

The Tragedy behind Israel's Ostensible Triumph

by Riccardo Alcaro

The killing by Israel of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, the Islamist Shia militia that controls South Lebanon, may well go down in history as the harbinger of a seismic change in the balance of power in the Levant and arguably the whole Middle East.

Iran's ensuing retaliatory missile strike makes war with Israel all but inevitable, though its magnitude remains uncertain. Part of it will be fought with missiles, rockets and drones flying across the sky between the two arch-enemies. Part of it will be fought across the region, possibly wherever Iran's axis of resistance – the network of pro-Iran armed groups spanning Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Yemen is based. Most of it will likely be fought in Lebanon, home to Hezbollah, whose demise – or even severe weakening – would result in Iran's influence in the Levant being curtailed.

While Israel's onslaught on Hezbollah has tilted the balance of power heavily in its favour, it is too early to make

predictions – after all, the Middle East has disrupted expectations time and time again in the past. It is still possible though to make some considerations and discuss a few open questions.

Hezbollah mauled

The first consideration concerns the Israeli government's resolve to inflict massive damage on Iran and its allies. Of these, Hezbollah is by far the most important.¹ The relationship with Iran dates back to the early 1980s, when Hezbollah was formed in reaction to the brutal Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Hezbollah is the best-armed of the pro-Iranian militias – it claims to have a hundred thousand fighters (albeit forty-fifty thousand is probably closer to reality) and was estimated to have around 120-200 thousand rockets and

¹ Clayton Thomas and Jim Zanotti, "Lebanese Hezbollah", in *CRS Reports*, No. IF10703 (last updated on 20 September 2024), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/details?prodcode=IF10703>.

Riccardo Alcaro is Research Coordinator and Head of the Global Actors Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

short-range missiles.² Along with the Houthis in Yemen, it is the most battle-hardened, having resisted another Israeli invasion of Lebanon in August 2006 and then supported the Syrian regime for years in its bloody repression of rebel groups. Above all, Hezbollah's entrenchment just north of the border allowed Iran to exert indirect pressure and deterrence on Israel.

No more. Hezbollah's deterrence capacity has proven illusory as in the last two months Israel has eliminated almost all of its leadership, hit thousands of military targets (essentially depots or missile launching sites) and maimed thousands of militiamen (and civilians) by turning pagers and walkie-talkies into booby traps.³ Add to this the assassination of Hamas's political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in mid-summer, and the picture is one of a dazed Iran. Acting upon a hyper-extensive interpretation of its right to self-defence, Israel has no qualms about striking its enemies even if this means indiscriminate massacres of civilians, as has been the case in Gaza (41,600 dead, including 16,500 children, and 1.9 million displaced)⁴ and now

also in Lebanon (over one thousand dead and one million displaced in just over a week).⁵

Iran in a bind

A second consideration concerns Iran's response. Given the centrality of the axis of resistance for Iran's regional policy, the decimation of Hamas and especially the severe weakening of Hezbollah implies a substantial reduction of Iranian influence in the Levant. Many have wondered in recent months why the Islamic Republic, which in April went so far as to launch a – largely choreographed and therefore demonstrative – missile and drone attack against Israel in response to the Israeli bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus,⁶ remained inactive throughout the summer. Iran's new president, the reformist Masoud Pezeshkian, has claimed that the United States held Iran back with the promise that a ceasefire in Gaza was in the making.⁷ Another hypothesis was that

² Seth G. Jones et al., "The Coming Conflict with Hezbollah", in *CSIS Briefs*, March 2024, <https://www.csis.org/node/109857>.

³ Raya Jalabi, "'Hizbollah Is Voiceless': Lebanon's Most Powerful Force Reels from Loss of Leader", in *Financial Times*, 30 September 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/d30101b4-f233-440e-a54a-14801d3274c0>; Edward Wong, Julian E. Barnes and Eric Schmitt, "Israel Has Destroyed Half of Hezbollah's Arsenal, U.S. and Israeli Officials Say", in *The New York Times*, 2 October 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/01/us/politics/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-airstrikes.html>.

⁴ AJLabs, "Israel-Gaza War in Maps and Charts: Live Tracker", in *Al Jazeera*, last updated on 30 September 2024, <https://aje.io/pnauxp>;

UN Population Fund, *Occupied Palestinian Territory*, last updated on 3 September 2024, <https://www.unfpa.org/occupied-palestinian-territory>.

⁵ James Shotter and Raya Jalabi, "Israeli Troops Move into Lebanon", in *Financial Times*, 1 October 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/a7da45e1-c32d-4d98-903d-214cfae842f0>; Daniel Johnson, "Lebanon Crisis: Over One Million People Flee Strikes Amid Invasion Fears", in *UN News*, 30 September 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/09/1155141>.

⁶ Maziar Motamedi, "'True Promise': Why and How Did Iran Launch a Historic Attack on Israel?", in *Al Jazeera*, 14 April 2024, <https://aje.io/ofw1x8>.

⁷ "Iranian President Slams US, Europe's 'False Promises' on Ceasefire", in *Hürriyet Daily News*, 30 September 2024, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/iranian-president-slams-us-europes-false-promises-on->

Iran's leadership had opted for 'strategic patience', that is, avoid escalation and let the indiscriminate killings in Gaza but also in the West Bank (and Lebanon) contribute to creating an international front that would thwart Israel. Either way, the strategy clearly did not work.

In the end, Iran cast the die and directly attacked Israel with a barrage of 180 ballistic missiles. This time around, there was no preliminary communication. The attack was clearly designed to harm, although it was limited in size and targeted at military and intelligence sites only. Israel has claimed to have intercepted most of it (with critical US support), although there is much uncertainty as to its impact.⁸ Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed revenge, and US officials have echoed that view.⁹ The question is not whether Israel will retaliate, but how far its response will go. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the powerful paramilitary organisation that is in charge of Iran's regional and

ceasefire-201072.

⁸ John Paul Rathbone, Ian Bott and Neri Zilber, "How Israel's Air Defences Withstood Iran's Missile Barrage", in *Financial Times*, 2 October 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/3fa784e6-3e5e-4f6c-8285-52b297c986da>; Evan Hill (@evanhill), "Round-up of Verified Iran Ballistic Missile Strike Videos", *X post*, 2 October 2024, <https://x.com/evanhill/status/1841237261880324159>.

⁹ James Shotter et al., "Benjamin Netanyahu Vows Retaliation after Iran Fires Barrage of Missiles at Israel", in *Financial Times*, 2 October 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/e053817b-9f15-4b3e-af58-b106a8fed087>; Jacob Magid, "US's Sullivan: 'There Will Be Severe Consequences' for Iran's Attack; 'We Will Work with Israel to Make that the Case'", in *Times of Israel*, 1 October 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/us-official-says-iranian-attack-on-israel-appears-to-have-been-defeated-and-ineffective.

security policy, is a natural target, but Iran's nuclear facilities are also in the crosshairs,¹⁰ as are Iran's allies across the region.

Netanyahu has every interest in intensifying military operations. The attack on Lebanon is beneficial to him in every respect: it has seemingly reduced, perhaps removed, a direct threat to Israel; it has restored his reputation, compromised since 7 October; and it has attracted new members into the governing coalition so that he is less dependent on his most extremist allies, ministers of national security Itamar Ben-Gvir and of finance Bezalel Smotrich.¹¹ A direct attack on Iran will complete the picture. This is all the more true given that the Biden Administration appears willing to support the retaliation and even participate in it. If Iran has accepted the logic of retaliation and counter-retaliation, an all-out war is entirely in the realm of possibilities.

Hapless America

Another consideration concerns the weakness shown throughout the past year by the Biden Administration. Netanyahu ordered the bombing of Nasrallah's refuge in Beirut while he was in New York for the UN General Assembly, where he was busy dismissing all Israel's critics as anti-Semites (as is

¹⁰ Israel, *Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Speech at the UN General Assembly in New York*, 27 September 2024, <https://gadebate.un.org/en/79/israel>.

¹¹ James Shotter, "Benjamin Netanyahu Critic Joins His Coalition in Boost for Israeli Premier", in *Financial Times*, 29 September 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/00a20643-5407-4a8b-9b42-3e2b0f5cd62a>.

the practice in government rhetoric and in general of many who support the Zionist project).¹² Speaking before that same assembly, US President Joe Biden had called for a ceasefire in Gaza and de-escalation in Lebanon.¹³ Indeed, the United States and France had hastily put together a truce proposal, which Netanyahu promptly ignored.¹⁴

This was yet another episode in which Israel acted contrary to what the Biden Administration and its European allies had been advocating for months: a ceasefire in Gaza, the release of the hostages still in Hamas' hands after the latter's 7 October 2023 terrorist attack on Israel, and the containment of regional escalation. Netanyahu made no bones about it because the Biden Administration's response usually was to protest 'ignorance' of Israel's moves before agreeing to them ex-post, as was also the case with the Nasrallah assassination.¹⁵ Despite his supposed

frustration with Netanyahu, Biden has continued to give Israel diplomatic cover and billions of dollars in arms.¹⁶

Without American support – direct, indirect or simply passive – Israel would never have embarked on such ambitious plans. Now that Iran, put in a bind by Israel's escalatory belligerence of summer 2024¹⁷ (and before), has retaliated with a direct attack, the Biden Administration finds itself entangled in exactly the direct confrontation with Iran that it was desperate to avoid. While Biden will probably try to contain Netanyahu's maximalist objectives, the record so far points to an Israeli prime minister who can easily bring the US president to follow, or at least endorse, his course of action.

Wrecked Lebanon

Turning now to the questions that Nasrallah's assassination leaves open, the first concerns the situation in Lebanon. Hezbollah is without leadership and with a compromised communications system, but it still has thousands of adherents and can therefore reorganise. To prevent this

statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-the-death-of-hassan-nasrallah.

¹² Robin Wright, "What Israel's Assassination of Hezbollah's Leader Means for the Middle East", in *The New Yorker*, 28 September 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/what-israels-assassination-of-hezbollahs-leader-means-for-the-middle-east>; Israel, *Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Speech at the UN General Assembly in New York*, cit.

¹³ United States, *Remarks by President Biden before the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, 24 September 2024, <https://gadebate.un.org/en/79/united-states-america>.

¹⁴ Clea Skopeliti, "First Thing: Netanyahu Rules Out US-French Ceasefire Proposal", in *The Guardian*, 26 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xvhe9t>.

¹⁵ Edward Helmore, "US Was Not Given Notice of Israeli Strike that Killed Nasrallah, Top Biden Aide Says", in *The Guardian*, 29 September 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xvt4fh>; White House, *Statement from President Joe Biden on the Death of Hassan Nasrallah*, 28 September 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/28/>

¹⁶ Jacob Magid, Lazar Berman and Emanuel Fabian, "US, Frustrated, Says Ceasefire Plan Rejected by Netanyahu Had Been Coordinated with Him", in *The Times of Israel*, 26 September 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pms-rejection-of-lebanon-ceasefire-plan-shatters-ties-with-biden-tv-report>; Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, "U.S. Aid to Israel in Four Charts", in *CFR Articles*, last updated on 31 May 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/node/250617>.

¹⁷ Andrew England, "Middle East at War: 12 Key Moments", in *Financial Times*, 2 October 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/11f910cc-cb97-4d5a-9acf-d8b3d51059cc>.

eventuality, Israel has just launched a ground invasion ostensibly aimed at controlling the territory between the border and the Litani river, a few dozen kilometres to the north, so as to allow sixty thousand displaced Israelis to return to their homes in northern Israel, which has been under fire by Hezbollah for months (as has South Lebanon, where Israel forced a hundred thousand to leave their homes).¹⁸ Whether the ground offensive can achieve this goal remains uncertain. After all, a year of ultra-intensive military operations in Gaza has not managed yet to root out Hamas, an organisation weaker and more isolated than Hezbollah. Whatever the outcome, the ground invasion is likely to come at a high human cost.

Gaza silenced

A second open question concerns Gaza. Netanyahu launched the attack in the north without wrapping up military operations there or having freed the hostages. The priority for him is to degrade Iran and its allies and, behind the screen of an all-encompassing self-defence, to promote Israeli expansion into East Jerusalem and the West Bank. It is no coincidence that violence and expropriations of Palestinians' homes and land there have increased (between October 2023 and September 2024, the Israelis killed about 700 people).¹⁹

¹⁸ James Shotter, "Israel Has Pushed into Hizbollah's Backyard. Where Will It Stop?", in *Financial Times*, 1 October 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/54edccd0-6e04-436a-805b-36b445f25bb6>; see also Seth G. Jones et al., "The Coming Conflict with Hezbollah", cit.

¹⁹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) oPt, *Humanitarian Situation Update #222 | West Bank*, 25 September 2024, <https://www.ochaopt.org/node/12102>.

Israel unbound

The last open question is obviously the future of the Middle East. Israel has shifted the balance of power, but is still in the initial steps of re-ordering the region so that it more closely reflects its interests. At a minimum, Israel is aiming to control the strip north of the border with Lebanon as well as the whole of the Gaza Strip, reserving the right to intervene at will. In parallel, it will seek to weaken Iran as much as it can, including by hitting it hard on its territory. In the meantime, settlement expansion into East Jerusalem and the West Bank is all but certain to continue, as after all it never stopped and has actually accelerated under the current Israeli government. The decades-long system of oppression of millions of people, most recently detailed by the International Court of Justice, is likely to get more entrenched.²⁰

Again, there are so many variables that will shape the Levant's future – whether Israel gets bogged down in the ground invasion of Lebanon, the magnitude of the coming war with Iran, and US choices before and especially after the November presidential election, to name a few – that the scenario sketched out above is far from certain. It does seem plausible though, as Israel finds no military obstacles in its enemies and no diplomatic opposition in its friends.

2 October 2024

²⁰ International Court of Justice, *Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024*, <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/204176>.

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Editor: Leo Goretti (l.goretti@iai.it)

- 24 | 56 Riccardo Alcaro, *The Tragedy behind Israel's Ostensible Triumph*
- 24 | 55 Riccardo Alcaro, *The Root of Western Haplessness with Israel*
- 24 | 54 Darlington Tshuma and Bongwiwe Mphahlele, *South Africa's G20 Presidency: Tapping into Africa's Potential through Financial, Climate and Food System Reform*
- 24 | 53 Chiara Scissa, *Italy's Migration Policies Amidst Climate Change: An Assessment*
- 24 | 52 Leo Goretti, *The Kremlin's and Far-Right War on Gender at the Paris 2024 Olympics*
- 24 | 51 Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, Alex Benkenstein, Jordan Mc Lean and Krissmonne Olwagan, *The G7, South Africa and the Sustainable Climate Agenda for Africa*
- 24 | 50 Ç. Esra Çuhadar, *How Women Mediators Overcome Resistance: Innovative Strategies from the Field*
- 24 | 49 Nicoletta Pirozzi, *How the European Elections 2024 Will Shape the EU*
- 24 | 48 Menachem Klein, *The Beijing Palestinian Reconciliation Agreement: An Opportunity not to Be Missed*
- 24 | 47 Nicola Casarini, *Europe's De-risking from China: Dead on Arrival?*