

How the Israel Defense Forces Might Confront Hezbollah

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The inevitability of another war between Israel and the Hezbollah terrorist organization seems nearly certain; however, at present, neither belligerent in this longstanding feud desires immediate conflict.¹ The two sides confronted each other in Lebanon in the 1980s and in the 1990s, until the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) withdraw from that country in 2000, concluding a campaign that had come to be known as the “Israeli Vietnam.” In 2006, war erupted between the two combatants again, lasting a mere 34 days.² That war ended in a draw. Since then, the two sides have been preparing for another round.

In recent years, the IDF has been adapting to fight hybrid forces such as Hezbollah and Hamas, instead of focusing on the militaries of Arab states like Syria and Egypt. This transformation has been a challenging process, although overall the risk of state-on-state war is much lower for Israel in comparison with the era of high intensity wars (1948–1982). Even a coalition of hybrid forces together with the Syrian military in its current strength does not pose an existential threat to Israel, in contrast to the danger of an alliance between Arab states from the 1950s to the 1970s. However the IDF still must be ready for major combat.³

Since 2012, Israel has carried out hundreds of sorties in Syria, aiming to reduce as much as possible the delivery of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁴ Israel avoided directly attacking Hezbollah in Lebanon, although some in Israel support a preemptive strike against the terrorist organization.⁵ There is a low probability that Israel will conduct a massive surprise offensive against Hezbollah due to its cost and the uncertainty of the outcome. Despite the military advantages of capturing Hezbollah off guard, Israel prefers to continue to contain the organization. Israel hopes that like another of its enemies, Syria, Hezbollah might also decline through other means, without confronting this group on the battlefield. After all, Syria once possessed a quite large and powerful military, which had been the IDF’s main enemy since the mid-1980s, until the civil war in Syria brought a sharp decline of the Syrian military. Hezbollah might lose much of its power if its Iranian patron weakens in the wake of new sanctions imposed upon the rogue state. Sometimes waiting, while maintaining deterrence, is the best way to handle a foe. However, there might yet be a war between Israel and Hezbollah, with or without Iranian instigation.

Firepower of Both Sides

The IDF outnumbers Hezbollah in troops and weapon systems. However, Hezbollah has up to 150,000 rockets and missiles that can reach every spot in Israel.⁶ Hezbollah might fire more than a 1,000 missiles and rockets a day during a war. The group's leaders, however, will be aware that doing so will bring a fierce Israeli response. While Iran too might seek to avoid a full-scale war, a clash between Israel and Hezbollah might still lead to such a conflict.

The Israeli Air Force (IAF) has defense systems, such as the Iron Dome, that can intercept only a portion of Hezbollah's projectiles due to their vast numbers.⁷ Furthermore, defense systems cannot destroy the missiles and rockets on the ground before they are launched. This is why the IAF has been training to launch thousands of sorties in a very short time, aiming at destroying Hezbollah targets, including rocket launchers.⁸ Israel's F-35 could take part in the war, but this highly advanced aircraft is needed mostly against advanced air defenses that Hezbollah does not have. Both sides will use unmanned aerial vehicles for gathering intelligence and attacks.

The Israeli Offensive

On April 2018, the IDF published an updated version of the *Israel Defense Forces Strategy Document*, which strives for a decisive and quick victory.⁹ This is a tall order considering the strength and elusive structure of Hezbollah and its roots inside the Lebanese Shiite community.

The IDF has several potential fronts—mostly Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and Syria and Iran in the Golan Heights.¹⁰ If Lebanon is its only front, then the IDF will dispatch its best units there. Even if Israel faces more than one front, the fight in Lebanon will be its top priority. However, it does not make sense to overcrowd south Lebanon, with its narrow and often winding routes. IDF vehicles might be stuck in traffic jams, including during combat, so only the head of the columns would be able to fight back.

One of Hezbollah's main strongholds is in Dahiyeh, a suburb of the Lebanese capital, Beirut, which is about 55 miles north of the Israeli border.¹¹ The last time the IDF reached Beirut by land was in the 1982 war, and getting there took about a week. During high-intensity wars such as those of 1956 and 1967, the IDF advanced dozens of miles quickly. However, the IDF penetrated less than two miles in its wars in the Gaza Strip in 2008–2009 and 2014; so, Israeli forces were not tested in launching a massive offensive deep inside hostile territory. The IDF has to be skilled in this matter, even if it does not prove necessary to approach Beirut again.

The IDF might penetrate several dozen miles into Lebanon without remaining there for more than a few weeks or so. Israel does not want to renew its costly deployment in Lebanon. Instead, the IDF will stay there only long enough to annihilate Hezbollah's military infrastructure, mostly rockets and missiles, and then withdraw.

The IDF would need to concentrate on Hezbollah's centers of gravity, and there might be more than one. The Israeli offensive might be launched on a wide front to quickly reach many objectives and to save time, while putting maximum pressure on Hezbollah. In addition, due to the rugged terrain in south Lebanon, the IDF would strive to exploit any accessible road. This maneuver would also allow the IDF to gain momentum, which would help in shortening the war.

Manpower and the Corps

The IDF, in a major war, relies on its citizen—active-duty personnel and reservists—who might be mobilized under fire from Lebanon. Leaving their families while rockets are striking their neighborhoods might cause some troops to hesitate. Hezbollah might also hit bases, where Israeli soldiers get their weapons, vehicles, materiel, and so forth. Israeli troops will continue to be exposed to Hezbollah's fire on roads to the front and in assembly areas. Where there are no bunkers, Israeli forces require basic shelters, such as foxholes. Israeli troops have to be aware that sometimes they have to dig their own cover.



(Reuters photo by Baz Ratner)

Figure 1. Urban warfare training. A view of a mock village set up by the Israeli army to conduct urban warfare exercises, at the urban warfare training center at Tze'elim military base in southern Israel.

For decades, the IDF has been training in urban warfare, since Hezbollah deploys its rockets in towns and villages across Lebanon. In 2005, the IDF built an urban warfare training center at the Tze'elim Army Base in the Negev Desert. This has become one of the most technologically advanced training centers in the world. At Tze'elim and other Israeli bases, there are mock villages designed to look like those the IDF may encounter in Lebanon, replete with homes, mosques, and clothes drying in the air.¹²

The IDF's sophisticated command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) network assists ground, air, and sea operations and upgrades the cooperation among Israeli services.¹³ Despite the clear advantages of this advanced technology, the IDF should not rely on it too much, because it is vulnerable to cyberattacks. There is also the problem of overwhelming officers with too much information. The IDF ran training in which Israeli troops had to quickly adjust to carrying out their missions without their cutting-edge gear.

In recent decades the IDF infantry became more important than armor, due to the nature of the fight against hybrid forces, particularly in urban areas. However, tanks are still required to support the infantry. Tanks are also needed in generating the momentum. Therefore, the spearhead of a hypothetical Israeli offensive would include elite armored units such as the 401st "Iron Tracks" Brigade, with its Merkava Mark IV tanks.¹⁴ The Israeli military industry produces ammunition for urban warfare, such as the M339 multipurpose tank cartridge.¹⁵

Israeli infantry such as the crack 1st "Golani" and the 35th "Paratroopers" brigades will move with Achzarit and the Namer heavy-armored personal carriers along with the vulnerable and antiquated M113.¹⁶ The latter should be used to transfer troops to the battlefield but not to storm the enemy, unless there are no other choices. Even then, some Israeli troops might prefer to walk near the M113—the perception being it is safer than being inside one.

The IDF's combat engineers are essential in clearing routes from land mines and improvised explosive devices and paving new roads to bypass those that would be heavily mined or damaged. Combat engineers would assist also in fighting underground and in crossing rivers in Lebanon. Hezbollah might sabotage bridges; so, the IDF will have to build new ones, doing so under fire. If the IDF is not well-prepared to conduct such measure, casualties and delays are likely.

Israeli ground units will strike deep inside Lebanon—not only by land but from the air as well, with the IDF's new 89th "Oz" Commando Brigade, which was established in 2015.¹⁷ The brigade will land its troops from CH-53 Yasur and UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters. Parachuting is also an option. Other Special Forces and high quality units will contribute in attacking key targets and collect-

ing intelligence. This effort must be coordinated as part of the overall Israeli offensive to have a positive effect.

In the 1982 war, the IDF carried out a relatively substantial amphibious landing on 6 June—sort of an Israeli D-Day, if you will—although leadership failed to fully exploit the landing. The lessons from that operation cannot be implemented if the IDF does not possess a real option to again conduct such a major amphibious assault. However, the IDF has hesitated to develop this aspect because of other priorities, budget constraints, and a dearth of experience in the complicated field, which demands a tight cooperation among air, sea, and land units. This represents a missed opportunity. Lebanon's long coastline offers a means for the IDF to outflank Hezbollah from the sea and then strike the latter from its flanks and the rear.

Hezbollah's Intentions and Capabilities

Hezbollah is in a precarious position. While the group attempts to balance its commitments, domestic and international, within the Levant, it is leery of prompting another major conflict at present. However, each measure that the group implements to counter possible Israeli attacks makes the likelihood of just such a conflagration more probable.¹⁸

On 3 January 2020 the United States killed Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force. Israel welcomed the attack. Soleimani was one of Israel's most dangerous foes, who among others helped Hezbollah to receive weapons. Despite this setback, Hezbollah was careful not to provoke Israel, at least not in the weeks after the assassination. However, Hezbollah might be involved later on in an Iranian retribution against the United States and/or Israel, in the Middle East or elsewhere.

Hezbollah has significant influence in the Lebanese parliament and government as well. Through those bodies, Hezbollah tries to hide its terrorist identity, pretending to be a legitimate party. The group also has ties to the Lebanese military.

In 2018–2019, the IDF found and destroyed tunnels leading from Lebanon to Israel.¹⁹ In the next war Hezbollah will try, above and below the ground, to infiltrate its operatives into Israel. Its cadres can seize a very tiny piece of land or part of a village near the border. The IDF will quickly kill or capture Hezbollah's fighters who breach into Israel. However, Hezbollah will, of course, portray that incursion—no matter how brief or unproductive—as a victory, necessitating that Israel emphasize the attempt as only a failed raid.

Hezbollah hides its rockets in urban areas. Israeli firepower, aimed at the rockets there, might inflict enormous collateral damage to those places and those living there. Thus, Israel, before striking towns and villages that serve as a fire base,

will allow Lebanese noncombatants to leave their houses, knowing that such a warning gives Hezbollah ample time to better establish its position.

Hezbollah has a few tanks, including Soviet-era T-72 main battle tanks, which will be exposed to Israeli air strikes.²⁰ During any Israeli offensive inside Lebanon, Hezbollah would have no ability to conduct major counterattacks due to Israel's overwhelming firepower and control of the air. Hezbollah could ambush small Israeli forces on a company-level or smaller, particularly vulnerable ones like those from the logistic corps. For the IDF, preventing Hezbollah from moving men and supply from one spot to another inside Lebanon could be difficult if it is done in small scale at night, exploiting the rough terrain Hezbollah knows well.

On 14 August 2019, Gen Hossein Salami, the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, said that "Hezbollah has now developed such an extent of power through the experience of confrontation against proxy wars that it is now able to wipe the Zionist regime off the map in any possible war by itself."²¹ Indeed, Hezbollah gained many lessons in the Syrian Civil War that could help the group in confronting Israel. However, a fight against the IDF would be quite a big challenge for Hezbollah, since the IDF is much better armed and trained than Syrian rebels. In Syria, Hezbollah also enjoyed air superiority, due to the support of the Russian and Syrian air forces, which will not participate in the war against Israel. Instead, the IAF's F-15 and F-16 multirole fighter aircraft will rule the skies and will bomb Hezbollah throughout Lebanon. While Hezbollah has some air defenses that might shoot down a few Israeli aircraft, such losses would not stop the IAF. Therefore, Hezbollah has to adjust from having air superiority and air support, as was the case in Syria, to a new reality in any conflict in Lebanon.

In the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah lost more than 2,000 dead, a significant cost for this group.²² The fear of paying an even a higher price if the group confronts Israel, besides the huge damage that will be inflicted to Lebanese towns and villages, deters Hezbollah from getting involved in a full-scale war against Israel. If Iran demands that Hezbollah attack Israel, the group's leaders can try to limit the clash in the hope of reducing the casualties and the damages it can ill-afford to absorb.

Conclusion

The IDF has an overwhelming edge over Hezbollah, but it would not be easy for Israel to defeat this tough and elusive hybrid force. The two sides will continue to try to avoid a war because of such a conflict's substantial cost for both of them. Israel will probably not launch a preemptive attack but will go on containing Hezbollah as much as possible. However, if Israel decides to engage Hezbollah, such an undertaking should be done in the best terms, i.e. when the IDF can

capture Hezbollah by surprise. Either way, the IDF plans to conduct a massive air, land, and sea offensive, aiming at gaining a quick and decisive victory.

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Notes

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