

Israel poised to expand war against Hezbollah in Lebanon

Peter Symonds
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As the US escalates the war in the Middle East by targeting Iran and Iranian-backed militia, Israel is preparing to widen its genocidal war in Gaza by attacking Hezbollah military forces in southern Lebanon and Syria. Such a conflict would likely extend the barbarity being inflicted on Gaza and dramatically inflame the situation throughout the region and internationally.

Fighting along Israel's northern border has been underway for months since the eruption of the war in Gaza on October 7, including strikes by Israel and Hezbollah on virtually a daily basis. Israeli attacks have killed at least 177 Hezbollah fighters and 40 others, including 19 civilians, three of whom were journalists. Nine Israeli soldiers and reservists have been killed, along with six civilians. Some 76,000 civilians in Lebanon have been displaced by the conflict, as well as 80,000 Israelis.

Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant made a series of statements last week indicating that full-scale war is imminent. Amid negotiations over a temporary ceasefire in Gaza, he warned on Friday: "If Hezbollah thinks that when there's a pause in fighting in the south, we will hold fire against it, it's sorely mistaken."

Speaking to Israeli troops, Gallant emphasised: "I say here explicitly: Until we reach a situation in which it's possible to restore security for residents of the north, we will not stop. Whether we reach this through a [diplomatic] arrangement or military means, we will [restore] calm."

Earlier in last week, the defence minister told troops on Israel's southern border with Gaza that "forces close to you... are leaving the field and moving towards the north, and preparing for what comes next." Gallant declared that "they very soon will go into action."

As it launched its onslaught on Gaza, the Israeli

military boosted its presence in northern Israel. Tens of thousands of regular troops and some 60,000 reservists are deployed there already.

The following day, Gallant declared again that "the stage will come when our patience will run out." He warned that "a forceful action to enforce peace on the northern border" would impact the northern Israeli city of Haifa. Indicating the close involvement of the US in the war preparations, Gallant discussed tensions on the northern Israeli border with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin last Thursday night.

Over last weekend, Israeli officials held talks with US special envoy Amos Hochstein who has been sent to the Middle East ostensibly to negotiate a deal to prevent the outbreak of war in southern Lebanon. Hochstein is hardly a neutral arbiter: he was born in Israel and served in its armed forces. He was heavily involved in negotiating a deal in 2022 that demarcated a maritime border between Israel and Lebanon, but the undefined land border between the two countries is far more contentious.

The Zionist regime is insisting that Hezbollah remove its forces beyond the Litani River, some 30 kilometres to the north of the current de facto line of demarcation established after Israeli troops left Lebanon in 2000. Israel points to UN Security Council resolution 1701 that followed Israel's most recent invasion of Lebanon in 2006, which requires such a withdrawal. However, it has not been implemented. The resolution's clauses called for an end to Israel's continued occupation of Lebanese lands and its repeated violations of Lebanese sovereignty.

Hezbollah dismissed proposals for its withdrawal to the north as unrealistic given that many of its fighters are from areas of southern Lebanon close to Israel. Last week, Hezbollah deputy secretary general Naim

Qassem declared: “The party is not interested in any discussion at present over Israeli demands regarding the southern front... Our position is clear: an end to the war on Gaza will automatically close the Lebanese front.”

According to Israeli media, Hochstein, who met with Gallant on Saturday, floated a three-stage plan. It would start with a 10-kilometre withdrawal of Hezbollah forces from the existing boundary, followed by an increased deployment of Lebanese army and UN forces to the area and the return of evacuated Lebanese and Israeli residents. Further talks demarcating a land border would then take place.

Gallant’s response was hardly a fulsome embrace of the plan. A readout from his office said he was thankful for Hochstein’s efforts, adding that Israel was “ready to resolve this crisis via diplomatic understandings.” At the same time, however, he warned, that “we are also prepared for any other scenario,” exactly what he has been preparing the Israeli military for.

Moreover, the Biden administration’s diplomatic “peace” moves in the Middle East are little more than window dressing. The US is dramatically expanding its wider war throughout the region in collaboration with Israel. Using the deaths of three US soldiers during a missile strike on an American base in Jordan as a pretext, Washington is targeting Iran and Iranian-backed militia. It has escalated attacks on Houthi forces in Yemen, conducted strikes in Syria and Iraq and has not ruled out hitting targets inside Iran.

Israeli plans for a full-scale offensive against Hezbollah dovetail with the Biden administration’s strategic aim in the Middle East to undermine and subordinate Iran. Hezbollah, a bourgeois Shiite clerical movement, is an ally of Iran and played a key role in propping up the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad against Islamist militias backed by the CIA, Israel, Turkey and the Gulf States. Its well-armed militia has long been regarded as an obstacle to US and Israeli ambitions in the region.

While public attention has been focused on Israel’s genocidal war in Gaza, the conflict on its northern border has already assumed significant proportions, with Israeli strikes not only inside southern Lebanon but also on Hezbollah militia inside Syria.

On Saturday, Israeli military spokesman Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari outlined the extent of its operations, showing video footage of the attacks.

“Instead of one brigade in peacetime, we’ve deployed three brigades, tens of thousands of soldiers. So far, we’ve struck over 150 terrorist cells, eliminating more than 200 terrorists and commanders. We’ve targeted over 3,400 Hezbollah sites across southern Lebanon, a complex terrain with villages and settlements,” he boasted.

“We are also targeting Hezbollah infrastructure in Syria, having struck over 50 such targets spread across Syria,” Hagari said. In a chilling sign of the widening Israeli-US conflict throughout the region, he warned: “We will be wherever Hezbollah is found. What applies to Lebanon also applies to Syria and even further afield.”

Moreover, any US-backed Israeli offensive inside Lebanon, and potentially Syria, will not simply be a repeat of Israel’s previous illegal and brutal invasions. Rather just as it is conducting a barbaric war of extermination in Gaza, Israel will not only seek to destroy Hezbollah’s military arm but its social base among the impoverished Shiite population of Lebanon, laying waste to whole areas of the country.

The rapidly expanding US-led war in the Middle East is part and parcel of the emerging global conflict involving Washington’s war against Russia in Ukraine and advanced military preparations targeting China. Only by building a unified anti-war movement of the international working class, based on a socialist perspective, can the plunge toward a catastrophic world war between nuclear-armed powers be prevented.



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