



## Concern That Israel Could Be on the Brink of a Two-Front War as Tensions with Hezbollah Rise

This past weekend saw a dramatic turn in the already tense situation on Israel's northern border, as Hezbollah launched its largest rocket barrage to date following a strategic Israel Defense Forces (IDF) strike against a senior Hezbollah leader. This exchange follows over several thousand others that the two have had since the October 7th Hamas attacks. The ongoing tit-for-tat strikes were initiated shortly after October 7th and are believed to have nearly led to a preemptive Israeli strike, after an intelligence assessment revealed that Hezbollah had taken up positions on Israel's northern border and was on the verge of crossing over. The escalation comes at the same time that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has disbanded his war cabinet following the exit of two of the six members. While Israel has insisted that this has not changed the chain of command, this shakeup will likely have longer-term effects, especially as Israel faces what could quickly turn into a two-front war with a very well-supplied northern combatant.

Israel now claims that it has taken control of 60% of Rafah in Gaza, destroyed two of the four remaining Hamas battalions, and laid siege to the center of the city. These military operations are ongoing, as Israel has conducted overnight assaults that have seen dozens of civilians killed and hundreds wounded. With these developments and international pressure for a cessation of hostilities rising, logically, negotiations for an end to the violence should be well underway. However, despite efforts by the United States and others, no ceasefire deal has been reached, and the alarming number of civilian deaths have continued. The combination of an inability to find mutually-agreed upon conditions in negotiations and the IDF's willingness to carry out attacks regardless of the presence of innocent civilians means that, as of now, the conflict perpetuates and risks devolving into a wider-scale regional war.

With Hamas' ability to counterstrike and resupply greatly diminished by the longstanding nature of the now nearly nine-month conflict, the question is what this means for Hezbollah. The group has contended that it will not stop until a ceasefire has been reached in Gaza, but with Hamas depleted, Hezbollah and Israel are in precarious positions. This standoff is made all the more perilous by the recent exchanges by both sides. Israel and Hezbollah have taken dangerous postures, spurring concern over the potential destruction from a wider conflict in the Middle East. Should this occur, it is highly likely that this would draw in other regional actors as well. Cyprus specifically has been a talking point in Hezbollah's threats, as the group has determined that their munitions will fall on the island nation should it play host to the IDF in its bases and airports. Hezbollah is an altogether different entity than the one that Israel faced back in 2006, and the buildup of munitions, supply lines, tunnel networks, and the strong relationship that it has with Iran mean that a conflict with Hezbollah will likely cost the IDF much more in terms of lives and supplies. An escalation of this nature will also bring the U.S. ever closer to conflict with Iran. This would certainly strain U.S. resources, as supplying Ukraine, Taiwan, and Israel has already divided U.S. attention, and a possible additional increase in arms and supplies that could come with a two-front war for Israel would be detrimental to U.S. interests globally.

U.S. Envoy Amos Hochstein has been in talks with both the Lebanese and Israeli governments since the violent exchanges began on October 7th, but has seen little progress. This comes even after the offer of U.S. economic aid to Lebanon, and the recognition that de-escalation and an agreement on a defined border between Israel and

Hezbollah is the most attainable and realistic goal. The historical agreement provided by UNSCR 1701, which outlined the existing Lebanon-Israel border and relied on the Lebanese government to control its own territory, seems to have been thrown out the window. Attempt at continuous de-escalation can be considered a failure as of now, but yet and still the framework provided by the previous resolution may provide the building blocks for an eventual agreement.

All told, the daily attacks in the preceding months have displaced nearly 100,000 people, and should an all-out conflict break out, that number is expected to rise to well over 200,000. The risk of this happening is significant, especially with Hezbollah's target strike capabilities. The group has demonstrated an ability to hit precise targets such as military installations, runways, and areas of sensitive importance around Israel's northern border. The threat of this continuing is one that the group seems to be primarily relying on, as evidenced by the release of a drone video identifying more sensitive secure sites deeper within Israel.