

A war with Hizbollah would essentially mean war with Iran this time around

Conflict with Israel might be inevitable, but the context has become more complicated than ever ... for both sides in equal measure.

The possibility of an imminent war between Israel and Hizbollah has been growing as both Israeli and Hizbollah officials engage in fiery rhetoric about how damaging the next war will be (for the other side, of course). Convinced that Hizbollah has strong control over Lebanon's state institutions, Israel is now threatening to target Lebanon's infrastructure, institutions and army, while vowing to attack Israel's nuclear facilities and cities.

There is no doubt that Hizbollah's build-up of precision weapons presents a serious threat to Israel. Yes, if Iran is not contained in Syria and Hizbollah's threat to Israel from both Lebanon and the Golan Heights is not dealt with, the next war between Israel and Hizbollah may well be inevitable (though at present, not necessarily imminent).

Still, despite escalating war rhetoric, both sides understand that there is a lot at stake and that is why there are tell-tale signs of avoidance on both sides.

For Hizbollah, its priorities in the region have changed, and although the Syrian crisis has not yet been resolved, Hizbollah – and Iran – continue to achieve gains in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

Why would they risk these achievements for another confrontation with Israel, especially when another “divine victory” is not guaranteed? In addition, Hizbollah is stretched in the region and has lost many of its high-ranking commanders and trained fighters. As such, they will certainly need time to redeploy and organise themselves if a war with Israel is to ensue.

That is precisely why Hizbollah has not responded the way it typically does to Israeli provocations. Indeed, Israel has struck one of its weapons convoys in Syria many times in order to prevent its acquisition of “game-changing” weapons. And

yet, Hizbollah only responded when it claimed that an Israeli attack had hit a Hizbollah military base inside Lebanon and this is why all of the Israeli attacks against Hizbollah in Syria have been ignored thus far.

Matters aren't all that easy for Israel either. While Israel might be more ready than Hizbollah for this war, the Jewish state also knows that another war is costly.

In addition, Hizbollah's arsenal is estimated to have grown from 33,000 rockets and missiles before 2006 to 150,000. These are more advanced weapons that would cause serious damage to Israel.

Perhaps even more importantly, given that Hizbollah now controls more ground in Syria, Israel might find itself fighting two or more fronts in the next war and involved in confrontation with all the Shiite militias in Syria, not just Hizbollah.

Under the command of Iran's Quds Force, Hizbollah is today leading tens of thousands Shiite fighters from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen. Earlier this summer, Hassan Nasrallah warned that any future Israeli war against Syria or Lebanon would draw thousands of fighters from these militias now fighting in support of the Syrian regime.

In other words, the next war could actually be a war between Israel and Iran. All this essentially means that while the war might be inevitable, the context has become more complicated than ever.

Indeed, given that Hizbollah is a regional force and Iran's leading Shiite militia, a conflict with Hizbollah could very well be a conflict with all the Shiite militias in the region, and therefore a conflict with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force.

Because the can of worms is proving too big, both sides are flexing their muscles trying to cause as much peripheral damage, stopping short of actually igniting a confrontation.

Still, in the event war does break out, Hizbollah may find it easier to declare victory this time around. In order to do this, all they would need to do is inflict the most damage possible on Israel and simply survive to fight another day.

As long as they have Iran as their sponsor - and Syria and Iraq under their control - they can always rebuild their arsenal the way they did after the 2006 war with

Israel.

At the time, its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, declared: “As long as there is a missile that is fired from Lebanon that targets the Zionists, as long as there is one fighter who fires his rifle, as long as there is someone who plants a bomb against the Israelis, the resistance still exists.”

The damage inflicted on Lebanon and its civilians will not be an issue for them. On the contrary, a war with Israel that would lead to death of civilians and the destruction of state institutions and infrastructure might be taken advantage of by Hizbollah to lobby back popular support for the “resistance”, an ideological selling point that has waned since their involvement in Syria.

Indeed, the Lebanese, including many Shiites, have been increasingly critical of the “party of God”. The long war in Syria has taken a toll on the Shiite community in particular, which lost many of its young men – with no “divine victory” in return this time around.

In addition, Hizbollah’s budget shifts have led to serious cuts in social services, a sacrifice that has left many poor families struggling.

Despite many Shiites viewing the group as a beacon of resistance and liberation, the Syria crisis has long changed this perspective and Hizbollah is now seen among many as a sectarian militia fighting for Iran’s regional agenda. While, yes, some don’t mind the sectarian power this new mission is bringing to the community, many do. Indeed, these disillusioned community members feel more isolated than ever and realise that this power is coming at a huge price: their livelihoods and future.

A tell-tale sign of this discontent are the results from the most recent municipal elections that took place last summer. For example, only 55 per cent of the votes in Baalbeck – the biggest Shiite city in the Bekaa Valley – went to both Hizbollah and Amal combined.

Much of this discontent among the Shiites – and other Lebanese communities – stems from the fact that people are beginning to realise that the enemy may be within.

On the other hand, war may also bring back Hizbollah’s resistance niche and

distract people from internal problems, a scenario that would no doubt bode well for them. Indeed, if the next war takes place on Lebanese soil, Hizbollah will use the opportunity to regain public support, mainly from the Shiite community. By contrast, if the war takes place in Syria, where Hizbollah is more exposed, the party definitely won't reap as much benefit. On the contrary, it will be seen as part of the regional war.

In any case, much depends on the goals of both sides in instigating war. If Hizbollah were to initiate a conflict, it will likely be much later and only to regain popularity, whereas if Israel is to start the war, much will depend on the objective and the context. If the goal of the war is to eradicate Hizbollah, it will have to face Iran. This would be the only way to ensure Hizbollah does not rebuild its arsenal. But without the United States' willingness to lead a war against Iran, Israel might try to contain Hizbollah for the time being by perhaps expanding its strikes in Syria to stop it from gaining more ground or stocking up more missiles.

Whatever the scenario, one thing is for sure: both the Jewish state and Hassan Nasrallah's so-called party of God have much to consider.

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