

How Different is the Fourth Israeli Invasion of Lebanon?

written by Saeed Rahnema | November 27, 2024



This past year's new round of conflict and war between Israel and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon has once again plunged Lebanon into a dangerous predicament.

The recent war marks the fourth time that Israel has launched an invasion of Lebanon to secure its northern borders, intending to clear and control south Lebanon up to the Litani River. In each of the earlier military operations in 1978, 1982, and 2006, Israel succeeded in devastating the region, killing many Palestinians and Lebanese, and limiting their capacity for attack, but ultimately had to withdraw except in a few small areas along the Lebanese border. The first two invasions were directly related to the conflict with Palestinians, but the 2006 and particularly the current 2024 invasions are more related to confrontations with the anti-Israeli policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). To clarify the circumstances that brought Lebanon into the arena of war between Israel and Palestine and also set the stage for the proxy war between Iran and Israel, it is essential to take a brief look at the very complex history of Lebanon.

Involvement in the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Lebanon was gradually dragged into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During the First Israeli-Palestinian War (1947-1949), which led to the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians, about 100,000 sought refuge in Lebanon and were housed in 12 camps.

In the Six-Day War (1967), more Palestinian refugees entered Lebanon. Sporadic military clashes between the Lebanese army and Palestinian militants, who were now armed in all the camps, further destabilized the situation. In 1970, following the severe crackdown on Palestinians in Jordan (Black September), even more Palestinian refugees entered Lebanon. The leadership of the Palestinian resistance, which had moved to Jordan following the loss of the West Bank, was forced to Lebanon, turning it into the main base for the Palestinian movement.

Israel sought to find allies among Lebanese groups and intervene in Lebanon's politics. The Maronites were considered potential allies, but they were not united. The Maronites of northern Lebanon had a close relationship with the Syrian Ba'ath leader, Hafez al-Assad, and were staunchly opposed to Israel. Southern and central Maronites, mostly from the landowning and traditional middle classes, were against Arab unity and the PLO. Some had formed the Kataeb Phalange Party, influenced by Italian fascists. Israel recognized this party as a potential ally and began providing it with financial and military assistance. In 1976, the Lebanese Forces (LF) was established to unify the right Christians. With the help of Israel, this faction became involved in military conflicts with

Palestinian resistance and Syrian forces.

The horrific Lebanese Civil War, which lasted nearly 15 years (1975-90), went through several phases, and the balance of power shifted back and forth between the two main coalitions—Maronites on the one side and Druze and different left and religious groups on the other—with ongoing interventions by external forces like Syria and Israel.

In 1977, Israel's elections brought the right-wing Likud party to power for the first time, strengthening the positions of right-wing Maronites. In response to a Palestinian attack on a bus in northern Israel that killed its passengers, Israel found a pretext to invade southern Lebanon. In March 1978, during "Operation Litani," Israel launched a ground invasion after extensive bombing of south Lebanon, occupying the entire southern region up to the Litani River. Political differences and rivalries among the Maronites further complicated the situation. Multiple UN resolutions called for the immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon and established a new peacekeeping force, "UNIFIL." Israel eventually had to retreat but handed over its positions to the violent Maronite militia known as the "South Lebanon Army" (SLA), equipping them with American weapons. This militia openly acted as Israel's proxy.

In 1982, Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon decided to expel the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Lebanon and were waiting for a pretext to invade. When the Abu Nidal group, a dubious Palestinian faction split from Fatah, attempted to assassinate the Israeli ambassador in Britain, the Israeli army, supported by Maronite Phalangists, launched one of its largest assaults against Lebanon. Alongside extensive bombing, the Israeli army advanced and besieged western Beirut, levelling the area. The intensity of the bombing was such that Theodore Arcand, the Canadian ambassador at the time, in an interview with the *Sunday Times* on 8 August 1982, stated that the destruction was so vast that the bombings of Berlin in 1945 seemed like a tea party in comparison! Israel ultimately succeeded in expelling the PLO from Lebanon to Tunisia, marking its fourth relocation. Under the watch of Israeli occupiers, Phalange forces attacked the Sabra and Shatila camps, massacring thousands of Palestinians.

The Emergence of Shiites as a Major Political Power and Iran's Influence

Historically, Shiite Muslims in Lebanon were among the poorest and most marginalized ethnic-religious groups. Most Muslim groups and factions with Islamic origins in Lebanon had established their political and military organizations before the Shiites: The Druze, had founded the influential "Progressive Socialist Party" (PSP) in 1949; Sunnis had formed the Islamic Group in 1946 along with its military branch, "Al-Fajr"; a splinter group called the Islamic Unity Movement or "Tawhid Movement" had emerged in 1982, along with another Sunni faction known as the "Tripoli People's Movement." The Alawites, a relatively small community in northern Lebanon, had also formed their organization called the "Arab Democratic Party."

Lebanese Shiites are Twelvers and, like the Maronites and the Druze, had escaped religious persecution and had settled in Lebanon centuries ago. However, they were increasingly marginalized over the centuries, especially after the Maronites and Druze established dominance in their regions during the Ottoman era. Colonial powers supported specific religious groups: the Sunnis were backed by the Ottomans, the Maronites by French, Russian, and American missions, and the Druze by Britain. Meanwhile, the significant Shia minority remained on the sidelines. In later periods, including during the French mandate, they also participated in military confrontations against the French. With a demographic ratio of about 30%, the Shia found significant representation in the agreements following the drafting of the constitution.

In 1974, Imam Musa Sadr, a charismatic Iranian-educated cleric with Lebanese family roots,

travelled to Lebanon after studying in Qom, Tehran, and Najaf. He was crucial in organizing the Shiites in Lebanon and strengthening their position. With the help of Hussein al-Husseini, he established the “Movement of the Deprived of Lebanon.” At the onset of the civil war, it was the only religious faction without a military wing, so it formed the “Amal” (Lebanese Resistance Brigades) and engaged in the leftist front’s struggles but withdrew from that front after Syria entered the war. Musa Sadr mysteriously disappeared during a trip to Libya in 1978, invited by Gaddafi, and there is still no information on what happened to him. After Sadr, Hussein al-Husseini assumed leadership. He refused to engage in the war on behalf of the Palestinians and instead competed with them for control over Palestinian camps. Palestinians sought to assassinate him, and amid the civil war, Amal clashed with Palestinians, killing many of them. After al-Husseini, Nabih Berri became the leader of Amal in 1980 and engaged in warfare in favor of the Palestinians in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. With Berri’s rise to power, some main Amal leaders stepped down. Berri became the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament in 1992 and continues to play an active role in the same position.

In 1982, Hezbollah was formed with military and financial support from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Over time, Hezbollah and leaders who had separated from Amal gradually gained significant influence within the Shiite community. The 1983 bombings, which killed American and French soldiers, brought more attention to Shiite groups. Starting in the mid-1980s, Hezbollah engaged in conflict with Israel’s proxy forces, the Maronite “South Lebanon Army”, inflicting substantial damage on them.

Following the resignation of Subhi al-Tufayli, an opponent of Iran, and the assassination of Abbas al-Musawi, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah—who had closer ties with the Islamic Republic—assumed Hezbollah’s leadership in 1992 as Secretary General. Under his direction and with extensive Iranian support, Hezbollah became the most formidable force against Israel. That same year, Hezbollah decided to participate in parliamentary elections, expanding its political and social activities.

Repeated skirmishes, incursions into Israeli territory, hostage-taking, and missile attacks set the stage for another Israeli assault on southern Lebanon in 2006. The extensive bombardment targeted not only the south but also key infrastructure, including Beirut Airport. After enforcing a complete naval and aerial blockade of Lebanon, the Israeli army began a ground invasion.

During this conflict, the Israeli government implemented the “Dahiya Doctrine”—named after Dahiya, a large Shia neighborhood in southern Beirut. This brutal military strategy aimed to deliberately destroy civilian, residential, and economic infrastructure to demoralize the population and weaken their resistance to occupation. A similar, more extreme genocidal version of this policy is being implemented in Gaza today.

The United Nations, through Resolution 1701, called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon, the disarmament of all militia groups, including Hezbollah, the retreat of Hezbollah to the north of the Litani River, the deployment of the Lebanese army, and the expansion of UNIFIL’s activities. While Israel withdrew from the occupied areas, it retained—to this day—control of several border regions, including the Shebaa Farms and part of Ghajar village. Despite suffering significant losses and casualties, Hezbollah refused to disarm. This responsibility was assigned to UNIFIL at the request of the Lebanese army, but neither at that time nor afterward did any Lebanese government dare to enforce it.

Through this process, Hezbollah emerged as the most powerful political force in Lebanon, with successive Lebanese governments unable to function fully without its support. Hezbollah evolved into a highly organized entity with a clear hierarchy, led by the “Shura Council,” comprising senior Shia clerics responsible for appointing the Secretary-General. The organization established numerous specialized committees, a decision-making council, and, most notably, a military branch

known as the “Jihad Council,” which commands tens of thousands of fighters. Hezbollah also enjoys broad support among the Shiite community, which benefits from its extensive network of social services and financial institutions.

Israel's Two Objectives in the Current Invasion

The present ultra-right-wing Israeli government, taking advantage of the political and military mobilization following the post-October 7 Hamas terrorist attack, is pursuing broader goals in this round of the invasion of Lebanon: the complete elimination of Hezbollah and dragging its main supporter, the Islamic Republic of Iran, into war. In both cases, however, Israel knows it faces major obstacles and will not be able to achieve these goals alone.

To eliminate Hezbollah, Israel hopes to provoke civil strife and potentially civil war in Lebanon. While simultaneously conducting widespread killings and bombings in the Shiite areas of southern Lebanon and south of Beirut, Israel aims to draw the non-Shiite population into the conflict with Hezbollah. The recent bombing of part of a Christian neighborhood is linked to this strategy. Israel sees the current political moment, the world's silence, and the unwavering support of the U.S. as an opportune time to depopulate southern Lebanon through massacres and the displacement of its residents. However, it is finding this task more difficult than anticipated. In southern Lebanon, in the Nabatiyeh and South Lebanon governorates that border Israel, about a million people live in over a hundred villages and several towns and cities, with over 60 percent of them being Shiite, a demographic with a significant grassroots base for Hezbollah. The South governorate also contains several Palestinian refugee camps. Evacuating or killing this population is impractical. Even the Christians in southern Lebanon, who make up about 20% of the area's population, cannot necessarily be counted as allies or supporters of Israel due to the damage they incur. Israel can displace many of them with extensive bombardments, as it is currently doing across Lebanon, but it cannot fully clear the region.

Undoubtedly, Hezbollah, aside from its friends and supporters, has many foes among Lebanon's political-religious factions. Its involvement in the Syrian civil war, in alignment with the Islamic Republic's policy to keep Bashar al-Assad in power in 2012, raised doubts about its position as a national Lebanese force. Hezbollah's anti-Israel policy has not necessarily been about assisting the Palestinians but is tied to its official stance on the destruction of Israel. A notable example of Hezbollah's neglect of Palestinian conditions is the dire state of Palestinian camps in Lebanon, which I have addressed elsewhere. Like the Iranian regime itself, the issue of Palestine serves as a tool to further its policies, not to liberate the Palestinians. Hezbollah's close ties to the Islamic Republic have drawn Lebanon into a proxy war between Iran and Israel, leading to more opposition against it within Lebanon. Despite this, Hezbollah still enjoys the support of many Lebanese, including some Maronites, and I have personally witnessed such positions in Lebanon.

The recent series of devastating blows to Hezbollah, particularly the killing of Hassan Nasrallah and many senior political and military leaders, as well as terrorist infiltration and the destruction of their communication devices by Israel, has undoubtedly weakened Hezbollah significantly. However, it has not destroyed the organization. Israel is also aware that Hezbollah is not just a military and guerrilla organization but also a major political force, a significant social service provider, and a financial entity. Accordingly, it has a broad popular base.

Although Israel has so far been unsuccessful in instigating internal confrontations among the Lebanese, the continuation of the current war may change the situation. Almost all the political and religious groups mentioned above, with some changes in their leadership, remain present, and it is unpredictable how each will react and what alliances and stances will emerge as the conflict continues. Furthermore, Lebanon is experiencing its most severe economic crisis, and its political

system is on the verge of collapse: it has no president, and its government is temporary and lacks credibility and resources. The Lebanese army is also financially and militarily incapacitated. All these factors further complicate the situation, with unforeseeable consequences.

Hezbollah's ability to reorganize and rebuild itself to its pre-assault level is linked to the military and financial support it can receive from the Islamic regime in Iran. Without this support, Hezbollah will not only be unable to continue its war with Israel but will also be unable to sustain its extensive social, medical, and educational services, which have been crucial in maintaining its popular base. However, the continuation of support from the Islamic Republic depends, on one hand, on Iran's economic and financial capabilities and internal political situation, all of which are in severe crisis. On the other hand, it relies on behind-the-scenes dealings and negotiations with the U.S., which seek to prevent a large-scale Israeli attack and to lift certain sanctions. All this leaves Hezbollah in a state of uncertainty.

The return of Donald Trump to power would exacerbate the problems faced by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Trump, hoping to enforce a major compromise on Iran, will impose more pressure and sanctions on the country. These sanctions, particularly further restrictions on oil sales, would not only worsen Iran's economic crisis but also significantly reduce its ability to provide financial aid to its proxy forces, including Hezbollah. This would inevitably diminish the Islamic Republic's influence over these jihadist organizations. Additionally, because Trump withdrew from the JCPOA nuclear deal and was responsible for the killing of senior IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani, any compromise between the Islamic Republic and the Trump administration seems much more difficult. Yet, more than ever, Iran's Islamic regime is facing a catch-22 situation it created for itself since its establishment in 1979. As mentioned elsewhere, to protect itself, aside from its nuclear ambitions, it created proxy militant Shiite groups in various neighboring countries. Yet, nurturing and maintaining these groups has proven to be financially and politically costly. Now, faced with major economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental crises—as well as crises of legitimacy and succession—the regime must confront the bullish Trump administration's sanctions and threats. Under these circumstances, the Islamic regime has no choice but to accept humiliating concessions.

For a full-scale war with Iran, Israel recognizes that the geographic distance makes it difficult to send tanks and commando forces to Iran—if it would dare to do so at all. Moreover, it faces limitations in using the airspace of neighboring countries for its bombers and fighter jets. Israel needs to draw the U.S. into the war, but this is highly unlikely. Neither the Biden administration for its remaining period nor the upcoming Trump administration would want to enter such a war, partly due to the terrible experiences of fighting much weaker countries like Afghanistan and Iraq. Furthermore, given the numerous examples of post-'regime-change' failed states, the US is less eager to topple the current regime in Iran without first identifying a viable alternative. In any event, a Trump presidency will certainly strengthen the position of Israel's present coalition government and further weaken the Islamic regime in Iran. However, it cannot resolve the conflict. Contrary to the policies of the present ultra-right-wing Israeli government and many elements within the Islamic regime in Iran, there is no military solution to the current conflicts.

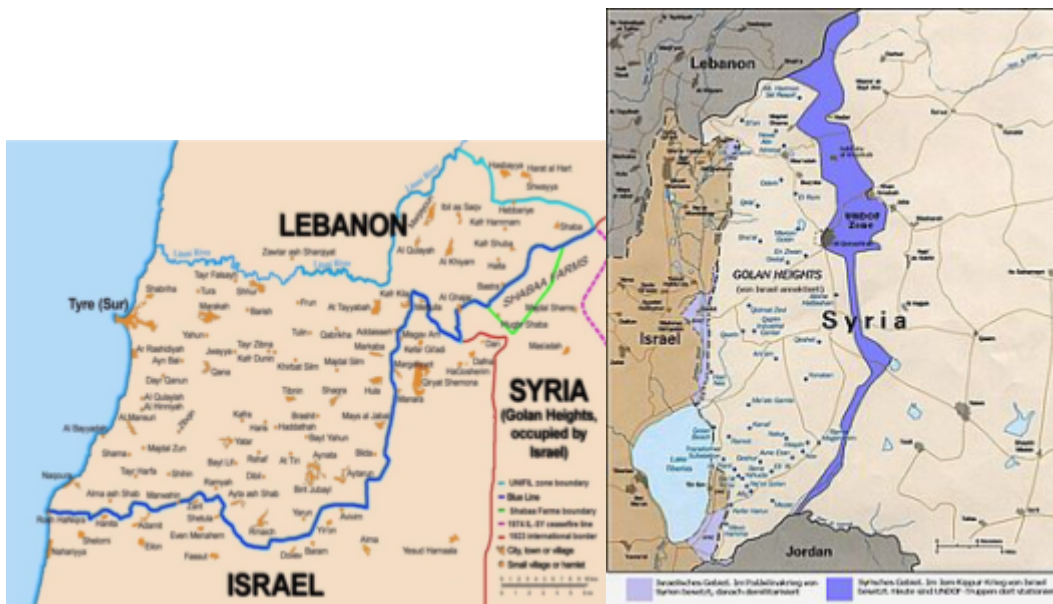
Path to the Resolution of the Conflict

Eighteen years ago, during the 2006 war, I wrote an article titled "Is This the Last Arab-Israeli War?" In it, I stated: "Of all the gruesome, tragic photos of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, one clip remains in my mind: that of an injured boy lying on the ruins of what was his home, raising his hand and showing a 'V' sign to the camera. Since the boy is so young, he may not know what 'victory' means. But, seeing his face and his gesture, there is a good chance that he will grow to be an enemy of Israel, perhaps a Hezbollah fighter." I pointed out that Israel and its main supporter, the United States, mistakenly believed that this violent assault would lead to the defeat of Hezbollah and the

Palestinians in Lebanon. However, after 34 days of war and heavy casualties, Israel soon faced reality and was forced to withdraw.

The UN Security Council Resolution 1701 is certainly a suitable basis for preventing the recurrence of Israel-Lebanon wars. However, it does not address the root causes and requires significant adjustments. Key preconditions for ending the conflict include, first, a complete ceasefire and the removal of all Israeli forces from Lebanon, the return of the Shebaa Farms and the Ghajar area—which remain under Israeli occupation—and the withdrawal of Hezbollah to the north of the Litani River. This would be a first step toward integrating Hezbollah’s military apparatus into the Lebanese Army and placing it under the army’s control.

A deliberately neglected issue is the delineation of the operational boundaries of UNIFIL peacekeeping forces. It is a bitter irony that all UN peacekeeping forces in the Middle East are stationed at the borders of Israel’s neighboring countries and not in Israel itself, implicitly suggesting that aggression always comes from neighboring countries and that Israel’s borders must only be protected and secured. Currently, UNIFIL has deployed 10,000 troops from 47 countries in southern Lebanon. In Syria, the UNDOF peacekeeping force, established in 1974, is absurdly located not on the border with Israel and the Golan Heights but on the other side of the Golan—an area that, despite condemnation by the UN Security Council, Israel has illegally occupied and annexed. (See maps.) If UNIFIL is to remain any longer, it is necessary for part of its forces to be stationed in southern Lebanon and the other part in northern Israel.



As this article was being prepared for publication, a “ceasefire,” similar to UNSC Resolution 1701, was announced. It called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon and for Hezbollah to pull back north of the Litani River over 60 days. It is hard to imagine that this temporary pause in military operations will last long. Israel will “retain complete military freedom of action,” while Hezbollah will not disarm and can launch its missiles and drones from the other side of the Litani River. The current ceasefire highlights the fact that, while Israel has severely weakened Hezbollah, it has once again failed in its stated goal of “eliminating” the group.

Overall, as long as the core issues of the conflicts between Israel-Palestine and the neighboring countries remain unresolved, wars and conflicts will continue to recur in various forms. Ultimately,

hostilities between Israel and its neighbors should end with the resolution of the Palestinian issue. Israel must return to its pre-1967 borders with some agreed-upon land swaps. A genuine Palestinian state should be established within a two-state solution framework, with its capital in the eastern section of Jerusalem. Peace between Israel and regional governments should materialize, with recognition of Israel by all states in the region.

However, as long as Israel's government is dominated by the most right-wing factions and religious extremists, and it continues to be unconditionally supported by the U.S., Western countries, and the powerful Israeli lobby, as long as the Palestinian movement is led by a corrupt and ineffective semi-autonomous administration and right-wing religious extremists, and as long as regional powers, including Iran, support proxy conflicts and wars, there will be no chance of resolving these issues. Consequently, we will continue to witness wars, massacres, and the destruction of infrastructure in the region.

Saeed Rahnema is a retired Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, and Founding Director of the School of Public Policy and Administration at York University, Canada. He taught, among others, the course "War and Peace in the Middle East."

The longer original Farsi version was published in the *pecritique*, on 10 October 2024.