Thursday, August 29, 2024 / Israel vs. Hezbollah

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL KING (HOST): Israel’s 11-month war with Gaza has a few different fronts. There’s Gaza, of course. On the other side of the country, there’s the West Bank - Israel launched a big operation there this week. And in the north, there’s the fight with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

*<CLIP>CBS: This Sunday morning volley of rockets, drones and interceptions aimed at military targets - the largest between Hezbollah and Israel since the war in Gaza began.*

And we hear again and again that if Israel v. Hezbollah goes even one step further it very well could pull the region in.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZdCXC1ubOw)*> DW NEWS: Fears are growing of a wider conflict in the Middle East.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.google.com/search?q=fears+of+a+wider+war&oq=fears+of+a+wider+war&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIICAEQABgWGB4yDQgCEAAYhgMYgAQYigUyDQgDEAAYhgMYgAQYigUyCggEEAAYgAQYogQyCggFEAAYogQYiQUyCggGEAAYgAQYogQyCggHEAAYogQYiQXSAQgzMDUwajBqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:eb55bb44,vid:ykI58HWt70w,st:0)*> CBS: The hostilities raised concerns of a wider war in the Middle East. By nightfall both sides pulled back in a show of deescalation.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CukUJ5BavXU)*> ABC: Tonight fears of a wider war in the Middle East appear to be subsiding for now.*

Again and again, fears of a wider war that DOESN’T happen. Coming up on Today, Explained: What is holding this region back from the brink?

[THEME]

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King. So, many times in the past ten months we’ve woken up to headlines about a BROADER MIDDLE EAST WAR LOOMING in the hours after Israel and Hezbollah trade fire across their shared border. Why do they keep stopping before it escalates? We called on Vali Nasr of the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies.

VALI NASR (PROFESSOR): I think neither Hezbollah nor Israel, despite claiming otherwise, actually want a full war going into Lebanon at this time for Israeli military is a very tall order. It's much more complicated. Is much bigger operation than what they've done in Gaza. Hezbollah is much more capable and lethal than Hamas, was when Israel went in there. And Israeli military is also fairly exhausted. It's short of soldiers. It's, it's not capable of starting the…a kind of operation that Lebanon would require. So it wants to deter Hezbollah from attacks. It wants to show that it is willing and capable of inflicting huge pain on Lebanon and on Hezbollah, but it does not want an all out war.

NOEL: All right. So you've explained that neither side wants a war. And yet you know as well as I do that every weekend when this tit for tat happens, we hear that this is the variable that could tip the entire region into war. Israel and Hezbollah’s back and forth could tip the entire region into war. Why do people keep saying that again and again and again, if neither side wants this to happen?

VALI: Saying it again and again is actually a way to, get everybody mobilized to not let this get out of hand. I mean, for instance, the United States does not want a full, war in this region, and therefore it raises the alarms that that this might be the straw that breaks the camel's back.

*<CLIP> CNN: Amos Hochestein, US Special Envoy: The more time goes by of escalated tensions, the more time goes by of daily conflict, the more the odds and the chances go up for accidents, for mistakes, for inadvertent targets to be hit that could easily cause escalation that gets out of control and that is why the time is now to get us into a better direction.*

VALI: Hezbollah is capable of inflicting huge damage on Israel, in an outright war, and therefore, that would then compel Israel to escalate even further against Hezbollah. And if we come to a ground invasion or a kind of bombardment of Lebanon that we saw in Gaza, then Iran and the Houthis are also likely to get involved in the war. They're not going to allow Hezbollah to be demolished the way they they they've watched, Hamas be demolished. And then the United States would, would have to enter the war if Israel and Iran get into it. So everybody's trying to avoid the domino that fell in Gaza to cause a domino to fall in Lebanon, because the domino in Lebanon is far larger and is much more likely to cause other dominoes to fall.

NOEL: Can you tell us what Hezbollah is, exactly?

VALI: So Hezbollah is both a political organization and a military organization.

SCORING IN

*NBC: <<drumming>> <<chanting Hezbollah!>>*

VALI: It's a political organization in the sense that it's a government for large parts of Lebanon, including large parts of its capital city of Beirut.

*<CLIP> DW NEWS: It funds schools, hospitals, special institutions … services because of the economic crisis, many communities depend on.*

VALI: It's basically a second state within Lebanon, and it has it technically its own citizens, but it's also a very powerful military force which is stronger than the Lebanese military.

*<CLIP> i24NEWS English: The group’s leader referred to having 100,000 fighters in 2021. Last year, the US estimated that Hezbollah has over 150,000 rockets and missiles. More than enough to overwhelm Israeli air defenses and cause significant damage to infrastructure in a war.*

VALI: So we call it a terrorist organization. But that doesn't quite describe what it is. Hezbollah is essentially a middle eastern state, carved out of the larger state of Lebanon with government and with, military capability.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Are Hezbollah's citizens, if we think of it as a state, are Hezbollah citizens loyal to it? Civilians?

VALI: Some are, some are not. And Hezbollah used to be much more popular in the areas that it governed, partly because it provided better social services to people who lived in Shiite areas of Beirut or in South Lebanon than the Lebanese government provided them. But also because after 1982, Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when Israeli forces did not leave South Lebanon, many Shias in south Lebanon came to the conclusion that Israel perhaps covets Lebanese land and may turn South Lebanon into West Bank, build settlements there, never leave.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS ARCHIVE: Now the Israelis have annexed East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, settled down more or less permanently on the West Bank and occupied close to half of Lebanon. In the interests of self defense, that galant little underdog Israel has started behaving like the neighborhood bully.*

VALI: And and Hezbollah was the force that that caused Israel to leave south Lebanon.

*<CLIP> AP NEWS ARCHIVE:*

*Former Prime Minister of Israel, Shimon Peres: We wish that Lebanon will remain independent. Peaceful. We do not seek a part of her waters, neither a part of her territories, and we don’t want to play a role in her politics.*

VALI: So there was a sense that Hezbollah's presence and Hezbollah's ferocity, military capability, was what was protecting south Lebanon from Israel. But increasingly, over time, many, even in south Lebanon have tired of the conflict, have tired of Hezbollah's, rule and, and populations that never liked Hezbollah, like the Sunnis in Lebanon, Christians in Lebanon, are even becoming more anti Hezbollah in that sense. So Hezbollah still does command popularity and loyalty in Lebanon, but not to the extent that it once did. And in the last election, as we saw in Lebanon, it actually did lose constituencies.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA ENGLISH: The country’s Iran-backed Hezbollah group and its allies scored 62 seats in the 128 seat assembly, falling short of the 65 needed to maintain a majority in parliament, a turnaround for the Shiite faction who has held support since 2018.*

VALI: But we don't have a gauge about what the mood is in, particularly south Lebanon after October 7th and the shelling that Israel has been doing. It's very clear that it has helped Hezbollah in the rest of the Arab world. Its popularity has gone up, but not necessarily in Lebanon itself.

NOEL: How did Hezbollah develop its ties to Iran. Were they there from the beginning? Was that something that happened over time?

VALI: No, they were there from the very beginning. In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon to destroy the Palestinian Liberation Organization's military machine in Lebanon.

*<CLIP> AP ARCHIVE 1982:*

*<<jeeps rolling in>> The Israeli armed forces have been massed along the northern border of their country at least 4 times over the last few months…The Israeli’s said they had one goal: to root out once and for all, Palestinian bases across the border from their northern settlements and then to set up a buffer zone so Palestinian shells would never again threaten Israeli citizens.*

VALI: And there was an assumption that they can militarily eliminate completely and put a Palestinian force. And they did. So they put a siege on Beirut, and they forced the PLO to leave, Lebanon. When that when PLO left, there was a military vacuum in Lebanon. And it's in this moment where Iran becomes involved and organizes the religiously most militant parts of the Shia militias into sort of a nucleus of Hezbollah. And and Hezbollah ultimately forces Israel to leave Lebanon. And that was the first time Israel first and only time Israel has left Arab territory involuntarily under military pressure. And with that victory, essentially, Hezbollah becomes the dominant political military force of south Lebanon and the Shia neighborhoods of, of of Beirut and also the Shia enclaves on, in eastern parts of Lebanon and, and as well as accomplishments all the lot to Iran and Hezbollah and Iran therefore forged, if you would, a strategic partnership each needs the other and the two basically, are are now wedded together in this strategic alliance, to contain and combat Israel and the United States in the region.

NOEL: You've laid out how there are a lot of players involved here, including the United States and Iran. How does this particular cycle? Lebanon, Israel, Israel, Lebanon, back and forth? Every couple days or every couple of weeks. How does that end?

VALI: It's very clear that Hezbollah says there has to be a ceasefire in Gaza. You know the ceasefire in Gaza is no longer about just ending the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. It's about avoiding an escalation along the northern border. So they've made that conditionality that there has to be a ceasefire in Gaza if we're going to avoid a free for all on Israel's northern border. And the United States has a vested interest in avoiding a larger war in the region. It doesn't want to come back into the region after three presidents have said that we need to free ourselves of wars in the Middle East. They don't want to end up in a war with Iran. They don't want to destabilize the Gulf region, and its economy. Everything the United States says suggests that they want to go quickly back to before October 7th, talk about normalization, economic growth, trade corridors, etc… And and the last thing the United States wants is a bigger war that would bring it into the region.

SCORING IN <CEZ MAG FINAL STRETCH>

VALI: And and the only way to achieve that is essentially to arrive at a ceasefire in Gaza. And so that is really the linchpin here.

NOEL: Vali Nasr, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced and International Studies. Coming up: the ceasefire.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: I’m Noel King, Aaron David Miller first joined us about a week after the war started. He’s Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, also a former Middle East State Department advisor, negotiated in both Republican and Democratic administrations. The path to a ceasefire runs through two men, Aaron says. And in ways both metaphorical and literal - neither man is going to survive this war. So they are holding on to it. Hamas political chairman Yahya Sinwar is a marked man, living in hiding - in a tunnel. Israel’s killed the other Hamas leaders. And then there is Benjamin Netanyahu, whose political days were numbered even before his catastrophic failures of leadership that many people blame for leading to the attacks of October 7th. The two principal actors, Yahya Sinwar and Benjamin Netanyahu. Can you tell us briefly what each man wants most? Let's start with Sinwar.

AARON DAVID MILLER (Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Foundation for International Peace): I mean, this is highly speculative, right?

<SCORING IN> At the edge of perception

AARON: How Sinwar is communicating with the external leadership, conveying his positions is any, is anybody's guess.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: CHAPMAN BELL, PRODUCER: seeing this footage, they say was taken from a Hamas security camera and shows the leader of Hamas in Gaza in a tunnel with his family in a tunnel under Khan Yunis…*

AARON: But it's also anybody's guess to divine the calculations and motives of this man.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: NOUR ODEH, CORRESPONDENT: This is a 62 year old man. He was sentenced to four consecutive life sentences. He was released from Israeli prison in 2011, and he has skyrocketed to an influential position in Hamas, leading it.*

AARON: I mean, he must understand, given the traumas that they've managed to inflict on on the Israeli population, that he's on Israel's list.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: NOUR ODEH, CORRESPONDENT: A fierce foe for Israel, Sinwar is closer to the military wing of Hamas, yet able to maneuver its multilayered political ranks and become its leader during a ferocious war.*

AARON: And, I mean, I think it doesn't take much imagination. The Israelis have killed to allow a Salah Arouri in Beirut. They killed Mohammed Deif, who is the second most important Hamas figure.They killed Marwan Issa, who was a senior Hamas commander. They assassinated even though they didn't claim responsibility for it, Ismail Haniyeh, the head of Hamas's political organization. Sinwar must know that whatever the Israelis agreed to. Ceasefire or no ceasefire, that he is a marked man. So you have to wonder what? What? What are those calculations?

<SCORING OUT> At the edge of perception

AARON: I just think right now, he is not prepared to accept what the Israelis want, which is, an Israeli presence along the Philadelphi corridor, which is essentially the border between Gaza and and Egypt. He's not prepared to accept what the Israelis want, and that is to monitor the movement of Palestinian civilians from southern Gaza, where most of the Palestinian population now resides, and he wants a permanent cessation of hostilities. So all of this strikes Sinwar, I think, as you know, why why do we need to give into this? I've got Israel and Hezbollah on the cusp of a serious escalation in the North.

*<CLIP> HASSAN NASRALLAH: Hezbollah is obligated to respond. And the enemy is watching and counting every strike.*

AARON: I've got the Houthis as part of this Axis of Resistance.

*<CLIP> YAHYA SAREA, HOUTHI SPOKESPERSON: They will continue to prevent Israeli vessels or those headed to the occupied Palestinian seaport from navigating in the Arab or the Red sea.*

AARON: Abbas,Mahmood Abbas, deemed virtually deemed to be irrelevant. He controls 40% of the West Bank. Israel's name and credibility has perhaps been blackened for years to come as a consequence of the exponential rise in deaths that the Israelis have caused and trying to, you know, end my organization. I've got a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, which, of course, could alienate Palestinians, from, from what I've done. But then again, the they will always hold the Israelis first and foremost, accountable for their misery.

<[CLIP](https://www.facebook.com/aljazeera/videos/they-are-making-the-safe-areas-smaller-and-smaller-palestinian-filmmaker-bisan-o/856443712891287/)> BISAN OWDA: *Look like. This is the new technique. The Israeli army is now committing more than one massacre at the same time. So you don't talk about everything, or at least one of the massacres, will not be, recorded, will not be heard, will not be seen…*

AARON: So he’s in no hurry to give up his leverage.

NOEL: What are NETANYAHU’S calculations? What is the sticking point on his end?

AARON: The organizing principle of Benjamin Netanyahu's universe is political survival.

<SCORING IN> The plot thickens

AARON: He's on trial in the Jerusalem district Court before three judges for bribery, fraud and breach of trust. That trial is four years in running.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS: MARC STONE, CORRESPONDENT: Speaker 5: Case 1000, in which he said to have received a continuous supply of champagne and cigars. Case 2000 involves positive coverage from a media tycoon. It's alleged Mr. Netanyahu offered to restrict the circulation of a rival paper and case 4000. It's alleged that he promoted regulatory decisions that favored a telecoms company.*

AARON: The only way he can evade a conviction or somehow undermine the charges against him is by remaining Prime Minister.

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS: MARC STONE, CORRESPONDENT: Elements in police and the General Attorney's office have allied with left wing media. I call them the Just Not Bibi gang. In order to stitch up unfounded and to listen to three cases against me.*

AARON: So he needs to maintain his coalition of 64 seats. Do that. I think he needs to keep this pot boiling.

*<CLIP> BENJAMIN NETANYAHU: Ladies and gentlemen, the Bible says that there was a time for peace and a time for war. This is a time for war. A war for a common future.*

<SCORING OUT> The plot thickens

AARON: Because he knows or he should know, given the polls. When the war de-escalates to the point where most Israelis could say it's over, even though the Israelis may still be operating at some level in Gaza. Questions are going to be asked how Benjamin Netanyahu, the longest governing prime minister in the history of the state of Israel, presiding over the most extreme government, could preside over the single bloodiest days day for Jews since the Nazi Holocaust. And the single greatest intelligence failure in Israel's history. And how could this Israeli government, who is responsible for funding Hamas through the Qatari’s. What? What kind of legitimacy and credibility does he have to maintain himself in power? So the longer the war goes on, the greater the odds that you'll achieve some some additional success.

NOEL: You would be aware, Aaron, that here in the US, a ceasefire deal is a is a major issue in the 2024 election and that there are two main stories that you hear. The first is that Hamas is unwilling to come to the table, even though Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been tireless in his efforts to get ‘em there. The other you're going to hear is that Hamas accepted a deal back in May, and Benjamin Netanyahu is obstructing it because he needs to survive. It sounds like what you're saying is there is some truth to both of these stories.

AARON: Yeah, because I think in the end, since October 7th, these two stories, calculations of Yahya Sinwar and Benjamin Netanyahu and the stakes are, near existential for Netanyahu and existential Sinwar. I think they are the two parties that have fundamentally shaped the trajectory of this conflict, and it demonstrates with a terrifying clarity, the lack of influence, or perhaps will, on the part of the vaunted international community, including the United States, to fundamentally alter or change the trajectory of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The ICJ, the ICC, the G7, the U.N., the US, the EU. I mean, it, it demonstrates something that that I think should have been evident and is evident about, about relatively modern Middle Eastern history, that it's littered with the remains of the schemes, dreams and aspirations of, external powers who believed wrongly they could impose their will on smaller ones.

NOEL: Hmhm. You may or may not recall that you and I talked just about a week after October 7th, and you said that every agreement in the Middle East comes after a war. And your hope was that somewhere amid all this horror, this violence, this tragedy would come what you called a new sort of opening to put Israelis and Palestinians on a different course than they've been on almost a year later. How optimistic are you that this is possible?

AARON: I would never say never. I do believe that a that the least bad option to this conflict, which is two states. I believe that it is still possible. But as I look out over the damage, the wreckage, the trauma. Of these two communities over the course of the last year. What I see is two traumatic people who are leaderless.

<SCORING IN> Gonethan

AARON: I don't see Noel, the counter to the trauma. I don't see it right now. It doesn't mean it can't happen, but it is going to require three things. Leaders who are masters of their political houses, not prisoners, of their ideologies and their own politics. A degree of ownership on the part of Israelis and Palestinians that they care more about doing something for themselves and their respective peoples than any outside observer. And it's going to require a third party. Now, I would argue the U.S. has demonstrated at times that it can be, an effective broker, but it's going to require, a heroic lift by, an American president, by a Israeli prime minister, and by the president, of the Palestinian Authority and key Arab leaders to get this done. Just right now, I would be I would be dishonest with you and myself if I could identify somehow that there was an inexorable pathway forward, I can't.

NOEL: Former Middle East negotiator Aaron David Miller.

Today’s episode was produced by Haleema Shah and Victoria Chamberlin. Amina al-Sadi is our editor. Andrea Kristinsdottir and Rob Byers engineered. Laura Bullard fact-checked. I’m Noel King. This is Today, Explained.

<SCORING OUT> Goneathan

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]