become a New Front in Israel's Regional War?" *The Arab News*, October 15, 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/could-iraq-become-new-front-israels-regional-war>
- 48 Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Maya Gebeily, "Iraqi Fighters Head To Syria To Battle Rebels But Lebanon's Hezbollah Stays Out, Sources Say," *Reuters*, December 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-militias-enter-syria-reinforce-government-forces-military-sources-say-2024-12-02/>
- 49 Grace Dean, "Houthi Missile Strike Injures More Than a Dozen In Tel Aviv," *BBC*, December 11, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3we936v266o>
- 50 Bernd Kaussler, "Tracing Qatar's Foreign Policy Trajectory and its Impact on Regional Security," *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, September 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12689>
- 51 Mohammed Alyahya, "The Middle East's New Battle Lines," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2018, https://ecfr.eu/special/battle_lines/saudi_arabia
- 52 Mehran Haghiriian, "Walking a Tightrope: How Gulf States are Navigating the Iran-Israel Conflict," *Stimson*, October 11, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/walking-a-tightrope-how-gulf-states-are-navigating-the-iran-israel-conflict/>
- 53 Tovah Lazaroff, "No Peace Talks with Israel Without A Two-State Solution, Saudi Arabia Says," *The Jerusalem Post*, February 7, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-785551>



BCSP Belgrade Centre
for Security Policy
bezbednost.org