



# The Next Unthinkable Attack: Growing Risks of a Third Lebanon War

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## Executive Summary

- Hamas' October 7 shock attack, and escalating tensions on the Israel-Lebanon border, are forcing Israel to reassess if its frayed deterrence can hold off massive conflict in the north while it undertakes in Gaza what could be its most demanding operation in decades.
- Since at least last year's Israel-Lebanon maritime boundary deal, Hezbollah has acted increasingly emboldened to escalate militarily what was long thought to be a fairly quiet frontier to Israel's north, as its leader Hassan Nasrallah leveraged his group's tightening coordination with other Iranian proxies to gauge and erode what he perceived as weakening Israeli deterrence and declining military readiness.
- Though Hezbollah likely does not want an all-out Third Lebanon War, which would be catastrophic for both sides, it nevertheless is raising the risks of serious escalation through its ongoing, lower-level attacks that seek to exploit Israel's distraction in Gaza, further erode Israeli deterrence, and potentially gain further victories and concessions.
- Now Israel faces a strategic crossroads in the north, which may be inseparable from the one it faces in the south: can its weakened deterrence hold off Nasrallah, at least while it focuses immediately on Hamas, or has its deterrent collapsed to the point that Hezbollah's entry into an Israel-Hamas war is a real possibility, absent further Israeli action?
- Israeli preemption is becoming increasingly plausible against Hezbollah. This is driven by several interrelated factors that have become more acute since October 7, namely:
  - » Hezbollah's much more formidable capabilities than Hamas, including its ability to conduct far larger and more lethal rocket, missile, and ground offensives from the very outset of hostilities, gives Israel a strong first-strike incentive to disrupt, blunt, and neutralize these threats before their full weight can be brought to bear;
  - » Israel's newfound urgency to restore deterrence against Iran and its proxies;
  - » Fears that escalation in the north could be much harder to control or defuse than in Gaza, given the prohibitive costs of Hezbollah unleashing a first strike of its own; and
  - » Concerns that IDF operations in Gaza could undermine its ability to deal with a second-front attack from Hezbollah, and that the risks of triggering such an attack would grow in proportion to the intensity and extensivity of the Gaza operation.

- Building directly on their important and positive steps thus far to bolster Israel's freedom of action and U.S. force posture in the Middle East, the Biden administration and Congress must proactively expand these efforts, in word and deed, to help prevent or mitigate an even bigger northern conflict which could move very fast and unexpectedly.

## Strategic Context

Intertwined with the shocking brutality of Hamas' October 7 assault is the strategic surprise that it was carried out by an enemy that Israel thought was both deterred from such brazen escalation, and lacked the skills, intelligence, and overall capabilities to carry it out. As it now confronts the daunting prospect of a major military operation in Gaza, Israeli leadership also must confront a festering problem that assumes even greater significance and urgency after October 7: the erosion, first gradually over many years and then more suddenly in recent months, of deterrence against Hezbollah in Lebanon, and, with it, the potential for an ensuing conflagration that would dwarf anything to come in Gaza, and in which time is against Israel.

### *Hezbollah Leaves Its Bunker*

The unexpected costs of the last major Israel-Hezbollah conflict, the Second Lebanon War in 2006, unsettled both sides and produced a largely consistent calm along the border. Iran exploited this lull over the next decade-plus to transform its primary terrorist proxy into the world's most formidable non-state military, and one that could credibly threaten to impose far greater costs on Israeli forces and society than it did even in 2006. During those same years, while Hezbollah diverted its main combat forces to propping up the Assad regime in Syria, Israel signaled its desire to avoid another direct conflict in Lebanon by interdicting Tehran's weapons transfers to Hezbollah in auxiliary theaters like Syria, in what it tellingly called the "campaign between the wars." By not systematically or decisively targeting Hezbollah's conspicuous buildup inside Lebanon after 2006, something which Israeli officials later admitted regretting, Israeli deterrence may have begun to erode years ago.

Well before October 7, therefore, Hezbollah felt its room for maneuver against Israel was widening, and the risks to itself increasingly acceptable, when it came to challenging the status quo along the Israel-Lebanon border on land and at sea. In July 2022, amid U.S.-brokered talks to resolve the maritime boundary dispute between Beirut and Jerusalem over potentially resource-rich waters, Hezbollah launched [four drones](#) toward Israel's Karish offshore natural gas rig. Though the deal forged that October offered economic benefits for both countries, the fact it entailed Israel completely renouncing longstanding territorial claims, and secured Lebanon's more maximal demands, conveyed to Nasrallah that blackmail and escalation were increasingly viable options to pressure a conflict-averse Israel into concessions.

In the following months, as perceptions of Israel's distraction and military unreadiness grew in tandem with persistent internal political turmoil, Hezbollah sought to compel further Israeli concessions by shifting its escalation to the land border, known as the Blue Line. In spring 2023 Hezbollah leaders [began gloating](#) how "everything that is happening in Israel is a sign of the end of this entity," and how it is "moving toward downfall and collapse." In March, the terrorist group sent an operative deep into central Israel to detonate a roadside explosive, an [operation](#) which Israel's national security adviser noted "was a kind of opposition we're not used to." In April, Hezbollah permitted Palestinian militants

to fire dozens of rockets at northern Israeli villages from southern Lebanon, the biggest cross-border exchange of fire since the 2006 war and part of a broader, unprecedentedly multifront attack on Israel with other Iran-backed proxies in Gaza, Syria, and the West Bank. In May, in [large-scale exercises](#) along the border that now in retrospect seem unsettlingly prescient, Hezbollah publicly rehearsed invading northern Israeli villages, taking hostages, and launching large rocket and missile barrages.

Timeline: Rising Tensions on Israel-Lebanon Border		
Date	Hezbollah Provocation	IDF Response
July 2022	Four drones launched toward Israeli offshore natural gas rig.	Drones intercepted, no response against drone launchers or associated sites.
3/13/23	Roadside bombing deep into central Israel seriously injures an Israeli citizen.	N/A
4/6/23	Hamas/PIJ fire dozens of rockets into northern Israel, wounding three Israeli civilians.	Airstrikes in southern Lebanon.
April-May	Erects two tents on Israeli side of Blue Line.	N/A (Hezbollah later removes one tent).
May 2023	Builds military outposts along Blue Line, violating UN Security Council Resolution 1701.	N/A
7/6/23	Anti-tank munition fired along Blue Line.	Artillery fire toward source of attack.
7/12/23	Damage to border fence, and explosive device planted along fence.	Controlled detonation of explosive device planted along fence.
7/16/23	Hezbollah armed patrols along Blue Line, violating UN Security Council Resolution 1701.	N/A
<b>--- Hamas 10/7 Attack ---</b>		
10/8/23	Dozens of mortar and artillery rounds fired over the Blue Line into Israel.	Counterbattery fire, and drone strike on remaining border tent.
10/9/23	PIJ infiltrators attack along border fence.	Airstrikes kill multiple PIJ and/or Hezbollah fighters.
	Retaliatory rocket and artillery fire kills three IDF personnel.	N/A
10/10/23	Antitank missile fire at Israeli tank.	Strike on Hezbollah observation post.
	Hamas/PIJ rocket fire into northern Israel.	Counterbattery fire.
10/11/23	Antitank missile fire at IDF positions.	Counterbattery fire.
10/13/23	Attacks on border fence, and cross-border drone launch.	Artillery and tank fire on border, and drone intercepted by air defenses.
10/14/23	Attempted infiltration of border fence, and several projectiles fired into northern Israel.	Three infiltrators killed, and drone counterstrikes on projectile launch sites.
	30-50 artillery and antitank rounds fired into northern Israel.	Artillery and tank fire, and drone strike.
10/15/23	Antitank missiles fired across the Blue Line kill two and injure four Israelis.	Artillery and airstrikes on Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon.
10/16/23	Antitank missiles, small arms fired at IDF units.	Artillery counterfire.
10/17/23	Antitank missile and/or infiltrators injure two IDF personnel and one Israeli civilian.	Four infiltrators killed, tank and artillery counterfire against antitank launch site.

Throughout these events, Hezbollah forces assiduously built at least 27 illegal military [outposts](#) along the Blue Line to replace positions and patrols held by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and UN peacekeepers (UNIFIL). During this time, Hezbollah also made little effort to disguise its increasingly frequent meetings with Hamas and Iranian military officials in Beirut. Then in June, it more directly tried to delegitimize Israel's presence in a contested area of the border, and perhaps even force its withdrawal, by erecting two tents on the Israeli side filled with troops and emblazoned in Hezbollah yellow, and [warning](#) "Israel won't dare to take one step against the tent," and that "any Israeli action to remove the tents will lead to war." In July, as Hezbollah fired an [antitank missile](#) into Israel and

sabotaged parts of Israel's border security fence, a senior Israeli official [reflected](#) on the string of recent events by noting "Nasrallah seems to have lost his fear. He is doing things he has not done since the Second Lebanon War, he is toying with a powder keg." As if to punctuate this comment, in September Israeli Defense Minister Gallant [revealed](#) Hezbollah, apparently with Iranian assistance, was further rewriting status quo by building a new military airfield just 12 miles from the Blue Line.

### *Israel's (Non-)Responses*

Between last year's maritime negotiations and Hamas' October 7 attack, Israel grappled with how to rebuild deterrence and disabuse Hezbollah's growing perceptions of Israeli distraction and weakness, while still avoiding crises or conflict that would distract from rising West Bank tensions and countering Iran's accelerating approach to the nuclear weapons threshold. Thus, it pursued a combination of clear verbal warnings and [\(in\)action](#) intended to limit the risks of escalation – an uneasy mix which only seemed to confirm for Hezbollah the wisdom of its serial provocations. Though the IDF intercepted the July 2022 drone launches, there was no other kinetic response to that attack or to Hezbollah's border tents, matters which were left instead to American and UN diplomats, respectively, to resolve. Nor did the IDF respond directly against Hezbollah's growing list of attacks along the Blue Line, similar to its concurrent efforts to avoid escalation with Hamas in Gaza by [clearly limiting](#) operations there to PIJ targets.

At the same time, however, Israeli officials ramped up their rhetoric toward Hezbollah. In May, after the April multifront attacks but before the tent construction, the IDF's intelligence chief [warned](#) that "Nasrallah is close to making a mistake that could plunge the region into a big war.... Let [our enemies] not be mistaken, we're ready to use force and we will do whatever is possible and necessary to bring calm." In August, in response to Hezbollah's threats of war if Israel took down the border tent, Defense Minister Gallant [reiterated](#) for Nasrallah "not to make a mistake.... If an escalation or conflict develops here, we will return Lebanon to the Stone Age. We don't want war, but we are ready to protect our citizens, our soldiers, and our sovereignty."

In the run-up to October 7, therefore, Israeli intelligence [assessed](#) that while Nasrallah did not want a full-blown Third Lebanon War, with all the costs and uncertainties it would entail for Hezbollah – not just militarily, but also politically in a country already teetering on economic collapse – the risks to him of escalation, and even of igniting a short-term conflict, no longer outweighed the potential benefits of further eroding Israeli deterrence and trying to lever additional concessions. Seeing a growing gulf between Israeli words and actions, Nasrallah and his cadres seemed evermore emboldened to leave the bunkers where they had sheltered since the shock of the 2006 conflict – both metaphorically and literally.

## Israel's Post-10/7 Northern Dilemma

The strategic surprise, and shocking brutality and effectiveness, of Hamas' October 7 attack shows in a clear, if retrospective, light the failure of Israel's attempts to maintain tacit détente with the Gazan terrorist group and compartmentalize its approaches toward Iran and its various proxies – all of whom increasingly work together to [encircle](#) Israel, chip away at its deterrence, and seize new opportunities to attack it with evermore lethal capabilities.

Consequently, as it contemplates what could be its biggest-ever Gaza operation, Israel simultaneously confronts the urgent, and even far more consequential, strategic dilemma on its northern front. Since October 7, Hezbollah has ramped up the intensity and pace of its provocations that resulted in both IDF and Hezbollah fatalities, to the extent that the past week has seen more exchanges of fire than the entire year preceding it. On October 12, Iran's foreign minister declared – while meeting with Nasrallah in [Beirut](#), portentously – that opening other fronts is a “real possibility,” reflecting Tehran's [broader](#) efforts to [integrate](#) its proxies' strategic and operational efforts against Israel. Hezbollah reportedly also has [warned](#) Israel of its preparations to attack, should the IDF enter Gaza on the ground.

Israel now faces a strategic crossroads, where it must decide whether its weakened deterrence can hold off Nasrallah, at least while it focuses immediately on Hamas, or whether that deterrence has collapsed to the point that Hezbollah's catastrophic entry into conflict is a real possibility, absent further Israeli action.

Though the Lebanon border standoff held fast for years, given Hezbollah's increasing escalation over the last year and now Hamas' earthshaking attack – which shattered Israel's belief in its continued ability to hold off Iran's proxies – it appears Israel may be forced to conclude that deterrence has become too tenuous and unreliable in the north. Indeed, unlike its past Gaza campaigns, Israel must now countenance the very real possibility of Hezbollah and others opening up additional fronts to complicate IDF operations against Hamas. The IDF's margin for error and window for patience are also much smaller in the north, due to Hezbollah's far greater ability to overwhelm Israel's defenses and visit destruction on the entire country, either in an all-out surprise attack or through rapid escalation that spirals out of further lower-level Hezbollah provocations. This all means that Israeli preemption is rapidly moving from an abstract consideration to a very real near-term contingency – and one that could move much faster than what awaits in Gaza.

## Dynamics of the Next Northern War

### *Preemption vs. Devastation*

As JINSA laid out in a comprehensive [2018 report](#), Hezbollah's astounding rearmament since 2006 gives it unparalleled capacity to devastate Israeli forces and society. Even if a blitz from the north failed to catch Israeli civilians unawares like October 7, Hezbollah's arsenals can credibly threaten to cause cumulative damage beyond anything the Jewish state has faced since at least 1973, and possibly since its 1948-49 War of Independence. In turn, the urgency to promptly neutralize or mitigate these threats gives Israel its most compelling argument, since at least the 1967 Six Day War, for striking first, fast, and decisively. It also means that, even if Nasrallah seeks only a short or limited conflict to make additional gains at Israel's expense or draw heat away from Hamas, such actions still could put Israel perilously on the wrong end of a rapid escalation spiral.

Israel's strong first-strike incentive is driven by Hezbollah's intent and ability, from the outset of hostilities, to launch an overwhelming air and ground blitz against the IDF and the Israeli homeland. Hezbollah's capacity to rapidly generate such immense combat power gives Israel a clear use-it-or-lose-it proposition, in which it would need to neutralize as many Hezbollah launchers and fighters as quickly as possible to minimize their chances of taking out IDF bases, executing an even deadlier version of Hamas' October 7 ground attack, and raining down unprecedented projectile barrages on Israeli critical infrastructure and cities.

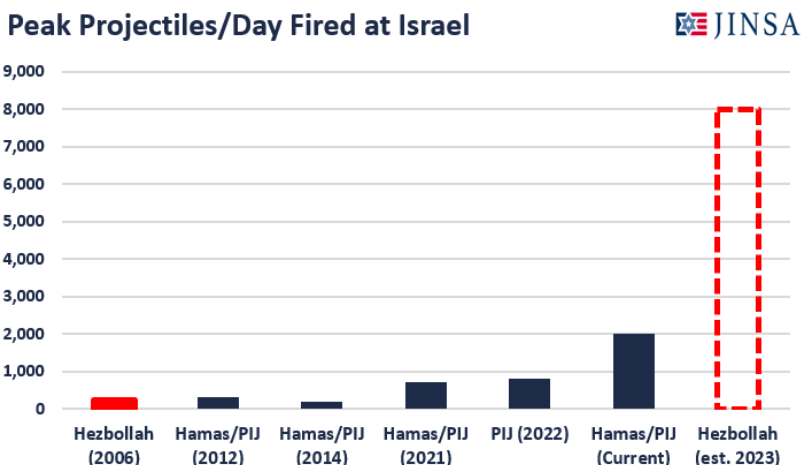
Accordingly, Israel will not have anything like the strategic patience it has when conducting operations in Gaza, where the IDF's clear overmatch of military power – including its air superiority and ability to adequately disrupt and absorb Hamas and PIJ air, ground, and seaborne attacks – afford it some real measure of flexibility in terms of the means, ends, and timeframe for its military responses. In stark contrast, the IDF will need to launch a full-scale combined-arms campaign, including a significant ground maneuver element, from the outset of hostilities with Hezbollah, that would take out launchers and stockpiles, blunt any ground and naval attacks, neutralize Hezbollah anti-air capabilities, and disrupt Hezbollah defensive preparations, as quickly and thoroughly as possible to prevent their full weight being brought to bear against the IDF and Israeli homeland.

As JINSA's 2018 report put it succinctly, Israel's next northern war must be both decisive and short, and the two are inseparable. The October 7 attack only reinforces this consideration. Hezbollah's ability to escalate and broaden hostilities, and costs of Israeli inaction, become even more tempting and dangerous while the IDF is enmeshed in a large-scale Gaza operation. In turn, this threat from the north could hamstring Israel's ability or willingness to devote proper time and resources to eliminating Hamas as a military threat in Gaza. Furthermore, the more drawn-out and less effective any IDF operation against Hezbollah would be, the more it would sharpen perceptions of Israeli weakness and vulnerability that could encourage Iran to escalate and broaden the conflict even further, while further fueling anti-Israel passions among publics across the Arab and Muslim worlds.

### *Hezbollah Capabilities Driving Israel Urgency*

Hezbollah's 150,000 rockets, missiles, and drones is the primary factor influencing Israel's inability to absorb a first blow. This arsenal is an order of magnitude larger than anything in Gaza, and unlike Hamas or PIJ it includes precision-guided munitions, sophisticated attack drones, and long-range heavy missiles capable of striking most anywhere in Israel. Hezbollah also could fire these munitions at much larger volume: Israel currently [estimates](#) 6,000-8,000 rockets and missiles daily at the outset of conflict, roughly 3-4 times larger than what Hamas and PIJ have accomplished to date. This combination of precision and sheer volume also could reduce the efficacy of Israel's air defenses, from their past 90 percent success rate against projectiles from Gaza that were headed toward built-up areas, to perhaps 80 percent against Hezbollah. Consequently, Israeli forces and society could be hit with roughly 1,600 rockets and missiles per day - far more than ever before, and many of them with larger payloads and higher probabilities to strike high-value targets than anything coming out of Gaza.

This means Hezbollah very likely could overwhelm and evade Israel's advanced multi-layered air defenses, enough to cripple the IDF's limited numbers of airbases and other vital installations, as well as inflict serious damage on the small handful of critical infrastructure nodes upon which Israel's



strategic and economic viability depend, for instance Haifa seaport, Ben Gurion airport, key electrical plants and desalination facilities, the Dimona nuclear reactor, and offshore energy platforms. In such a dire scenario the IDF will have to task the country's limited numbers of air and missile defense batteries with protecting its own counterforces, leaving Israeli cities far more exposed to far more firepower than they ever faced in the many Gaza conflicts since 2008. These strains and tradeoffs become exponentially more acute over time, and will compound further if Israel faces large-scale projectile barrages coming from north and south simultaneously.



In the wake of Hamas' wanton and gruesome ground incursion in the south, Israel now has all the more reason to move fast in the north, before Hezbollah could conduct larger and potentially even bloodier assaults against northern Israeli towns, villages, and military outposts. Though most or all of Hezbollah's cross-border tunnels were [neutralized](#) by 2019, the hilly and forested terrain along the Blue Line acts as "aboveground tunnels" to aid Hezbollah assault columns intending to kill Israeli civilians, seize hostages, and attack IDF forces concentrating along the border. Hezbollah also boasts experienced ground forces, forged by years of heavy combat in Syria's cauldron battles and in military-advisory roles throughout Middle East conflict zones. Supported by short-range artillery, mortars, and drones, these forces could conduct large-scale ground incursions targeting Israeli towns and nearby forces, similar to what Hamas just accomplished. Indeed, it is entirely plausible that the October 7 Hamas attack drew from Hezbollah's own playbook, and possibly benefited from Hezbollah's direct training and lessons from previous operations. The atrocious behavior of Russian forces against Ukrainian civilians, combined with Russian salvos of massed artillery rockets, missiles, and Iranian-supplied drones that deluge Ukrainian towns and trenches – if magnified by Israel's much smaller and denser geography, population, and list of high-value military and civilian targets – offers an unsettling glimpse into Hezbollah's concept of operations for bringing the next war to Israel, and of the price of delay in moving against these threats.

Just as its offensive capabilities seek to exploit Israel's vulnerable and profound lack of strategic depth in a way unimaginable to Hamas, Hezbollah's defensive capabilities take advantage of its own strategic depth across most of Lebanon and even farther afield. This reinforces Israel's need to move quickly and comprehensively, in order to minimize Hezbollah's opportunities to harden, reinforce, and redeploy its weapons and forces in ways Hamas could never hope to do. First, Hezbollah has turned southern Lebanon into a series of defensive belts anchored around fortified villages and [warrens](#) of strongpoints both aboveground and below. Second, while Hamas and PIJ have turned Gaza's dense urban areas into an ideal fortress for block-by-block defensive fighting, the Strip is relatively small and effectively surrounded; by contrast, Hezbollah's strongholds and room to maneuver stretch from all of southern Lebanon to Beirut, the Beqaa Valley in northeastern Lebanon, and potentially into Syria and beyond. Third, Hezbollah possesses more, and better, anti-aircraft and anti-armor weapons than Hamas or PIJ that must be neutralized before Israeli aircraft and ground forces can operate at full effectiveness. Fourth, the LAF, while officially a separate entity, often coordinates with Hezbollah, and could pose additional challenges for IDF operations. Finally, Hezbollah is much more closely intertwined with and dependent on Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) than is Hamas, thereby making it much more likely that a prolonged war with Hezbollah also becomes a wider one involving Iranian and proxy forces in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran itself, and/or Iranian and Hezbollah terrorist attacks against Israeli and possibly American soft targets around the world. Notably, this month marks the fortieth anniversary of Hezbollah's violent debut on the world stage, when its bombing of U.S. barracks in Beirut inflicted the deadliest single-day toll on the Marine Corps since Iwo Jima.



# Next Steps for the United States

## *Good Start, Now More Is Needed*

Part of the strategic fallout from October 7 is the clear-eyed awareness, in the United States as well as in Israel, that deterrence against Iran's increasingly integrated and potent network of terrorist proxies had become a weak reed, and that selective détente or efforts at so-called "de-escalation" to try to stave off crises and deal with these groups piecemeal only fostered counterproductive complacency. In this context, the tangible and prompt public steps and statements by the Biden administration and Congress to support Israel's freedom of action and its military capabilities, and to bolster American force posture in the Middle East and caution Iran or Hezbollah against escalation, are highly salutary and necessary turnabouts in U.S. policy – but also will be insufficient by themselves. JINSA recently issued a comprehensive list of [recommendations](#) for the Biden administration and Congress to support Israel more generally, from which these specific steps are drawn.

## *Expand Support for Israel's Self-Defense*

American policymakers and military leaders now urgently must face the prospect of even more serious escalation, and what it means for U.S. interests, forces, and partners in the region and globally. The Biden administration's rapid resupply of Israel's vital military needs, particularly air defense interceptors, precision-guided munitions, and ammunition and spare parts, is of utmost importance, both concretely and in terms of signaling U.S. resolve to support its partners' self-defense. But regardless of whether Israel seeks to deter Hezbollah from joining in the war, or decides to mitigate the costs of an increasingly plausible Third Lebanon War via preemption, additional surges of U.S. capabilities to Israeli armories, and robust intelligence support regarding Iran's threat network, will be paramount for either objective – as will public statements reinforcing Washington's support for Israel's freedom of action. Indeed, the IDF's operational strains in a northern war, particularly on its stocks of precision-guided munitions and air defense interceptors, likely will be far greater and more immediate than in a looming Gaza campaign, no matter how prolonged or intense. The run-up to, and course of conflict in, Ukraine illustrates how proactive and robust U.S.-led military support for a besieged partner ultimately helps reduce the risks and costs of conflict.

## *Further Reinforce U.S. Deterrence and Readiness*

Concomitantly, the United States should underline its own determination to prevent Iran and/or Hezbollah from seeking to broaden the evolving Gaza conflict. Given the demonstrated intent and sizable abilities of Hezbollah and Iran (unlike Hamas) to threaten U.S. forces across the Middle East, this should include actions to boost U.S. force presence and readiness in the Persian Gulf as well as the Eastern Mediterranean: sending U.S. naval vessels through the Strait of Hormuz, overflights of the Middle East by U.S. strategic bombers, and announcing the deployment of Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) munitions to the U.S. airbase at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Following past practice, and to add credibility to reported U.S. pledges to shoot down Hezbollah missile launches, the United States also should consider port visits or docking by *Arleigh Burke*-class guided missile [destroyers](#) at Haifa as they deploy to the Eastern Mediterranean in the *USS Eisenhower* carrier strike group. In tandem, the Pentagon should harden exposed U.S. forces in the Middle East, especially Iraq and Syria, that could become points of leverage to pressure the United States to restrain Israel – as Iranian proxies already have done frequently in recent years.

Along with its European and other allies, the United States also must harden targets and home and abroad to guard against increased risks of Hezbollah and/or Iranian terrorism intended to weaken U.S. resolve and support for Israel.

As commander-in-chief, President Biden also must work proactively with Congress and U.S. partners, and prepare the American public, for the possibility and consequences of Hezbollah and/or Iran failing to heed his stark deterrent threat against intervening and widening the war. Having put America's credibility on the line, part of the president's preparations now must include making a clear case, in advance of any potential escalation, for how the costs of fulfilling his threat would pale in comparison to the drastic consequences to U.S. global interests and to Israel of failing to carry it out. In parallel, and as part of this broader effort, the administration must coordinate closely with its political, military, and intelligence counterparts in Israel regarding the latter's possible next steps in the north. This will reduce risks of miscommunication that could catch the United States off-guard diplomatically or operationally in terms of rapidly-evolving Israeli decision-making. It also could counter inevitable Iranian efforts to cynically portray Israeli preemption and self-defense as unprompted aggression intended to drag in the United States.

### *Undercut Iran*

Lest Tehran continue to believe it can cajole and divert U.S. resolve, and pry open daylight between Washington and Jerusalem, with yet more vague pledges to reinvigorate diplomacy, the Biden administration also should make clear it will fully enforce existing U.S. sanctions on Iran, freeze billions of dollars in recent sanctions relief that greenlights more Iranian aggression, and work with its European allies to "snap back" UN sanctions on Iran's proliferation of conventional weapons, drones, and missiles. Underlying all of these actions is Tehran's reliable tendency, over four decades, to deescalate and adjust its malign behaviors when confronted credibly with the basic logic of deterrence and compellence – a logic which becomes crystal clear when the United States and Israel are unmistakably on the same page. The more they see strong U.S. support for one of its closest partners when faced with a dire threat, the more Beijing, Moscow, and other adversaries also will understand that their own aggressive ambitions against other core U.S. allies and partners will not go unmet.

### *Back Israel on the World Stage*

Last but not least, the Biden administration and Congress must be ready to convert their support for Israel's freedom of action into a coherent, proactive, and sustained public diplomacy effort that underscores both Israel's right to defend itself under international law and the IDF's ingrained [commitment](#) and institutional procedures to ensure its operations comply with the law of armed conflict (LOAC). On the flip side of this coin, American leaders should condemn serial LOAC violations by Hamas and other Israeli adversaries which cynically and illegally intersperse their military stores in and around schools, hospitals, mosques, residential areas, and other civilian sites, in order to exacerbate collateral damage that can be blamed on Israel. This is necessary already in the context of Gaza, but will become even more important in a Third Lebanon War, given the much larger scale in which Hezbollah shelters its arsenals behind civilian infrastructure. Indeed, even with its capacity to inflict unprecedented devastation on Israel, Hezbollah's theory of victory hangs at least as much on its ability, by disseminating and amplifying disinformation about the IDF's lawful operations, to generate international political pressure on Israel to terminate its operations prematurely and afford Hezbollah precious breathing space to rearm again and fight yet another day.