

What Nasrallah's Death Could Mean for the Hezbollah Network

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Brief Analysis

Iran's proxy faces steep challenges on the leadership and military fronts, and the international community can now act vigorously to free Lebanon from its grip.

The killing by Israel of Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah constitutes a shattering moment for the group that could alter the Lebanese political landscape as well as dynamics across the region. Nasrallah's death came at the end of a brutal week for Hezbollah, which has now lost most of its military leadership along with its communication system and an array of weapons depots and other facilities. All this was made possible by Israel's intelligence infiltration of the group's leadership and military infrastructure. For multiple reasons, including Hezbollah's massive growth, [succession dynamics \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-future-leadership-state-and-state-within-sudden-succession-essay-series\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-future-leadership-state-and-state-within-sudden-succession-essay-series) will today be more complicated than they were three decades ago when Nasrallah's predecessor, Abbas Musawi, was killed.

Political Succession

On paper at least, replacing Nasrallah will not be difficult, and Hezbollah will take up the task alongside Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Likely successors include deputy leader Naim Qassem and executive council head Hashem Safieddine—who is also Nasrallah's cousin. Yet on a deeper level, replacing the charismatic longtime leader will be very difficult. He has become inseparable from the group's brand, and is identified with successes such as Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and the perceived summer 2006 “divine victory” against Israel. Nasrallah served as a father figure for many Lebanese Shia, who regarded him as their provider and protector. Whoever succeeds him will not have an enviable job, given the eviscerated condition of the group and the

likely dark days ahead. Yet the resulting void will provide opportunities for the international community to advocate better leadership for Lebanese Shia and the entire nation.

Military Prospects

Since October 2023, when Hezbollah committed to support Hamas's fight against Israel, its trio of first-tier commanders, Fuad Shukr, Ibrahim Aqil, and Ali Karaki, along with most of its second-tier commanders have been [killed \(https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/23/hezbollah-israel-lebanon-iran-nasrallah-pagers-gaza/\)](https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/09/23/hezbollah-israel-lebanon-iran-nasrallah-pagers-gaza/). Given this loss of personnel along with the infrastructural blows and associated weakening of trust, it will be an arduous years-long task to rebuild the group's military prowess. Moreover, Nasrallah himself served a principal role in restructuring Hezbollah military activities and coordinating with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Thus, the connective tissue between Lebanon and Iran has now been cut.

Regional Dynamics

Early in Syria's civil war, which began in 2011, Hezbollah backed the regime of Bashar al-Assad, working directly under IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani. Hezbollah thereafter emerged as the IRGC's regional arm, providing logistical support, training, and leadership to militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. When Soleimani was killed in early 2020, Hezbollah's regional role expanded further, and until recently its commanders spent more time in those countries abroad than they did in Lebanon. With Hezbollah now severely damaged, the Qods Force must not only replace Hezbollah's leadership in Lebanon but also the role it played across the region. For the United States and its allies, this period of transition provides a significant opportunity to mitigate the Iran-driven regional threat.

Options for Iran

The Islamic Republic has two broad options for responding to the Nasrallah strike: to escalate or back down.

- **Escalation.** If Iran opts to escalate, it could take a hands-on approach to commanding Hezbollah fighting forces, an inefficient path at best given the current absence of Lebanon-based military leadership. Alternatively, Iran could facilitate the firing of Hezbollah's precision-guided missiles (PGMs) before Israel destroys them, or else direct proxies such as Iraq-based Shia militias and the Yemeni Houthis to engage Israel militarily. But this option also comes with challenges, including the personal risk posed to Iranian commanders based in Lebanon, who anyway are unfamiliar with the country and its complicated security and politics. It could finally incur a wider Israeli campaign against Iran's regional assets.
- **Backing down.** Alternatively, Iran could back down for now in the interest of containing its proxy's losses. This could entail accepting the U.S.-France diplomatic initiative and guiding Hezbollah to withdraw its military presence to north of the Litani River. Such retrenchment would also mean decoupling the Lebanon and Gaza war fronts. All this would provide the IRGC time and space to rebuild Hezbollah's arsenal and restructure its military leadership. Yet backing down carries its own risks, including vulnerability to a continuing Israeli military campaign that would include degrading or eliminating Hezbollah's PGMs.

How Western Actors Can Fill the Void

With Nasrallah dead and his group hobbled, Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shia community—as well as all Lebanese—will feel exposed and unprotected. So far, no actor has effectively come to Hezbollah's aid: neither the Iranian regime nor other sympathetic actors in the region.

This is where the international community has an opportunity to invest seriously in the future of Lebanon, an undertaking that will involve far more than establishing a ceasefire or reimplementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which ended the 2006 Lebanon war. The United States already has strong leverage with Lebanon through its assistance program to the Lebanese Armed Forces, but the LAF itself must answer to an independent

Lebanese government, not one in thrall to Hezbollah. A post-ceasefire Lebanon must above all be anchored in state sovereignty and independence. Moreover, the international community can now work toward supporting a credible, inclusive coalition of opposition figures and forces—which must include the Shia community in all its diversity—to counter Hezbollah, its allies, and Iranian influence in Lebanon.

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