

U.S. Poured Billions of Military Aid Into Lebanon. Now Israel Threatens to Invade.

The U.S. is warning Israel against launching all-out war on Hezbollah — while continuing to send Israel unconditional military aid.

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In-depth Report: [THE WAR ON LEBANON](#)

Attacks between Israel and Hezbollah, the militia and political party based just across Israel's northern border with Lebanon, are fueling fears that a wider regional conflict may erupt any day.

Hezbollah, an Iran-backed Shia group loosely allied with Hamas, has been in a low-level war with Israel since the conflict in Gaza began last October. Hezbollah, which is believed to have an arsenal of more than 150,000 rockets and missiles, has repeatedly emphasized that attacks will continue as long as the war persists.

Over the weekend, a rocket attack that the U.S. and Israel said originated in Lebanon killed at least 12 civilians in the Israel-controlled Golan Heights. The Israeli foreign minister said that the attack “crossed all red lines,” and said “the moment of all-out war against Hezbollah and Lebanon” is approaching. Hezbollah denied responsibility for the strike.

On Monday, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken cautioned Israeli President Isaac Herzog about ramping up its war with Hezbollah in response on a call, according to State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller.

But the conflict has been escalating for weeks. Israel has increased [airstrikes](#) aimed at the group. Current and [former](#) Israeli officials have also spoken publicly about shifting their attention from Hamas to the more powerful Hezbollah.

After Israeli officials [warned](#) of the possibility of launching a war that would send Lebanon “[back to the Stone Age](#),” the Biden administration [intensified diplomatic efforts](#) to [defuse tensions](#) and forestall a conflict that U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said could have “[terrible consequences for the Middle East](#).”

The low-level war has created a tinderbox that could explode into a regional conflict involving Iran, [Iraq](#), Syria, [Turkey](#), [Yemen](#) and, to an even greater extent than now, the United States.

Lebanon and Israel are both U.S. allies, and America has poured billions of dollars in military aid into Lebanon, trained tens of thousands of its troops, and operated a proxy commando unit run by U.S. Special Operations forces there for years.

After all that aid and billions of dollars in support, Hezbollah remains Lebanon’s dominant

military force and a [quasi](#)-“state within a state” that wields significant influence in Lebanon’s government. [Israel’s war on Gaza](#) has only bolstered the group’s support, according to some metrics.

While Hezbollah’s popularity is centered in Lebanon’s south and east, the group has [gained support](#) among non-Shiite Lebanese across the country since the outbreak of the war in Gaza due to its resistance to Israel, according to a survey by the Arab Barometer.

The U.S. has also contributed to the group’s sway, says Erik Sperling of Just Foreign Policy, an advocacy group critical of mainstream Washington foreign policy. “U.S. support for the mass killing of Palestinians is so indefensible that it is actually strengthening groups like Hezbollah, who are able to capitalize on their firm but relatively restrained opposition to U.S.-Israeli actions,” he told The Intercept.

In Lebanon’s south, the conflict with Israel in the past year has left towns and villages [deserted and destroyed](#). More than 1,900 casualties, including 466 deaths, have been reported and almost 100,000 residents have already been displaced, [according](#) to the United Nations.

Last month, Human Rights Watch released a report chronicling [Israel’s widespread use of white phosphorus](#) in southern Lebanon. The use of the incendiary agent, which ignites when exposed to oxygen and can cause gruesome lifelong injuries or death, may be a violation of international law and is, according to the rights group, “putting civilians at grave risk and contributing to civilian displacement.”



Artillery-delivered white phosphorus munition being airburst over Kfar Kila, a Lebanese border village with Israel, as seen from Marjayoun in southern Lebanon, November 22, 2023. © 2023 Hussein Malla/AP Photo

But as grave as their suffering has been to this point, a wider war between Israel and

Hezbollah would be “catastrophic” for the people of Lebanon, said Seth Binder of the Washington-based Middle East Democracy Center. “A war would only make things exponentially worse,” he told The Intercept. “For the region, it risks a further conflagration, likely at enormous cost to the people of the region and U.S. national security interests.”

Lebanon has been in crisis since well before the Gaza war began, having been [overwhelmed by the Covid-19 pandemic](#); the [largest refugee population](#) per capita in the world; systemic corruption; and the [2020 explosion](#) of a warehouse full of fertilizer at Beirut’s port that [killed more than 200](#), wounded another 6,000, and demolished significant portions of the capital, causing billions of dollars in damage. Since then, Lebanon’s economy has collapsed, with its GDP [shrinking](#) from \$55 billion in 2018 to \$31.7 billion in 2020 — one of the steepest depressions in modern history. About 80 percent of the population is now estimated to be living in poverty.

The Senate Armed Services Committee recently summed up the situation in a [report](#):

“Lebanon was already assessed to be on the [precipice of being a failed state](#) prior to the [Gaza war], which is negatively impacting the stability of the Lebanese Armed Forces, and their capabilities, to counter and deter regional threats including violent terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah.”

Earlier this month, Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, threatened to attack new areas in Israel if its military does not stop killing civilians in southern Lebanon.

“The resistance missiles will target new Israeli settlements that were not targeted before,” he [warned](#). “If Israeli tanks come to Lebanon, they will not only have a shortage in tanks but will never have any tanks left.”

The Biden administration has reportedly [warned Israel](#) against launching a “limited war” in Lebanon.

“Restoring calm along the Blue Line remains a top priority for the United States and must be of the utmost importance for both Lebanon and Israel,” a State Department spokesperson, referring to [the border between the countries](#), told The Intercept. “The conflict along the Blue Line between Israel and Hezbollah has gone on for long enough. It’s in everyone’s interest to resolve it quickly and diplomatically. We continue to believe a diplomatic resolution is both achievable and urgent.”

At the same time, the U.S. has also [assured Israeli leaders](#) of continued military support, even in the event of a full-scale war with Hezbollah. Since the beginning of the conflict in Gaza, the U.S. has called out Israel’s “[indiscriminate](#)” bombing and [pressed](#) its ally to “implement a series of specific, concrete, and measurable steps to address civilian harm [and] humanitarian suffering.” Its support has nonetheless been almost unwavering despite the fact that the conflict has [killed](#) more than 39,000 Palestinians, injured more than 89,000, [displaced](#) 90 percent of the population, and reduced most of Gaza to [rubble](#).

“The nearly unconditional support that the United States has provided Israel over the past nine months has not only resulted in horrific tragedy in Gaza and extended the war in Gaza, but it has also allowed Israel to continue to escalate against Hezbollah, further risking a wider regional conflict,” Binder told The Intercept.

The U.S. has also [cautioned](#) Lebanese officials that it cannot prevent an Israeli invasion. This

mirrors Biden administration policy in regard to the Gaza war where the U.S. has kept arms flowing to Israel despite [the administration's own assessment](#) that U.S. weapons were likely used by Israel in [violation](#) of international humanitarian law.

“Biden’s efforts to avert a wider war in Lebanon are plagued by the same failures as his policy towards Israeli slaughter in Gaza. Israeli generals acknowledge that Israel cannot survive without U.S. diplomatic and military support, and as a result, the U.S. could force Israel to change policy at any time,” said Sperling of Just Foreign Policy. “Biden is reluctant to employ this leverage, however, because he doesn’t want to alienate the pro-Israel constituencies in the U.S. who have appreciated his steady support for the biggest mass killing of Palestinians in history.”

The US has a long and checkered history in Lebanon, including a 1958 intervention by U.S. Marines to forestall an insurrection there. In 1983, during a civil war that lasted 15 years, [bombings](#) of the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut killed more than 300 people. The United States [blames](#) Hezbollah for both attacks and has long designated the group as a terrorist organization. (Israel invaded Lebanon, during this same war, [in 1982](#) and only left in 2000.)

For years, the U.S. has poured funds into the Lebanese Armed Forces to provide a [counterweight](#) to Hezbollah. A recent State Department [report](#) called the United States “Lebanon’s paramount security partner.” Since 2006, America has provided more than [\\$5.5 billion](#) in foreign assistance to Lebanon, including [\\$3 billion](#) in military aid.

The U.S. government has facilitated almost \$2 billion in Lebanese purchases through the Foreign Military Sales program, including light attack aircraft, helicopters, and Hellfire missiles. The U.S. separately provided Lebanon with 130 armored and tactical ground vehicles. From 2016 to 2021, the United States also authorized the export of more than \$82 million in U.S. military equipment to Lebanon, including \$12 million in [“firearms and related articles.”](#)

“U.S. security assistance to Lebanon has been quite extensive — one of the largest assistance programs in the world,” said Binder, noting that the U.S. has even rerouted tens of millions of dollars withheld from Egypt due to human rights concerns to Lebanon. “Despite the assistance, however the country remains incredibly unstable and its security forces remain unable to respond to Hezbollah’s domestic or regional operations.”

In addition to pumping military aid and arms into Lebanon, the U.S. also maintains its own small military presence in the country.

For years, the U.S. has waged a [“secret war”](#) in Lebanon against Sunni terror groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda, according to retired Gen. Joseph Votel, a former four-star commander who oversaw the effort; declassified documents; former special operators with knowledge of the program; and analysts who have investigated U.S. Code Title 10 § 127e — known in military parlance as “127-echo” — which allows Special Operations forces to use foreign military units as proxies.

Through 127e, the U.S. arms, trains, and provides intelligence to foreign forces. But unlike traditional foreign assistance programs, which are primarily intended to build local capacity, [127e partners are sent on U.S.-directed missions](#), targeting U.S. enemies to achieve U.S.

aims. The 127e program in Lebanon — code-named Lion Hunter — supported an elite unit known as the G2 Strike Force and was in operation as recently as 2019, according to a formerly secret Special Operations Command document obtained by The Intercept via the Freedom of Information Act.

Central Command, which oversees U.S. military operations in the greater Middle East, did not respond to questions about Lion Hunter and the number of U.S. troops who have been, and may still be, involved. But in a June “War Powers” report to Congress, President Joe Biden noted that approximately [75 United States military personnel](#) are deployed to Lebanon to “enhance the government’s counterterrorism capabilities and to support the counterterrorism operations of Lebanese security forces.”

In a joint written [statement](#) to the Senate Armed Services Committee in April, Christopher P. Maier, assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, and SOCOM’s commander, Gen. Bryan P. Fenton, also noted that U.S. commandos are “postured to prepare for a wide-range of contingency operations in Israel and Lebanon.”

In [testimony](#) before the House Armed Services Committee in March, Fenton called out Iran as “a longtime malign actor [that] leverages its proxies ... to sow instability in the Middle East,” specifically citing Hezbollah. But Special Operations Command refused to talk about America’s own proxy force in Lebanon. “Unfortunately, we cannot provide comment on ... whether the U.S. has continued to work with the G2 Strike Force,” James Gregory, a SOCOM spokesperson, told The Intercept.

The U.S. has trained more than [32,000 Lebanese troops](#), including 6,000 schooled in the United States since 1970.

Requests for comment about U.S. military assistance sent to Lebanon’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs were not returned.

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Featured image: Hezbollah supporters attend a Hassan Nasrallah speech in Beirut, 3 November 2023 (Licensed under CC BY 4.0)

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