

Hezbollah's rapid return: the cost of stopping too soon

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 14.03.2026

Hezbollah's decision to join the war "resembles the dilemma of a patient forced to choose between a dangerous emergency operation and quietly waiting for certain death." This is how a commentator on the Lebanese channel *Al-Mayadeen*, which is aligned with Hezbollah, described the choice facing the organization's leadership about whether to enter the war.

This self-justifying description was aimed mainly at Lebanese ears. It was meant to soothe the anger over the price the Land of the Cedars is paying - and is still expected to pay - because of the dubious service the proxy organization provides to its Iranian patron. Hezbollah's secretary-general, Naim Qassem, who is under heavy domestic pressure, quickly rejected the criticism. The war is not for Iran, he claimed. According to him, Hezbollah's actions merely accelerated an attack that Israel had already planned.

In any case, Hezbollah's response does not fit the description of a gravely ill patient, certainly not a terminal one. In its attacks on the Israeli home front, mainly in the north, it is succeeding in providing what Iran expected from it: an active second front. Every minute of attention by Israel's political-security leadership that is directed toward Hezbollah rather than Iran is a gain for its sponsors. The same applies to the diversion of military resources, especially those that could otherwise be used to fight Iran. The division of attention naturally also influences the character of Israel's operations against Hezbollah in the Lebanese arena.

Hezbollah's entry into the campaign did provide Israel with the opportunity it had been awaiting to deal with the Shiite terrorist organization, but it came at a time when Israel is striving to fully exploit the larger opportunity: the joint war with the United States against Iran, which is also Hezbollah's main sponsor.

The impression so far is that Israel is dividing its attention and resources between the two arenas optimally. The focus on Iran as the primary theater reflects the magnitude and rarity of the opportunity, while the Lebanese challenge is currently receiving only the essential response. The time for a systematic

campaign will come. The end of the war with Iran will by no means mark the end of the fighting with Hezbollah; quite the opposite. It will enable the concentration of the bulk of forces and attention on that front when the Iranian patron is battered and bleeding.

Meanwhile, under the constraint of divided resources, and when Israel cannot continue absorbing Hezbollah's attacks, it is entitled, and perhaps even obliged, to adopt a more aggressive approach in Lebanon. Alongside active defense, retaliatory steps should follow the principle of inflicting maximum damage with minimal resources and risks.

As for the fundamental response, the possible courses of action are well known. Some are even discussed in the media, and there is no need to detail them again here. At the base of this response should stand three assumptions: Hezbollah will not relinquish its military capabilities; the Lebanese government will not disarm it; and diplomatic agreements will not prevent its entrenchment and military buildup.

Reports about the achievements of the IDF and the US military in striking Iran usually focus on quantitative data about "what we have taken" from the enemy. No less interesting, however, is "what remains" – the residual capabilities still in its hands.

One can understand the difficulty in providing such information. Sometimes it stems from gaps in knowledge and intelligence; sometimes from the need to protect sources; and sometimes from the desire to prevent the enemy from understanding what we know. All of these are legitimate considerations when information is presented to the general public, but decision-makers must receive detailed and up-to-date answers to these questions.

The fact that Israel finds itself fighting Iran and Hezbollah not long after the previous rounds of confrontation with them ended illustrates the danger of settling for limited achievements against a determined enemy that retains residual capabilities and conditions enabling its recovery. Sometimes that is the lesser evil. That is not the case when there exists an opportunity to bring about a fundamental change, as in the case of Iran.

Many of the messages in the speeches of President Donald Trump and his associates are intended to create a perception of victory, not based on general

impressions and feelings, but on detailed quantitative achievements relative to the objectives defined.

The avoidance of declaring regime change as an official objective of the war does not necessarily reflect the real aspirations regarding that outcome. It can be assumed that this stems from the difficulty of assessing the likelihood of achieving such a goal, which depends on internal Iranian factors, as well as from a desire to avoid a burdensome controversy in light of past disappointments from wars that failed to deliver such ambitions. The objective has therefore been defined as “creating enabling conditions.”

The achievements of the war so far are dramatic. Through an orderly and systematic process, Iran is being stripped not only of its military capabilities – missiles, the nuclear program, naval forces, air capabilities, and the like—but also of its infrastructure and economic assets. In the internal struggle that awaits it over the survival of the regime, Iran will face the challenge with a command-and-control system functioning only partially, battered institutions, a deep economic hole, and a regime whose legitimacy is at a low point.

The deeper, broader, and more prolonged the damage, the greater the challenge the regime will face in ensuring its survival, especially if it finds no hope for resolving the fundamental problems it suffered from before the war and that will worsen as a result of it. There is no way of knowing whether the terrorist regime will ultimately fall, but the opportunity that has emerged to achieve this must not be missed. As long as it exists, it will continue to cast a threatening shadow over Israel and the entire region. Its survival would inspire extremist Islamist forces everywhere.

From an Iranian perspective, the most significant advantage the regime brings to its confrontation with the West is patience. The sensitivity of Western societies to casualties, economic costs, and disruptions to everyday life sustains Tehran’s hope.

President Trump understands this. He is clearly aware of the rare opportunity and is concerned that it might be missed because of impatience. “We don’t want to leave early,” he said. “We have to finish this.” “We don’t want to have to go back there every two years.”

His remarks accurately reflect the prevailing sentiment in Israel as well.

Published in Israel Hayom, March 15, 2026.

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