Preventing Escalation between Hizbollah and Israel

Since October 2023, Hizbollah and Israel have been trading fire across the Lebanon-Israel border. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2024 – Spring Update, Crisis Group looks at how the EU and its member states can stop the conflict from escalating and restore greater stability.

Since the Gaza war began in October 2023, hostilities between Hizbollah and Israel have slowly grown in scope, in terms of both the territory under fire and the weaponry used. The sides have managed to avoid all-out war thus far, but that could change at any time: the conflict’s gradual expansion in itself increases the risk of inadvertent escalation. The U.S. and France have attempted mediation, but Hizbollah has said it will continue fighting unless and until Israel stops its Gaza campaign. For now, Hizbollah and Israel are locked in a war of attrition, with more than 100,000 Lebanese and similar numbers of Israelis evacuated or forced to flee their homes. Israel has also indicated that it may step up military action if diplomacy fails to allow people living in the areas along its northern border to return safely. Significantly sharper exchanges would put civilians in both countries, especially Lebanon, in severe danger. It would prompt even greater displacement in Lebanon, possibly pushing many to seek refuge in Europe. It might also spiral into a broader Middle East war. While tensions between Israel and Iran have ebbed since the unprecedented confrontation in April, which saw the first-ever direct Iranian attack on Israeli soil, an Israeli assault on Hizbollah in Lebanon could well trigger a wider confrontation involving Iran. Along with other outside powers, the European Union has consistently warned of these perils, but thus far no one has been able to reverse the worrying trajectory.

To do their part in restoring calm, the EU and its member states should:

- Throw their diplomatic weight behind attempts to achieve a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and a release of all hostages held there, an end to the Gaza war being key to preventing further escalation. European leaders should also consider what more they might do to press the parties to make such a deal.
- Give full support to French and U.S. efforts to mediate sustainable security arrangements in southern Lebanon. France should, where possible, keep its European partners informed of progress in its mediation efforts in order to ensure coordinated political messaging and planning within the EU.
- Reaffirm their commitment to Israel’s security, including on its northern border, while stressing that this goal is best pursued by diplomatic rather than military means, as the U.S. has done.
• Prepare to provide material aid for measures designed to increase mutual security along the Lebanon-Israel border at short notice and step up support for and troop contributions to the UNIFIL peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon.
• Take steps to prepare for the humanitarian fallout and displacement an escalation might cause. These include support for anticipatory humanitarian action that can enable international organisations to scale up aid operations inside Lebanon and in Syria, as well as increasing the capacity of reception centres and sea rescue operations on the maritime route to Europe, in particular in Cyprus and Greece.

Escalation Risks

The tit-for-tat war between Israel and Hizbollah, which the Shiite party-cum-militia initiated on 8 October 2023 and framed as imposing a cost on Israel for its military operations in Gaza, continues to escalate in slow motion. Where once the parties limited their bombardment to small areas, some of them uninhabited, both are now striking deeper. Israel has repeatedly hit sites as far north as Baalbek and Hermel in the Beqaa valley and near Saida on the coast. Hizbollah has largely restricted its attacks to a swathe of Israel some 10km south of the border. It has lobbed occasional missiles farther south – eg, at Nahariyya and the occupied Golan Heights – but using projectiles that Israeli’s advanced air defences can intercept with relative ease. Yet the group has gradually introduced new weapons, such as guided anti-armour rockets, attack drones and air defence missiles apparently capable of taking down advanced Israeli drones, showing that it can deploy these in complex operations. By mid-May, Hizbollah drone attacks had reached as far south as Tiberias, some 35km from the border. To date, the fighting has reportedly destroyed some 6,000 dwellings in Lebanon and over 1,000 in Israel.

Both Israel and Hizbollah appear interested in avoiding all-out war, showing some restraint, in particular striving to avoid civilian casualties, which would be most likely to trigger a dangerous escalation. Hizbollah has focused its attacks on Israeli military targets, while Israel has relied on precise intelligence to minimise civilian harm when hitting Hizbollah assets in Lebanon. But as the battlefield expands and the weapons used increase in potency, the risk mounts that a tactical error – eg, a strike that unintentionally takes many lives – or strategic miscalculation about what would prompt the opponent to launch a strong response will set off an escalation that is difficult to control.

A full-scale Israeli invasion of Rafah, the city and district in southern Gaza where most of the territory’s population had found uneasy shelter from the war, could also trigger further escalation between Israel and Hizbollah. Hamas has suffered military setbacks, but it is far from defeated and continues to stage vigorous counterattacks on Israeli ground troops, despite the massive suffering Israel’s offensive has inflicted on the Palestinian population.

The frequent exchanges of fire across the Israel-Lebanon border since October have prompted the U.S. and France to mediate (the U.S. reportedly communicates with Hizbollah through other Lebanese politicians). They have floated ideas for ways to contain the conflict, in particular a withdrawal of Hizbollah fighters and their equipment to an area some 10km north of the border, to be replaced by the Lebanese army. Yet Hizbollah has refused to consider any arrangement until there is a Hamas-endorsed permanent ceasefire in Gaza. As a result, negotiations have remained stalled. Absent a Gaza ceasefire, Hizbollah and Israel will remain on high alert, each ready to respond to what it sees as the other’s provocations.
Israel, in particular, may continue attacking Hizbollah as a way to convince it to stand down or, failing that, to degrade its capacity to harm Israel in what could become a drawn-out war of attrition.

**Impact of Failure**

The situation in the north puts significant political pressure on the Israeli leadership. Displaced civilians are demanding more decisive military action against Hizbollah. Such public campaigns may prompt Israeli leaders to deal Hizbollah a bigger blow if diplomatic efforts to restore calm to the border areas fail. Some in the Israeli government vow to do precisely that. Foreign officials speaking to both sides say they of Hizbollah-dominated areas sooner or later, potentially with a level of destruction similar to that in Gaza. It is hard to see how Israel can carry out an effective attack to restore security without triggering all-out war. A concerted Israeli attack would prompt Hizbollah to activate its reported arsenals of longer-range missiles, some of which are reportedly equipped with precision-guidance systems and can reach crucial nodes of Israeli infrastructure, including the nuclear facilities at Dimona in the Negev.

Such a conflict between Israel and Hizbollah would risk bringing their respective patrons, the U.S. and Iran, into direct confrontation, sparking a regional war with far-reaching consequences. (Conversely, a direct escalation between Iran and Israel, the potential for which the events in April underscored dramatically, could see Hizbollah enter the fray.)

If the worst-case scenario comes to pass, Israel could well suffer greater damage than it has ever experienced before, while parts of Lebanon would be destroyed. Such a war would also cause mass civilian displacement, in particular as Israel bombs densely populated areas in Lebanon, which it accuses Hizbollah of using as launchpads for its missiles. Significant numbers of refugees may try to escape, either by sea to Cyprus and Greece or by land to Syria and potentially on from there.

**Pathways to Stabilisation**

The European Union and European capitals should all factor in these risks and their potentially grave implications for Europe. At present, discussions in Europe lack a sense of urgency, with some seeming to believe that the Hizbollah-Israel clashes are manageable. The EU and its member states should instead step up their diplomacy aimed at de-escalation in this highly perilous flashpoint.

An end to the war in Gaza remains the key, not only to ending the agony of the Palestinians there, but also to banishing the spectre that the conflict will contribute to further destructive wars in the region. EU member states should throw their full diplomatic weight behind efforts to achieve such a ceasefire (the most likely form of which probably remains the phased approach entailing an initial pause and the release of the hostages held by Hamas and other militants in exchange for Palestinian prisoners, ideally leading to an end to hostilities, which appeared to be at least under discussion some weeks ago).

Europe has leverage it could use to this end, though it remains hamstrung by discord among EU member states. Efforts by some member states, most prominently Ireland and Spain, to push Europe to review, for example, whether Israel is complying with the EU-Israel Association Agreement’s human rights principles, and potentially suspend that agreement if not, have gained little traction. In private, some European
officials broach the option of stronger sanctions, potentially against parts of the Israel military (Hamas is already designated and sanctioned as a terrorist organisation), but such a decision would require unanimity among member states. Nor do any of the European capitals exporting arms to Israel, albeit in far smaller quantities than the U.S., show any inclination to withhold those supplies. Still, given European opposition to a full-scale Rafah operation (which European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen, usually a strong Israel supporter, has stressed would be “completely unacceptable” and would provoke European action) and the disastrous consequences of an Israel-Hizbollah war, Europe would be better served by trying to reach consensus on what pressure it might apply to avoid both.

An end to the war in Gaza could also pave the way for security arrangements in southern Lebanon that would address Israel’s demands. Hizbollah refuses to negotiate as long as the conflict in Gaza is under way, but it has not rejected an agreement in principle, and Lebanese government intermediaries have reacted somewhat favourably to proposals submitted by the U.S. and France. A settlement in southern Lebanon will not end the longstanding conflict between Israel and Hizbollah. Iran will almost certainly keep supplying Hizbollah with arms and funding, leading Israel to keep targeting shipments passing through Syria and the personnel accompanying them. But new security arrangements that calm cross-border tensions and allow the displaced on both sides to return home are worth pursuing.

European countries should prepare to lend their full support once workable security arrangements become possible. France may not be able to reveal all the details of its diplomacy, but it should remain in as open communication as possible with its European partners about its mediation efforts, so that the latter are ready to supply what is needed at short notice. The Lebanese army will need substantial aid in order to station sizeable numbers of troops on the border, given the dilapidated state of Lebanon’s public finances. The EU is already providing some direct support through individual member state measures and the European Peace Facility. Additional assistance through the latter is on the way. Member states should approve the proposed measures and EU institutions should ensure swift delivery. UNIFIL, the international peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon, will likewise need a financial boost, but also additional troop commitments from major Western countries. Financial support for Israel to bolster security measures along the border, by finishing construction of a border wall, for example, may help reduce its sense of vulnerability created by the 7 October events and increase its trust in the proposed measures’ effectiveness.

The latter type of support could be initiated immediately once the fighting pauses and may also help dissuade Israel from continuing attacks on Hizbollah or taking unilateral action in the time that elapses until negotiated security measures can be put in place, which may be significant. Europe should make a larger effort to emphasise the EU’s commitment to Israel’s security, while at the same time prevailing on Israel to address the security situation through diplomacy and not unilateral military action. The U.S. has taken this line, suggesting that a unified trans-Atlantic position on this matter is possible and likely to be effective.

At the same time, European countries should prepare contingency plans, particularly for the displacement that an all-out war between Israel and Hizbollah, which could erupt with very little warning, would cause. Through anticipatory humanitarian action, the EU and its member states should therefore enable international humanitarian NGOs and agencies to rapidly scale up their operations in Lebanon, which are already hugely overstretched. Massive refugee flight from Lebanon would likely follow the maritime route to Cyprus and Greece. Experience suggests that the countries involved, as well as the EU border agency Frontex, would need proper preparation to respond to a new influx of refugees across the
sea in a fashion that is compatible with international humanitarian and human rights law and the EU’s professed values. Other refugees will escape over the border to Syria, where they would need immediate humanitarian support but where European assistance would be complicated by the lack of relations between the EU and Damascus. Given Syria’s desperate economic plight, most refugees are likely to try to travel farther, with European countries the likely destination for many due to geographic proximity and the Lebanese diaspora communities already living there.