

The conflict between Israel and Hezbollah threatens to escalate

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Since 8 October last year, parallel to the war in Gaza, there has been an exchange of fire on the Israeli-Lebanese border between the Israeli army and Hezbollah, a pro-Iranian Shia armed group. This confrontation is a persistent feature of the region, but its current phase, the most intense since the 2006 war, is related to the conflict in Gaza. Hezbollah has declared that it will not cease fire until Israel stops its operations in Gaza and withdraws its troops. Meanwhile, the response from the government in Jerusalem has been asymmetrical: Israeli forces have struck deeper inside Lebanon and targeted increasingly valuable sites, prompting Hezbollah to intensify its retaliatory attacks.

This state of affairs raises the risk of a full-scale war, especially as there are no prospects for an end to the conflict in Gaza, while some in Israel are calling for a radical solution to the problem. Up to 100,000 people on each side of the border have been forced to evacuate as a result of the shelling. The US and some other countries, including France, have been engaged in diplomatic efforts to de-escalate the ongoing tensions, but there is no guarantee that these efforts will succeed.

Commentary

- The government in Jerusalem views Hezbollah, which has an estimated arsenal of 150,000 rockets and 50,000-100,000 armed fighters, as the most serious military threat in Israel's immediate vicinity. This assessment stems both from the number of its missiles (which could overwhelm Israel's air defence if the group launches a massive attack) and the fact that some of them are precision-guided missiles, posing a greater threat to critical infrastructure. There is no doubt that a full-scale conflict with Hezbollah would also result in much higher casualties among Israeli civilians than is the case in the ongoing war against Hamas (excluding the 7 October terrorist attacks). However, a sharp escalation of the confrontation with Israel would also be extremely risky for Hezbollah and its regional patron Iran, as both have seen their position weaken politically and financially.
- Despite the risks that an open war would entail for Israel, there are also a number of factors that favour escalation on Israel's part:
 - The widespread belief that war with Hezbollah (now or later) is inevitable;
 - The sense that the current state of affairs, where the country's north is exposed to shelling, cannot be maintained for much longer because it disrupts the life of the entire country;

- The fear of those in power that the current situation may incur political costs ;
- The lack of any political settlement proposals for the Gaza war that would remove Hezbollah's justification for launching attacks;
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's low approval ratings, which could prompt him to take action that would again (as was the case after 7 October) drive the public to rally around the country's political leadership;
- The weakness of Joe Biden's administration, which would be forced to support its ally (and effectively join the conflict) in the event of an Israeli attack on Hezbollah, but which does not have any effective tools to influence developments on the ground.

However, whatever the outcome of the decision-making process, Israel is unlikely to take any far-reaching steps before Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to the US, which is scheduled to take place in late July.

- Should a full-scale war break out, it would very likely escalate into a regional conflict involving the United States on one side and Iran, supported by its proxies in the Middle East, on the other. Indeed, both the US and Iran would come under heavy pressure to actively defend their key regional allies. In this scenario, attacks could be launched not only against US military facilities in the region, but also against countries such as Cyprus, which has made its airspace and airfields available to the Israeli air force. This would mean that the conflict could also affect an EU member state.