

Hezbollah's Escalation Ladder

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Brief Analysis

In his highly anticipated first speech since the Hamas massacre, Secretary-General Nasrallah can be expected to offer plenty of bluster and a possible step up the escalation ladder, but his group has an interest in avoiding all-out war.

Nearly a month into the war triggered by the October 7 Hamas massacre, Hezbollah attacks targeting Israel reveal a pattern of restrained escalation. Eager to fight Israel but wary of the impact such a war would have on Lebanon, Hezbollah has so far limited its rocket and drone attacks to mostly military targets within about one mile of the Blue Line marking the Israel-Lebanon border. Hezbollah has, in turn, been the target of [memes \(https://preview.redd.it/memes-about-the-battle-of-the-pole-hezbollah-has-been-v0-ilwvf9fux5xb1.png?width=720&format=png&auto=webp&s=c98dcf274c38db6dad6d456994979d36bd6aff8f\)](https://preview.redd.it/memes-about-the-battle-of-the-pole-hezbollah-has-been-v0-ilwvf9fux5xb1.png?width=720&format=png&auto=webp&s=c98dcf274c38db6dad6d456994979d36bd6aff8f) and [satirical songs \(https://www.reddit.com/r/NonCredibleDefense/comments/17ggpxu/hezbollah_opposition_drops_hit_song_who_stole_the/\)](https://www.reddit.com/r/NonCredibleDefense/comments/17ggpxu/hezbollah_opposition_drops_hit_song_who_stole_the/) mocking its sniper attacks targeting Israeli cell towers as meek contributions to the war effort. Over the past week, Hezbollah released [video clip teasers \(https://x.com/JasonMBrodsky/status/1719436504269799577?s=20\)](https://x.com/JasonMBrodsky/status/1719436504269799577?s=20) to build up anticipation for Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's first public speech since the Hamas massacre, scheduled for November 3. While Nasrallah is certain to ratchet up the rhetoric, what remains to be seen is whether his speech heralds an acceleration of Hezbollah's operational tempo, which could include firing rockets at civilian targets deeper into Israeli territory.

Background: Shifting Rules of the Game

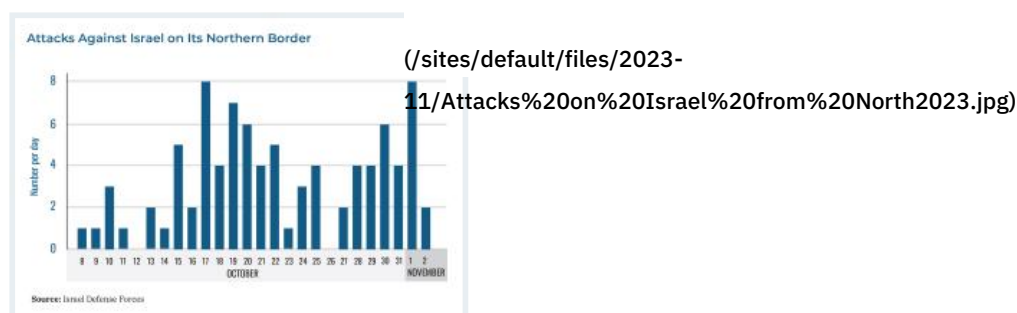
For at least the past three years, Hezbollah has been slowly trying to move the goalposts on the longstanding, informal rules governing attacks between the Lebanon-based Shia group and Israel. Hezbollah's previous red lines dictated that it would only launch a direct attack on Israeli soil if Israel initiated strikes on Lebanese soil or killed Hezbollah operatives in Lebanon or abroad. So the group would show restraint as long as Israel stuck to targeting weapons shipments in Syria, assuming those attacks did not kill Hezbollah operatives. But over the past few years, Hezbollah has redrawn its red lines in an effort to strike at Israel in ways that would not elicit a fierce Israeli response. Consider Hezbollah's launch of a drone at [Israel's Karish offshore gas platform \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-infiltrates-israel-part-1-another-step-toward-changing-rules-game\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-infiltrates-israel-part-1-another-step-toward-changing-rules-game) in July 2022 or the group's [infiltration of a terrorist operative \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-infiltrates-israel-part-1-another-step-toward-changing-rules-game\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-infiltrates-israel-part-1-another-step-toward-changing-rules-game) sixty kilometers into Israel in March 2023.

Hezbollah's success expanding the rules of the game with new operations targeting Israel prior to October 7 **[emboldened](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-lebanon-border-tensions-hezbollah-provocation-idf-response-and-potential)** (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-lebanon-border-tensions-hezbollah-provocation-idf-response-and-potential) the group to act as aggressively as it could without incurring a massive response and leading to full-scale war. Now, in a post-October 7 Middle East, Hezbollah is looking to rewrite the rules again and redraw its red lines as it escalates its activity along Israel's northern border.

Wartime Rules of the Game

In assessing the first few weeks of the Hamas war, Israeli military officials see Hezbollah as largely deterred from engaging in a full-scale escalation but committed to demonstrating support for Hamas by attacking Israeli military targets over the border and allowing other groups to attack Israel from Hezbollah-controlled areas in southern Lebanon. Israeli authorities remain concerned, however, that the group could quickly climb a structured escalation ladder that presents the greatest non-Hamas threat to Israel in this stage of the conflict.

Based on a preliminary analysis of IDF reports covering the northern border, as of November 2, Hezbollah, Hamas, and other militant groups launched around eighty-eight attacks against Israel from Lebanon and Syria, including antitank guided missiles, rocket and mortar fire, drone attacks, and shootings (see chart, "Attacks Against Israel on Its Northern Border").



The Israeli military assesses that Hezbollah's new wartime rules of the game involve a three-tiered escalation ladder. The potential for miscalculation, or an attack that hits a sensitive target by mistake, remains dangerously high. So far, Hezbollah has stuck to the first tier of its strategy, which involves targeting primarily military, not civilian, sites in northern Israel, within approximately one mile of the Blue Line (see map of Hezbollah attacks below). In a few cases, civilian targets—like empty private vehicles—were hit by Hezbollah missiles, but Israeli authorities assess these were errant strikes, not intentional targeting of civilians. Civilians are unlikely to be hurt in such attacks, since Israel **[evacuated forty-two communities](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-adds-14-communities-northern-evacuation-plan-statement-2023-10-22/)** (https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-adds-14-communities-northern-evacuation-plan-statement-2023-10-22/) in the north, including the city of Kiryat Shmona. Hezbollah fire has targeted nearly every Israel Defense Forces post along the Blue Line, often more than once. Antitank guided missiles have featured heavily in Hezbollah attacks so far, but these are short-range weapons that are only effective when fired within a clear line of sight of their target. To date, the attacks targeting Kiryat Shmona were claimed by Hamas, not Hezbollah. By allowing and likely facilitating such attacks, which are carried out and claimed by other groups, Hezbollah hopes to limit the nature of the Israeli response.

[\(Click here to view a map of clashes along Israel's northern border since the war began.\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/mapping-clashes-along-israel-lebanon-border)
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An expanded campaign (tier two) could see Hezbollah firing three to five miles into Israeli territory, rather than one mile. The group could continue to primarily target military bases within that range, but the significant escalation would entail hitting larger military facilities that host hundreds of soldiers, as opposed to the small posts along the border. These facilities are often located close to cities, increasing the risk of an errant missile hitting a civilian target. Hezbollah could also decide to move beyond military targets and start targeting critical infrastructure, cities, and towns in northern Israel. And Hezbollah could facilitate still more aggressive attacks against civilians by other groups operating in areas it controls.

Finally, Hezbollah could further climb the escalation ladder (tier three) by initiating attacks ten to forty miles into Israel. While Israel might be able to tolerate the three-to-five-mile targeting, it could not tolerate an expansion that extended toward Haifa.

Anticipating Nasrallah's Speech

While Nasrallah has been eerily silent since the Hamas massacre, other senior Hezbollah officials have sought to portray the group as being on the frontlines. Nasrallah's deputy, Naim Qassem, [insisted \(https://twitter.com/shnaimkassem/status/1716739663963058203\)](https://twitter.com/shnaimkassem/status/1716739663963058203) on October 24 that "Hezbollah is at the heart of the battle for the resistance to defend Gaza and confront the occupation and its aggression in Palestine, Lebanon, and the region, and its hand is on the trigger to the extent that is required in the confrontation." Yet Hamas officials have been vocal in their disappointment at Hezbollah's limited engagement, with figures like Ghazi Hamad [saying \(https://apnews.com/article/hamas-ghazi-hamad-israel-gaza-hezbollah-iran-ee10f09cf1ffe34ab68cff7987b49f53\)](https://apnews.com/article/hamas-ghazi-hamad-israel-gaza-hezbollah-iran-ee10f09cf1ffe34ab68cff7987b49f53) they "expect more" from group.

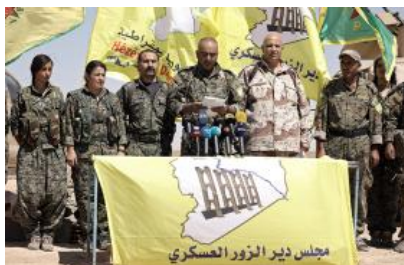
In his forthcoming speech, Nasrallah will likely try to thread the needle by using fiery rhetoric and warning of unspecified intervention should Israel truly pursue its stated goal of ending Hamas rule and terrorist safe haven in Gaza. In the meantime, Hezbollah will likely intensify its operational activities along the Blue Line, possibly expanding into the three-to-five-mile strike range. It may also recruit other Shia militants to carry out attacks from Syria, effectively opening up a third front with Israel.

But absent a triggering event, Hezbollah is still unlikely to pursue a full-scale war with Israel. The group understands that the Israeli military has prepared extensively for Israel's "next war" with Hezbollah, which would be of a completely different magnitude than the 2006 war. They understand that almost no one in Lebanon wants such a war, especially not in the context of the country's current economic-political crisis. And they understand from a flurry of public and private messaging—and the positioning of two U.S. aircraft carrier groups in the East Mediterranean—that President Biden meant what he said when he warned parties like Hezbollah against opening new fronts in the Hamas war. Finally, Hezbollah understands that Iran wants the vast majority of the group's rocket arsenal kept in reserve to deter Israel or anyone else from attacking its nuclear program.

The Hamas massacre caught Israel and the world by surprise, which means that analysts must revisit all their previous assumptions and paradigms about whether and when the region's rejectionist groups will carry out spectacular attacks. Miscalculation and misperception could still lead Hezbollah to change its current posture and draw Israel into a second front in the north. The challenge in interpreting Nasrallah's speech will be separating his inflammatory language from the group's probable plans.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Eli and Jeanette Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. He hosts [Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule \(/node/18328\)](#), a podcast about the group's worldwide criminal, militant, and terrorist activities. ♦

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