

Opinion **Global Insight**

Benjamin Netanyahu may yet avert an Israel-Hizbollah war

Many in the region fear all-out conflict but calculations on the Israeli side are not straightforward

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Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant is shown across the border with Lebanon. Israel and Hizbollah have been exchanging near-daily fire for nine months © Ariel Hermoni/IMoD/dpa

Neri Zilber in Tel Aviv 8 HOURS AGO

Across Israel, Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East, there is one dominant topic of conversation: will there be a full-scale war between the Jewish state and Hizbollah this summer?

If you were to judge by the breathless media debate, mounting travel warnings and panicked stockpiling of generators and dry goods, the answer would be a resounding yes.

But while there is an ever-present possibility of miscalculation and further escalation of cross-border clashes, that does not mean an all-out conflict is inevitable — or that it will happen soon.

Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that Israel will soon shift to a "low intensity" phase of its campaign against Hamas in Gaza. Israeli forces will be pulled out of most of the strip and redeployed to the northern border with Lebanon, across from the forces of Iran-backed [Hizbollah](#), which is considered the world's most powerful non-state actor.

[Israel](#) and Hizbollah have been exchanging near-daily fire for nine months, since the Shia movement entered the fray in support of Hamas after the October 7 attack.

While still contained, the war of attrition has wrought destruction in bands of both northern Israel and southern Lebanon. In total, almost 200,000 people have been displaced.

Netanyahu has vowed to return the residents of Israel's Galilee region to their homes — either via a diplomatic resolution with Lebanon (read: Hizbollah) or via “other means”. Hizbollah has vowed to continue firing as long as there is still fighting in Gaza, while Netanyahu has rejected any prospect of ending the war short of “total victory”.

In the meantime, the Israeli military holds constant mock drills for a ground invasion of southern Lebanon; talks for a ceasefire in Gaza stagger along inconclusively; and Hizbollah has said that while it does not want an all-out conflict, neither is it afraid of one.

This is the reason for the rising concern on both sides of the Israel-Lebanon frontier, or Blue Line.

But there are several reasons why the simmering conflict is unlikely to spill over into war just yet.

Netanyahu is set to travel to Washington for a July 24 joint address to the US Congress. As he never fails to highlight, it will be his record fourth invitation, one more than Winston Churchill. There is little reason for him to scuttle his own speech by expanding the conflict.

More pertinently, Israel still needs a few more weeks to conclude its ground offensive in the southern Gaza city of Rafah and other parts of the territory. At present, Israel still has large elements of three divisions, including several important combat infantry units, devoted to the task — forces that it is likely would be needed in any campaign against Hizbollah.

August and September are believed by Israeli analysts to be the “danger zone” for the outbreak of a full-scale war. Unlike several of his main political rivals, however, Netanyahu has never committed to getting northern Israeli families back into their homes by the start of the school year on September 1.

And, in general, street protests against his rule — whether by displaced northerners, relatives of Israeli hostages still held captive in Gaza, or simply citizens clamouring for early elections — have so far failed to reach a critical mass that would endanger his far-right coalition.

Despite months of grinding and bloody conflict, daily life in much of Israel has returned to a wartime semblance of normality. A serious escalation with Hizbollah, military officials warn, would be completely different: thousands of missiles and drones raining down on Israeli cities, fears of nationwide blackouts and weeks spent in bomb shelters. The devastation in Lebanon, too, would be orders of magnitude greater.

Netanyahu knew all this and so was likely to be “trying to play for time”, said one former senior Israeli official.

“You survive to the next stage and the next stage, overcoming specific obstacles week after week” until parliament’s summer recess begins, and stretches languidly from the end of July to late October, past the Jewish high holidays, the person said.

More importantly, say several insiders, that would take Netanyahu to the eve of the US general election in November and the prospect of a Donald Trump victory. Many Israelis expect the former, and possibly future, US president to be unconditionally supportive of their country, whether against Hamas, Hizbollah or Iran.

This would not be a recipe for Netanyahu’s often-promised “total victory” but rather “endless war”, said Amos Harel, the veteran defence analyst for Israeli newspaper Haaretz. The only question is what scale of war that might be.

Barring any unforeseen mass-casualty event on either side of the Blue Line, such as an errant Israeli air strike or Hizbollah suicide drone, onlookers believe that Netanyahu is likely to remain purposefully non-committal for now.

“There are never any clear statements. He’s always leaving his options open” depending on his needs and the circumstances at any given moment, said Harel. “We’re all living in his ‘kingdom of uncertainty’.”

