

## International Involvement and Prevention of Escalation in the Ongoing Israel-Hezbollah Crisis

Summary of a Roundtable Discussion Held on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004

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Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies – recently held a roundtable discussion via Zoom focusing on international involvement and its role in preventing escalation in the ongoing crisis between Israel and Hezbollah. The discussion included several experts and scholars from leading institutes and think tanks from around the world.

The discussion, conducted under the Chatham House Rule, was initiated while taking several basic assumptions into account:

1. An all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah would have devastating consequences for both sides, and would not be sufficient on its own to bring about a long-term settlement. Furthermore, such escalation would surely have implications both in the regional and international spheres, carrying a dangerous potential for triggering an all-out war in the Middle East.
2. All the parties directly involved (Israel, Hezbollah, Lebanon) are caught in a situation from which they are unable to extricate themselves on their own and will inevitably need international involvement to do so.
3. Prevention of escalation or war will inevitably have to come as part of a broader settlement process with significant implications in both the regional and international spheres.

Given these assumptions, the discussion aimed to examine the importance of international involvement in the ongoing crisis along the Israeli-Lebanese border and to map the various relevant actors, their characteristics and interests, and their levers on other actors.

### **Main points raised during the discussion:**

1. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE
  - **Saudi Arabia** expects an escalation between Israel and Hezbollah and regards it as de facto unavoidable. Given this conviction, the Saudis are unwilling to expend political capital, resources, or assets to try and prevent such an escalation.
  - **Qatar**, on the other hand, has emerged as the most optimistic among the Gulf monarchies regarding achieving a ceasefire deal in Gaza, and they believe that an escalation in Lebanon can be avoided. Although there is a growing feeling

among the Qataris that they are drawing criticism because of their mediation work, and they may therefore begin to wonder whether the mediation role they took upon themselves is worth the effort, they are still convinced in their ability to bring about de-escalation and are willing to take an active role in that regard.

- **The UAE** also believes that some form of a managed escalation is likely. Unlike the Saudis, they think there is a significant margin for negotiation and mediation that can be utilized to keep this risk of escalation contained and controlled, preventing it from escalating into a major regional war.
- Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE look to mitigate the risks of escalation. The right formula to achieve this may involve their combined channels and points of contact with the various actors, as well as their combined leverage – while always keeping in mind the limitations of this leverage, especially concerning Iran.
- The three countries are well aware of these limitations, and their immediate priority is to prevent the conflict from reaching their own territories. In this context they are most willing to contribute efforts and resources to prevent an escalation and a potential breakout of an all-out regional war.

## 2. The USA

- The USA is determined to prevent the current escalation from spiraling out of control, which is evident in the shuttle diplomacy undertaken by Amos Hochstein. Whether or not this diplomacy is successful, the Americans remain very concerned about miscalculations. There is a heightened concern that even if a ceasefire in Gaza is achieved, it could lead to an all-out conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. This pushes the USA to exercise proactive diplomacy, particularly to prevent the Israelis from diverting their forces from Gaza to deal with the northern front.
- The Biden administration also has an interest in keeping a space open for de-escalation with Iran on multiple fronts. The Americans are heavily invested in achieving a potential ceasefire and hostage deal in Gaza, playing a very active role in promoting this. These efforts are closely interlinked with their attempts to de-escalate the situation in the North.
- Another effort promoted by the Americans, should there be a Phase One ceasefire, is to leverage the established mediation basis from the successful negotiations over the maritime border between Israel and Lebanon in October 2022. Although the situation has changed significantly following the October 7<sup>th</sup> Attack, some of the rationale that led to those successful negotiations still applies, particularly on the Lebanese side. This carries potential for addressing the land border issue as well.
- It is clear that the Americans bring significant tools and leverage to the table, including their military strength for the defense of Israel, the supply of weapons

and ammunition, and the presence of American forces in the region as a form of deterrence. Additionally, as mentioned, Hochstein's diplomatic efforts in concert with other countries are also a key component.

### 3. France

- Lebanon holds historical significance for France, which plays an important role in various aspects and fields concerning it. All parts of the French political system are deeply attached to Lebanon, and President Macron has demonstrated personal engagement in Lebanese affairs throughout his time in office, especially regarding the political crisis Lebanon has faced for the past several years. Macron's ongoing efforts to address both the internal political crisis in Lebanon and the current conflict between Israel and Hezbollah give him, from his perspective, a certain legitimacy to act as a mediator.
- France cannot afford to remain passive when it comes to preventing further escalation between Israel and Hezbollah. From the French viewpoint, without resolving the political crisis and the ongoing tension with Israel, Lebanon cannot even begin to consider economic rehabilitation.
- Several factors make France an important player in preventing escalation: President Macron's personal ongoing engagement in the arena, the continuous participation of French forces within UNIFIL, and its role in mediating the maritime border agreement between Israel and Lebanon, alongside the Americans.
- A major asset for the French is their maintenance of ties with all relevant actors – both regionally, and within Lebanon itself, including with the political branch of Hezbollah, which is not classified by them as a terrorist organization.
- The French are aware that, in terms of mediation efforts, they play a secondary role to the American efforts led by Hochstein. However, they believe they can offer elements beyond American capabilities. This is why France initially insisted on presenting its own proposal for a settlement between Israel and Hezbollah, separate from the American one. Interestingly, it seems the French proposal is actually closer to the Israeli perception of a desired settlement.

### 4. Germany

- There is an underestimation of the lack of strategic calculations taking place in Germany regarding the issue of preventing escalation in the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Berlin fears getting proactively involved, partly due to domestic political concerns, upcoming elections in Germany and the EU, and the rise of the political right. Combined with concerns raised by the ongoing war in Ukraine, there is increasing sentiment that Germany should avoid involvement in another conflict.

- At the same time, Germany is deeply tied, both emotionally and politically, to the fate of Israel. Therefore, there is fear in Germany that, in the event of an escalation presenting an existential threat to Israel, there would be no scenario where Germany could avoid involvement. Additionally, the current situation in the Middle East raises fears of potential refugee inflows into Germany.
- All of these fears are accompanied by a belief that even if Germany gets involved, there is not much it can do, unlike the USA or France, for example. For this reason, Germany is currently waiting for other actors to take the lead in addressing the ongoing tensions.
- Germany also follows a “Gaza first” approach, based on the belief that there cannot be a sustainable resolution to the conflict in the North without a ceasefire in Gaza. Like the French, the Germans engage with all parties involved, including Hezbollah, which helps them facilitate communication between the sides. However, when it comes to addressing more strategic issues, Germany generally defers to France.
- There could be a scenario where Germany plays a more proactive role in convincing its stakeholders to engage. Germany could contribute to stabilization efforts in Lebanon, not necessarily financially, but through technical aid. However, for this to be effective, Germany needs to ensure that France, Hezbollah, and Israel permit and support such involvement.

## 5. Iran

- At this point, it seems that Iran does not wish to become engaged in a full-scale confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah. Despite this, the general mindset among Iranian leadership appears optimistic, with their strategic assessment indicating that things are going well for them. In Iran, there is a perception of a connection between the October 7<sup>th</sup> attack by Hamas and the Iranian attack on April 13<sup>th</sup>. While the latter is viewed as a tactical failure, it is considered a strategic success.
- The direct conflict between Israel and Iran in April marks a significant turning point in regional affairs. This is especially relevant to the escalating hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah, as the two are intertwined and reflect the new reality of the region.
- Despite this, one could argue that the notion that Iran does not wish to “waste” Hezbollah’s strategic and military capabilities for the sake of the Palestinians remains intact. Hezbollah has always been regarded by Iran as its major strategic asset to first deter Israel from attacking its nuclear facilities. If deterrence fails, Hezbollah’s capabilities are then intended to be used for retaliation against Israel. This conception appears to still hold true.

- Unlike Hamas, Hezbollah is indispensable to the Iranians, and it can be assumed that in the event of a war between Israel and Hezbollah, Iran will do everything it can to assist the latter. Indeed, recent statements from Iran suggest that if Israel attacks Lebanon, Iran will take whatever actions are necessary to ensure its security. However, it is still safe to say that the last thing Iran wishes at this moment is to engage Hezbollah in a full-scale confrontation with Israel.
- The Iranians are quite concerned about the challenge of resource mobilization in the event of a large-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah. They recognize that they would face significant difficulties in supplying Hezbollah in such a scenario and that they lack the necessary resources to do so effectively. The reconstruction of Hezbollah after such a war would be a very challenging task, beyond the current capacities of the Iranian economy.
- From the Iranian perspective, the top priority is to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza that will preserve the capabilities of both Hamas and Hezbollah as much as possible. If a ceasefire is not attainable, Iran's second priority is to engage Israel in a form of attrition war, both in Gaza and in Southern Lebanon. Only if Israel initiates a war against Hezbollah will Iran certainly intervene. This does not necessarily mean that Iran would deploy its own capabilities from the outset of such a war, but it would certainly seek to involve components of the so-called "Axis of Resistance" on a broader scale.
- Even if the Iranian Supreme Leader decides to engage Hezbollah in a war against Israel, it will not be a decision imposed solely by Iran. It will likely be a mutual decision made by both Hezbollah and Iran, taking into account the interests of Iran, Lebanon, and Hezbollah.

## 6. Israel, Hezbollah, and Lebanon

- It seems that Israel is interested in an all-out war but is not fully prepared for it, while Hezbollah is prepared for an all-out war but is not interested in it.
- On the Lebanese side, Hezbollah's reluctance to engage in such a war is influenced by the domestic context. Most Lebanese have expressed a strong desire to avoid participation in this conflict. Hezbollah takes these domestic concerns into account, though they may not be its highest priority. Lebanon continues to grapple with an economic and political crisis, and the prevailing sentiment within the country, including among the Shi'ite community, is against the war.
- Some may argue that a limited, short-lived ceasefire in Gaza could force Hezbollah to resume fighting, preventing stabilization in the North. However, Hezbollah has a strong interest in ending the current conflict, and even a limited ceasefire might be welcomed, especially if Hezbollah views itself as a victor. If Hezbollah can find a way out, even if temporary, it may be inclined to take it.

- On the Israeli side, recent polls have shown that many Israelis believe the crisis in the North should be resolved through military means, specifically a full-scale war with Hezbollah. However, examining the conditions of the IDF since October 7<sup>th</sup>, it is evident that the army is not prepared for such a war.
- The issue is not just the army's readiness, but also the civilian preparedness for the consequences of a full-scale war with Hezbollah. Israel is an ultra-modern country with numerous strategic targets that Hezbollah could strike, potentially destabilizing the country to the point of acute crisis. Conversely, Israel's list of targets in Lebanon is limited, as Lebanon is not as strategically equipped.
- We are witnessing a paradigmatic shift in Middle Eastern politics, one element of which is the openly exposed weakness of Israel. The Israeli instinct, especially among public opinion, is to restore an image of strength. However, the question remains: should this be achieved through a full-scale, potentially all-regional war, or by restoring and developing diplomatic relations with both regional and international actors? The former option would have devastating consequences for all parties involved, with Israel likely bearing the brunt of such a conflict.

### **Main Conclusions:**

- A full-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah is not inevitable. Diplomatic efforts aimed at short-term de-escalation could be effective, as neither Israel, Lebanon, Hezbollah, nor Iran has an interest in escalating the situation into a regional war. This creates an opportunity to foster a de-escalation dynamic and halt the violence. However, it will also require careful planning on how to sustain this dynamic in the long term.
- Instead of discussing intended or an unintended escalation, it may be more accurate to view the situation as both adversaries probing to determine the new rules of engagement in the altered regional reality. The ongoing hostilities should be understood in that light. The established rules of engagement have been upended, leading to efforts to ascertain the new rules and red lines. In this environment, the risk of miscalculation is extraordinarily high.
- Apart from the primary actors in this conflict – Israel, Hezbollah, and Lebanon – all of the secondary actors agree on a fundamental principle: that war is not a desirable option at the moment. This creates an opportunity, as there is convergence among most external actors, including Iran. However, the international initiatives presented so far do not align with this convergence and fail to leverage it effectively for preventing escalation. There is significant room for improvement, and more comprehensive initiatives, both regional and international, could be developed to include all relevant actors.
- Achieving a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah will be nearly impossible without a prior ceasefire in Gaza. It is important to recognize that even if a

ceasefire in Gaza is reached, it might be temporary and not last long. It is crucial to use any temporary ceasefire in Gaza to attempt to break the linkage Hezbollah has established between the situations in Gaza and Lebanon. We must create a mechanism to ensure Hezbollah has no legitimacy to resume the conflict if a ceasefire in Gaza does not endure.

- Any attempt to de-escalate the situation between Israel and Hezbollah must address Iran. There may be disagreements between Hezbollah, which considers domestic issues, and the Iranians. It is important to communicate to Iran, and not just to Hezbollah, that a full-scale confrontation with Israel will have significant repercussions for Iran itself. The Americans have already discussed this issue with the Iranians, and it is crucial that the Europeans do the same.
- We are witnessing a paradigm shift from Israeli deterrence against Hezbollah to a conventional version of a mutual assured destruction equation. However, this partial power symmetry between Israel and Lebanon is still very difficult for Israelis to digest. This explains the public pressure within Israel to restore the previous order of Israeli strategic superiority.
- Another key element is what one might call the “ladder question” – how to provide both sides with the right ladder in the form of a face-saving framework, allowing them to “climb down” from the escalation dynamic. In other words, how do we enable both sides to present a convincing narrative to their respective publics, in which they can claim victory after achieving their objectives, and, therefore, justify a ceasefire?
- When discussing long-term solutions, it is essential to address the broader dynamics surrounding this conflict. For example, creating an international mechanism to handle the rehabilitation of Lebanon is of great importance. Connecting rehabilitation and de-escalation while leveraging the capacity of the international community can provide a new framework for long-term stabilization.