

Will Hezbollah strike back? It depends

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 17.09.2024

From supermarket lines in Beirut's Dahieh district to various locations in southern Lebanon, the Beqaa Valley, and even Syria, chaos erupted as at least 2,800 Hezbollah operatives were struck by explosions in their organization-supplied communication devices. The group now faces the daunting task of initiating three simultaneous processes.

First, Hezbollah must investigate the incident and assess its scope, focusing on casualties among both its members and civilians in the vicinity. Second, an intelligence inquiry will attempt to uncover how the perpetrator managed to infiltrate these devices into the organization's ranks and why Hezbollah failed to detect the impending threat. Third, the group will need to consider a retaliatory operation to restore Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's standing and mitigate the severe blow to the organization's image, while evaluating the extent of casualties and injuries that will become clearer in the coming days.

Hezbollah has blamed Israel for the attack. In the current conflict, one of the longest in its history (alongside the War of Attrition), Israel finds itself engaged in a type of warfare it has not previously experienced against Hezbollah. The group strikes Israel daily with various missile and drone attacks and has managed to establish a buffer zone within Israeli territory. However, if Israel is indeed behind this attack on Hezbollah, Nasrallah and the group's leadership will need to reassess their war strategy.

Nasrallah and senior Hezbollah officials have repeatedly stated that they will only cease fire when Israel agrees to end the war in Gaza. Their sole objective is to assist Hamas by engaging in activities designed to wear down Israel and force it to keep a significant portion of the IDF's military power on the northern front, maintaining the possibility of escalation into a full-scale war against Hezbollah.

It is highly doubtful that this bold operation will deter Nasrallah and his lieutenants from continuing their current strategy. Apart from the elimination of Hezbollah's Chief of Staff, Wissam Tawil, Nasrallah has not paid a high enough price to reconsider his course in the war. In his view, criticism from Lebanese

state actors regarding Lebanon's involvement in the conflict is insignificant, and he can continue the current war pattern for years to come, thanks to Iran's strategic backing and his strong hold on Lebanon's Shiite community, which forms Hezbollah's social base. Israel's avoidance of attacking Lebanese state infrastructure also allows Nasrallah to continue the war effort without much difficulty.

However, once the full extent of the damage suffered by Hezbollah becomes clear in the near future, the group's leadership will need to recalculate its approach to the war. The primary factor influencing the organization's conduct will likely be the number of casualties, both among Hezbollah operatives and civilians. It appears that the US forces deployed in the area due to tensions between Iran and Israel will not affect Nasrallah's considerations, given the absence of a tangible American threat against Hezbollah.

While Nasrallah is not interested in entering a full-scale war against Israel, he will certainly seek severe retaliation. The Shin Bet revealed today that it thwarted a Hezbollah plot aimed at targeting a former senior Israeli security figure in the coming days using a remotely detonated Claymore mine. This is similar to the method Hezbollah employed in Tel Aviv's Yarkon Park in September 2023, which, according to the Shin Bet, was aimed at a senior Israeli official but ended without casualties. This information points to dangerous terrorist capabilities that Hezbollah has acquired, which Nasrallah can use in planning his response.

Israel has already demonstrated its ability to thwart Hezbollah's revenge plans in the August 25 attack. Now, it must further hone its intelligence capabilities against Hezbollah and act to preemptively foil Nasrallah's retaliatory response. It seems that both sides are still not ready to be dragged into a full-scale war due to mutual deterrence, but Israel is willing to take risks in an attempt to throw Hezbollah off balance and make it pay a heavy price for its participation in the conflict.

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