



## **SAGE Intelligence Brief –**

### **Israeli Troop Withdrawal: Strategic Shift or Tactical Manoeuvre?**

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#### **Executive Summary:**

In the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, the Israelis have demonstrated a strategic upper hand, prompting the recent announcement of the withdrawal of thousands of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) troops. [Al Jazeera News](#) (01/01/24) suggested that Israel came under pressure from the Biden administration to move to a lower-intensity campaign after the international outrage at the IDF's initial response to the Hamas, October 7, 2023 attack against Israel. Thus far, it is estimated that the IDF has lost a total of 172 soldiers since its ground offensive against Hamas, with Palestinian deaths standing at around 22,000. These figures are hard to confirm since no one has been able to independently verify them. The IDF figures come from the Israeli military and the Palestinian figures come from the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza.

Speculation also arose over the potential redeployment of these forces to Israel's northern frontier, potentially signalling a looming face-off against Hezbollah, a potent Iranian proxy in southern Lebanon.

Despite limited support from Hezbollah during Israel's operations against Hamas, the absence of significant coordination suggests that Hezbollah's leadership is hesitant to be drawn into a direct conflict with Israel. Hezbollah's restrained response, limited to sporadic cross-border rocket and mortar fire, underscores its reluctance to jeopardize its political standing in Beirut. Hezbollah leader Nasrallah has remained cautious in public statements, hinting at a calculated approach to avoid being entangled in the aftermath of the Israeli-Hamas conflict.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, facing domestic political challenges, may be tempted to divert attention from his waning popularity by opening a new front against Hezbollah. However, the analysis contends that such a move is not without grave risks. Hezbollah, an exponentially more formidable force than Hamas, boasts disciplined, well-trained fighters, battle-hardened from their involvement in supporting Syria's al-Assad regime.

A potential IDF offensive against Hezbollah could quickly escalate, engulfing northern Israel and straining the capabilities of Israel's anti-ballistic missile systems. With an estimated arsenal of 150,000 rockets, Hezbollah poses a substantial threat to major Israeli cities like Haifa and Tel Aviv, raising the spectre of significant casualties and property damage.

Furthermore, the strategic landscape suggests that an expanded Israeli attack could draw in regional actors, including the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Shiite proxy groups in Iraq, Afghanistan, and potentially even Pakistan. While Israel may emerge victorious in such a scenario, the prospect of a protracted, multifront conflict could exact a heavy toll on the Israeli state and exacerbate political dysfunction. Logic dictates that it would be HIGHLY UNDESIRABLE for Israel to launch a war against Hezbollah, considering the risks involved. However, the recent (08 January 2024) targeted assassination of a top Hezbollah commander, Wissam Tawil, demonstrates that the likelihood for wider escalation is HIGH.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Evaluate the long-term consequences of a potential IDF offensive against Hezbollah, considering the formidable strength and regional alliances of the latter.
2. Assess domestic and international repercussions, acknowledging the potential for a broadening conflict that could involve neighbouring states and proxy groups.
3. Consider diplomatic channels and strategic alternatives to avoid a protracted conflict, recognizing the risks associated with diverting attention from domestic political challenges.

This strategic brief highlights the delicate balance Prime Minister Netanyahu must navigate in determining Israel's next moves, emphasizing the critical implications of potential actions against Hezbollah on both a domestic and regional scale.

*This analysis is subject to evolving developments in the region, and further updates may be warranted.*

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### **About SAGE International:**

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