

JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy

Lebanon Rocket Attacks

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On August 6, Hezbollah fired nineteen rockets into Israel, which the Israelis quickly retaliated against with artillery fire into southern Lebanon. The incident is a further escalation of what was already the largest uptick in cross-border fire in years. Left unchecked, there is growing potential for the tense situation along the Israel-Lebanon border to erupt into a deadly multifront war. The Lebanese state is at best failed and at worst coopted by Hezbollah, its misery a direct result of Iranian meddling in the country's affairs. The United States should not allow the Lebanese state and international community to escape responsibility for restraining Hezbollah and holding the group accountable for destabilizing rocket fire. But Washington should also understand that the most effective means for deterring a broader conflict remains ensuring that Israel has the capabilities it needs to prevail in any war as quickly as possible and protect its population and critical infrastructure from incoming munitions.

What Happened?

- Hezbollah [launched nineteen Katyusha rockets](#) into open areas of the Golan Heights on August 6, with three landing in Lebanon and sixteen reaching Israeli airspace.
 - Israel's Iron Dome short-range air defense system intercepted ten of the rockets, six fell into open areas, and there were no reported casualties.
 - The Lebanese army announced that they arrested four individuals for their participation in the rocket attacks and that the IDF fired approximately forty munitions at open areas in southern Lebanon.
 - Residents of a Syrian Druze village [reportedly stopped the truck](#) from which the rockets had been fired and assaulted Hezbollah members inside, accusing them of exposing the village to Israeli retaliation by firing from areas in close proximity to it.
- On August 4, [three rockets were launched](#) from Lebanon, allegedly by local Palestinian militants, with two landing in Israel and another failing to reach the border.

- The attack came on the first anniversary of the Beirut port explosion that caused at least 218 deaths and as [Lebanon now verges on economic collapse](#), which has been a direct result of Hezbollah and Iranian influence in the country.
 - Marking this anniversary, President Biden announced on August 4 that the United States would provide [nearly \\$100 million in additional humanitarian assistance](#) to Lebanon on top of the \$560 million it has provided over the past two years.
- Israel responded to the August 4 attack by launching artillery into Lebanon and then firing a second and third round of artillery roughly two hours later. In the early morning of August 5, [Israel launched airstrikes](#) against the sites in Lebanon from which the rockets had been fired and an additional location where rockets had previously been fired from.
- The rocket attacks from Lebanon coincided with an uptick in incendiary balloons from Gaza and shortly after Iran was blamed for both a July 29 kamikaze drone attacks against an Israeli-operated tanker in the Gulf of Oman, killing British and Romanian crew members, and the short-lived hijacking of another tanking off the UAE coast on August 3.
- Israeli Defense Minister [Benny Gantz warned](#) on August 5 that “Iran seeks to pose a multi-front challenge to Israel, as such is building up its forces in Lebanon and Gaza, deploying militias in Syria and Iraq and maintaining its supporters in Yemen. Iran is a global and regional problem and an Israeli challenge.... We need to continue to develop our abilities to cope with multiple fronts, for this is the future.”
- The U.S. State Department condemned both the August 4 and August 6 rocket attacks from Lebanon. Spokesman [Ned Price said](#), “we absolutely condemn the rocket attacks from armed groups, based in Lebanon, that were fired into Israel,” and [added](#) on August 6 that “the United States condemns in the strongest terms Hezbollah’s rocket attacks into Israel.”
- Last week’s rockets from Lebanon are part of a trend of increasing security issues on Israel’s northern border.
 - In July, two rockets were fired into Israel from Lebanon, reportedly by Palestinian militants, with one being intercepted by the Iron Dome and another hitting an open field.
 - During the latest conflict in Gaza in May 2021, [rockets](#) were fired from Lebanon at Israel on three separate occasions by alleged Palestinian militants, at times prompting retaliatory artillery fire by Israel.
 - In mid-July, Israel also [seized dozens of weapons and ammunition](#) along the Lebanese border that it believed would have been used in terror attacks inside Israel. Security officials said the [intercepted cache](#) was “the largest smuggling attempt in years.”

Why Does It Matter?

- Hezbollah's rocket fire into Israel signals a potential fraying of deterrence that has helped make the border with Lebanon Israel's quietest since the 2006 war.
 - Hezbollah may be trying to routinize periodic rocket fire on Israel's northern border communities to see if they can engage in gray zone warfare beneath the threshold of all-out conflict, similar to Hamas' regular harassment of Israeli civilian towns in the south near Gaza, using rockets and incendiary balloons.
 - The rocket fire could also be part of a broader Iranian effort to test the United States and the new Israeli government through increased regionwide pressure, including heating up conflicts in Gaza, southern Lebanon, and Iraq, escalating attacks at sea, and accelerating its nuclear program.
 - It is highly unlikely that the repeated rocket attacks in Lebanon attributed to Palestinian militants occurred without Hezbollah's knowledge, given the group's iron grip over southern Lebanon.
 - However, if Hezbollah did not know about the multiple attacks before they occurred, or was unable to prevent (or punish) attacks to which it objected, this would suggest it might be losing control over armed militants operating in southern Lebanon, creating a much greater potential for inadvertent escalation – including Hezbollah using any Israeli retaliatory action to justify escalating its own hostilities.
 - Neither side appears to be seeking an escalation after Hezbollah's August 6 rocket attacks, and both Israel and Hezbollah fired at open areas.
 - IDF Spokesperson Brig. Gen. Ran Kohav [told reporters](#) that “if Hezbollah wanted to carry out a significant response, they have the ability to do so.”
 - On August 7, [Nasrallah said](#) that Hezbollah “are not seeking a war but we are ready for it and we do not fear it.”
 - Hezbollah's rocket fire could be a face-saving retaliation for Israel's recent air strikes in response to the August 4 rocket attacks, which Hezbollah claimed were the most significant Israeli air strikes in Lebanon in several years.
- The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) have completely failed to enforce United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701, which calls for “the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon, so that...there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese State.”
 - Lebanese President Michel Aoun is an ally of Hezbollah and has praised the group's “major” and “essential” role in Lebanon's security. Similarly, Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah has [called the LAF](#) a “partner” and “pillar” in the “golden formula, “which means the resistance, the Army, and the people” fighting against Israel.

- Instead of disarming, Hezbollah's military capacity has grown under UNIFIL's watch from roughly 13,000 rockets and missiles before the 2006 conflict to approximately 130,000 today, including increasingly sophisticated precision munitions, anti-ship cruise missiles, drones, and antitank guided munitions.
- Even as Hezbollah has built up its arsenal, Israel has deterred the militia from initiating a massive conflict over the past 15 years.
 - Hezbollah has acknowledged that the [2006 war was an error](#). It has not wanted another war, especially considering the casualties it suffered recently in the Syria war keeping the Assad regime in power, and its preoccupation and responsibility for Lebanon's current economic and political collapse. Growing anti-Hezbollah sentiment has been a feature of large-scale protests inside Lebanon over the past year, providing strong evidence of the Shiite group's dwindling popularity at home.
 - Externally, Tehran wants to maintain Hezbollah for its own deterrence against Israel, wielding the group's rocket arsenal as a second-strike capability that would massively retaliate for any attack on Iran. It would be reluctant to expend that card in an unplanned war triggered by rocket fire from Palestinian militant groups in Lebanon.
 - Nevertheless, Hezbollah might see limited rocket fire against Israel as an acceptable tactical risk as it seeks to divert focus from the suffering its corrupt and oppressive dominance of the state have caused the Lebanese people, especially if it has plausible deniability via the Palestinian groups firing the rockets and can limit the Israeli military blowback against Lebanon itself.
- Tensions could rise quickly to a [full-blown war](#), especially if Israeli civilians or soldiers are killed by errant rockets, as both Hezbollah and Israel would have strong incentives to strike first and strike hard.
- As JINSA laid out in a [comprehensive report](#), a broad conflict would be devastating for both Israel and Lebanon, including Lebanese civilians in and around whose homes, hospitals, mosques, and schools Hezbollah intentionally and illegally places military equipment.
 - Such a conflict also would sharply accelerate Lebanon's already rapidly collapsing economy, raising the knock-on risk of complete state collapse.
 - A larger conflict would deplete Israel's limited stockpiles of air defenses and precision munitions necessary to strike projectiles, launchers, and other key military targets.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States needs a Lebanon strategy, with buy-in from its European partners, that seeks to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of Lebanese citizens, without strengthening Hezbollah or propping up Lebanon's corrupt political elite, and conditioning any economic or military support on major reforms that begin to curb Hezbollah's malign power over the state. Elements of such a strategy should include:
 - Increasing sanctions on Hezbollah and other political elites who facilitate its hegemonic role, including utilizing the [Sanctioning the Use of Civilians as Defenseless Shields Act \(Shields Act\)](#), which unanimously passed Congress in 2018 but has not been utilized, to designate those cooperating with Hezbollah to hide rockets in civilian areas across southern Lebanon;
 - Providing humanitarian assistance to Lebanon solely via trusted non-governmental groups.
 - Placing heavy conditionality on all other forms of international assistance to the Lebanese state tied to specific political, economic, and security-sector reforms, including requiring the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to start fulfilling its duties under UNSC Resolution 1701 to curb Hezbollah's weapons and military activities, and maintain quiet on the southern border;
 - Pressuring more European states to fully designate Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist group and hold the Lebanese government, LAF, and UNIFIL accountable for Hezbollah's actions;
 - Pressing the UN Security Council to condemn the escalation in rocket fire against Israel;
 - Using the renewal of UNIFIL's peacekeeping mandate in southern Lebanon at the end of August to insist that the LAF and UNIFIL fulfill their obligations under UNSCR 1701 to stop southern Lebanon from being used as a source of aggression against Israel.
- Since Hezbollah's dominance of the imploding Lebanese state makes it highly unlikely that Lebanon will take meaningful action to maintain stability on its southern border, the United States must understand that maintaining Israel's overwhelming military strength offers the best means of deterring Hezbollah and avoiding a dangerous miscalculation.
- Accordingly, Washington should provide funding to improve Israel's air defense capacity.
 - The Biden administration and Congress should expedite the replenishment of Israel's Iron Dome interceptors.
 - Congress should provide funding for Israel to buy 3-5 additional Iron Dome batteries.

- The United States should support the production of additional David's Sling and Arrow air defense systems to protect against Iranian and Hezbollah longer-range and precision weaponry, such as drones and ballistic and cruise missiles.
- The Biden administration should upgrade America's prepositioned stockpile of weapons and other military equipment in Israel, called WRSA-I, with the munitions Israel would need in a major war, such as Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM) that convert unguided bombs to precision munitions, as well as precision-guided GBU-39 and GBU-53/B small diameter bombs.
 - WRSA-I's official stated purpose is to support Israel's military needs in an emergency.
 - Precision munitions, combined with other precautionary measures, enable Israel to more effectively target military equipment placed by Hezbollah near civilian sites.
 - Depleting these stockpiles raises the risk of Israel having to fall back on using much less precise, unguided bombs.
 - The United States could loan Israel the weapons, or the Pentagon could use the Special Defense Acquisition Fund (SDAF) to expedite delivery.

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