

Transcript — Hezbollah's End Game: Hilal Khashan Reporting from Lebanon

Christian Smith: Hello and welcome to this podcast from Geopolitical Futures. I'm Christian Smith. As the war in the Middle east continues, the future of Iran remains an open question. The same can also now be said for Lebanon, where exchanges of fire between Hezbollah and Israel have been taking place for more than a week. Hezbollah wishes to avenge the death of Iran's supreme leader. Israel sees the current moment as an opportunity to destroy Hezbollah once and for all. But with hundreds now dead in the country and around 700,000 people displaced, where does the current conflict in Lebanon end? How is it tied to what is going on in Iran? And where might the Iranian conflict be? To discuss just that, I am joined on this podcast by Geopolitical Futures senior Analyst Professor Hilal Khashan, who is in Lebanon. Hello, Hilal.

Hilal Khashan: Hello, Khashan. How are you doing?

Christian Smith: I'm good, thanks. I'm good. To start with, how are you? Tell us what it's like from your personal experience there in Lebanon at the moment. Of course, you're not in Beirut itself, but what can you see? What are people talking about there? How does this feel compared to some of the conflicts that have been going on in the last few years?

Hilal Khashan: Yeah, yeah. Well, this is a different conflict. In the past, every conflict ended with a ceasefire. This conflict is not going to end with a ceasefire. Therefore, it is an open, open ended question. The ultimate objective of Israel during this war is to finish, to finish off Hezbollah by the time the war is over. Israel has repeatedly stated its objective to eliminate Hezbollah and it hoped that the Lebanese army would shoulder their responsibility. However, the army command is hesitant to take on such a momentous task. As you know, Lebanon is a sectarian country and one third of the troops in the Lebanese army are Shiites. Should the Lebanese army attempt to disarm Hezbollah, there is a high risk that the army would splinter. It happened twice in 1976 and in 1984 when the government sought to, to take sides in that, in the civil war. So whenever the government takes side in the civil war, the army splinters and the army command does not want this to happen again. So therefore Israel will, will do it. You know, and you know, actually the many army is hoping that Israel would relieve them of the task of, of this army.

Christian Smith: And just from a, from a personal perspective there, Hilal, are people perhaps more worried about what's going on now than they would have been, say during the

conflict a couple of years ago or perhaps even last year? Of course, Hezbollah was not involved in the 12 Day War last year, but when that was going on, as well,

Hilal Khashan: well, now people are aware that this is a different conflict. People were still hoping that Hezbollah would not venture and join this war. Especially as you mentioned, Hezbollah did not take part in last year's, last year's 12 Day War. Now this is what happened after the ceasefire last November 2024. Hezbollah abided by the terms of the ceasefire. Actually, Hezbollah received a very severe blow by the Israelis during that war that culminated in the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah and his successor. And of course, it followed the pagers attack that killed that injured more than 4,000 Hezbollah operatives. Now, since the ceasefire in 2024, in November 2024, Israel continued to bombard Hezbollah and target its militants to. More than 500 Hezbollah members have been killed since then. Until the break out of this spate of fighting, Hezbollah knew. Hezbollah knew that Israel aimed at eliminating it. Actually on the day, actually a day before, Hezbollah opened a front against Israel. This time, Hezbollah's chief said, we are going to have war and we will fight heroically until the last soul of our soldiers. He knew that Hezbollah will be defeated in the event of war, but he knew whether Hezbollah opens a front or not, their fate is the same. He said, let's die fighting. Let's die standing. So you know, the question of death or martyrdom as Hezbollah advertise its military campaign, you know, they Shiite perspective about war is painted with martyrdom that goes back to the days when the Umayyads, during the first Islamic State, after, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in the battle of Karbala, Imam Hussain was beheaded by the state. And since then, Shias commemorate this event and they haven't forgotten it 1400 years later. And their argument is that if our Imam was beheaded, then we are no better than our Imam and we have to repent for his death and for the way that we abandoned him. And here came the vision of martyrdom. And martyrdom for them means a new life. So Hezbollah decided to go to war. I don't think, I don't think the idea was to avenge the killing by Israel of the supreme leader. Hezbollah did not attempt to avenge the killing of Hassan Nasrallah or his successor Hashim Safiyeddin. So it was not a question about revenge. It was an issue about dying standing.

Christian Smith: That's interesting. So you think the current. Because of course, Hezbollah was the first to strike in this most recent conflict against Israel. Do you think their decision to do that was much more about opportunity to die standing, as you say? Because they probably thought that Israel was going to come for Them at some point soon anyway.

Hilal Khashan: Yeah, yeah. See, for 16 months, Israel bombarded Hezbollah and killed its, its men on a daily basis every day. And Hezbollah did not respond. And then the argument was

that, okay, we are being killed anyway, so why not take a stand and fight? That's as simple as that.

Christian Smith: Let me just drill into that for a little bit. So you think Hezbollah effectively now is conscious of the fact that this could be its last fight, that this is part of a wider change in the Middle east where it may no longer be a credible military force going forward?

Hilal Khashan: Well, they are aware of the consequences and it's not that that will no longer be credible. I think that the objective is to eliminate them as a fighting force. And I think even the plan goes beyond their elimination as a fighting force. I think the objective also is to ban their political dimension of the party. Hezbollah has two components, one military and one political. So the plan is also to finish off their civilian administration and their political establishment. Hezbollah has 13 members in the Lebanese parliament. And the parliament just extend, given itself another mandate of two years because it is difficult to hold elections nowadays. You know, should an election, a parliamentary election take place, Hezbollah will not be able to place any member in the parliament. So I mean, the defeat of Hezbollah, the elimination of Hezbollah's military component will lead to the dismantlement of their political establishment as well. Because Hezbollah over the past 35 plus years dominated Lebanese politics thanks to its military component. With the elimination of their military component, their political institutions will become worthless.

Christian Smith: And yes, so just on that. So why would, if there was an election tomorrow, say, or in a couple of years, why would it no longer be able to have MPs in Parliament? Is it just because its legitimacy has been degraded?

Hilal Khashan: Well, okay. You know, many Shiites are unhappy about Hezbollah's behavior. Especially every time there is a war, hundreds of thousands of Shiites become displaced. I remember since 1993. There was an operation in 1993 that lasted for a week and 300,000 Shiites fled. In 1996, Israel waged the Grapes of Wrath operation. 500,000 Shiites fled their homes. 2006, all Shiites fled the south. 900,000 people during the, during the last year war again, hundreds of thousands left their homes and Shiites lost many of their houses in the south and the Bikar Valley. And now the same is happening again. There's widespread destruction. So there is resentment of Hezbollah. Shiites want to lead a normal life. They are, many of them are aware that given the, given the range of the current operation and what will happen in the near future when Israel mounts its offensive? Some of them believe that they will never return to their homes. So the lives of many Shiites have been shattered. That had an impact on the way they perceive Hezbollah. However, their opposition, their resentment of

Hezbollah remains muted because the consequences of opposing Hezbollah for Shiites is extremely high. So Hezbollah may tolerate non Shiite's criticism of the party, but if Shiites criticize the part the party, then they might face consequences that they would rather not be subjected to.

Christian Smith: That's interesting. Hilal, let's come on to what Israel is trying to do in a moment. But while we're talking about the wider domestic situation in Lebanon, I want to say Lebanon's president, Joseph Owen, who, who took over at the start of 2025, he's been in the news in the last few days. He issued a statement which CNN called remarkable, calling Hezbollah an armed faction that wanted to achieve the fall of the state of Lebanon after many years of disorder. I suppose in Lebanese politics and inability to form governments, the current government has a lot more support, at least from outside Lebanon. I'm not sure what the situation is domestically, but it says that it wants to disarm Hezbollah. How likely is that? How, how possible do you think a kind of not a conflict, but maybe a confrontation between the state and Hezbollah

Hilal Khashan: is now there is a political confrontation, but the army does not want, the government does not want a military confrontation. Since the election of Aun early January 2025, he took the file of Hezbollah's disarmament personally and he involved himself with frequent meetings with the head of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc, trying to convince him to disarm peacefully. And he told them, he told them on many occasions, the game is over. You need to accept the new reality Hezbollah has to disarm. And you don't have to worry about the achievements of the Shiite community in the Lebanese political system, the achievements that they made during the past 35 plus years. But Hezbollah has been adamant about its refusal to disarm. They argue in rather in not only an unconvincing way, but in a manner that shows lack of understanding of reality. They say our military component is important for the defense of Lebanon. But everybody is telling them how can you defend Lebanon if you cannot defend yourself? If you are lame duck, Israel keeps targeting you on a daily basis and you can't do anything to stop Israeli attacks on you. But Hezbollah realizes that the moment they abandon their military component Shiite, they will lose their political significance. That's in the mean that they best. They argue that the best way to maintain their military component. Sorry, the best way to maintain their achievements in the Lebanese political system is to keep their armed wing. That's the issue. They know that there are no match for Israel and they know that they will never fight Israel again. Because this is the end game now.

Christian Smith: Right? And how much from the point of view of the Lebanese state, how much of their position. I've seen it. I see an opinion elsewhere suggesting that a lot of some of

the position, the anti Hezbollah position, the desire for disarmament has come from outside forces, from the US and from Israel pressuring the Lebanese government. Do you think that's true or do you think this is a more internally driven process?

Hilal Khashan: Both, but essentially it is internally driven. Right after Israel pulled out unilaterally from south Lebanon in 2000, Israel celebrated it as the day of liberation. Actually, Israel could have stayed in South Lebanon, but there was an opposition in Israel for the war in Lebanon. Many Israelis believed that it was not necessary for defending Israel. As you know, the IDF was established as a defense force. And many Israelis, including in the military, believe that the war in Lebanon had nothing to do with the defense of Israel. And in 1999, the two contenders for office in Israel. I remember Ehud Barak and. I forgot his name. Anyways, he's in the media. I talk about him every day. The two guys ran for office. The mood in Israel back then was for peace and for pulling out from Lebanon. And Netanyahu lost the election and Ehud Barak became prime minister. And immediately after he became prime minister, he pulled out from Lebanon because he felt it was unnecessary, useless war. Now, since then, many Lebanese began to demand Hezbollah to disarm because in 1989, the Taif Agreement that ended the Lebanese civil war exempted Hezbollah from disarmament. All other factions disarmed. Back then, Syria applied pressure on the government because Syria and Iran were allies at the time. And Hezbollah was exempted because it was treated as a resistance movement that had nothing to do with the Lebanese political system. Now, however, the pressure continued to apply on Hezbollah. Disarm, disarm, disarm. Hezbollah refused disarm. And then Hezbollah invented the question of Shiba Farms, said, okay, our task is not finished yet. We have to liberate Shiba Farms as Lebanese territory. But however, Shiba Farms was not taken from Lebanon. Sheba Farms, yes, true, belonged to Lebanon, but it was a smuggling ground to Syria. Until the 19, the early 1960s. The Syrians kept telling the Lebanese to establish a police station there to Stop illegal traffic activity into Syria. Lebanon refused. In 1964, the Syrian army occupied Sheba Farms, which is contiguous to the Golan Heights. In 1967, when Israel occupied the Golan Heights, it seized Chaba Farms. But they took it from the Syrians, not the Lebanese. And She Farms went unnoticed in Lebanon. Nobody ever thought about sheba farms until 2000, when Israel pulled out from South Lebanon to justify maintaining its military component. Hezbollah said, we want to liberate Sheba Farms. But Hezbollah did nothing to liberate Sheba Farms. You know, actually you need to understand why Israel, why Iran created Hezbollah after the revolution in 1979, Iran wanted to export its revolution and it decided to sponsor the Palestine question after Arabs abandoned it, you know, so they created Hezbollah and Israel and Iran pledged to support the Palestinians. However, by 2000, for Iran, the military component, the military importance of Hezbollah had exp. Okay, so they decided to

use Hezbollah elsewhere. In the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah played a major role in defending the regime of Bashar Al Assad. Hezbollah also Hezbollah trainers worked with the. With the Shiite mobilized popular mobilization forces. Hezbollah also played a role in supporting the Houthis in Yemen. Not a lot, not to a large extent though. So Hezbollah now for Iran after 2000 became, became an important tool of regional expansion. So the pressure, however, continued against Hezbollah. So Hezbollah said, okay, let's try to find a way out of the problem and, and focus on, on establishing a national defense system whereby Hezbollah and the Lebanese army would act in collaboration. The Lebanese said, no, you guys need to dissolve your military component in order to avoid this. Hezbollah mounted an operation on July 12, 2006 to take Israeli troops hostage to swap them with Lebanese prisoners in Israel. Now the operation went out of control and led to the death of 13 Israeli troops. And that meant war. Israel went to war over this incident. But again, the main issue between the Lebanese people government and Hezbollah is that Hezbollah hijacked the functions of the Lebanese government and decided whenever it wanted to start wars against Israel. In 2006, Hezbollah caused a war with Israel that the Lebanese did not want. And in. In after Hamas's attack on Israel in 2023, Hezbollah opened a front without consultation with the Lebanese government. The Lebanese government became a spectator. Now, after the assassination of Iran's supreme leader, Hezbollah sent her dracas at Israel. So every time there's every. On every occasion, it was Hezbollah who started wars. So the Lebanese government and the people have been fed up with that. So the pressure on Hezbollah to disarm has been more significant domestically than internationally. But again, I will say here there is a congress of interest of the Lebanese people and the international community to see Hezbollah disarmed. But there is no lack of motivation and enthusiasm in Lebanon to disarm Hezbollah.

Christian Smith: And of course, if there was domestic push, you know, physically to disarm Hezbollah, the risk there, of course, and the concern is that that would lead to another civil war in Lebanon.

Hilal Khashan: Yeah, you know, the Lebanese army is poor. First of all, the Lebanese army is structured along sectarian lines. Christians don't like to join the army. The Lebanese army is an all volunteer Army. At least 75% of the troops are either Shiites or Sunnis. Therefore, to commit the army to war and to fight against Hezbollah is not, is not likely to work out, you know, because of sectarian tensions in the country. Lebanon, I mean, identity in Lebanon. The primary identity in Lebanon is not to the state. The primary identity is to the sect. So if you put the army against a sect, then those troops who belong to a sect will not accept, will not take the orders. Now that's one thing, the army represents the Lebanese sectarian makeup. Second, the

army is poorly armed. In a show, even if the army does not disintegrate in a civil war between the Hezbollah and the army, the army will lose. It is poorly armed. Third, the army does not have the motivation to fight. As you know, since 2019, Lebanon has been witnessing a financial meltdown down. Office enlisted men with bonuses and fringe benefits. Their monthly salary with everything with bonuses and fringe Benefits are around \$200 a month. Nobody will fight for \$200 a month.

Christian Smith: Take a moment to follow and rate us on your preferred podcast platform. For video versions of the show and much more, subscribe on YouTube Eopolitical Futures GPF click the link in the description below to gain access to our full 2026 forecast. Re anchoring the world, complete with geopolitical predictions, maps and graphics from our global team of analysts. Hilal, Let's look at Israel then and what it is doing there before we start on what's going on right now. As you were saying, Israel was striking his bulletin targets on a near daily basis before the new conflict broke out. Talk us through what was behind that. Was that, I mean, of course there was meant to be a ceasefire. Was that just a matter of Israel wanting to maintain the pressure? What was the story there?

Hilal Khashan: Well, now the ceasefire agreement. When the ceasefire, when Lebanon accepted the ceasefire agreement, it was with the understanding that Lebanon will dismantle Hezbollah's military component. The Lebanese government did not do it. So Israel continued to hammer Hezbollah in a low intensity, in low intensity war of attrition. But it was a one sided war of attrition. And the Israelites are saying, hey, the Lebanese government is not living up to its promise to handle the disarmament of Hezbollah. Actually, the full disarmament of Hezbollah was supposed to take place by the end of 2025. It didn't happen. And even in southern Lebanon, the army said, we cleared Hezbollah from the south Litani area. But with the start of the hostilities with Israel, it became clear that this was not the case because Hezbollah now is fighting in the deep south, an area that was supposed to have been cleared from Hezbollah by the Lebanese army.

Christian Smith: And so Israel now, as you suggest, there's a, this war is, is potentially or, or probably a war to the end of Hezbollah, perhaps. But you know, we've been seeing the war in Palestine before this and the attempt of Israel to destroy Hamas. I mean, how possible is it for Israel to actually disarm Hezbollah? It's proven very popular, very difficult for them to disarm and dismantle Hamas in Gaza. Could this be another, another Gaza?

Hilal Khashan: It is. No, no, it is different Gaza. The population of Gaza is homogeneous. The population of Lebanon is heterogeneous. Shiites in Lebanon are simply a faction. They

amount to less than one third of the population of Lebanon. Okay, Lebanon, 1/3 Shiite, 1/3 Sunnis, and one third Christian and Druze. So this is not Gaza because there is a widespread opposition to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In Gaza, nobody dared oppose Hamas. And there is another thing. You know, the international community and the US understand that most Lebanese are opposed to Hezbollah. And this, this react, this understanding of the situation in Lebanon is the reason why the airport remains open, because the international committee understands that the Lebanese are not Hezbollah.

Christian Smith: And so how do you see this process playing out with Israel? Where do you see the conflict going from here? How will they go about seeking to disarm and end Hezbollah?

Hilal Khashan: Well, okay, you know, this conflict in Lebanon will outlast the conflict with Iran. I. There is no way that this war will end without Iran accepting the terms set by President Trump. Let's keep in mind, the war against Iran is Trump's war. The war against Hezbollah is Netanyahu's war. So we distinguish between the two. Now, if Iran, if the ceasefire, and when the ceasefire with Iran concludes, one of the preconditions is to dissociate from Hezbollah and Israel and Iran will have no choice but to accept that this total disengagement from Hezbollah, if Hezbollah loses its Regional sponsor. Not only Iran is not just Hezbollah's regional sponsor, it is the creator of Hezbollah. If the creator says I am no longer affiliated with you, then Hezbollah will begin to atrophy in connection with a sustained Israeli military campaign. So I mean it is. Israel does not lack the capability to finish off Hezbollah, but the Israelis, it might take him some time because the Israelis are careful to avoid casualties. Is, I mean, as a Israel could have, could easily mount an allout offensive against Hezbollah. For the past few days, Israel has been sensing Hezbollah's defenses and advancing slowly in the south to establish points, to establish launching points for their full scale invasion. When the ceasefire took effect in November 2024, Israel seized five strategic points on the Lebanese side of the border. Now after the beginning of the hostilities, Israel added seven more points to them. So now Israel controls 12 points. And these 12 points will be staging points for Israeli invasion of South Lebanon. So the Israelis are moving against Hezbollah methodically and systematically. So they, they want to avoid casualties, but at the same time they are advancing. Now recently, I mean today they advanced into a town that is 6km north of the border. So now there's an advance. I mean the Israelis are advancing, but they are in no rush.

Christian Smith: And I suppose, I mean, we of course saw a war in southern Lebanon a couple of years ago. How far do you think Israel could go this time? Is there a risk that this is going to become an entirely a war that encompasses all the way up to Beirut? Or do you think this will be contained in the south?

Hilal Khashan: Israel came to Beirut in 1982 because of the PLO. The PLO's headquarters was in Beirut. That's why they came to Beirut. No, the Israelis told the residents in the South Litani area, you know, there is the Litany river, the largest river in Lebanon. It terminates in the Mediterranean sea around, around 30 kilometers from the border, from the coastal border with, with, with Israel. Now because you know, the border between Lebanon and the Israel is crooked, but at the widest area it is 30 kilometers. So Israel told residents south of the Litanian river area to leave it and not return to it. So it is, it is clear that this is the objective of the Israelis, to take over the South Litani area. It's around 1,000 square kilometers in, in an area. Now if the Israelis decide to develop the attacks, that attack to the valley, that's another matter. There is no, there is no final decision on this matter. I don't know if the Syrians might step in and take over the valley, but for sure Israel Yeah, yeah, talk

Christian Smith: us through what's going on. Talk us through what's going on with Syria there, you know.

Hilal Khashan: Okay. Trump likes the new Syrian leadership in Damascus, and he believes that they are sincere about their objective, their determination to fight the Islamic State in Syria. The remnants of the Islamic State in Syria. Now, right after the fall of Assad's regime on December 8, 2023, 22, 2023, no, 2024, the Israelis mounted hundreds of air raids that destroyed the entire weaponry of the Syrian army. And they occupied the additional areas beyond the. Beyond the ceasefire line. And Israeli troops even took the peak of the Mount Hermon mountain. Mount Hermon. The peak of Mount Hermon overlooks the entire area. Now, it could be the Israeli, see, they seize more than 300 square kilometers from Syria beyond the ceasefire line. There is a possibility that the Israelis, and not only that Israel wants southwest Syria to be demilitarized. That's three Syrian governors, you know. So it could be that in exchange for the demilitarization of the southwestern Syria that is contiguous to Israel and the Golan Heights, Israel may be willing to allow Syria to compensate for that loss, to take part in the northern Beqaf Valley and Tripoli. Tripoli, this is a city in northern Lebanon. Tripoli was a Syrian city until the French created Greater Lebanon in 1920. And the mood in Tripoli remains pro Syrian, by the way. So it may be the Syrians want Tripoli, they want their harbor because they don't trust the Allaways along the Syrian Mediterranean coast. So it could be. I'm not. It could be that in compensation for Syria's territorial loss in the Golan Heights and the earlier seized By Israel After December 8, 2024, it may be that Israel would allow them to compensate for it by taking areas in the north Beqaa Valley and Tripoli. Now there is something else. You know, why was Greater Lebanon created in 1920? You know, in Lebanon, in 1861, the European powers, after the civil war between the Druze and the Maronites, they

created an autonomous region in the Lebanese mountain that consisted mainly of Maronites and Druze. During the First World War, one third of the Lebanese Christians in that area perished because of the blockade. The British Navy blockaded the eastern Mediterranean and there was good foods were not coming in. Lebanon does not feed itself imports food, and one third of the population perished in order to avoid another famine. They felt that by adding additional land, more plains, you know, and agricultural area, Lebanon could be safer in the event of another world war. But now, after more than a century of creating great Lebanon Many Christians don't want it anymore. They want to lead their life on their own and they don't want to interact with non Christians in Lebanon. So maybe. I don't know how the future of Lebanon will look like. The entire region is going to change, by the way. So it could be part of regional change. It could be that the Christians may want to return to the idea of Mount Lebanon as a separate entity there

Christian Smith: and just, just sticking with Syria for, for a moment. There's been reports that, that some Syrian divisions have been put alongside the border with Lebanon. Do you think there's any credibility in the idea that, that Syria could be involved in the disarmament of Hezbollah?

Hilal Khashan: Well, I know the Israelis kept pushing the Syrians to take action against Hezbollah after the fall of Assad. They refuse to take part. I'm not saying this will happen, definitely, but there is a strong possibility that if the Israelis may not. If the Israelis don't decide to move into the Northern Biqa Valley, 1, the Israelis may not decide to move into the north Biqa. The Lebanese army will not take action against Hezbollah. Therefore, in the event that Israel does not want to move northward, then the Syrians will do it. You know, should Israel decide to do it, then there would be no need for the Syrians to take. So again, you know, we don't know. There are possible the Israelis may advance to the birthplace of Hezbollah and put an end to it, or they could be, in order to avoid casualties, they may allow the Syrians to do it and then as a result, they will get their. I mean, their share of the land.

Christian Smith: And before we want to look at the situation between Israel, US and Iran before we let you go, Hilal, but before that, I mean, how. As you said, you know, this war could last longer and will last longer than the war with Iran. I mean, how long could this take and how brutal could it get? Could this be a matter of years or is it more likely months?

Hilal Khashan: No, no, it will not take years. Roughly speaking. Roughly speaking. Now, now the war against Iran cannot last very long, you know, because of the oil factor and the Gulf

countries have become victimized by it. You know, I don't think the war against Hezbollah in Lebanon would, could last beyond the end of April. I doubt it very much.

Christian Smith: Okay. Okay. And then look, let's. Let's look at the war. Sorry, you go on.

Hilal Khashan: Even the Israelis. The Israelis don't want a long war. The Israelis are mobilizing 100,000 troops and they can't keep them fighting for a year. No, I Don't think this would last beyond. Beyond April.

Christian Smith: Okay. And looking at Iran now, then the president of Lebanon pointed out and accused Hezbollah of working for the calculations of the Iranian regime. He said, where do you see? You've been writing for Geopolitical Futures this week about where the war could be heading in the future of the Iranian regime. Where do you think it is heading? How do you think it will end?

Hilal Khashan: Well, okay. I think Trump wants a clear victory. He cannot stop this war without claiming a major victory, otherwise this might ruin his presidency. So the US Wants tangible evidence that they made an achievement, and I think they are moving in that direction. I don't think the Iranians. The amount of destruction taking place in Iran is staggering. I don't really believe the claim of the Iranians that they prepared themselves to fight for six months at the current rate of. Of fighting intensity. So I think this is what happened. Right now, the main concern of the regime in Tehran is political survival. I forget about bringing down the regime, toppling the regime. I don't think this will happen as a result of this confrontation. I believe, however, that the regime will lose credibility and face and eventually it will atrophy, but not immediately. Not as not immediately because of this war, but afterwards it will lose its credibility. The likelihood that regime change can happen now could lead to bloodshed in Iran because the government made it very clear, if you demonstrate, it means you are traitors. You are collaborating with the Israelis and Americans. So the fall of the regime will not happen. Now, if the regime gets the assurance that it will stay in office for now, then they will come to terms with the US on ending the war. And this way, Trump can declare a major victory.

Christian Smith: And what do you think those terms will be? Do you think they will give up their nuclear program, for example?

Hilal Khashan: Well, the Iranians keep saying that their nuclear program is peaceful, it is civilian. Now, the destruction. You know, sometimes the Trump administration issues conflicting comments. Last year, Trump said that he destroyed Iran's nuclear program. Now he

says we are focusing on eliminating their nuclear program. He told us that he completed it last year. I think the main issue now, I don't think the issue is destroying their nuclear program. The issue is taking hold of Iran's 400 kilograms of enriched uranium. That's the issue. I think he will get them eventually. He will either get them or degrade them. So I think the issue, this war will not end without taking control of Iran's 400 kg of enriched uranium. If that happens, and I think it will happen, then Trump can declare a Major victory.

Christian Smith: And let's look ahead to what the future of the regime then might be. As you say, Hilal, it's credibility could fade. What's the sort of path for this? I suppose so. The regime survives this war, but it loses its enriched uranium. How does it. Because it's of course a very ruthless and has proven, as you wrote this week, very. It sustained a lot of pressure over the decades. How does it degrade from here?

Hilal Khashan: Yeah. What Even before this war, according to reliable statistics and surveys conducted by Western agencies. I mean, there was an article about it published in a use in a reputable US magazine. 80% of the Iranian people have aversion to the regime. But they wanted to go. Only 20% support the regime, but the support for the regime, the 20% who support the regime are rural people. But in the major cities there is a complete estrangement between the regime and the people. 89% of Iranians want a democratic political system. By the way, there is a gap between wanting to live in a democratic system and behaving as a democrat. So there is a gap between the two. There is no democratic tradition in Iran. I don't think when eventually in the longer run the regime falls, I don't think Iran will have a democratic system. Because, you know, Iran is a diverse country ethnically and politically and ideologically is a diverse country. And if the country becomes free, all of a sudden people will go different ways. Something similar to what happened to France after the 1789 revolution that liberated everybody. So the country will witness upheavals after the fall of the eventual fall of the regime. But now, you know, in 1906, there was a constitutional movement in Iran and there was a demand for transforming Persia, it was called Persia still into a constitutional monarchy. But the process failed. Eventually this movement failed. But since then Iranians have been demanding freedom, have been demanding an open political system. It didn't happen. Rizal Shah took over power after 1921. And in 1925 he became the Shah of Iran. And his son succeeded. Succeeded him. Actually, the US reinstated him after the 1953 coup. So the Iranians won't change. But there is no agreement in Iran on how the system will look like after the failure of the current regime. By the way, the Iranian people, most of them are secular people, but they are ruled by a religious establishment, unlike Arabs. Arabs are religious people, but

they are ruled by secular political establishments. But the Iranians want to get rid of the religious form of government.

Christian Smith: And just last question. Hilal, can I put you on the spot. How long, what's the timeline here, do you think? How long do you think the regime can survive?

Hilal Khashan: Well, now, that's a very good question. Now, as you realize, Iran suffers from a major economic situation, very ungainly situation. Poverty is on the rampage in Iran. Now. The ability. I don't think the regime, even after the end of the hostilities, I don't think the regime, I don't think the sanctions on Iran will be lifted immediately. The sanctions may be lifted incrementally. Even after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the US control of the country, the US did not lift the sanctions all of a sudden on Iran. The sanctions were lifted incrementally. I think the last part, the last components of the sanctions were lifted recently, I believe. So the same thing will happen in Iran even with an agreement, because the US will want to test the compliance of the Iranian regime with the agreement. So the lifting of the sanctions will be incremental. I don't think the regime, after the devastation that we are witnessing, I don't think the regime will, will be able to fulfill the increasing rising demands of the population after a destructive war. So I think the economic crisis, the continuing economic situation will eventually cause the regime to fall. And I, I think this will be the objective of the U.S. okay, we will not change, transform the regime. We will not cause the regime to fall, but we, we will cause the economic dimension, the economic need in Iran, the poverty of the people to eventually cause the erosion and eventually the fall of the regime. I think the economic dimension will lead to the fall of the regime, but war itself.

Christian Smith: And do you think that's, that's a kind of near future possibility? Is it too hard to say?

Hilal Khashan: Well, no, I don't think this can happen in weeks or months. It will happen. It will happen, though. I mean, I don't have a time frame. It depends on now. Okay? If the Iranians were to take it to the street and protest against the regime, they will be shot dead as foreign agents. If the protest movements start several months after the end of the war, that it would be a different matter. People could say that this is spontaneous as it happened in the past, or people can say this is, these protests are organic. They are not driven by outside forces. So I think the pull of the street will eventually cause the regime to fall. But this have, there has, there has to be a gap between the end of the war and people's ability to demonstrate against the regime because of economic needs. Most problems in Iran after the revolution. Most protest

movements were caused by economic factors, and I think the economic dimension will become more pronounced after the end of the war.

Christian Smith: Well, Hilal, let's leave it there. Thank you as always, for coming on the podcast. We'll have to get you on again soon to talk about what the future landscape of the Middle east might look like after all of this. Stay safe there in Lebanon. Best wishes to you and thank you out there very much, everyone for listening and watching to this episode. We'll be back again soon with another one, but until then, you take care and goodbye. Find all of our expert geopolitical analysis at geopoliticalfutures.com.