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The Iranian Studies Unit

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Despite the dramatic nature of the killing of Hassan Nasrallah, leader of the Lebanese Hezbollah militia, the long-term success of Israel's *decapitation strategy* remains very much in doubt. Such a strategy is by no means new, having been deployed on numerous occasions in the past. Repeatedly, however, the decapitated organization has replaced its fallen head with a new one before long, having re-emerged from the loss of its leader with at times even renewed vigour. Nasrallah's killing may act as a harbinger of changes to Hezbollah's tactics and perhaps even its strategy. Nevertheless, if history is any guide, it is unlikely to seriously erode the longer-term objectives and capabilities of the organization.

"Leadership decapitation" refers to the strategy of targeting and removing the leaders or key figures of an organization, movement, or government.¹ This concept is often used in military, political, and counter-terrorism contexts. The idea behind it is that by eliminating the leadership, the organization will become less effective, disorganized, or even collapse. In military or counter-terrorism strategies, leadership decapitation aims to disrupt the chain of command, reduce the effectiveness of enemy forces, or demoralize followers. In political terms, it can involve removing high-ranking officials or political leaders, hoping that this will lead to instability or a loss of direction.

However, the effectiveness of leadership decapitation is debated. In many historical instances, the assassination of leaders or key figures has inflicted short-term damage on their organizations or structures, causing tactical disruption. However, in the long run, it usually yields more complex results and, in some cases, even strengthens the ideology and prolongs the resistance. While it can sometimes weaken an organization, in other cases, it can lead to unintended consequences, such as increased violence, the rise of more extreme leaders, or the persistence of an ideology even without its key figures. For example, in the case of non-state actors, leadership decapitation has sometimes led to the group adapting or becoming more decentralized.

The assassination of figures at the level of Hassan Nasrallah is not a new occurrence. Ahmed Yassin (founder and spiritual leader of Hamas in 2004),² Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi (leader of Hamas in 2004),³ Fathi Shaqaqi (Secretary General of Islamic Jihad in 1995),⁴ Abbas al-Musawi (former Secretary General of Hezbollah in 1992),⁵ Imad Mughniyeh (high-ranking military commander of Hezbollah in 2008),⁶ Hassan al-Laqqis (Hezbollah's technology commander in 2013)⁷, and Mustafa

1 Jenna Jordan, *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 4.

2 Jennifer Hassan and Maham Javaid, "Israel has a long history of assassination operations across borders," *The Washington Post*, (July 31, 2024), <https://bit.ly/3NhGfC0>.

3 BBC News, "Profile: Abdel Aziz al-Rantisi," April 18, 2004, <https://bit.ly/3ZZ5Vv3>.

4 Joel Greenberg, "Islamic Group Vows Revenge for Slaying of Its Leader," *The New York Times*, (October 30, 1995), <https://bit.ly/3Nd60DA>.

5 Azani, Eitan. *Hezbollah: The Story of the Party of God: From Revolution to Institutionalization*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 47 - 74.

6 Ian Black, "Car bomb ends life of Hizbullah chief wanted for string of kidnappings and mass murders," *The Guardian*, (February 13, 2008), <https://bit.ly/3ZQ8RTP>.

7 Laila Bassam and Dominic Evans, "Hezbollah says commander killed in Beirut, blames Israel," Reuters, December 4, 2013, <https://bit.ly/4dzYptA>.

Badreddine (senior military commander of Hezbollah and successor to Imad Mughniyeh in 2016)⁸ were all targets on Israel's high-profile assassination record, which to this moment has not led to even partial resolution of the issue. Often, new figures with even more hardline approaches have assumed their place.⁹

Targeted assassinations of leaders in militant organizations are often not considered a strategic solution for several key reasons:

1. *Decentralized Leadership Structures*: Despite differences in their roles and functions, many militia groups, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, have decentralized leadership frameworks. This allows them to rapidly replace leaders who are assassinated, maintaining operational continuity. For instance, in her book *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations*, Jenna Jordan found that in over 70 percent of cases reviewed, groups survived leadership decapitations due to their organizational resilience.¹⁰

2. *Enduring Ideologies*: The ideologies driving these organizations often remain intact despite the loss of leadership. Assassinations do not dismantle the ideological support systems that sustain these groups. As a result, their political and religious motivations persist, enabling them to continue their activities without significant disruption. This is especially true for organizations with strong grassroots support.¹¹

3. *Retaliatory Dynamics*: Targeted killings frequently lead to cycles of violence and retaliation. After the assassination of a leader, militant groups may escalate attacks against perceived enemies, leading to increased violence rather than resolution. This cycle can result in a more complex and prolonged conflict, undermining the initial objectives of the assassination strategy.¹²

4. *Limited Long-term Impact*: While assassinations may provide short-term tactical advantages, they often fail to address the broader strategic challenges posed by these groups. Factors such as funding, recruitment, and external support networks continue to operate independently of individual leaders. Consequently, the underlying capabilities of the organizations remain largely intact.¹³

The RAND Corporation study *How Terrorist Groups End* finds that if a group has the ability to replace its leadership and possesses a strong ideology, the assassination of its leaders has only a short-term effect unless the group has an absolute autocratic leadership and a weak, inflexible structure.¹⁴ For

8 "Al Arabiya investigates: Who really killed Hezbollah's Mustafa Badreddine?" Al Arabiya, March 8, 2017, <https://bit.ly/4dFG3Hw>.

9 Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 234.

10 Jordan, *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations*, 145 - 150.

11 Jordan, *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations*, 90 - 95.

12 Shapiro, Jacob. "Targeted Killing as a Counterterrorism Strategy: Assessing the Risks and Rewards." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2019): 337 - 355.

13 Jordan, *Leadership Decapitation: Strategic Targeting of Terrorist Organizations*, 112 - 115.

14 Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering alQa'ida* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 45.



instance, after the assassination of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda did not collapse; rather, it adapted by promoting new leaders and leveraging its decentralized structure, allowing it to persist and continue its operations globally.¹⁵ Similarly, in the case of Hezbollah, despite the assassination of key figures like Imad Mughniyeh in 2008, the organization successfully replaced them and maintained its operational capabilities, demonstrating resilience rooted in strong ideological commitment and grassroots support.¹⁶

Israel's assassination strategy is a tactical, short-term approach aimed at immediate threats, while Iran's Axis of Resistance is a long-term strategic framework designed to continuously challenge and destabilize Israel. Both strategies have had significant impact, but Israel's focus on individual targets contrasts with Iran's emphasis on fostering resilient networks of proxy forces. By operating through non-state actors, Iran forces Israel to confront threats on multiple fronts, often in prolonged, low-intensity conflicts that are hard to resolve through military means alone. This dynamic increases the complexity of Israel's security calculations, as these proxy groups have proven resilient despite Israeli military operations.

In essence, Iran's backing of these non-state actors enables it to challenge Israel indirectly, complicating the regional balance of power while enhancing its own strategic standing.¹⁷ Additionally, by supporting groups with shared anti-Israel sentiments, Iran enhances its regional influence while reducing the likelihood of direct retaliation. This strategy also allows Iran to sidestep accountability for actions carried out by its proxies, shielding it from immediate consequences while sustaining its regional ambitions.¹⁸

There is a more critical issue: The persistence of the underlying problem or challenge that the group's existence is based on and their efforts to resolve or address it. Popular support for such groups is also rooted in the continuation of unresolved problems. In such a scenario, the open case of a fundamental problem – whether ideological, historical, social, or political – cannot be simply closed through the assassination or imprisonment of individuals.

From the perspective of analysts like Thomas Katz, Iran's regional strategy can be characterized by its use of a network-based approach to exert influence and control over various non-state actors across the Middle East. This model leverages a decentralized system whereby Iran provides support to allied militias and organizations, enhancing their military and operational capabilities without direct state intervention.¹⁹

¹⁵ Peter Bergen, "Jihadist Terrorism 15 Years After 9/11," New America Foundation, September 8, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3BzgbzS>.

¹⁶ Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: The Hamas and Hezbollah Militants* (New York: Random House, 2009), 172.

¹⁷ Suzanne Maloney, *Iran's Political Economy since the Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 389 - 392.

¹⁸ Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, "Mowing the Grass: Israel's Strategy for Protracted Conflict," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 65 - 66.

¹⁹ Thomas Katz, *Iran's Network Strategy in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 45.



Katz emphasizes that this network model is effective because it allows Iran to maintain plausible deniability while expanding its reach. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), particularly through its Quds Force, plays a crucial role in training, advising, and supplying these groups, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and various militias in Iraq and Syria. This strategy not only enhances Iran's military presence but also builds a web of alliances that can be mobilized for various regional objectives, including countering Israeli influence and confronting US forces in the area.²⁰

Moreover, Iran's network approach has shown resilience and adaptability, allowing it to recover from setbacks, such as leadership losses within these groups. The interconnectedness of these factions means that they can continue operations and even strengthen their ideological underpinnings despite the loss of key figures. This is evident in the way groups have persisted and adapted following targeted assassinations, underscoring that Iran's influence is not solely tied to individual leaders but rather to a broader ideological commitment among the groups it supports.

Arian Tabatabai, an expert in Iranian security and foreign policy and senior policy advisor to the United States Department of Defense, notes that Iran's approach involves a complex mix of asymmetrical warfare, regional alliances, and proxy groups such as Hezbollah.²¹ The goal is to extend its influence while undermining Israel's regional standing. She argues that Iran's strategy is rooted in leveraging its non-state allies across the region to counterbalance Israel's military and technological advantages. By supporting groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, Iran aims to create pressure points around Israel's borders without directly engaging in conventional warfare. This indirect approach complicates Israel's security situation, leading to prolonged conflicts that are difficult to fully resolve through military means alone.

Tabatabai has also highlighted the role of the IRGC in such a strategy, particularly after the killing of General Qassem Soleimani, which initially seemed like a potential blow to Iran's regional network. However, the IRGC quickly adapted, demonstrating Iran's resilience in maintaining its broader objectives despite leadership decapitation attempts by adversaries like Israel and the US.²²

The strategy of "Leader Decapitation," or targeting the leadership of militant groups, is often viewed as a double-edged sword, especially in cases like Hezbollah under Hassan Nasrallah. While the death of a figurehead can cause short-term disruption and confusion within an organization, it does not guarantee the dismantling of the group or resolution of the underlying conflict. Several factors must be considered to understand why success in such a strategy is not guaranteed:

1. *Leadership Succession Systems:* Many groups, particularly those like Hezbollah, have established strong leadership succession protocols that allow them to quickly replace assassinated leaders. Hezbollah has a decentralized leadership structure and a strong system of governance that ensures

²⁰ Katz, *Iran's Network Strategy*, 56.

²¹ Ariane Tabatabai, *Iranian Security and Foreign Policy: Asymmetrical Warfare and Regional Alliances* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2020).

²² Tabatabai, *Iranian Security and Foreign Policy*.



operational continuity. This prevents the organization from being paralyzed by the loss of a single leader. Even after high-profile assassinations in the past, such as those of Imad Mughniyeh or Abbas al-Musawi, Hezbollah was able to maintain its activities and organizational integrity due to its robust internal structure. Thus, the death of Nasrallah might lead to the emergence of an even more radical or strategic figure, as seen in other instances.

2. *Popular Support and Grassroots Ties:* Hezbollah's foundation is rooted in strong popular support among Lebanon's Shia population. The group provides social services, education, healthcare, and other essential needs, making it a crucial part of the social fabric in southern Lebanon. Even if its leadership is decimated, its deep ties to the local populace mean that support for the group's mission and ideology would remain strong. Popular backing is essential in allowing groups to recover from leadership losses, as they can draw on widespread support to recruit new leaders and continue their operations.

3. *Ideological Appeal:* Groups like Hezbollah are driven by a strong ideological commitment that is not easily dismantled through the elimination of individual leaders. Hezbollah's ideology, rooted in resistance to Israel and support for Iran's regional agenda, is deeply embedded in the group's rank and file. Leaders may come and go, but the cause that drives the organization persists, often gaining more momentum when leaders are martyred. This is a key reason why Leader Decapitation is frequently ineffective; the organization's ideology sustains its operations beyond the loss of individual leaders.

4. *Persistence of Underlying Issues:* Most importantly, the continued existence of the problem that led to the group's formation ensures the group's survival even after leadership decapitations. In Hezbollah's case, its *raison d'être* revolves around resistance to Israeli occupation and influence in Lebanon. As long as these issues remain unresolved, the group will likely continue to function, regardless of how many leaders are targeted and killed. Assassinating Nasrallah or other key figures may temporarily weaken the group but will not resolve the underlying political, social, and territorial issues that sustain its existence. Conversely, the assassination could intensify the group's resolve and spur retaliatory violence, escalating the conflict further.

5. *International and Regional Support:* Hezbollah enjoys significant backing from Iran, both financially and militarily. This external support network ensures that even if the group loses leaders, it will continue to receive the resources needed to recover and reassert itself. Iran's support for Hezbollah is part of its broader strategy to project influence in the Middle East, particularly as a counterbalance to Israel and Saudi Arabia. As long as this support persists, Hezbollah's operational capacity will remain intact.²³

The intense bombing of Beirut about one week after assassination of Nasrallah aimed at assassinating Hashem Safieddine, a key Hezbollah leadership candidate, sends a clear message to those who believe that decapitating leaders will resolve the conflict. Whether or not the assassination attempt

23 Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Georgetown University Press, 2013).



succeeded, the fact remains that if targeting leaders were truly effective, it would have worked after the assassination of Nasrallah. Neither has Nasrallah's killing put a stop, so far at least, to Hezbollah's resistance against Israel. Yet this ineffective cycle persists.

In conclusion, while Israel may consider the assassination of Nasrallah a tactical victory, it is unlikely to result in the strategic defeat of Hezbollah. The group's decentralized leadership, strong ideological base, popular support, and backing from regional powers like Iran suggest that it would survive, and potentially become even more radicalized, following the loss of its leader. Therefore, Leader Decapitation in this context is a limited strategy that does not address the root causes of the conflict, which must be resolved through broader diplomatic and political efforts.