

September 2024

# country report

Foundation Office Israel

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## Escalation in the Middle East intensifies

### Is a regional war inevitable?

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- In just over a month, we will mark the first anniversary of the Hamas terror attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Since then, Israel has been at war with attacks from several fronts.
- The situation dramatically peaked over the summer months. Twelve children were killed in a Hezbollah rocket attack. The Israeli army (IDF) then took out a high-ranking Hezbollah commander in Beirut with a targeted airstrike. A few hours later, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyya was killed in Tehran. Although not officially confirmed, the attack is attributed to Israel.
- Iran and its proxies vowed retaliation and announced to attack Israel. The IDF and Israeli security services have been on high alert ever since. On August 25, 2024, an imminent Hezbollah attack was repelled by a pre-emptive strike. Over 100 Israeli fighter jets attacked numerous targets in Lebanon and destroyed over 6,000 Hezbollah missiles and drones.
- At the end of August representatives of the Israeli government announced that the war aims will be extended so that the evacuated inhabitants of northern Israel could return to their homes.
- Negotiations on an agreement between Israel and Hamas to free the Israeli hostages abducted on October 7<sup>th</sup> and a ceasefire appear to have reached an impasse. Since August 28, 2024, Israel has also been conducting a major military operation in the West Bank with the aim of preventing further attacks from there.

### Predictable Tragedy – rocket attack on Majdal-Shams

The current escalation was triggered by a rocket attack on the small Israeli-Druze town of Majdal-Shams at the end of July, in which twelve children were killed and numerous others injured. The attack was carried out by Hezbollah, which initially confirmed the shelling but then, after the extent of the attack became clear, denied any responsibility for the attack.

Forensic investigations have now proven that the used rocket was an Iranian-made Hezbollah missile (Falaq 1) equipped with a 50 kg warhead. Due to the ongoing rocket fire the the villages at Israel's approximately 120 km long border with Lebanon were evacuated in an approximately five kilometers wide strip. The inhabitants of the Druze settlements near the Lebanese border have not yet been obliged to leave their homes. Although there have been some rocket alerts since October 8<sup>th</sup> 2023, they have not been in the primary focus of Hezbollah attacks, unlike the town of Kiryat Shmona, for example, which is only 20 kilometers away but mainly inhabited by Jewish Israelis. One reason for this is that a not inconsiderable number of Druze also live in Lebanon - around 5.2% of the Lebanese population is estimated to do so - and Hezbollah does not want to antagonize them. It is suspected that the Hezbollah attack on Majdal-Shams was actually aimed at a military base on Mount Hermon, on whose southern foothills the town lies. Despite the deadly attack, no Israeli Druze have left their village so far.

Since October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Hezbollah has fired over 7500 shells at Israel. With the deadly attack on the soccer field, the number of Israeli fatalities from these attacks has now risen to 50. Israel's multi-stage missile defense system is considered to be highly efficient: according to the manufacturers, Israeli interception systems such as "IronDome" or "David Sling" have an

interception rate of over 90 percent. The efficiency of the systems was clearly demonstrated during the Iranian attack in mid-April - 99% of the 300 missiles fired at Israel were intercepted. Despite this high interception rate, the deadly attack on Majdal Shams was a tragedy in the making - given the sheer mass of rockets that have been fired at northern Israel for months, it was probably rather fortunate that such a deadly attack did not occur sooner.

### **Killing of Ismail Haniyya**

In response to the rocket attack on Majdal Shams, the IDF killed Fuad Shukr, a senior Hezbollah commander and close confidant of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut. A few hours later, on July 31, 2024, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyya was also killed in Tehran by a bomb planted in his accommodation. The attack massively embarrassed the Iranian leadership. It became clear that it was unable to guarantee the safety of its guests even in the heart of its capital. At the same time, the Israeli secret services have once again demonstrated their capabilities and underpinned Prime Minister Netanyahu's claim to bring all the masterminds of October 7 to justice. Given that Haniyya was only in Tehran for a short time, it seems likely, though not confirmed, that Israel used this brief window of opportunity to eliminate one of the main perpetrators of the terrorist attack of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Both, Iran and Hezbollah, immediately threatened full retaliation. Intensive diplomatic efforts by various sides - particularly the USA - seemed to go nowhere. Iran repeatedly emphasized, even in the weeks that followed, that it would not be dissuaded from a massive military response, even if this would lead to a regional war.

### **Failed Hezbollah attack**

Despite great tension, there was no immediate military response from Iran for the time being - probably also because Israel and the USA made it clear that they would respond comprehensively to an attack. In the early morning of August 25, 2024, a planned attack by Hezbollah was largely thwarted. The terrorist militia wanted to attack two bases of Israeli special forces and intelligence units in the center of the country. The aim was to first saturate the Israeli air defenses with a volley of short-range missiles and then hit the military bases with precision missiles and explosive drones. Thanks to precise intelligence information, the IDF managed to fend off most of the impending attack. In a pre-emptive attack, significant parts of the facilities from which the attack was to be launched were destroyed. This embarrassment was nevertheless reinterpreted as a success by Hezbollah. In a video address, Nasrallah emphasized that the attack had gone according to plan and that the goal of atoning for the killing of its commander Fuad Shukr had been achieved. This reaction makes it clear that Hezbollah (currently) has no interest in a further escalation with Israel beyond that of recent months. At the same time, Iran is maintaining the threat backdrop. Iran has said that the attack was only part of the outstanding response and that it is still considering when and how exactly "revenge" will be taken for the killing of Haniyya. Accordingly, the Israeli army is still on high alert. Air traffic to and from Lebanon remains largely suspended and numerous flights to Tel Aviv and other cities in the region remain canceled.

### **Danger of a multi-front attack**

Various scenarios are being discussed for a possible attack by Iran: Similar to April earlier this year, Iran could carry out a direct attack on Israel - but this time without warning. Alternatively, or in parallel, one of the Iranian proxies - most likely Hezbollah - could also launch an attack. With its highly developed missile arsenal, it would be able to reach targets far within Israel. The greatest threat is a combination of the first two scenarios in a multi-front attack. In this case, a direct Iranian attack would be accompanied by simultaneous attacks by Hezbollah in the north, the Houthis from Yemen in the south and militias from Syria and Iraq. In such a case, a comparable pre-emptive attack in several countries would not only be logistically impossible on its own, but also practically impossible due to the distance. Such an attack from different borders would very likely overwhelm the Israeli missile defense and could cause massive damage. Possible targets could be military bases, as in the previous Hezbollah attack, but also critical infrastructure such as the port of Haifa.

Such an attack would than provoke a massive Israeli response, which in turn would make a regional war even more likely.

### **War in the North - unwanted in the short term, unavoidable in the long term?**

For several reasons, Israel has no interest in a further military escalation in the north. After almost a year, the war in the Gaza Strip is still not over and significant military resources are tied up in the south of the country. Israeli society is also war-weary after months of war (already one of the longest in the country's history). There are also still numerous Israeli hostages in the hands of Hamas, whose fate and liberation are the top priority for many. In addition, social debates, such as compulsory military service for the ultra-Orthodox or the judicial reform, are dividing the country and leading to massive internal political tensions. An open war with Hezbollah would also be associated with massive risks for Israel and would result in heavy losses. Hezbollah's rocket arsenal exceeds that of Hamas by a factor of about ten. The approximately 180,000 Hizobbal-rockets also include thousands of precision-guided missiles that can be used to attack targets throughout Israel. The militant units of the terrorist militia are also a powerful army professionally trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. From Israel's point of view, it would therefore like to avoid or at least postpone an additional front in the north. For this reason, the response to the ongoing attacks by Hezbollah has been comparatively restrained, with air strikes and the elimination of their commanders. In the longer term, however, Hezbollah is forcing a military escalation on Israel, or making such an escalation unavoidable: With its sustained shelling, Hezbollah has made parts of northern Israel uninhabitable. Over 60,000 Israelis had to be evacuated and cannot return to their homes. At the same time, Hezbollah has succeeded in demonstrating its military capacities and capabilities. With the tragedy in Majdal-Shams, it has also shown the vulnerability of the Israelis. Even a possible ceasefire would by no means mean security for Israel. Many Israelis would not want to return to their homes because they would fear a renewed and then perhaps even more violent escalation with an even better equipped Hezbollah. There would also be an omnipresent fear of a "second October 7<sup>th</sup>" - this time not by Hamas in the south, but by Hezbollah in the north. For Israel, this would result in an intolerable situation in which significant parts of their country would remain uninhabitable due to the eminent threat in the north. In Israeli society, discontent about the intolerable situation and the government's handling of it, is steadily increasing. In the past, officials have repeatedly announced that a safe return would be made possible in the near future. The start of the new school year in Israel on September 1<sup>st</sup> was mentioned as the date for this - a date that has now passed without any further progress. The pressure on Prime Minister Netanyahu to find a solution is therefore increasing. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant recently demanded that the war aims formulated by the government should be expanded to include the return of the evacuees from the north, which was promptly underlined by other members of the Israeli government, as well as by some parts of the opposition. From Israel's point of view, the threat posed by Hezbollah can only be countered if it withdraws behind the Litani River, which runs 30 kilometers inland - as envisaged after the 2006 Lebanon War and UN Resolution 1701. At the same time, it is considered highly unlikely that Hezbollah will voluntarily implement this through an agreement or a ceasefire. Militarily, this would only be possible through a massive military operation, including the deployment of ground troops - a horror scenario for Israel after the traumatic experiences of the Lebanon wars in 1982 and 2006. Due to their forests and hills, the areas of southern Lebanon are much more impassable than, for example, the coastal area around Gaza, which makes warfare much more difficult. Hezbollah has also been preparing for this for years. Parts of southern Lebanon are said to be tunneled similarly as Gaza to lure Israeli units into ambushes. Israel is therefore now faced with a dilemma that has been looming for some time: either it strikes back comprehensively in the event of a possible attack from the north, accepting high losses of its own and thus getting rid of an existential threat in the long term. Or one reacts with comparative restraint and avoids further bloody escalation. In this case, however, an escalation would only be postponed, and a future conflict would be even more intense and costly.

## Eliminatory anti-Semitism of Iran and its proxies

From an Iranian perspective, some commentators see no interest by Iran in escalating the current situation. Hezbollah, which has been strengthened and built up over the years, should not be sacrificed in a conflict. Iran, so the argument goes, still needs Hezbollah in order to maintain deterrence against a possible attack against the advancing Iranian nuclear program. Here, Hezbollah and Iran are seen as rational actors, at least in part. The danger of such an approach is that it ignores the underlying eliminatory anti-Semitism towards Israel. Hezbollah, Houthis and Hamas, as proxies of Iran, are not to be understood as a homogeneous group. What unites and holds them together, apart from their funding and equipment by Iran, is their hatred and will to destroy Israel. This is widely documented and is not concealed by the individual groups themselves. For example, the founding charter of Hamas from the 1980s calls for the murder of Israelis and Jews, and the Houthi flag reads among other things "Death to Israel" and "Damn the Jews". In Iran, anti-Semitism now has a role of "raison d'être". One example is the "Doomsday Clock", which has been running for years on Palestine Square in Tehran and counts down the days until Israel's demise. Israel has been aware of this existential threat for years and has repeatedly warned of it, including on the international stage. The eliminatory threats became a reality for Israel with the Hamas terror attack on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 and are being continued by the ongoing attacks by Hezbollah from Lebanon or the Houthi from Yemen. Even if each of the parties has so far good reasons to avoid a regional war, the current escalation seems to have reached a tipping point at which a direct confrontation between Israel and Iran is not only likely, but almost inevitable. In view of the intolerable situation for Israel in the north, once the war in Gaza is possibly ending, Israel could be forced - also due to the increasing domestic political pressure - to turn to the north in order to guarantee a (permanent) safe life for the people living there. In addition, the situation in the West Bank continues to escalate. Terrorist attacks are occurring there on an almost daily basis, with several bomb attacks recently being carried out. To prevent further attacks, the Israeli military has been conducting a comprehensive military operation since August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2024. According to the Israeli government, the aim is to eliminate or prevent terrorist groups and activities. At the same time, the indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas to free the Israeli hostages abducted on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 and achieve a ceasefire in Gaza, have reached an impasse. Hamas is so far not willing to accept compromise proposals. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the Israeli security cabinet confirmed the deployment of Israeli forces in the Philadelphi Corridor on the Gaza Strip's border with Egypt, which Hamas vehemently rejects. In the early morning of September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, it was also reported that the IDF was able to recover the bodies of six Israeli hostages in the Gaza Strip, who were probably murdered by Hamas shortly before the IDF arrived. The internal Israeli debate about the government's course is thus intensifying even further and massive protests have been announced for the coming days.

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