

## The Death of Hassan Nasrallah: What Lies Ahead

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### Introduction

On 27 Sep, Israel executed a targeted air strike on the headquarters of Hezbollah under 'Operation New Order' which resulted in the death of its chief, Hassan Nasrallah. Shortly before the strike, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, [during a speech at the United Nations General Assembly](#), promised to continue "degrading" Hezbollah, crushing hopes that Israel would agree to a 21-day truce proposed by the United States (US) and France.

Nasrallah's killing completes a process of decapitating Hezbollah. Its Chief of Staff Fuad Shukur, Radwan Force Head Ibrahim Aqil, Missile Force Commander Ibrahim Qubaisi and other operatives have fallen to Israeli targeted strikes recently.

Israelis have tried to eliminate Nasrallah before. That they have been successful now is attributed to their vastly improved intelligence collection effort inside Lebanon. This killing underlines how vulnerable Hezbollah is to Israeli surveillance and infiltration.

Although considered as the most heavily armed non-state actor in the world, within Lebanon, Hezbollah operates as a legal political party and a security force: the group effectively governs much of the country, particularly in the South and East. Nasrallah had been at the helm of Hezbollah for more than three decades. And during this time, Hezbollah's power grew exponentially. But his death is unlikely to remove the group from power in Lebanon.<sup>[1]</sup>

### Iran's Options

The expected future scenario involves Iran using its proxies, the [Hezbollah and the Houthis](#), to launch an extensive missile and drone attack on Israel. In an even more extreme scenario, Iran itself could join the conflict directly with strikes from its territory, although this is considered unlikely. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said, "The fate of this region will be determined by the forces of resistance, with Hezbollah at the forefront".<sup>[2]</sup>

The recent Israel strikes represent a direct challenge to Iran, as Nasrallah was considered its most important strategic regional ally, whose tens of thousands of Iranian-supplied missiles aimed at Israel have long been seen as a key strategic foil preventing an Israeli attack on [Iran](#) itself.<sup>[3]</sup>

The most important question: whether Iran can accept the strike against Nasrallah, or whether it too could be drawn into a widening conflict or was the strike intended by Israel as setting the conditions for a strike against Iran.

The US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin said the US was determined to prevent Iran or Iran-backed groups from expanding the conflict and was committed to the defence of Israel. Russia condemned the killing of Nasrallah as "political murder" and called on Israel to stop hostilities in Lebanon.<sup>[4]</sup>

Iran now faces a difficult dilemma between a sharp reaction to Israel, which risks a regional war, and no reaction, which will deeply harm its 'Axis of Resistance' armed proxy network. At the same time is the question of Iran's nuclear deterrence, given the fact that Hezbollah was presently considered a deterrence tool of Iran against Israel.<sup>[5]</sup>

### Hezbollah and Lebanon

No doubt this is a transformative moment for Hezbollah as it has lost not only Hassan Nasrallah but also many leaders in its command structure. The central question is whether Hezbollah's leadership will stick to its hardline stance against Israel, continuing to tie the organisation's fate to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, or if it will reconsider its strategy for the present in view of the loss of its leadership at various levels. A statement from the group said that Nasrallah "has joined his fellow martyrs" and it vowed to "continue the holy war against the enemy and in support of Palestine".[\[6\]](#)

For Lebanon's elected government, this turn of events opens up possibilities of it reclaiming greater control over parts of Southern Lebanon where the writ of the Hezbollah ran. There is no doubt that Lebanon is a multi-ethnic and religiously divided country, and its 'confessional system' of democracy only adds to that. Ever since experiencing a near-total collapse of its economy in 2019, common Lebanese have faced immense challenges.

The Hezbollah, though powerful, is blamed for many of its present ills including the storage of a large amount of [ammonium nitrate](#) at the [Port of Beirut](#) which exploded on 04 Aug 2020, causing 218 deaths, 7,000 injuries, and rendering an estimated 3,00,000 people [homeless](#).[\[7\]](#) Hezbollah is deeply embedded in Lebanon and its foreign policy is largely dictated by the group, particularly when it comes to Israel. A recent [Arab Barometer survey](#) indicated that 55 per cent of Lebanese have "no trust at all" in Hezbollah. But do the blows inflicted on Hezbollah mean it has lost its core capacities?

### **The Israeli Question**

The other question is that will Israel now open up yet another front by launching a ground offensive into Southern Lebanon in order to eliminate the threat from Hezbollah. An Israeli campaign that intends to degrade Hezbollah and dislodge it from its entrenched positions would lead to a large-scale collateral damage as Hezbollah has shielded its weapons by embedding them in urban and civilian areas.[\[8\]](#)

As Hezbollah is likely to retaliate by launching rockets and missiles at Israel, the first task of Israel will be to disrupt or intercept these launches.

Since the 07 Oct Hamas attack, Israel has been engaged on numerous fronts. Hezbollah has been engaging Israel from Lebanon and this has resulted in displacing 60,000 Israelis. Shortly thereafter, the Houthis in Yemen also joined in, with attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea and launching missiles and drones at Israel, including one that exploded in central Tel Aviv.[\[9\]](#)

Meanwhile, militias in Iraq and Syria have also targeted Israel with drones and rockets. In mid-April, after Israel carried out a airstrike near an Iranian diplomatic complex in Damascus, Iran retaliated by launching more than 350 ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones at [Israel](#), creating a new precedent for direct and open combat between the two countries.[\[10\]](#) At the same time, Iran has been flooding the West Bank with funds and weapons to encourage terrorist attacks.

But so far, this multifront war has been of limited intensity. It is evident that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has chosen to escalate the level of violence. The question is to what degree will this change now and will Israel now start taking on these proxies of Iran. If the war becomes wider as well as longer, existing security assumptions will be even further

challenged. In an all-out regional war, Israel would be fighting not only proxies sponsored by Iran, but also Iran.

## **Conclusion**

Israel has been working deliberately on targeting Hezbollah commanders in different areas to dismantle the command chain of the group. The two sides were locked in an upward military spiral with a violent choreography of incremental escalation and calculated strikes.

While Hezbollah has suffered a severe setback, it is unlikely to crumble under the weight of Nasrallah's death, even though the group has lost a leader whose influence extended far beyond Lebanon.

The death of Hassan Nasrallah has been considered as 'a seismic event' in the Middle East. The group will now need to select a new leader, who in turn will need to decide what direction to take Hezbollah in. The question uppermost in everyone's mind is what comes next?

The risk of a broader conflict is at its highest, but there are also opportunities for a comprehensive settlement which now hinges on Israel and Iran. But this is the time for the international community, led by the US, to exert its full leverage on Israel to demand a complete and an immediate ceasefire in Lebanon. This would make any reaction by Iran and its proxies more difficult and provide the opportunity for a larger settlement.

There is no doubt that the killing marks a major escalation in the crisis and threatens to reshape the course of events in a region where Nasrallah had a significant presence, and we are now stepping into uncharted territory.

## **Endnotes**

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