

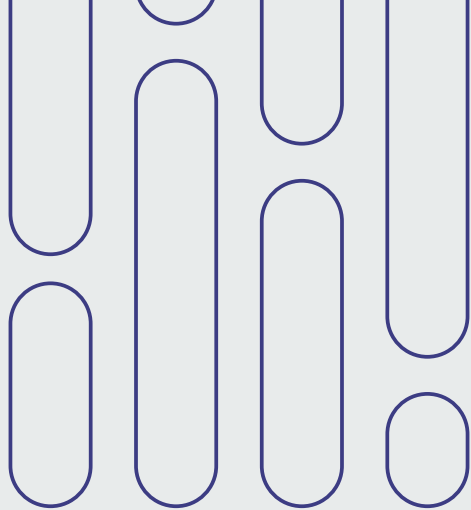
POSITION PAPER

Israel's Attack on Hezbollah's Communication Devices: Contexts and Significations

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CONTENTS

Context and Timing of the Attacks	03
Israel's Intended Messages	06
Hezbollah's Potential Responses to the Israeli Attacks	07

In an unprecedented cyber security development, over two consecutive days, various regions in Lebanon witnessed a series of synchronized explosions that targeted Hezbollah members. What shrouds these events in further mystery is that conventional forms of attack through air and missile strikes were eschewed in favor of lethally compromising the pagers and walkie-talkies used by Hezbollah operatives. How this sabotage operation was undertaken remains unclear. This resulted in the deaths of approximately 30 individuals and injuries to more than 3,000 others. This incident raises numerous questions related to the timing, location and nature of the attack, as well as the breach that Hezbollah is facing within its ranks in Lebanon and Syria. Moreover, there are questions about Israel's motivations for executing this wide-ranging operation and whether it signals the prelude to a larger war or is simply part of its ongoing psychological warfare. Additionally, Hezbollah's potential response to the operation is under scrutiny.

Context and Timing of the Attacks

Given the ambiguity surrounding the mechanics of the explosions involving communication devices in Lebanon, various hypotheses have emerged about how the operation was carried out and how these devices were breached. Was the explosion remote-controlled, or were the devices previously rigged with explosives? One explanation suggests that the communication devices were hacked, and malware was installed to overheat the batteries, leading to their explosion. Others believe the devices were overloaded with massive amounts of data, causing them to malfunction and explode. Another hypothesis posits that the devices were equipped with explosives or heat-sensitive materials that could pass security screenings and detonate upon receiving a signal

from a server.

No company has claimed responsibility for manufacturing the pager devices. Japan stated that it stopped production about 10 years ago, and Taiwan's Gold Apollo company also denied manufacturing the devices. Attention has shifted to a Hungarian company, and notably Budapest has close ties to Moscow. Suspicion has also been cast upon Serbia and Belarus. However, given that Iran and its militias have limited supply chains, this Budapest-based company became Tehran's preferred option for producing pagers. Hezbollah operates a growing network for money laundering, technology smuggling and human intelligence in Europe, especially in its eastern regions. Given Israel's infiltration into Lebanon and Iran, it might have been able to hack the devices during shipment or possibly infiltrate the manufacturing process itself from the start. In general, not only are plausible scenarios available, but there are also many other possibilities, most of which are based on conspiracy theories or are technologically far-fetched. Regardless of these hypotheses, it is worth noting that the explosions coincided with various events and contexts tied to Hezbollah and Israel, including:

Continued Israeli Pressure on Hezbollah

The timing of these explosions aligns with several Israeli strategies aimed at pressuring Hezbollah, including increased military airstrikes on Hezbollah's infrastructure, designed to push the group back beyond the Litani River. In addition, Israel has escalated its threats, repeatedly announcing its readiness for military action against Lebanon. Since the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023, Israel has frequently threatened a military operation in Lebanon to neutralize the threat posed by Hezbollah to northern Israel. For example, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, during

a conversation with his US counterpart Lloyd Austin, reiterated Israel's commitment to distancing Hezbollah from its borders. Moreover, Israel has pursued diplomatic and negotiation channels to garner international support for putting pressure on Hezbollah and Lebanon. Notably, the Israeli operation targeting Hezbollah's communication devices came just hours after Israel announced the thwarting of a Hezbollah-led plot to assassinate a high-ranking Israeli security official.

Israel's Ongoing War Against Hezbollah, Syria and Iran

The recent explosions that targeted Hezbollah's communication structure are part of a broader campaign by Israel in the region. These operations come on the heels of significant targeted assassinations, such as the killing of senior Hezbollah military commander Fuad Shukr in Beirut on July 30, 2024, and the assassination of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran on July 31, 2024. Additionally, they follow Israel's recent large-scale strike on the Syrian research center in Masyaf. Thus, the sabotage of Hezbollah's communication equipment forms another link in the chain of escalating Israeli operations, not just against Hezbollah but also against Iran, posing a significant challenge for both in light of repeated and embarrassing intelligence breaches.

Domestic Pressure on the Israeli Government

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government is under increasing pressure to address the situation in northern Israel and ensure the safe return of displaced Israeli citizens. A recent poll by Maariv showed that 62% of Israelis support decisive military action against Hezbollah. Netanyahu has hinted at the possibility of opening a broad front in southern Lebanon in a bid to change the security dynamics on the Israeli-Lebanese border.

Israel's Intended Messages

The scope and timing of the operation holds symbolic significance both domestically and internationally:

- Amidst internal pressures and official threats to expand the conflict, Israel wanted to send a clear message that it can deliver a powerful blow to Hezbollah without suffering significant military losses or high costs.
- The operation highlights Israel's advanced cyber warfare capabilities, which were specifically directed at Hezbollah. By breaching the group's communication systems, Israel showcased its ability to escalate security penetrations against Hezbollah. This comes at a time when Hezbollah is already struggling to balance the use of technology against Israeli surveillance. Hezbollah has to rely on basic methods to evade Israeli intelligence signals intercepting the group's communications. Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah had previously warned members not to carry mobile phones due to the ease with which they could be intercepted. The incident confirms that Israel can infiltrate even rudimentary communication methods and weaponize seemingly ordinary systems, undermining Hezbollah's efforts to evade Israeli cyber superiority. This signals a redefinition of the conflict's rules, further cementing Israel's dominance over its adversaries.
- Of particular concern is that these attacks against Hezbollah took place during the group's day-to-day activities, right in the heart of their operations. This is more unsettling than the recent targeted killings of Hezbollah officials and commanders, which were expected in the course of military action. Through these attacks, Tel Aviv aims to convey to Hezbollah members that Israeli intelligence has deeply penetrated their ranks, creating a sense of psychological distress, insecurity, and internal doubt.

- The operation also extended to Syria where similar explosions occurred concurrently with those in Lebanon. The injury of Iran's ambassador to Lebanon in one such incident further underscores Israel's ability to not only infiltrate and weaken Hezbollah but also target Iranian officials in the country.

Hezbollah's Potential Responses to the Israeli Attacks

Tel Aviv is anticipating the nature and manner of Hezbollah's response to its recent operation, which resulted in deaths and thousands of injuries. According to Israeli media, Netanyahu's government has mobilized its forces and various agencies in preparation for a broader confrontation with Hezbollah. Meanwhile, its security apparatus is in a state of constant session to discuss all possible scenarios that Hezbollah might resort to, especially in light of the group's threats to retaliate for the operation. In this context, the potential scenarios that Hezbollah might resort to can be highlighted.

A Comprehensive Response Leading to Full-scale War

In this scenario, Hezbollah may escalate the conflict by launching large-scale military operations, potentially involving ballistic missiles with substantial destructive power aimed deep into Israeli territory. This could also include coordination with Iran-backed militias across the region and even possible involvement from Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), particularly following the assassination of Hamas leader Haniyeh in Tehran. However, this scenario is considered unlikely, as both Hezbollah and Iran are aware that Israel's recent actions might be provocations designed to draw Hezbollah into a war that would justify broader Israeli military action in Lebanon. Both Hezbollah and Iran would

be reluctant to engage in a conflict that could be immensely costly.

Avoiding Retaliation to Undermine Netanyahu's Provocations

Hezbollah could opt not to retaliate, recognizing that Netanyahu may be seeking an excuse to escalate the conflict for political or military gain. This scenario is supported by Netanyahu's escalating threats against Hezbollah in which he confirmed his government's readiness to expand the military operation on the northern front with the aim of resettling the settlers. However, by refraining from a direct response, Hezbollah would deny Netanyahu the pretext for a full-scale military operation, which could be devastating for both the group and Lebanon. Hezbollah might calculate that a restrained approach would serve its interests better than engaging in a conflict that could worsen Lebanon's already fragile political and economic situation.

A Calculated, Proportional Response

This scenario suggests that Hezbollah will opt for a measured response that maintains its credibility without escalating into full-blown war. The group might carry out a targeted operation similar to past responses to assassinations of key figures, such as the retaliatory actions following the killing of senior commanders like Shukr. Hezbollah's response could be carefully calibrated to avoid disrupting the current rules of engagement while still addressing the attacks in a manner that reassures its base and preserves its reputation. Hezbollah may also use its media platforms to publicize and amplify the effect of the strike. There is also the possibility of coordinating with Iran, as Tehran views the injury of its ambassador in the same attack as a direct affront. As happened after the targeting of the Iranian consulate in Damascus

and the assassination of Iranian leaders in Damascus by Israel, which necessitated a direct but precisely calculated attack by Iran against Israel, so as not to drag Tehran into a broader war. Within this scenario, it is not unlikely, given the escalating tensions, that this calculated attack will be coordinated across multiple fronts to avoid Hezbollah bearing the responsibility alone, with the deadly response that this would inevitably provoke from Israel.

Several factors lend credence to this scenario. The first is Hezbollah's need to maintain its standing with its supporters both in Lebanon and abroad. The credibility of its leader Nasrallah is at stake, as the attack not only violated a red line by targeting Hezbollah members but also revealed a significant vulnerability in the group's security. Israel's cyberattack highlighted the extent of its intelligence capabilities, raising concerns within Hezbollah about how much sensitive information Israel has acquired. If Hezbollah does not respond, even symbolically, its credibility could suffer, and its carefully cultivated image, especially in the Arab and Islamic world, could deteriorate.

Second, Hezbollah has always followed the calculated response strategy to deal with Israeli attacks since the Gaza war began. In previous incidents, Hezbollah carefully considered several key factors before responding. A primary concern is that Israel might be aiming to escalate the conflict with Hezbollah, given the group's increasing strength along Israel's northern border and Israel's perception of its deterrence weakening. The rise of extremist voices within Israel, such as ministers like Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, pushing for aggressive actions — including annexing parts of southern Lebanon which they deem as part of the “promised land” — adds pressure on the Israeli government.

Additionally, Netanyahu is likely seeking ways to deflect internal and external pressures, which have been growing as calls to halt

the war and strike a deal with Hamas intensify, especially since his objectives in Gaza have yet to be fully realized. Hezbollah is fully aware of these dynamics and has already repositioned some of its assets from the south to the north, anticipating a potential escalation.

From Hezbollah's broader perspective, this confrontation is seen as part of a protracted, multi-front struggle between Israel and the wider "resistance axis" across the region, not just confined to Lebanon and Palestine. Therefore, Hezbollah views the current situation as a long-term war of attrition, one that could eventually shift regional power balances. Given these circumstances, Hezbollah is unlikely to respond impulsively, as such an action could grant Israel the legitimacy to launch a full-scale war, shifting the conflict's nature and trajectory.

Another crucial factor in Hezbollah's calculations is the potential consequences of engaging in a major confrontation, which could lead to an outcome similar to that faced by Hamas in Gaza. Hezbollah is aware that any significant escalation, especially one that alters the existing rules of engagement, would not only result in a conflict with Israel but could also draw in a broader coalition, including the United States. The latter has been amassing military forces in the region, marking the largest deployment since the Iraq invasion. A heavy blow in this context could severely weaken Hezbollah, setting it back by years.

Despite these risks, the United States seems to have an interest in preventing the conflict from spiraling out of control. Due to the approaching US elections, the United States is working diplomatically and militarily to ensure that Hezbollah's retaliation remains symbolic, while simultaneously pressing Israel to accept such limited responses, provided they do not exacerbate the situation. Domestically, Hezbollah must also weigh the potential fallout

from a wider conflict, as an escalation that leads to the destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure would turn public opinion against the group. Hezbollah's opponents in Lebanon could exploit this opportunity to shift the internal balance of power, threatening the group's dominance in the political, security, and military spheres. Thus, Hezbollah is keen to avoid facing both domestic and outside enemies simultaneously.

Hezbollah's actions are also closely aligned with Iran's strategic interests and the broader resistance axis. Both Iran and Hezbollah adhere to a policy of measured escalation, as widening the conflict could result in significant strategic losses for Iran. This includes the potential destruction of Iran's affiliated military groups and, possibly, extending the conflict to Iranian soil — something Iran has sought to avoid through its forward defense doctrine. The calculated response strategy is a shared understanding between Iran and the United States, reflecting a tacit desire to contain the conflict within manageable limits.

In conclusion, the recent Israeli cyberattack on Hezbollah's communications systems represents a major security breach, highlighting the technological and intelligence gap between the two sides. This incident underscores Israel's superior capabilities and reinforces the power imbalance in favor of Israel.

Hezbollah is currently facing a narrow set of choices and increasing pressure from its base, both domestically and internationally. The three scenarios before the group all present challenges that limit its ability to act decisively. At this critical stage, Hezbollah's primary concern is understanding the full impact of the recent breaches in its communication system, which involved the sabotage of its internal network. The group is focused on reconstructing its intelligence and security apparatus to ensure that these breaches do not extend to its top leadership or key military commanders.

