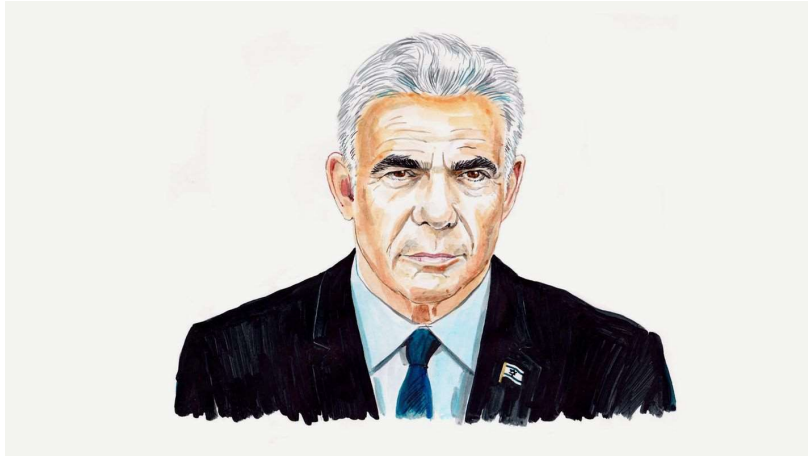


The Israel-Hizbullah war

## Lebanon needs a new army in the south, says Yair Lapid

**Israel's opposition leader sees a way to turn war into a much-needed reset for the country**



Photograph: Dan Williams

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THE ONGOING war between Israel and Hizbullah is a chance, perhaps the last, for Lebanon to become a normal state again. What is needed is wholesale defeat of Hizbullah, and a new administration and army in the country's south.

By any accepted criteria Lebanon is no longer truly a state. Its economy is ruined and food inflation rampant. According to UNICEF 90% of children do not receive regular meals. Electricity and water are available only a few hours a day. Lebanon has no president, only a perpetual caretaker. Corruption has dismantled all its institutions and its weak army lives in fear of Hizbullah, a ruthless terror organisation that is run by Iran.

This is what happens to a country overtaken by an Islamist terrorist group, and what happens wherever Iran has a presence: countries become weaker, poorer, more divided. When Iran turns a country into a basis for its proxies, that country is left in ruins. Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iraq are the most notable examples.

Israel did not go to war with Hizbullah to save Lebanon but rather to remove the threat from our northern border. One year ago today, Hizbullah began relentlessly bombarding Israeli civilians. Entire communities have been evacuated and we have dozens of fatalities from these attacks. No country in the world would ignore drones and missiles hitting it on a daily basis. It took time—too much of it—but eventually Israel launched a counterattack. From that moment, the international community began discussing when it would stop. The right question is how it will stop.

If the world wants to save Lebanon, it needs to set a single goal: the elimination of Hizbullah's military power. This is not only an Israeli ambition; it should be a Lebanese one. As long as Hizbullah controls Lebanon, the country will never recover. For Hizbullah, the shattered economy and weakening of the central government are key components in its takeover. It funds, with money from Iran and the drug trade, a state within a state aimed at imposing violent and extreme Islamic fundamentalism.

The current war could be more than just another disaster in Lebanon's long line of them. It could be used as a chance to choose a different future.

To begin with the world must support Israel in its war, without reservations and without fear. This is not a symmetric war. Israel is much stronger than Hizbullah, and with the appropriate support can shatter its military power and the intimidation effect it creates within Lebanese society. At the same time the world needs to invest the necessary resources in reorganising Lebanon's political structure and, importantly, rebuilding its army.

Lebanese soldiers currently earn \$120 a month, and even this money does not always arrive. With investment that would be negligible in international terms a South Lebanese army can be built, positioned south of the Awali River, acting as a buffer between Israel and Hizbullah. In the past the South Lebanon Army that existed in this area was of a totally different and more limited nature. Crucially, it was a completely separate entity from the Lebanese Armed Forces, the official army of Lebanon, and acted without co-ordination or instruction from the country's government. It must be different this time.

If each soldier in a new army were to earn \$500 a month there would be a flood of new recruits who could be trained by French, Emirati and American military officers. They would be motivated not only by this higher salary but also by a patriotic call to young Lebanese people to seize the opportunity for a better future for their country.

Alongside this investment the international community will need to appoint a sort of oversight committee for Lebanon to manage its civilian life for a set period until elections can be held and a new government can take control. This group would help set Lebanon on a path to fiscal responsibility, implement serious anti-corruption reforms and undertake the kind of institution-building needed to create a viable Lebanese state. It will need to include the four major Lebanese communities: Christians, Sunnis, Shias and Druze. Above all it would need to do what has not been done in Lebanon for a long time: to work for the benefit of Lebanese citizens and not for the violent terrorist organisation that has taken over the country. ■

*Yair Lapid was the 14th prime minister of Israel and is currently the leader of the opposition.*