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# After Assassinating Nasrallah, Will Israel Escalate Further?

Unit for Political Studies

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### Unit for Political Studies

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On the evening of 27 September, Israel launched one of its biggest attacks on Lebanon since it stepped up operations its northern front. The assault targeted Hezbollah's central command in Beirut's Dahiyeh suburb with intensive airstrikes that levelled six residential towers and assassinated Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. The organization confirmed his killing in a statement the following day.<sup>1</sup> The strikes also killed other Hezbollah leaders, the deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the commander of the Islamic Republic's Quds Force in Lebanon, along with an unknown number of civilians.

Israeli F-15I jets dropped over eighty "bunker buster" bombs, each weighing approximately a ton, on the row of buildings, completely destroying them to ensure there were no survivors. Taking advantage of the confusion it had caused in its attack on Hezbollah's command and control system, Israel then launched a series of raids on multiple districts across Lebanon, displacing thousands of civilians.

These operations, and Nasrallah's assassination, represent the most significant development so far in Israel's ongoing escalation against Lebanon, which began in July and culminated on 23 September in the launch of what Israel dubbed Operation "Arrows of the North".<sup>2</sup> This may be a precursor to Israel launching a wider war, especially given the weak Arab, regional, and international pushback against its ongoing onslaught in Gaza and Lebanon.

## Months of Gradual Escalation

The day after Hamas launched Operation "Al-Aqsa Flood" against Israel's Gaza Division and other military sites and surrounding settlements last October, Hezbollah announced it too had opened a support front against Israel. Since then, both Israel and Hezbollah had adhered to specific rules of engagement, exchanging shellfire on both sides of the border, to a depth of 5 - 10 kilometres, and displacing more than 60,000 Israelis and about 110,000 Lebanese on their respective sides of the border.

Although Israel has since razed entire villages to the ground along the Lebanese border and killed many Hezbollah members and commanders, the rules of engagement have nonetheless remained in place, with a few exceptions, including Israel's assassination of Hamas Deputy Political Chief, Saleh al-Aroui, also in Dahiyeh, in January 2024. During that period, Israel has also been wary of widening its front with Lebanon, while simultaneously fighting Hamas in Gaza and keeping a substantial share of its forces – no fewer than three military divisions – in the West Bank, which is also on the brink of going up in flames. But Israel had been willing to escalate further, knowing that Hezbollah was unwilling to enter into a full-scale war.

This situation began to change in July, when a rocket attack that killed 10 children at a school in the Druze village of Majdal Shams in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, for which Hezbollah vehemently

<sup>1</sup> "Hezbollah announces Martyrdom of Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 28/9/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zPbR>.

<sup>2</sup> "The occupation calls its aggression on Lebanon 'Arrows of the North', X, *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 23/9/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zP2C>.



denied responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Israel nonetheless exploited this tragedy to change the rules of engagement and radically alter the regional balance of power. Israel would have taken this decision regardless of the immediate justification. Accordingly, later that month, Israel targeted Hezbollah's military commander, Fuad Shukr, in Dahiyeh, the first in a series of assassinations that included the party's top leaders and most members of its Jihad Council. It also assassinated Hamas' Political Chief Ismail Haniyeh in July, while he was in Tehran to attend the inauguration of Iran's new president, Masoud Pezeshkian,<sup>4</sup> and foiled what it claimed were preparations for Hezbollah's response to Shukr's assassination by extensively bombing rocket launchers in south Lebanon.

Israel has done everything in its power to delegitimize and stifle global opposition to this war and remove any constraints on its military conduct. Nor has such opposition managed to raise the modest price Israel pays to implement its ready-made plans to expand illegal settlements and strike down any Palestinian resistance in the West Bank. By exploiting the Gaza battleground, it has been able to move forward in implementing the plan it had also prepared for Lebanon. Israel now seeks to resolve its battle with Hezbollah for good, or at least force the movement to back down over Gaza, while changing the rules of engagement on its northern border so Hezbollah can no longer strike northern Israeli settlements.

In practical terms, this war began on 17 September, when Israel killed dozens and wounded thousands by blowing up booby-trapped communications devices in a widely condemned terrorist operation that resulted in many civilian casualties and paralysed Hezbollah's entire communications network.<sup>5</sup> Hezbollah had turned to such low-tech devices after realising that mobile phone communications were vulnerable to Israeli hacking operations to locate and target its leaders and members. The day after the pager attack, Israel staged a similar attack against Hezbollah walkie-talkies. The communication device attacks constituted the largest security breach Hezbollah had suffered since its inception in the early 1980s and served as a prelude to wider Israeli escalation. On 20 September, Israel assassinated Ibrahim Aqil, the party's special operations commander and a member of its Jihad Council who had taken over Shukr's responsibilities, along with leaders of Hezbollah's elite Radwan unit.

Israel justified its escalation as a measure aimed at preventing a repeat of the 7 October attacks by Hamas, but across its border with Lebanon. In reality however, it was striking Hezbollah's communications network and chain of command to provoke the Lebanese movement into a full-scale war. It should have been clear what Israel was planning. However, Hezbollah made no changes to its strategy, remaining determined to avoid a regional conflict even after Israel had practically declared war. The organization has not deployed the full force of its missile arsenal so far, and Israel may have destroyed some of that arsenal before it could be used. Meanwhile, "Arrows of the North"

<sup>3</sup> "Unknown missile... 7 questions about the Majdal Shams incident," *Al Jazeera*, 28/7/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOPE>.

<sup>4</sup> "Regional War or the Last Chance for a Ceasefire? Likely Outcomes of the Assassination of Ismael Haniyeh", Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 1/8/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zPaQ>.

<sup>5</sup> "Israel Signals Escalation with Attacks on Hezbollah Communications Devices", Situation Assessment, *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*, 22/9/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zP8A>.



has been the most violent air campaign Lebanon has witnessed since 2006, hitting areas across the country from the south right up to the northern border crossings with Syria in. The operation peaked on 27 September with the assassination of Nasrallah and the large-scale bombing campaign of Dahiye and other areas across the country.

## Israel's Timing and Objectives

Since the end of July 2024, Israel has clearly shifted the centre of gravity of its military operations from the Gaza Strip towards the north. Initially, the main goal appears to have been to exert greater pressure on Hezbollah to choose between disengaging from the Gaza front or engaging in all-out war. Israel also set other conditions for a ceasefire, including the withdrawal of Hezbollah military units, especially the Radwan forces, north of the Litani River, as per Security Council Resolution 1701 which formally ended the July 2006 war. Such a move could eventually lead to a long-term ceasefire, and perhaps an agreement to demarcate the land border with Lebanon, similar to the 2022 agreement demarcating the maritime border.

Perhaps by demonstrating from the beginning that it was not interested in open warfare with Israel, for domestic and regional reasons, Hezbollah inadvertently encouraged Israel to continue escalating. The movement appears to have failed to grasp just how serious Israel was about launching a full-scale war. Prime Minister Netanyahu may have decided to seize the opportunity to develop Israel's objectives, to the point of using war to bring about a strategic change in the regional balance of power. According to Chief of General Staff Herzl Halevi, Israel had been "waiting for this opportunity for years" to settle scores with its various adversaries and transform the regional landscape to its advantage.<sup>6</sup> It found the pretext for this in 7 October and the temporary evacuation of some 60,000 of its citizens from the north.

On 17 September, the Israeli security cabinet announced that it had decided to add the return of the residents of the north to the previously defined war objectives, a list that already includes eliminating Hamas, freeing prisoners, and preventing the Gaza Strip from posing any future threat to Israel. With this objective in mind, it unleashed a comprehensive military campaign in Lebanon. However, Netanyahu has said that nothing short of a "radical change" on the border with Lebanon will enable Israelis to return to the north.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Defence Minister Yoav Galant has declared that "the only way to return the residents of the north to their homes is through military action".<sup>8</sup>

It is important to acknowledge the role of Hezbollah's "support front" in keeping up morale in the midst of helplessness, silence, sectarian incitement, and even the complicity of some Arab states.

<sup>6</sup> "Israel's Chief of General Staff: 'We have been waiting for this Opportunity for Years'", *Sarajevo Times*, 27/9/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOqp>.

<sup>7</sup> "Israel's Netanyahu demands 'radical change' on border with Lebanon", *Middle East Monitor*, 17/9/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOWP>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



Meanwhile, Israel continues in its genocidal campaign and outright rejects any ceasefire, not the behaviour of a defeated party. Thus, instead of focusing on Israel's failures in Gaza, exaggerating the "victories" of the resistance, as well as the military impact of the missiles fired from Lebanon and Yemen – often celebrated whether or not they hit their targets – blinds one to the fact that Israel sees current developments as an opportunity for it to implement its plans in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon.

Several events have confirmed Israel's impression that Iran is in a fragile domestic and regional position, and that it would abandon Hezbollah in the case of a full-scale war. The most significant such indication was Iran's reticence to respond to the Haniyeh's assassination in Tehran. Furthermore, new Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has made statements suggesting that Iran is not keen on a confrontation with Israel, and that it seeks to negotiate with the West to resolve the nuclear crisis.<sup>9</sup> Israel's desire to persist in its campaign against Hezbollah was reinforced by the group's weak response to the killing of Shukur, then its highest-ranking military official. Nasrallah himself indicated that the response to Shukur's assassination had been concluded with a strike against northern Israel and urged Lebanese residents of the border villages to return to their homes. Showing this strike to be merely symbolic, Israel denied Hezbollah's claim that its missiles had hit the Gilot base, which houses intelligence and surveillance Unit 8200.<sup>10</sup>

This seems to have reinforced Israel's impression that the Lebanese organization, which has suffered major blows in recent weeks, was in a weak position and keen to avoid confrontation at all costs. This encouraged the Israeli military to move forward with its targeting of Hezbollah leaders, all the way up the chain of command, up to the assassination of Nasrallah. It has become clear in the last two months that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government feel free to act unchecked. The feeble regional and international response to its genocide in Gaza over the past year, the ineffectiveness of mass protests in Israel calling for a ceasefire in order to secure the release of hostages in Gaza, and the preoccupation of its US backers with the presidential elections scheduled in November, have only bolstered Israeli confidence. The Israeli government has exploited these factors to press on with its strategy despite warnings about the risk of a large-scale regional war, launching a large-scale military operation against Hezbollah that even risks turning Lebanon into another Gaza.

Nasrallah's speech on 19 September, the day after the communications devices were blown up, stressed that Israeli residents of northern towns would not return to their homes before a ceasefire in Gaza. It is possible that this assertion prompted Israel to take the decision to target him personally. The opportunity came on 27 September. Israel knew about the meeting that he would attend in Dahiye, just as it had known about other fatal leadership meetings, and monitored his arrival.

<sup>9</sup> "Iran frankly confirms that it is about to revive diplomacy with the West," *MD East News Arabic*, 25/9/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOZG>.

<sup>10</sup> "Speech by the Secretary-General of Lebanese Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, regarding the response to the assassination of Fuad Shukur," *Al Jazeera*, YouTube, 25/8/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOys>; "Israel and Hezbollah: A new escalation or is the 'clash' over?", *Deutsche Welle Arabic*, 25/8/2024, accessed on 29/9/2024, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9zOno>.



Netanyahu, who issued the assassination order whilst in New York to address the United Nations, was on standby so that Israel would not miss any opportunity to assassinate Nasrallah.

## Implications of Nasrallah's Assassination

There is no doubt that the attack on Hezbollah's central command and the assassination of its Secretary-General are the biggest blow the party has suffered since its founding in 1982. The personality of Hassan Nasrallah extends far beyond his position as Hezbollah's leader: even his opponents acknowledge that he is also a charismatic and popular figure with sweeping regional influence. After IRGC Quds Force leader Qasem Soleimani was killed in 2020, Nasrallah had become the de facto director of operations for the "Axis of Resistance". He was assassinated in a battle over the Palestinian cause, one that most Arabs feel is their own. Nor is his killing without precedent: Hezbollah overcame the assassination of its former Secretary-General Abbas al-Musawi in 1992. So, although unlikely to lead to the party's disintegration, Nasrallah's departure from Lebanese and regional affairs will have major repercussions for Hezbollah, Lebanon, and the region.

Hezbollah should have spent more time analysing developments since the 2006 war, an act of resistance and political victory which it erroneously saw as a military victory. Israel, for its part, learned the lessons of 2006 and developed the Iron Dome anti-missile system to confront Hamas, Hezbollah, and other threats. It spent time collecting intelligence, infiltrating Hezbollah, and developing technology to track its leadership and penetrate its networks with surveillance, facial and voice recognition tools, and so on. In the meantime however, Hezbollah became distracted by a morally unjustified intervention in Syria that, from a military perspective, was primitive and did not help develop its military capabilities. Furthermore, this intervention divided Arab public opinion, placing many in opposition to Hezbollah which had previously enjoyed widespread Arab public support despite official hostility. By entering into operations with the Syrian and Iranian regimes, Hezbollah exposed itself to forces that were themselves infiltrated. Consequently, the rules of this war have been completely different from the 2006 war in which, despite falling short of a military victory, Hezbollah pushed back the Israeli invaders with heroic resistance. Illusions of strength and overconfidence are partly to blame for the current shock.

Hezbollah is likely to be preoccupied in the coming days with reorganizing itself and rebuilding its leadership structure, in addition to addressing multiple security breaches. Meanwhile, Israel will continue its onslaught in Lebanon, impose a siege on Beirut's airport and Lebanese ports and land crossings, and work to exhaust Hezbollah. It will also seek to weaken Hezbollah's domestic position in Lebanon, taking advantage of the momentum of its attack on Dahiyeh.

However, Israel will also wait for Hezbollah and Iran's response to its recent aggression, which will determine the course of the current conflict. If Iran chooses not to respond, as it did when Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in Tehran, it risks leaving Hezbollah to face Israel alone. Israel, which





considers Hezbollah the most dangerous military threat it faces due to its proximity and the size of its missile arsenal, will see this as an opportunity to weaken the group's military capabilities further. Iran's failure to respond will also encourage Israel, at a later stage, to attack the Islamic Republic's nuclear facilities and missile programs, because weakening Hamas and Hezbollah would strip Iran of the deterrents it has worked to strengthen against Israel in recent decades, leaving the country completely exposed. Moreover, an Iranian hesitation to respond would chip away further at the confidence of its allies, which effectively means dismantling the axis of resistance and pushing Iran to withdraw into itself – Israel's ultimate goal.

## Conclusion

The assassination of its Secretary-General in an attack on its central command constitutes a major blow to Hezbollah. Netanyahu will seek to capitalize on this victory to compensate for his failures in Gaza, a year into a genocidal war that has failed to achieve any of its stated goals. The Israeli prime minister is likely to continue building on the current momentum to try to generate political gains against both opponents and allies within his government coalition, by boosting his popularity with the public. In the coming days, he will continue layering pressure on Hezbollah to choose between disengaging from the Gaza front, surrender and withdrawing to the north of the Litani River, or continuing to fight.

The Israeli military will also continue to direct blows at Hezbollah to weaken the organization, which may entail a limited ground operation to establish a buffer zone on the border with Lebanon. But such a step may amount to Hezbollah dragging Netanyahu to exactly where it wants him, and to where the organization is strongest: fighting in its own heartland.

Whatever the case, the ongoing battles in Gaza and Lebanon threaten to reshape the regional landscape, and will have major consequences for Israel.