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Israel Signals Escalation with Attacks on Hezbollah Communications Devices

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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On Sunday morning, Hezbollah launched dozens of missiles at the Ramat David base, near Haifa, in response to repeated Israeli attacks across Lebanon last week. Israel conducted airstrikes on the Southern Dahiyeh neighbourhood of Beirut on 20 September, killing and wounding dozens. This came just days after a large-scale terrorist operation targeted communications devices, including pagers and wireless devices, widely used by Hezbollah on 17 and 18 September, causing explosions that killed 39 people and injured thousands.¹ Hezbollah accused Israel of orchestrating the attack, which hit multiple locations and ignited nationwide chaos, while Israel indicated a "new phase" of the conflict that could be a prelude to a broader and more violent escalation.

The Explosions

The wave of bombings targeting pagers used by Hezbollah members began almost simultaneously in Lebanon and Syria on the afternoon of 17 September.² The group had decided to switch to using pagers as a safer means of communication between its members and fighters because they do not support GPS technology. They chose pagers as an alternative to mobile phones, which members were banned from using in light of Israel's hacking operations. Hundreds of Hezbollah members and leaders have been targeted by Israel since the conflict between the two parties began on 8 October 2023, as part of what Hezbollah calls the "Gaza Support Front." The following day, a wave of more violent explosions, albeit fewer in number, targeted handheld wireless communication devices used by Hezbollah members and field leaders.³

Although Israel has not claimed responsibility for the bombings, security and media sources and Israeli officials have hinted that the Israeli army, in cooperation with Mossad, are behind the operation. Many international diplomats and human rights organizations have condemned the operation as a random and reprehensible act that violates accepted rules of war.⁴ For Hezbollah, the incident represents the biggest security breach since its establishment in the early 1980s, and has increased fears about expanding the war, especially after the Secretary-General of Hezbollah vowed to respond to this "massacre" committed by Israel.⁵

A Complex Security Operation

Numerous sources indicate that a batch of AR-924 pagers were brought into Lebanon earlier this year after Hezbollah banned the use of mobile phones within its combat groups and personnel due

1 "Al-Abyad Presents Total Death Toll for the Two Days of Enemy Security Breach: 37 Martyrs and 2931 Wounded", Ministry of Public Health – Lebanese Republic, 19/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/zu7v0>

2 "Pager Explosions... What Happened in Lebanon? 8 Points Explaining the Incident", *Al Jazeera Net*, 17/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/7v3woh>

3 "Walkie-talkies Yesterday, Fridges Tomorrow? Lebanon Residents Face New Fears of Exploding Devices," *The Economic Times*, 19/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/nhervo>

4 "Walkie-talkie Blasts: Attacks on Hezbollah Kill 20 As Israel Says Military Focus Shifting North," *The Guardian*, 18/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/p287y>

5 Speech of the Secretary-General of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, Al Jazeera Channel, YouTube, 9/19/2024, viewed on 9/22/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/imuzpx>



to their vulnerability to Israeli hacking operations. The founder of the Taiwanese company Gold Apollo,⁶ which manufactures the devices, denied that his company manufactured the pagers used in the explosions, noting that they were manufactured in Europe by BAC Consulting KFT,⁷ a Hungarian company authorized to use the Gold Apollo brand to produce pagers in some areas.⁸ The radios that were targeted the following day (September 18) were photographed with stickers bearing the logo of the Japanese company ICOM, which specializes in manufacturing radio equipment.⁹ The company, which manufactures its radios in Japan, could not confirm whether it shipped the radios that exploded in Lebanon, as it stopped producing this model 10 years ago.¹⁰ At the same time, it emerged that Bulgarian security agencies are investigating the role of a company registered under the name Nortra Global, based in Sofia, which may have played a role in selling the pagers to Hezbollah.

The *New York Times* revealed that the Hungarian company BAC Consulting, linked to pager explosions in Lebanon, was likely nothing more than an Israeli front, linked to at least two other fictitious companies created to hide the true identity of the parties behind the manufacture of the pagers. According to the Times the Hungarian company was attracting different customers, with a special focus on Hezbollah, whose pager deal was manufactured separately, containing a battery connected to a quantity of explosives planted in the devices. The pagers were initially shipped to Lebanon in small numbers in the summer of 2023 –before the Israeli war on Gaza. However, after Hezbollah and its allies realized that mobile phone communication and even encrypted messages were no longer safe the demand for pagers increased. Hezbollah Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, warned his members in a speech on 13 February that their phones were more dangerous than Israel's spies. Accordingly, thousands of pagers arrived in Lebanon during the summer and were distributed to Hezbollah members and allies as a precaution.¹¹

The Centre of Gravity Shifts North

Two main scenarios have the potential to explain the timing of the explosions of the Hezbollah communications devices. The first is that Israel decided to blow up the devices urgently on 17 September when Hezbollah security agencies began to have doubts about them in order not to lose the opportunity, even though the booby-traps were originally prepared to paralyse Hezbollah's

⁶ "What We Know about the Deadly Pager Blasts in Lebanon," *Reuters*, 18/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/avk4ro>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Lebanon Reels As more Devices Explode, Casualties Rise," *The Washington Post*, 18/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/09pzqy> However, Hungarian government spokesman Zoltan Kovács stated that "the pagers delivered to Hezbollah never entered Hungary." He also revealed that BAC Consulting acted only as an intermediary and was not involved in the handling of the devices. Kovács also stated on social media that the Hungarian National Security Service is cooperating with international partners to investigate the matter. See: "Walkie-talkies Yesterday, Fridges Tomorrow?"

⁹ "Japan's Icom Investigating Radio Devices Carrying Its Logo after Lebanon Blasts," *Reuters*, 19/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/exmjw>

¹⁰ Icom, which is listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange, said it will release updated information on its website as soon as it becomes available. The Osaka-based company, which has offices in several other countries including the United States, Germany, and China, said its products for overseas markets are sold exclusively through authorized distributors and exports are inspected in accordance with Japan's trade security oversight regulations. The company has previously warned of counterfeit versions of its devices on the market, especially discontinued models. The company previously said production of the IC-V82 model had been phased out in 2014.

¹¹ "How Israel Built a Modern-Day Trojan Horse: Exploding Pagers," *The New York Times*, 18/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/fnn9p>



command and control system on the eve of a potential major attack on Lebanon.¹² This may explain why the explosions took place just one day after US envoy Amos Hochstein, who is responsible for the negotiations between Lebanon and Israel, met with both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. The visit was a fresh attempt by the Biden administration to prevent a major escalation between Israel and Hezbollah that could turn into a large-scale regional war, just a few weeks before a decisive presidential election.

However, that Hezbollah was continuing to distribute pagers even a few days before the bombing, according to various media sources, suggests another scenario. That is, Israel deliberately blew up Hezbollah's communication devices at this time to force it to submit to the pressures exerted by the Israelis through Hochstein, to disengage the Lebanese front from the Gaza front.¹³ The Israeli security cabinet has made the return of settlers to the north a primary war goal.¹⁴ On the eve of this operation, unprecedented in form and scale, the Minister of War, Galant, and Netanyahu raced to issue statements talking about moving the military centre of gravity northward and returning settlers.¹⁵ These statements were echoed in transfer of the 98th Division from the Gaza Strip to the border with Lebanon to join the formations of the 36th Division, which has been stationed in the north facing Hezbollah since the war on Gaza began almost a year ago.¹⁶

Implications of the Attacks

Since the outbreak of the war on Gaza, and Hezbollah's decision to open a front to support the Palestinian resistance factions, the confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel has remained within the rules of engagement. It has mostly been concentrated on both sides of the border at a depth of 5 - 10 km. This is despite violations committed by Israel deep inside Lebanon, such as the assassination of the deputy head of the Hamas Politburo, Saleh al-Aroui, in the southern suburbs of Beirut in January 2024. However, with the recent decline in the intensity of military operations in Gaza, Israel has begun to escalate significantly in the north, where Israeli bombing has targeted Hezbollah sites throughout Lebanon, including its strongholds in Baalbek, the Beqaa valley, Hermel and elsewhere, leading to the assassination of the group's military commander, Fuad Shukur, in Haret Hreik, Beirut, in late July.

Israel is clearly shifting its focus to the Lebanese front, with the aim of imposing new rules of engagement on Hezbollah, and bringing about a profound change on the border security landscape, after its military capabilities were weakened and it had to remove its forces beyond the Litani River. Moreover, it seeks to

¹² "Use It or Lose It' – Israel Launched Attack on Lebanon Amid Fears of Being Exposed," *The Palestine chronicle*, 18/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/7c1ie>

¹³ Itamar Eichner, "Hochstein Visits Israel Amid Growing Calls for War with Hezbollah," *Ynetnews*, 16/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/hgs63f>

¹⁴ "Lebanon Reels as more Devices Explode, Casualties Rise."

¹⁵ James Mackenzie, "Israeli PM Netanyahu Says We will Return Residents of the North to their Homes," *Reuters*, 18/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/kh1ez>

¹⁶ Emanuel Fabian, "Amid Heightened Tensions with Hezbollah, IDF Deploys 98th Division to Northern Israel," *The Times of Israel*, 18/9/2024, accessed on 22/9/2024, at: <https://n9.cl/gg1ch8>



apply pressure on Lebanon to turn the page on the conflict over border issues by forcing it to demarcate the land border, following an agreement to demarcate the maritime border in 2022. The explosions that struck Hezbollah's communications network indicate that Netanyahu's government is now ready to open battle the group in Lebanon after inflicting widespread destruction on Gaza.

Early on, it was clear that Israel was avoiding opening a front with Hezbollah in the north, while it was embroiled in its genocide in Gaza. It allocated three military divisions to control the situation in the West Bank, which was threatening to explode due to the occupation's policies and violent settler practices. Israel could not have managed opening a Lebanese front at the same time, due to the lack of the necessary human resources and military capabilities. Hezbollah was also trying to avoid a large-scale war, as is evident from its behaviour and responses, due to domestic and regional considerations. Realizing this, Israel has now unleashed a plan of action that will bring about the escalation it had been avoiding.

At the present stage, Israeli leaders estimate that they can talk about returning the residents of the north to their areas as a primary goal of the war. This means that the possibility of escalation on the front with Lebanon has become likely, in regional and international conditions that are favourable to Israel. The weakness of President Joe Biden and his administration's preoccupation with the presidential elections scheduled for 5 November 2024 are especially pertinent.

In a speech he gave on 19 September, Nasrallah's response to this goal directly challenged it. He asserted that the settlers will not return to the northern towns, while Hezbollah-allied media presented this response as a failure of the new war goal that Netanyahu had set and promised to implement. The question of the Israel response remains open.

Conclusion

Although the Israeli attack on Hezbollah's communications network does not represent a strategic change in the balance of power with the group, which still possesses a large stockpile of missiles capable of causing widespread destruction in Israel, the breach is a major blow to the party's communications system and security apparatus. Determining the extent of the breach and reparations will be time-consuming. Moreover, the operation has served as a test for Hezbollah. If it avoids carrying out a response commensurate with what its Secretary-General referred to, in his speech on 19 September, as an unprecedented security blow to Lebanon and the resistance, it opens the door to further Israeli escalation and unrestrained violation of Lebanon. This was clear from the raid carried out by Israel targeting a meeting of Hezbollah leaders in southern Beirut on 20 September, which led to the killing of several leaders, most notably Ibrahim Aqil, the party's special operations commander. If Nasrallah responds as he has threatened, he will risk entering into a late military confrontation with Israel, which now seems free to act without restraint in Lebanon. But more importantly, in the current war, Israel has gone beyond every norm of warfare in searching for and killing opponents, or spreading terror, without care for consequence, marking a dangerous new phase in conventional warfare and raising many questions for the future.