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An Israel-Hezbollah War: The Winners and the Losers

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SYNOPSIS

While the world's attention is fixed on the possibility of an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah, an important question is who would be the likely winners and losers in such a war. This commentary argues that the war would benefit the Saudi-led anti-Iran coalition and Russia while disadvantaging Iran and Lebanon.

COMMENTARY

Speculation about an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah has [dominated international headlines](#) and has overshadowed the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict. Since the 7 October Hamas attacks, Israel has assassinated several [Hamas](#) and [Hezbollah](#) leaders in Lebanon. In turn, Hezbollah has supported Hamas by [missile attacks](#) on Israel.

Israeli generals recently "[signed off](#)" on an offensive against Lebanon. Thus, all-out war between both parties has become a dangerous possibility. Yet a pressing issue emerges: what are the geopolitical implications of an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah for the Middle East? Who would be the winners, and who the losers?

The Winners in an Israel-Hezbollah War

A war between Israel and Hezbollah would benefit the [anti-Iran coalition](#) consisting of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It would weaken Iran's "[Axis of Resistance](#)", which includes a collection of militant groups based in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon. Despite Iran's [resumption of diplomatic relations](#) with Saudi Arabia and the UAE recently, deep-seated distrust and competition for regional influence [remain](#).

Another issue is Iranian support for Hamas and Hezbollah. Arab states, particularly

Saudi Arabia, have long endured [threats](#) and [attacks](#) from both groups and are concerned about [the spread of their influence](#) within their borders. Yet Hamas and Hezbollah represent the most powerful proxy groups in Iran's Axis, allowing Iran to [project regional influence](#).

With [Hamas weakened and currently embattled](#), a similarly intense war between Israel and Hezbollah would weaken the latter, as much of its [weapons and manpower resources](#) would be consumed in an all-out war with Israel which has [committed US support](#).

Both conflicts combined could constrain Iranian influence in the Middle East and disrupt "[Tehran's strategic system of pressure](#)" on the region, especially if other Axis of Resistance groups including thousands of fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan join in to aid Hezbollah's efforts.

As a result, an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah, combined with the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict, would fracture an "[Iranian land bridge](#)" connecting Tehran across the Levant to the Mediterranean. As King Abdullah II of Jordan observed, Iran seeks to create an Iranian sphere of influence through the formation of a "[Shiite Crescent](#)" straddling Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.

The possibility of a weakened Axis of Resistance explains Iranian reservations about military escalation against Israel, and [underscores the strategic patience](#) of Iran's leaders, who are cautious of attributable, direct attacks against the US and Israel.

The weakening of both Iranian-backed Hezbollah and Hamas could therefore grant the anti-Iran coalition opportunities for increased influence in the Levant. Saudi Arabia and the UAE could leverage their considerable financial resources for post-war [humanitarian relief](#) and rebuilding efforts to stabilise, in particular, Lebanon and neighbouring Jordan. This strategy could strengthen diplomatic solidarity between the Levantine and Gulf states, potentially founding the basis for a greater future anti-Iran coalition.

Russia would also benefit from an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah, as it [seeks greater influence](#) in the Middle East and [voices its support for Hezbollah](#). An Israel-Hezbollah war could grant opportunities for an expanded Russian military presence in the Middle East, which Russia would welcome as justified by the outcomes of the ongoing Syrian civil war. Ever since Russia [declared its support](#) for the ruling Assad regime of Syria, it had gained strategic advantages, including [access to Tartus and other Syrian warm-water ports](#) in the Mediterranean, and the use of Syrian bases such as the [Hmeimim air base](#).

Russian intervention has propped up the Assad regime and brought about increased collaboration with Hezbollah. This in turn strengthened Russo-Iranian military cooperation, which formed when [Iran assisted Russia with drones](#) and missiles for its Ukraine war.

Cooperation between Russia and Hezbollah is [observed to be intensifying](#). US intelligence alleges that Russia has agreed [to transfer its Pantsir](#) missile defence

system to Hezbollah, granting Hezbollah protection from Israeli missile strikes. It is also suspected that Russia has provided [Hezbollah with anti-ship missiles](#).

Should Israel defeat Hezbollah in an all-out war, Russia would have a [stronger reason to stay](#) or even expand its military presence in the region to protect its interests in Syria, to aid Hezbollah, and to support Iranian influence. This could potentially pave the way for a lasting Russian military presence in the Middle East and fulfil the broader goal of keeping the US entangled. Conflicts there would consume American attention and resources and divert them from competitions with Russia elsewhere.

The Losers in an Israel-Hezbollah War

Being the theatre of an Israel-Hezbollah war would devastate Lebanon. As Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant proclaimed, Israel “[will return Lebanon to the Stone Age](#)” if Hezbollah started a war. An all-out war in Lebanon would likely be a replay, on a greatly magnified scale, of the devastation wrought on Gaza.

Hezbollah, like Hamas in Gaza, is [deeply embedded](#) in Lebanon’s political, economic, and military structures. Thus, Israeli attempts to destroy Hezbollah would lead to tremendous civilian collateral damage, as seen during the 1983 war when Israel invaded Lebanon and bombarded Beirut to expel the Palestine Liberation Organisation. The invasion [killed an estimated 19,085 Lebanese and wounded 30,000](#). To worsen matters, Lebanon’s [economic fragility](#), with 80 per cent of its people living near the poverty line, would be greatly worsened by devastation brought about by an all-out war.

Importantly, the collapse of the Lebanese political system and [power-sharing arrangements codified](#) by the Lebanese National Pact between ethnoreligious groups in the event of an all-out Israel-Hezbollah war could lead to the rise of fragmented, militant sectarianism as Shia, Druze, Sunni and Christian groups fight for control in the wake of the war, much like the struggle between Shia and Sunni militant groups in Iraq following the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist regime. This could further destabilise the region, creating new militant groups and intensifying the humanitarian and refugee crisis.

As discussed earlier, Iran would be disadvantaged by an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah. Besides its weakened Axis of Resistance and circumscribed influence, Iran would face pressures from both external and domestic sources. If it fails to adequately aid embattled Hezbollah and Hamas, Iranian proxy groups and supporters could perceive it as being “[rhetorically audible but almost invisible](#) on the battlefield”. Domestically, amid [economic decline](#) and [strict imposition of religious laws](#), the lack of affirmative action against Israel in its all-out war with Hezbollah [could be the final straw](#), potentially [angering pro-regime radical](#) and conservative factions against the regime’s leaders.

It should be noted that Iran balances [a delicate conflict of interests](#): it seeks to challenge US-Israeli influence in the Middle East without provoking US and Israeli responses that could destabilise the regime. An all-out Israel-Hezbollah war could, therefore, force the regime to act in more aggressive and unpredictable ways, which

it can do as demonstrated by its [unprecedented missile barrage against Israel](#) in April 2024.

And, as [Ali Vaez of the International Crisis Group](#) asserts, Iran could resort to nuclear deterrence by intensifying its nuclear enrichment programmes, which could invite stricter international economic sanctions and inflame tensions between Iran and the Sunni states of the Middle East.

Conclusion

From this assessment, it is clear that an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah would benefit the anti-Iran coalitions in the Gulf and Russia while Lebanon and Iran would be the losers. It might also alter the balance of influence in the Middle East by granting adjacent actors opportunities for greater action. However, such a war would worsen the lives of the embattled and long-suffering people who call the region home. Both Israel and Hezbollah should think carefully before escalating their conflict into an all-out war.

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