

## [As Israel Refuses to End Genocide in Gaza, Threat of War With Hezbollah Looms](#)

*Experts examine Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's calculations and politics of risking wider war.*

For the past eight months, Hezbollah has attacked the northern portion of Israel in an attempt to pull the Israeli army out from Gaza, reports [Al Jazeera](#). Fears of a wider war have prompted [international calls](#) to deescalate the situation at the border between Lebanon and Israel. During a recent meeting with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters that the U.S. is “urgently seeking a diplomatic agreement that restores lasting calm to Israel’s northern border and enables civilians to return safely to their homes on both sides of the Israel-Lebanon border.” The U.S. is also [preparing to be ready to evacuate](#) tens of thousands of Americans who live in Lebanon in the event of war.

In this interview, exclusive for *Truthout*, academics [Lawrence Davidson](#) and [Stephen Zunes](#) break down the rapidly developing situation in Lebanon. The scholars highlight U.S.-backed Israeli incursions that have incidentally resulted in a host of Security Council violations while commenting on the relationship between Hezbollah and Hamas and the 2006 war. Further, they touch on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s calculations and the prospects and politics of risking wider war.

**Daniel Falcone:** It’s being reported that [nearly 100,000 Lebanese](#) have been displaced since October by U.S.-backed Israeli attacks with the use of white phosphorus, which is banned by the international community. What are Israel’s stated goals in Lebanon compared to what’s happening on the ground?

**Lawrence Davidson:** There has been a clearing of the population on both sides of the border since October 7. This is especially true on the Israeli side where most of the population has been forced to move south. It is less so on the Lebanese side, but that has been changing in the last month or so. I am not sure of the numbers, but the area of Lebanon near the [border](#) has been less populated for decades because of past Israeli incursions. The Israelis have been using [phosphorus bombs](#) for the last couple of years on the Palestinian population. They have now introduced this banned weapon into Lebanon. The Israeli goal is to create a buffer zone of about 10 kilometers of “[no man’s land](#)” on the Lebanese side of the border. If they can move Hezbollah back from the border far enough to put most of their northern towns out of artillery range, they can bring their population back to the north.

**Stephen Zunes:** Like every Israeli attack on Lebanon, Syria, Gaza or the West Bank, Israel justifies it in the name of [self-defense](#), though few countries outside of the United States see it that way. Since October, Hezbollah has occasionally been lobbing shells and small rockets into northern Israel with little damage, holding back on their arsenal or larger Iranian-supplied missiles which could strike anywhere in Israel with devastating results. Meanwhile, Israel has been engaging in regular airstrikes on Lebanon, which would be receiving more international media attention were it not for the far greater carnage in Gaza. Current estimates as of mid-June are that [414](#) Lebanese have been killed, about one quarter of whom have been civilians.

[Netanyahu is hoping to provoke](#) a major military response from Hezbollah which could possibly also include Iran. Most of the world opposes Israel’s war on the Palestinians but may see Israel in a more sympathetic light if faced with attacks by Iran and its proxies. A major war with Hezbollah and/or Iran would unite an increasingly divided Israeli public, would strengthen Netanyahu’s hand, and would distract global attention from ongoing atrocities in Gaza.

***The New York Times* has called the Hezbollah/Israeli war as “[a careful dance](#).” They argue that all sides wish to inhibit the conditions that could set off a wider war. What’s the nature of this conflict?**

**Davidson:** There have been two past wars on the Lebanese border and periods of occupation by Israel. These wars helped give rise to [Hezbollah](#). Hezbollah is an ally of the Palestinian resistance movement now led by Hamas. It has aided them with some training and financial support. Hezbollah is also allied with Iran which has helped arm Hezbollah (but not Hamas). Hezbollah has always been tactically careful because of the amount of sheer destruction Israel can wreak on Lebanon. However, if they have developed an arsenal capable of defending against Israeli airstrikes, they might risk a [wider war](#). It is that identification with the Palestinians as fellow Muslims who have been displaced by a [non-Muslim colonial movement](#), backed by the West, that characterizes the conflict in the minds of Hezbollah members.

**Zunes:** [Hezbollah](#), with the likely support of Iran, wants to demonstrate solidarity with the Palestinian struggle by sending an occasional rocket barrage into northern Israel, but they have little interest in provoking a wider conflict. A major war with vastly superior Israeli forces would be incredibly damaging with enormous military and civilian casualties. By keeping things at a low level, Hezbollah and Iran are reaping enormous political benefits throughout the Middle East as they see growing hatred of Israel for its atrocities, growing anger at the United States for supporting it, and growing disappointment at other Western nations and with Arab leaders for failing to stop it. Hezbollah’s standing in Lebanon and elsewhere was hurt greatly by its support for Assad during the [Syrian civil war](#) but is now growing again as a result of Israeli policies.

**[Mouin Rabbani](#), an excellent Middle East analyst, has indicated that U.S. and Israeli [intelligence](#) found no connections between Hamas and Iranian, Syrian or Yemeni proxies on October 7. If no one is working with Hamas, how has Israel justified the onslaught in Lebanon?**

**Davidson:** The Gaza Palestinians have been largely isolated by the [Israeli blockade](#). There are, of course, underground connections and communications between Hamas and the outside, including the Gulf Arab states (from whom they have gotten financial support). But they have received no material aid like weapons. The weapons they now use against Israel are of their own manufacture. The Israeli aim is to [ethnically cleanse](#) the Palestinians and so they feel that they need no further justification. Israelis frame their genocidal aims in terms of self-defense against Palestinian resistance.

**Zunes:** Hamas’s ties with Iran and its proxies have been [greatly exaggerated](#). They were on opposite sides during the Syrian civil war. Iran has been closer with Hamas’s rival Islamic Jihad. Most of Hamas’s support has come from virulently anti-Iranian Arab Gulf states. And the amount of financial and military support Hamas has received from Iran has been quite small compared with the support Iran has provided Hezbollah and Iranian allies elsewhere. It appears that Israel’s attacks on [Hezbollah](#) and other Iranian-allied militia in Lebanon and Syria are based more on Israel’s long standing desire to cripple their capabilities overall and they are using the Gaza war as a cover.

**In what ways do the current tensions mirror the July War of [2006](#)? How have international priorities shifted since?**

**Davidson:** I think there is some similarity with the [2006 conflict](#) in terms of initial motivation. The [2006 war](#) saw Hezbollah seeking to take hostages to force Israel into a prisoner exchange. The October 7 effort by the Palestinian resistance was at least partially the same. On October 7, the Palestinians had other goals as well: a) to halt the [normalization process](#) that was going on between Israel and Arab states, b) to refocus world attention back on the plight of the Palestinians. All these goals have, to date, been quite successful, but at a very high cost. The Gaza cities and towns now resemble [Dresden](#) after the allied bombing in 1945.

**Zunes:** Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006 was largely at the behest of the George W. [Bush administration](#), which pushed the Israeli government against the better judgement of its military leadership to attempt to neutralize Hezbollah at a time when the United States was seriously considering war with Iran. By heavily damaging Hezbollah's arsenal of sophisticated Iranian missiles, they hoped to weaken Iran's deterrent against a U.S./Israeli attack. When it became clear to the Israelis that the war was not going as planned, the Bush administration pushed them to continue fighting despite disastrous results. By contrast, the Biden administration, despite its strong support for Israel's war on Gaza, appears much less willing to support an Israeli war on Lebanon or a U.S. war on Iran. Biden would like to be able to shift attention away from his [unpopular policies in the Middle East](#) in an election year and, in the grander scheme of things, would like to refocus U.S. strategic priorities towards East Asia and not be distracted by endless Middle East wars. As a result, the U.S. would likely discourage Israel from launching another front.

**Israel seems to be losing steam in its long-standing policy of “[maintaining deterrence](#).” It's not working well. Is Netanyahu feeling any pressure in your view. Does he fear that his form of reactionary statism is faltering?**

**Davidson:** Israel has its own internal divisions which were moving the country in an [autocratic](#) direction even before October 7. These have to do with the [degree of religiosity](#) that might be forced on the Israeli Jewish population by their own religious right wing (which is politically aligned with Netanyahu). That same right wing is driving the settler movement and the genocide in Gaza. If [Netanyahu](#) can sustain his present alliance the reactionary statism will persist. In the end almost all Israeli Jews are more hostile toward the Palestinians than they are to each other, despite sectarian differences.

**Zunes:** Even [putting aside the moral and legal arguments](#), Netanyahu's policies have been quite harmful to [Israel's security interests](#). Since 2002, every Arab state has pledged recognition and security guarantees in return for the end of the occupation, but Israel has refused to do so. Israel's ongoing repression and colonization of the West Bank and its refusal to allow for the emergence of a viable Palestinian state was directly responsible for the rise of Hamas and the horrific terrorist attacks of October 7. Unfortunately, U.S. policy of [rewarding Israel for its intransigence](#) by dramatically increasing military aid, abusing its veto power at the United Nations to protect the Netanyahu government and attacking the international judicial system for its effort to seek accountability for war crimes has given Israelis the sense that they can go as far to the right as they want without suffering the consequences. Israel does what it does not because it is uniquely evil but because it has the [protection of the world's most powerful nation](#). This is worsened by the demographic reality that with right-wing, religious, ultra-nationalist Israelis tending to have large families and secular left-leaning Israelis tending to have small families, the Israeli public is now well to the right of what it was a generation ago.

**Can you comment on historical relations between Israel and Lebanon, especially the brutal [1982 war](#), and its connection with Palestine?**

**Davidson:** We must start in 1947-48 with the [Nakba](#). When the Zionists waged war against the Palestinians, they pushed most of them into the neighboring countries. The refugees almost immediately engaged in acts of resistance using Lebanon, Jordan and Syria as bases. This eventually brought them into conflict with the local governments (which sought to avoid Israeli counter attacks) and, in the case of Jordan and Syria, the Palestinian attacks were eventually brought under control. Lebanon's government was, however, too weak to accomplish this and so the [PLO](#) [Palestine Liberation Organization] set up shop in the south of that country and periodically launched cross border acts of resistance. At the same time a civil war broke out in Lebanon between Christian and Muslim factions.

In 1982, in alliance with the Maronite Christian faction, Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied the south of the country. They forced the PLO fighters out (they went to Tunisia) and destroyed most of [western Beirut](#) (a preview of what they are doing to Gaza today). It is at this time that the Shiite paramilitary force that would evolve into Hezbollah was formed. It would eventually force an Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon (by virtue of a guerrilla war of attrition) and become one of the most powerful of Lebanese factions, participating in the government.

There seems to be a certain inevitability to all these events, set off by the Zionist colonization of Palestine. The Zionists like to think of their taking of Palestine as akin to the colonization of the [American continent](#) — the part that became the U.S. But the analogy is wrong because the consciousness of many has changed. In the case of the U.S., the taking and settling of the land was accomplished by overwhelming force at a time when the Western world had no real consciousness of human and civil rights — especially for “racial inferiors.” Today, the Israelis and their Western allies exist in a different “moral” world wherein popular anti-racist and anti-imperialist sentiment within democratic cultures greatly complicate their strategic goals and tactical policies.

However (there always seems to be a however), it should be noted that the West is also suffering from a political shift to the right and so it is an open question if present “moral” considerations will be enough to see the Palestinians through to some just end to their struggle. If not, we will find ourselves back in a barbaric age with little concern for human and civil rights, led by populist far right leaders, and a lot of loose nuclear weapons.

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