

FAQ: Israel's Northern Border

LEBANON

What countries border Israel to the north?

Israel is bordered to the north by **Lebanon** and to the northeast by **Syria**. The border between Lebanon and Israel has been referred to as the “Blue Line” since Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. The UN created a demilitarized zone in southern Lebanon after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War, commonly referred to by Israelis as the Second Lebanon War.

Who lives in Lebanon?

The population of Lebanon is about 5.5 million people. Approximately two thirds of the population is Muslim (split almost evenly between Sunnis and Shi’ites) and about one third is Christian (mostly Maronites and Greek Orthodox). The southern region of Lebanon, which borders Israel, is predominantly populated by Shi’ite Muslims. The UN estimates that between 200,000 and 500,000 Palestinians live in Lebanon. For the past several years, Lebanon has suffered from a severe financial crisis, leading to very high rates of poverty and unemployment as well as poor infrastructure.

Does Israel have diplomatic relations with Lebanon?

While there was momentum towards establishing diplomatic ties in the 1980s, the growth and activity of Hezbollah and other anti-Israel militias dashed hopes for an Israel-Lebanon peace deal.

Has Israel ever fought a war in Lebanon?

Yes, twice. In 1982, in response to frequent terror attacks launched against Israel by Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) fighters based in southern Lebanon, the IDF invaded. After eradicating the PLO from southern Lebanon, Israel tried to help its Christian allies form a new Lebanese government that would sign a peace treaty with Israel. When Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayal was assassinated, these plans fell apart, and Hezbollah and other anti-Israel militias gained power. As a result, the IDF became embroiled in a prolonged, domestically controversial war that lasted until 2000. As such, the **First Lebanon War** is often referred to as “Israel’s Vietnam War.”

In 2006, after Hezbollah launched rocket attacks on Israel and Hezbollah operatives crossed into Israel, killing three soldiers, Israel invaded Lebanon again. Heavy fighting ensued for 34 days until a UN-brokered ceasefire took effect. This conflict is known in Israel as the **Second Lebanon War**.

What has changed in Lebanon since October 7, 2023?

After the October 7 attacks, Hezbollah began a renewed aerial assault on Israel from across the Lebanese border in solidarity with Hamas. This aggression, combined with mounting political pressure to allow the return of some 60,000 displaced Israelis from northern Israel, led the IDF to launch what it initially called “limited operations” in Lebanon. These operations quickly expanded into a full scale ground invasion aimed at crippling Hezbollah’s military capabilities.

Is Israel’s ground invasion legal under international law?

The debate on the legality of Israel’s invasion of Lebanon is due to the tension between Israel’s right to self-defense and Lebanon’s sovereignty. Legal experts remain divided on how to reconcile the two. The right to self-defense also comes with limits, like the responsibility to prioritize the protection of civilians and use proportionate force (another hotly debated matter, see [here](#) for more). As an added complexity, while Lebanon is a sovereign state, Israel’s fight is with Hezbollah — a non-state actor that holds major sway in government operations — which has used Lebanese territory to strike at Israel in spite of a [2006 Security Council resolution](#).

HEZBOLLAH

What is Hezbollah?

In Arabic, Hezbollah means the “**Party of God**.” Hezbollah is an **Iran-backed Shi’ite terrorist organization** that was founded in the early 1980s in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War and the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. According to Hezbollah’s official manifesto, the group’s main goals include the destruction of Israel and the eradication of Western influence in Lebanon and the Middle East. Hezbollah is designated as a terrorist organization by Israel, the United States, and the EU.

Since 1992, Hezbollah has been led by **Hassan Nasrallah**, a Shi’ite cleric trained in the same school of thought as the Iranian ayatollahs (religious and political leaders).

Who leads Hezbollah?

From 1992 until 2024, Hezbollah was led by **Hassan Nasrallah**. Nasrallah was a Shi’ite cleric trained in the same school of thought as the Iranian ayatollahs (religious and political leaders). Under Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s operations and capabilities expanded tremendously. His supporters viewed him as the most successful leader in the resistance against Israel, in large part due to the perception that Nasrallah and Hezbollah were responsible for the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000. In September of 2024, Nasrallah, along with several other senior Hezbollah commanders, was killed in a targeted Israeli airstrike in Beirut. In his place, Naim Qassem was named the leader of Hezbollah and has vowed to expand its conflict with Israel by launching strikes deeper inside its territory.

What are Hezbollah's military capabilities?

Estimates of the number of Hezbollah's troupes range from 25,000 to 100,000. By way of contrast, the Lebanese Army has 85,000 soldiers. Experts estimate Hezbollah has about 150,000 rockets and missiles, a tenfold increase over the 15,000 that the group possessed during its 2006 war with Israel. A significant number of these rockets and missiles are capable of reaching central and southern Israel.

Is Hezbollah only a military group?

In the 1990s, Hezbollah established a political wing that has participated in multiple Lebanese governments. Most of Hezbollah's political support comes from the Lebanese Shi'ite community. Much of this support can be attributed to the organization's ability to provide better social services than those offered by the Lebanese government, particularly in southern Lebanon. In addition to the social services it provides, Hezbollah boasts military capabilities that surpass those of the Lebanese army, leading many to refer to it as a "**state within a state.**"

Is Hezbollah the Lebanese government?

Hezbollah is part of the Lebanese government and holds a lot of social and political sway in Lebanese society, but it does not alone constitute the Lebanese government. The Lebanese government seeks to represent all of the religious groups in the country through a delicate power-sharing agreement allocating specific roles to members of specific religious groups. In the past two decades, Hezbollah has held veto power over most government decisions as a result of the number of seats it held in the government along with the social and military power it possesses, preventing the government from making decisions that contradict Hezbollah's agenda.

What is Hezbollah's relationship with Hamas?

Both Hezbollah and Hamas are backed by Iran and share the destruction of Israel as their main goal, but their capabilities and resources differ vastly. Hezbollah is much stronger and ideologically-aligned with Iran, receiving billions of dollars, military training, and other support. Like Iran, Hezbollah is avowedly Shi'ite (a minority sect of Islam), whereas Hamas is Sunni (the majority sect of Islam). Iran has been Hezbollah's primary supporter since the organization was established.