

# Are the US and Israel Preparing for War in the Middle East? Lebanon is Next?

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*Despite the lack of visible preparation for war, the Lebanese authorities consider it important to take all necessary precautions for a possible Israeli attack on Lebanon. Israel is not alone; this time its forces enjoy unlimited military support from the US administration through the US forces stationed in Israel and in various bases in the Middle East. Israel also enjoys financial support from Middle Eastern countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, in case of a punitive war against non-state allies of Iran. Indeed, Israel sent a sharp message to the Lebanese authorities revealing its intention to bomb selected targets in the country, considered threatening by Israel. Lebanon answered: "a bombing of targets in Lebanon will be met with a similar bombing in Israel and we are ready for a possible escalation if it is imposed on us".*

The US and Israel are working side by side against Iran and its allies/partners in the Middle East. In Lebanon, the Lebanese authorities received an official warning, via France, revealing the intention of Israel to bomb specific locations in Lebanon, claimed to host missile factories. The local authorities answered:

"Lebanon shall not initiate a war against Israel. But if any location in Lebanon is bombed, a similar and equivalent and precise location in Israel will be bombed. If Israel bombs several locations, Lebanon will respond by bombing an equivalent number of locations and objectives. If Israel escalates, Lebanon will follow and the response may spill over the borders of Lebanon where its allies may not hesitate to take part in a war against Israel", said a well-informed source in the country.

"Unlike the US military, Israel has air force superiority in the Middle East. The US forces can only offer military advice, intelligence, interception missiles batteries, supply of weapons and ammunition, exert pressure on Middle Eastern countries (mainly Saudi Arabia and the Emirates) to finance a military campaign with the objective to cripple Iran's allies in the region, and make sure the UN is not taking any resolution against any possible Israeli aggression. But real attacks are normally carried out by the Israel Air Force", said the source.

Notwithstanding the non-state militant leadership in Lebanon who "personally estimate that the possibility of war is unlikely", "worst-case scenarios have been laid down by the high military command", as the leader of Hezbollah said in his last speech, reminding his listeners of "the treacherous capacity of Israel" (to start a sudden war).



Several war scenarios were discussed.

“In a first case scenario, it is unlikely that Israel would start bombing selective targets from its bank of objectives and then decide to stop because Lebanon would react by hitting specific targets drawn from its own bank of objectives and hurt Israel with its precision missiles”, said the source.

The non-state actor in Lebanon has several types of rockets and missiles, estimated by Israel at around 150,000, “capable of creating enough confusing to Israel’s interception missiles to limit their efficacy. It will be enough if 20% to 30% of these highly destructive and precise missiles reach their desired objectives. The question remains: is Netanyahu ready to engage himself in a long and destructive war? Our experience indicates the opposite, and Israel’s recent clash with the Palestinians in Gaza shows that it is hard for Israel to stand for a long and destructive war where missiles can reach the heart of Tel Aviv, its airports and infrastructures”, said the source.

Israel possess “Iron Dome” interception batteries to defend itself against rockets and missiles launched from Gaza or Lebanon. It has the “Arrow 3” and “Arrow 4” to intercept ballistic missiles. It has also the US “THAAD” System, the “Barak 8” and “David’s Sling”.



Nevertheless, the capability of Israel to intercept and destroy cruise missiles launched from different parts of Lebanon is doubtful. Moreover, Israel’s capability to defend its offshore oil and gas rigs as well as its harbour against the advanced anti-ship “Yakhont” missiles is highly doubtful, despite the deployment of Iron Dome on these platforms and protection vessels. Also, in Lebanon, anti-air missiles capable of downing helicopter or jets at low or

medium altitude have been delivered by Syria. This means the Israeli Navy will be out of the possible war equation, along with Israeli helicopters. The Israeli Air Force will be in need, in this case, of highly expensive laser guided missiles launched from high altitude.

In past years and wars, Lebanese militants used to fight within the 2000 sq km of South Lebanon as its military operational area, deploying forces and effectives to launch missiles and rockets against Israel. In any possible future war, the area of operation will be enlarged to beyond 6000 sq km, more than half of Lebanon's 10300 sq km, including the Bekaa valley and the Lebanese-Syrian borders. The capability and the possession of long-range solid fuel missiles with highly destructive warheads will allow a rapid deployment of effectives beyond the south of Lebanon, making it more difficult for the Israeli Air Force to localise, attack and destroy military positions in mountains and valleys spread all over the country.

Ground forces are the only possibility for Israel to make a change on the ground in case of war. One of the worse-case scenarios discussed and microscopically examined is the possibility of Israel pushing forces through the Golan heights, on the Syrian Zabadani axis, to reach the Lebanese-Syrian borders. This scenario was one of the possibilities contemplated during the 2006 war but not implemented. In this case, Israel could reach the Lebanese-Syrian borders and close them, imposing its conditions before leaving control over the borders to a United Nations forces capable of intercepting and blocking any flow of weapons into Lebanon in the future. But again, for Israel to force its way so far and stay until a negotiate political outcome is agreed is not a simple task and is full of risks. Syrian elite forces and their allies have established many traps on the way.

When military scenarios and possible plans are shared, it can be a message for both sides that these possibilities have been explored and taken into account. The aim is to tell belligerents that the element of surprise will no longer be effective, in order to reduce the possibilities of war where the objectives will be hard to achieve.



Are both sides ready to show their strength without using it?

Some in Lebanon believe Israel is not ready. Israeli military officials have indeed complained about the lack of readiness of the “internal front” in case of war. Military experts believe the internal front in any country is never fully ready in case of war, but there is a minimum of precautions to adopt to protect and warn the population in advance. Israel is working on these measures and considering seriously the possibility of dislodging and relocating Israeli settlements and villages to prevent casualties and possible cross-fire situations or kidnapping. All that would come at a high cost. Israel may very well opt for the less costly option: the financial strangulation of Lebanon.

Hezbollah may not be seriously affected by the US “strangulation war”. The US sanctions on Shia donations and wealthy Shia businessmen created peripheral damage to the non-state actor whose militants receive their regular salaries, enjoy free medical support and even receive a gift for the beginning of the month of Ramadan (6 of May) of \$200 for each contractor and employee. Donations received from abroad were used to ease the life of militants willing to marry or refurbish their homes. That bonus ceased but nothing else.

But the US administration and Israel want the Lebanese to complain about sanctions and blame Hezbollah as the cause of sanctions and the reason for the lack of financial support to the country.

In this context, a military war is unlikely. The US and Israel are better off adjusting to live with the presence of Lebanon defended by a non-state actor that is part of Lebanese

society. This will reduce any need for the use of weapons in the long term.

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