

6 Consequences of Israel Killing Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

Sep 30, 2024

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/6-tbat-lqyam-asrayl-bqtl-alamyn-alam-l-hzb-allh-hsn-nsrallah\)](#)

Also published in *The Hill*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

Robert Satloff is the Segal Executive Director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

By building on the death of an Iran-backed terrorist leader, President Biden has the opportunity to leave the Middle East better today than it was on October 8, which is no small achievement.

The assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah is not only the most significant targeted killing in Israel's history but also the first chapter in what could be a new, more hopeful future for Lebanon, its long-suffering northern neighbor. Here are six implications of Nasrallah's death.

First, after wiping out virtually the entire Hezbollah political and military command, from its spectacular exploding pager and walkie-talkie operation to its killing of Nasrallah, Israel is unlikely to suspend its military operations in Lebanon. To the contrary, Israel is likely to take advantage of Hezbollah's disarray to do everything it can to destroy the group's offensive capabilities, including its entire arsenal of precision-guided missiles and what's left of its infrastructure for cross-border attacks in southern Lebanon. Hopefully, Israel will achieve its objectives swiftly and avoid the fatal attraction of the long-term reoccupation of Lebanese territory.

Second, some of the third-level leaders who will inherit control of Hezbollah are likely to argue that Nasrallah and his comrades were vulnerable because they lacked an asset that Hamas had in Gaza since Oct. 7—hostages. This could lead to reckless plots to kidnap foreigners inside Lebanon; efforts to launch cross-border raids into Israel through underground tunnels; and perhaps even activation of Hezbollah terrorist cells around the world, including in America.

Third, Iran—Hezbollah's patron, funder and supplier—has so far shown that it wants to stay out of this fight, but its

inactivity could become an acute embarrassment and difficult to sustain. As an Arab, Nasrallah was not as important to Tehran as Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani, whose killing in a 2020 U.S. drone strike prompted a retaliatory attack against American troops in northern Iraq. But he was closer to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei than any non-Iranian, and his death will be viewed as a personal blow.

In this context, it would not be surprising for Iran to unleash its proxies—from Yemen’s Houthis to Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria—against American, allied and Israeli targets. Iran-backed terrorism against soft targets in the West cannot be ruled out. Given that Iran relied on Hezbollah as a deterrent against U.S. or Israeli direct attack, the group’s weakness means Iran is less likely to launch its own revenge assault against Israel, along the lines of its April 13 volley of missiles and drones. A key unknown is whether Iran’s sense of vulnerability triggers a rethinking of nuclear strategy, with its leaders now more determined to acquire a weapons capability as quickly as possible to compensate for the loss of Hezbollah.

Fourth, Lebanon is in shock at the sudden change in Hezbollah’s status. Just days ago, Hezbollah was the unquestioned power in the country, behind the mere facade of a Potemkin government. Now, there is a moment of opportunity for the disparate, often disputatious elements of an anti-Hezbollah coalition to organize itself before the remnants of Hezbollah find their footing and try to reimpose control.

One key variable is whether the Lebanese Armed Forces now believes it is relatively powerful enough to assert authority in the name of the state and has the cohesion and leadership to take that fateful step. Another question is whether external actors—from Washington to Paris to Riyadh—will coordinate effectively to empower local allies to fill the void left by Hezbollah’s disarray. Israel may have set the table, but it cannot deliver the meal of a new Lebanese political architecture. Only the Lebanese themselves—with the help of their foreign friends—can do that. But the possibility is more real today than it has been at any moment in recent memory.

Fifth, as the anniversary of the Oct. 7 Hamas attack approaches, the heady Israeli success in Lebanon will have its own impact on Gaza. The most obvious implication is the likely hardening of opposition by Hama’s Yahya Sinwar to giving up hostages in a cease-fire deal, as he probably concludes that keeping that “asset” has kept him alive after nearly a year of war.

The result is likely to be the freezing of an unsatisfying status quo in Gaza, in which Israel’s main battle operations are effectively complete but the situation stays in limbo. In this stalemate, Hamas cannot mount a serious military threat to Israel, but the rag-tag remnants of its fighting force remain enough to terrorize the local population and to prevent anyone else from governing the Gaza Strip. In this situation, the real losers are local Palestinians, who will likely remain caught between the roving street gangs of Hamas’s diminished but still potent brigades and the targeted operations of Israel’s counter-terror missions in Gaza.

Sixth, the killing of Nasrallah should be a moment for the U.S. to cheer that justice has been done, given the blood of hundreds of Americans that are on Hezbollah’s hands. But this is also a moment for the Biden administration to shift focus from its Sisyphean pursuit of a Gaza cease-fire to taking advantage of the opportunities presented by Israel’s seismic shock to Hezbollah.

With assertive, engaged diplomacy, the Biden administration can help engineer a new security regime that allows civilians to return to their homes along the Israel-Lebanon border and work with local and international partners to help build a new political architecture for Lebanon.

This isn’t the Saudi-Israel peace and normalization accord that the Biden administration hoped to leave as a legacy—though there might be one last bite at this apple during the presidential transition—nor even the Gaza cease-fire for which the White House has labored for months. But after a year of tragedy and sadness, this would be real progress. At the same time, it is essential for Washington to warn Tehran about the high price it will suffer if it decides to make

a dash for a nuclear-weapons capability. By building on Israel's killing of Nasrallah, President Biden has the opportunity to leave the Middle East better today than it was on Oct. 8, which is no small achievement.

This article was originally published on the Hill website (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4906569-6-consequences-of-israels-killing-of-hezbollahs-hassan-nasrallah/>). ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Embracing Asaib Ahl al-Haq: Pragmatism or Naivete?](#)

Oct 15, 2024

◆
Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/embracing-asaib-ahl-al-haq-pragmatism-or-naivete)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Breaking Point? How the Barzani Family Power Struggle Could Unfold After Kurdistan's Election](#)

Oct 14, 2024

◆
Renwar Najm

(/policy-analysis/breaking-point-how-barzani-family-power-struggle-could-unfold-after-kurdistan)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Tracking Anti-U.S. and Anti-Israel Strikes From Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis](#)

Oct 14, 2024



Michael Knights,
Amir al-Kaabi,
Hamdi Malik

(/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-and-anti-israel-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)