

## A Third Lebanon War Could Be Much Worse than the Second

Contributed by Michael J. Totten  
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Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah recently announced that he could hit any and every place in Israel with long-range missiles. That would mean that, unlike in 2006, Hezbollah could strike not only the northern cities of Kiryat Shmona and Haifa but also Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ben-Gurion International Airport, and the Dimona nuclear-power plant.

I dismissed his claim as a wild boast last week, but Israeli army commander Major General Gabi Ashkenazi confirmed it this week. So while we've all been worried about Iran's nuclear-weapons program, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been quietly arming his chief terrorist proxy with more advanced conventional weapons.

A Third Lebanon War could make the Second Lebanon War in 2006 look like a minor kerfuffle. And the Second Lebanon War was anything but. When Noah Pollak and I covered it from the Israeli side, we found the whole northern swath of the country emptied of people and cars like it was the end of the world. The city of Tiberias looked like a zombie movie set. Kiryat Shmona is so close to the border that the air raid sirens often didn't start wailing until after Hezbollah's incoming Katyusha rockets had already exploded.

Meanwhile, pitched battles between the Israel Defense Forces and Hezbollah seriously chewed up South Lebanon. The centers of entire towns were pulverized by Israeli air and artillery strikes. More than a thousand people were killed, many of them civilians used by Hezbollah as human shields.

Hezbollah is much more dangerous than any terrorist group that has ever been fielded from the West Bank or Gaza. It managed to create hundreds of thousands of refugees inside Israel, and it did so with fewer and shorter range rockets than it has now. And while the "Party of God" may think it's terrific that it can do what Hamas in Gaza only fantasizes about, its arsenal indirectly threatens Lebanon just as much if not more than it threatens Israel. Nasrallah can unleash a great deal of destruction, but it's still no match for what the IDF can dish out while fighting back.

If Israel's nuclear power plant comes under fire, if Tel Aviv skyscrapers explode from missile attacks, if Hezbollah manages to turn all of Israel into a kill zone where there is no place to run, Israelis will panic like they haven't since the 1973 Yom Kippur War when it briefly appeared the Egyptian army might overrun the whole country. I wouldn't want to be anywhere in Lebanon while Israelis are actively fending off that kind of assault. No country can afford to be restrained while fighting for its survival.

The last Lebanon war caught almost everyone by surprise, although it should not have. The next one might start much the same way because few seem to be taking its likelihood or its potential magnitude seriously.

It's possible that a "balance of terror" on each side of the border will prevent anyone from doing anything stupid, but I wouldn't count on it. Hezbollah's rhetoric is more belligerent this year than ever. Not only does Nasrallah threaten to avenge the assassination of his military commander Imad Mugniyeh, he and the rest of the leadership fantasize in public about nuclear war.

Christopher Hitchens went to a commemoration for Mugniyeh in the suburbs south of Beirut earlier this year and saw a huge poster of a nuclear mushroom cloud next to the stage. "OH ZIONISTS," read the inscription below, "IF YOU WANT THIS TYPE OF WAR THEN SO BE IT!"

This, I'm certain, really is bombast &ndash; at least for now. Nasrallah doesn't have nuclear weapons. Apocalyptic imagery and rhetoric, though, tells us something important about Hezbollah's psyche.

Just ask yourself how you would have felt during the Cold War if Ronald Reagan or Mikhail Gorbachev said "SO BE IT" to nuclear war. I would have wanted to hide in my basement or go off-planet entirely. And I have a hard time imagining an American or Russian crowd roaring with applause and pumping its fists in the air in response to that sort of thing. That's just not how Americans or Russians thought about a nuclear holocaust. Israelis don't think about nuclear war that way either, nor do Hezbollah's opponents in Lebanon. The same is almost certainly true of the millions of Iranian citizens who brave beatings, arrest, and worse to yell "death to the dictator" in the streets of Tehran.

Hezbollah's mindset is different. If you expect moderation, reasonableness, and restraint from that crowd, you are far more optimistic than I am.

About the Author

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