



## FIGHTING BETWEEN ISRAEL AND LEBANON THREATENS REGION

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*Israel and Lebanon are involved in an escalation of hostility that many fear could lead to a full-out war in the Middle East.*

The violence began July 12 when fighters from the militant group Hezbollah crossed into Israel from Lebanon and abducted two Israeli soldiers.

Within days, Israel attacked roads, bridges and Hezbollah buildings throughout southern Lebanon, and Hezbollah launched missiles into cities in northern Israel.

After Israeli missiles hit his headquarters in the Lebanese capital Beirut, Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah appeared on his group's television station to announce, "You wanted an open war, and we are heading for an open war. We are ready for it."

The predominantly Jewish nation of Israel is now fighting Muslim groups on two fronts: Hezbollah to its north, and the Palestinian group Hamas in the Gaza Strip region in its southwest.

The U.S. State Department considers both Hezbollah and Hamas to be terrorist organizations though both play roles in their respective country's democratically elected government.

### **What is Hezbollah?**

Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim group formed in 1982 after Israel invaded Lebanon to eliminate the Palestinian Liberation Organization, a group which at the time advocated the destruction of Israel.

The group was considered responsible for the suicide truck bombing deaths of 241 U.S. Marines in their Beirut barracks a year later.

Since then, Hezbollah has become part of the political system, winning seats in the Parliament and Cabinet.

The group has created a state-within-a-state in southern Lebanon, with its own schools and local civic groups.

Although the United Nations has passed a resolution requiring Lebanon to disarm Hezbollah, Lebanese officials warn that doing so could destabilize the nation and result in civil war.

## Hezbollah's motives

Although experts do not know why Hezbollah chose to cross the border and confront Israeli troops at this time, analysts say the groups leaders are trying to position themselves as the defenders of the Palestinian people under attack in the occupied territories.

Hezbollah has demanded the release of Hamas government officials currently being held by Israel.

"The Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, is trying to do is to claim a kind of regional status as a leader of resistance to Israeli -- what he would portray as Israeli aggression against Palestinians and portray himself and his organization as the group that is really leading the fight to come to the aid of the Palestinians at a time of great need," Flynt Leverett, a former CIA Middle East analyst, said on the July 14 NewsHour.

U.S. officials say that Hezbollah has close ties to Syria and Iran, and have called on those countries to work with Hezbollah to return the soldiers.

"I don't think that there is any doubt that Syria and Iran have been ... encouraging and, indeed, in the case of Syria, sheltering the people who are perpetrating these acts," U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said.

Syria and Iran, which have denied supplying weapons to Hezbollah, have warned Israel that an attack on Syria could have dire consequences.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said an Israeli strike on Syria "will be considered like attacking the whole Islamic world and this regime will receive a very fierce response," Reuters reported.

## A blow to Lebanon

The renewed violence is a blow to Lebanon, which had made progress toward political stability.

The country's civil war officially ended in 1990, and as recently as 2005, Syria withdrew its troops from Lebanon after a 29-year presence.

In the recent attacks, Israel bombed the major route from Beirut to Damascus (Syria's capital), halted operation of Lebanon's commercial airport, and exploded one of Beirut's two main power plants, according to Reuters.

In the first five days of conflict following the abduction, 162 Lebanese -- mostly civilian -- and 24 Israelis have been killed, according to Reuters.

At an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council, Lebanon's U.N. Special Representative Nouhas Mahmoud said, "What Israel is undertaking is an act of aggression and devastation aimed at bringing Lebanon to its knees."

## Searching for a solution

Envoys from the United States, United Nations and European Union have traveled to Lebanon to see if there is a way to stem the violence. One of the proposals is to send in a "stabilization force" to maintain a cease-fire.

Meanwhile, in New York, the United Nations called for all sides in the conflict to respect civilian life for humanitarian reasons and to maintain the infrastructure on which the civilians depend.

-- *Compiled by Adnaan Wasey for NewsHour Extra*

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