

A Hamas Leader Dies in Beirut

by [Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar), [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Hanin Ghaddar \(/experts/hanin-ghaddar\)](/experts/hanin-ghaddar)

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute's Rubin Family Arab Politics Program, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant.



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Saleh al-Arouri served as a major operative for the group over decades, and his loss will pose challenges for Hamas and Hezbollah alike.

Two days into the new year, an explosion killed Hamas deputy secretary-general Saleh al-Arouri and two other operatives from the group's Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades in Dahiya, the southern Beirut neighborhood dominated by the Shia militant group Hezbollah. Arouri celebrated the October 7 Hamas massacre that killed [some 1,200 Israelis \(https://www.haaretz.com/haaretz-explains/2023-11-23/ty-article-magazine/.premium/how-haaretz-is-counting-israels-dead-from-the-october-7-hamas-attack/0000018b-d42c-d423-affb-f7afe1a70000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/haaretz-explains/2023-11-23/ty-article-magazine/.premium/how-haaretz-is-counting-israels-dead-from-the-october-7-hamas-attack/0000018b-d42c-d423-affb-f7afe1a70000), including around 850 civilians, and in recent years he invested significant time and effort to build up a Hamas terrorist capability in Lebanon. A hardliner who long pushed for increased violence in the West Bank, over the past couple of years Arouri also participated in coordination meetings involving Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) at their "[joint war room \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-hamas-and-hezbollah-coordinated-gaza-fighting-in-joint-war-room-report/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-hamas-and-hezbollah-coordinated-gaza-fighting-in-joint-war-room-report/)" in Beirut. Within Hamas, Arouri was an old rival of Yahya al-Sinwar, the Hamas chief in Gaza who masterminded the October 7 attack, and a leading contender to be the group's next overall leader.

Dead Man Walking

Israel has not yet issued a statement on Arouri's targeted killing other than a spokesperson's [comment \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-spokesman-on-arouri-killing-whoever-did-this-\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-spokesman-on-arouri-killing-whoever-did-this-)

its-not-an-attack-on-lebanon-or-hezbollah/) that “whoever did this, it’s not an attack on Lebanon or Hezbollah.” But Arouri’s death should not come as a complete surprise. Two months before the October 7 massacre, Arouri told the Hezbollah-affiliated media outlet Al Mayadeen that Hamas was preparing “**an all-out war** (**<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/exclusive---al-arouri:-resistance-axis-preparing-for-all-out>**)” against Israel. At the time, Arouri was viewed as driving the spike in Hamas activity in the West Bank, and Israeli leaders implied he could be targeted if attacks there persisted. “It’s not a coincidence that he’s in hiding,” Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu **stated** (**<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/defense/1693127678-netanyahu-threatens-hamas-terror-organizers-in-hiding-to-pay-the-full-price>**) in August, adding that “whoever tries to harm us, whoever finances, organizes, sends terror against Israel, will pay the full price.” Speaking to Al Mayadeen, Arouri **insisted** (**<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/exclusive---al-arouri:-resistance-axis-preparing-for-all-out>**) that “the Israeli threat against my person does not change my beliefs and stances.”

After October 7, Israeli leaders made clear their intention to target Hamas leaders responsible for the cross-border raid and massacre. Defense Minister Yoav Gallant **stated** (**https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-ive-told-mossad-to-act-against-the-heads-of-hamas-whenever-they-are/**) that Hamas leaders were “living on borrowed time,” while Prime Minister Netanyahu **instructed** (**https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/netanyahu-ive-told-mossad-to-act-against-the-heads-of-hamas-whenever-they-are/**) the Mossad intelligence agency “to act against the heads of Hamas wherever they are.” Press reports included Arouri on **lists** (**<https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2023/10/26/who-are-the-key-targets-on-israels-hamas-hit-list/>**) of Hamas leaders likely to be targeted.

Early Years

A hardliner and founding member of the al-Qassam Brigades, Arouri had long pushed for Hamas to carry out more violence in the West Bank, where he was first recruited to the group at Hebron University in the 1980s. Elected head of the campus Hamas al-Kutla al-Islamiyah (Islamic Bloc) in 1986, Arouri soon started recruiting students into an operational cell. Israeli authorities arrested him in November 1990, but he was released six months later. Arouri then picked up where he left off and was assigned to recruit and arm a Hamas cell in Hebron. He provided funds received from abroad to an operative who bought weapons and later sheltered wanted Hamas operatives, including senior al-Qassam Brigades fugitives like Imad Aqel. Arrested a second time, Arouri was convicted for his “leadership role in Hamas” and then charged for conducting Hamas activities in prison, where he was elected to the group’s prison branch shura council. After serving a decade and a half, he was released in 2010 and deported, spending time over the next thirteen years in Syria, Turkey, Qatar, then Lebanon.

Arouri remained deeply involved in Hamas operational issues, especially regarding the West Bank. According to Israeli authorities, from his perch in Turkey, Arouri was the operational **commander** (**<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamass-not-so-secret-weapon>**) of the 2014 kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teens. It was at that time that his name started circulating as a potential target. It was likewise Arouri, speaking at a conference in Turkey, who publicly **revealed** (**<https://www.npr.org/2014/08/22/342318367/hamas-finally-admits-to-kidnapping-and-killing-israeli-teens>**) that Hamas kidnapped and killed the teens, which led to the 2014 rocket war between Israel and Hamas.

Recent Years

After he was forced to leave Turkey in 2015, Arouri moved to Qatar, then Lebanon, where he worked hard to strengthen ties between Hamas and both Hezbollah and Iran, which had taken a hit after Hamas broke with the Assad regime in 2012.

He also took a personal interest in building a Hamas operational capability in Lebanon. Within a couple years of

Arouri's move to Lebanon, the Israel Security Agency (ISA, aka Shin Bet) publicly **warned** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/shin-bet-chief-hamas-setting-up-in-lebanon-with-irans-support/>) that Hamas was setting up a base of operations in Lebanon. The idea, the ISA head explained, was to complement Hamas militant efforts based in Gaza, where Hamas continued "to invest considerable resources in preparation for a future conflict [with Israel], even at the cost of its citizens' welfare."

This past year saw the activation of this long-planned Hamas element in Lebanon. In June 2023, Hamas operatives **fired rockets** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/two-rockets-fired-towards-israel-lebanon-fall-short-sources-lebanon-2023-07-06/>) into Israel from Lebanon. Since the October 7 massacre, Hamas has fired **more rockets** (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/6/hamas-armed-wing-says-it-fired-16-rockets-at-israel-from-southern-lebanon>) at Israel from Lebanon, including **sixteen projectiles** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/northern-towns-bombarded-as-30-rockets-fired-from-lebanon-idf-shells-launchers/>) on one especially busy day.

On October 8, as Hamas operatives were still loose in southern Israel, Arouri expressed his "**hope and trust** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-deputy-chief-anticipates-hostages-will-be-swapped-for-palestinian-prisoners/>)" that Palestinians outside Gaza—especially in the West Bank—would join the fight against Israel. That did not happen. He also shared his hope that Hamas's regional allies, especially Hezbollah, would join the war against Israel in support of Hamas's invasion of the country's south. When, back in August, Arouri foretold Hamas's efforts to spark a regional war, he added that the group was doing this in **close discussion** (<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/exclusive---al-arouri-resistance-axis-preparing-for-all-out>) "with all the relevant parties." That did not prove to be true either. Indeed, it appears that Arouri may have oversold what Hezbollah did and did not promise to do once Hamas attacked.

Hezbollah's Reaction

On August 28, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah warned Israel as follows during a televised speech: "Any assassination on Lebanese soil against a Lebanese, Syrian, Iranian, or Palestinian will be met with a decisive response. We will not allow Lebanon to become a new killing field for Israel." After the January 2 strike, Hezbollah released a statement calling the operation an act of "dangerous aggression against Lebanon and its people, security, sovereignty and resistance," while vowing that it "won't go without a response and punishment." Such rhetoric implies that Israel can now expect a retaliatory move, but Hezbollah and Iran have their own calculations.

Yet Israel also signaled very clearly by ensuring no Hezbollah official was present at the meeting targeted. The Lebanese national killed in the strike was a Muslim Brotherhood official, Muhammad Bashasha.

In any case, a response could take multiple forms, including a missile barrage that strikes deeper into Israel than the usual attacks on border posts. A response could also target vital infrastructure such as the Karish natural gas field off **Israel's northern coast** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-karish-gas-field-diplomatic-opportunity-or-casus-belli>) using precision-guided missiles. The elite Radwan forces, which like the precision missiles have remained dormant since October 7, could also be called into action.

Yet even as Hezbollah will need to respond to the Israeli strike—both to preserve its "resistance" image and its sense of honor—it will likely do so in a way that falls short of full-scale war. This is in part because Iran does not wish to sacrifice Hezbollah, its top regional asset, for the sake of Hamas, as demonstrated through Nasrallah's speech **on November 3** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-did-nasrallah-really-say-and-why>). Further, Hezbollah has already sustained serious damage in this war, and limiting further harm will remain a priority for various reasons.

Longer-Term Repercussions

Even if Hezbollah does not seek a larger war, this prospect cannot be discounted, either by accident or design. Hezbollah knows that Israel will not tolerate the risk posed by precision missiles or Radwan forces along its border after the brutality of the October 7 Hamas attack. Yet Hezbollah, in truth, is not ready for such a war. Most of its forces consist of younger personnel who have no experience fighting Israel. The group's budget has been degraded by U.S. anti-Iran sanctions and its own expanded regional operations, having spent major assets in the Syrian war. And it lacks a signature leader in the mold of the late Imad Mughniyah, who was killed in 2008.

Since getting involved in the Syrian war, Hezbollah has seen its mission altered to become the IRGC's regional arm and the Iranian regime's protective front. This has affected Hezbollah's military operations against Israel and influenced its decision to avoid a war with Israel after October 7. As a result, Hezbollah will likely try to buy time, leaning on diplomatic discussions about implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701, all the while girding for the possibility of war.

Conclusion

Salah al-Arouri's death is a significant loss for Hamas. He played a critical role as one of the group's primary and most effective liaisons to both Hezbollah and Iran, meeting regularly in Beirut and from time to time in Tehran. According to Hezbollah's al-Manar television, under Arouri's leadership Hamas and Hezbollah were in constant communication, and Arouri himself [met \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hamas-deputy-chief-the-fighting-has-not-begun-yet/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/hamas-deputy-chief-the-fighting-has-not-begun-yet/) with Hezbollah leader Nasrallah on October 7. Arouri was also among a group of Hamas leaders who reportedly began [meeting \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growing-internal-tensions-between-hamas-leaders\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/growing-internal-tensions-between-hamas-leaders) with Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and opposition Fatah members about plans for the day after the Gaza war. The discussion reportedly focused on ways of integrating Hamas into the PLO as a means of unifying the Palestinian political polity. For Arouri, the goal was a Hezbollah-style system in which Hamas members hold office in a Palestinian government while Hamas itself remains an independent, armed entity.

The loss of someone so intimately involved in both tactical operations and strategic diplomacy is a serious setback for Hamas. What remains to be seen is how the group's allies, especially Hezbollah, react to the attack.

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics. Matthew Levitt is the Institute's Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of its Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. ❖

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