Is War With Lebanon Imminent?

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 01.04.2024

While most of the world's attention is focused on Israel's battle against Hamas in Gaza, Israel is simultaneously fighting on a second, lower-profile front against Hizballah in Lebanon. This is a war of attrition, and both sides have so far kept their ground forces out of the other's territory. Yet, in all other respects, it is a war, and it is more severe than any of Israel's numerous skirmishes with Hizballah since 2006. This war started the same day the one in Gaza did, when, on October 7, Hizballah expressed its support for Hamas by attacking Israel with missiles, RPGs, and drones. These attacks have continued daily since then. Worse, Hizballah has amassed ground forces along the border, poised to invade Israeli towns and carry out a slaughter that would make October 7th look mild by comparison.

This threat has forced Israel to evacuate the entire civilian population living within a few miles of the Lebanese border, leaving 80,000 Israelis internally displaced. The IDF has struck back at Hizballah targets, seeking to weaken the terror organization's military capabilities and command structure, but it has not yet sought a large-scale maneuver while it is focused on the Gazan theatre. But to many if not most Israelis, an intensification of the war in the coming months seems inevitable. The scale and severity of that war is one of the subjects of this essay, as are Israel's options in it, options that are shaped by the decisions—good and bad, wise and ill-conceived—that Israel has made about Lebanon in the past several decades.

The threat to Israel from its northern neighbor did not arise on October 7. It has been building since Israel fought its last war there in 2006, since it pulled its ground troops out at the turn of the new century, indeed since the modern state was founded. In a certain sense the threat from Lebanon has been present for millennia, a function less of politics and strategy than of simple geography.

How did we get to this point? What can be learnt from the previous rounds? What are Israel's options? And what is at stake in the coming battle?…

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