

Is Lebanon on the brink of a 2006 war scenario?

Tuesday 31 October 2023, by [MAUCOURANT ATALLAH Nada](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2023).

For many Lebanese, deadly border clashes rekindle memories of the 'July war', but what do they really have in common?

As tensions mount at the Israel-[Lebanon](#) border, where Hezbollah, closely linked to Hamas, has [exchanged fire with Israel](#), many Lebanese are remembering the 2006 war that pitted the two sides against each other.

The current exchanges, which followed a significant escalation of violence in Gaza after Hamas's [incursion into Israel](#), are confined to a few frontier towns and military positions on both sides.

This is the bloodiest escalation since the month-long war in 2006, which claimed the lives of 1,200 people in Lebanon, mostly civilians, and 157 Israelis, primarily soldiers.

While concerns arise about a scenario similar to 2006, when the fighting also caused extensive damage to Lebanon's infrastructure, these skirmishes have, as of yet, not led to a second front against Israel.

The National reviews what happened in the 2006 and outlines the significant differences, as analysed by experts, with the continuing border violence.

34-day war

The 2006 conflict was triggered when on July 12 Hezbollah militants kidnapped two soldiers patrolling northern Israel.

Hezbollah demanded the release of Lebanese prisoners being held in Israel in return for the two soldiers - a motive that has driven Hezbollah's repeated efforts to capture Israelis for use as bargaining chips.

But Israel refused and launched a large-scale military campaign in Lebanon, starting what was later called the "July war", which lasted for 34 days.

Israeli air strikes struck not only Hezbollah military positions but also vital infrastructure, including Beirut airport, roads, factories and hospitals, as well as TV and radio stations. Areas heavily affected included Beirut's southern suburbs, towns and villages in the south and parts of the eastern Bekaa Valley.

[Hezbollah](#) in turn launched thousands of rockets into Israel, resulting in civilian casualties and damage to infrastructure.

The conflict ended with a ceasefire agreement brokered by the UN Security Council on August 14,

which aimed to strip all entities, except the Lebanese army and other state security forces, of their weapons in southern Lebanon.

Lebanon took years to rebuild from the 2006 war. The government estimated direct war damage at \$2.8 billion, which triggered a 5 per cent contraction in the economy.

The 2006 war did not result in a conclusive victory for either side. Despite the damage, [Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah](#) said the militia had achieved a "divine, historic and strategic victory" over the US as well as Israel, and that "no army in the world is strong enough to disarm us".

Soon after, the Hezbollah leader has said he would not have ordered the soldiers' capture if he had known it would trigger the war.

For some observers, Hezbollah's resilience against the Israeli assault, along with its inability to destroy the group despite the power imbalance, was a PR victory.

Hezbollah, established in 1982 with under the guidance of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, garnered acclaim in Lebanon and the region after 2006, making resistance against Israel as cornerstone of its identity.

'Two different political moments'

While the Israeli shelling in the south of the country reminds many Lebanese of the 2006 conflict, political analyst Joseph Daher stressed that the Lebanon of today is a "different political environment".

In 2006, Hezbollah enjoyed rare "cross-sectarian popular support", Mr Daher said, in a country usually extremely polarised, citing an agreement signed in February 2006 between Lebanese Christian party, the Free Patriotic Movement, and Hezbollah.

On the Israeli side, Mr Daher said there was a growing momentum at the time for Israel to launch an attack.

The war was framed within "the context of the post-9/11 era, the war in Iraq and the broader fight against terrorism that characterised that period".

Mr Daher argued that Israel's response, a full-scale offensive, was disproportionate to the kidnapping of the two soldiers. This served as "pretext to launch the attack, with the overarching objective of eliminating Iran's influence in the Middle East", he said.

In 2023, the situation seems to have changed dramatically.

"Hezbollah no longer enjoys the same level of popular support," Mr Daher said.

Since 2006, a series of events has left Hezbollah in Lebanon increasingly isolated outside of the Shiite population, he said. This includes Hezbollah's takeover of West Beirut in 2008, amid clashes related to the Lebanese government's attempt to shut down the group's private telecoms network.

More recent examples of Hezbollah's involvement in sectarian conflicts in Lebanon include the Tayouneh clashes in October 2021, pitting supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement reportedly against those of Christian forces and the army.

The devastating explosion at the Port of Beirut on August 4, 2020 has further isolated Hezbollah,

with many Lebanese holding the militia, which is said to control the port, accountable for the tragedy.

Mr Daher said: "The struggle against Israel is no longer Hezbollah's top priority," adding that its military involvement in Syria to support the regime of President Bashar Al Assad has revealed its subordination to other political objectives by the party's main funder, Iran.

Israel 'cannot afford new front'

From the Israeli perspective, things have also evolved.

"Israel cannot afford to open a new front with Lebanon, without risking a general conflagration in the whole region," said Mr Daher.

Many fear this could more draw Iranian proxy groups in the Middle East into conflict with Israel. Last Thursday, the US military intercepted cruise missiles and several drones launched by the Iran-aligned Houthi movement from Yemen.

Yet there are still some similarities, Mr Daher said.

"Like in 2006, Israel believes it can destroy a party, Hamas or Hezbollah, through military means alone, ignoring that these are parties deeply entrenched in their society," he said.

"The narrative is also the same. Israel claims to continue the war against terrorism, comparing yesterday Hezbollah to Al Qaeda, and today Hamas to ISIS."

Nevertheless, as events unfold, the nature of a ground invasion and Hamas's capacity to preserve the gains it made on October 7 will be the decisive factors on whether Hezbollah will enter the war.

Nearly three weeks after the Hamas rampage into Israel, the [promised ground invasion in Gaza](#) has yet to happen.

On Thursday, Israel's military reported tanks entering the northern Gaza Strip in preparation for "the next stage of combat".

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