
The Post-Nasrallah Era: Shifting the Balance of Power Between Israel and the Resistance Front

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Authors

Ziryan Rojhelati

Summary : During a visit to Beijing, I found myself engrossed in a conversation with a Chinese Communist Party official, who spoke at length about his country's distinctive development path. He drew a clear distinction between China's approach and the historical experiences of both the Soviet Union and the West, emphasizing that China's model was built on peace and cooperation, not war or aggression. I had many questions about his speech, but I reflected on how closely this echoed Iran's slogan, "Neither East nor West," my thoughts were suddenly interrupted by breaking news on my phone: the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah. Despite being over 7,000 kilometers from Beirut, the weight of the news was undeniable.

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It was around 2020 when Nasrallah advocated for deepening ties with China—a reflection of Beijing's long-standing interest in cultivating relations with Shiite leadership in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Thus, this event undoubtedly resonates within China's foreign policy circles, which seem increasingly focused on embedding themselves further into Middle Eastern geopolitics. Only a week prior, after China's efforts to unite 14 Palestinian factions, Ismail Haniyeh was killed in Tehran. Nasrallah's death may underscore the region's perpetual volatility. If we momentarily set aside China's growing involvement, Nasrallah's killing marks a pivotal shift in the security architecture of the Middle East, which can be interpreted as follows:

Nearly a year after Hamas stunned Israel and the global community with its audacious attack on October 7, and as Iran's Resistance Front gained psychological leverage through its drone and missile assaults earlier this year, Israel has struck back. The elimination of Hassan Nasrallah not only demonstrates Israel's superior intelligence capabilities but also its capacity to deploy devastating munitions via its F-15s, capable of penetrating even the most fortified defenses.

Nasrallah, one of the most heavily shielded figures within the Resistance Front, had avoided several recent public engagements, including Pezeshkian's inauguration in Tehran and a scheduled meeting with Iran's foreign minister—likely out of security concerns. Even if Nasrallah had previously used the pagers that Israel recently destroyed, likely employed by Hezbollah members, it is assumed that after the incident, he would have abandoned both his mobile phone and pager. Therefore, his assassination would require a complex intelligence operation, where espionage likely played a significant role in facilitating his death.

On the political front, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has even brought his Defense Minister Yoav Gallant to his side in this attack on Hezbollah, despite differences with Gallant on Hamas negotiations, and has capitalized on the U.S. election cycle to further his campaign against Hezbollah to destroy the resistance ring around itself. Confident that U.S. President Biden would ultimately back him, Netanyahu has defied U.S. calls for a ceasefire, and despite the international communities' protest, dismantled much of Hamas' governing structure and weakened its military capacity. While it is difficult to eradicate Hamas completely, the organization has suffered considerable losses in its ability to govern Gaza and its military capabilities.

Hezbollah, expected to be equipped with a formidable arsenal of short-, medium-, and long-range drones and missiles, remains Israel's most potent non-state adversary that cannot be ignored. After its resilience in the 2006 war, and the failure of Israel to defeat Hamas, Hezbollah has been a perennial threat, launching over 1,200 attacks on Israel since the Hamas offensive on October 7. These attacks have displaced nearly 70,000 Israelis from border regions. The army stated in its announcement regarding Nasrallah's death, 'We want our refugees to return.' If this is indeed their objective, and they fail to negotiate Hezbollah's withdrawal north of the Litani River, the situation could escalate to a potential ground incursion. From the south of the Litani River, Hezbollah would still pose a significant and persistent security threat to Israel, capable of launching short-range missiles and Katyushas from thousands of pickup trucks."

The larger question looming over the region is: How will Iran and the broader "Resistance" axis respond?

In the short term, Hezbollah may struggle to mount a significant retaliation due to its strategic and tactical command disruption. While the group can still launch sporadic attacks here and there, the absence of its strategic leadership, commanders, and secure communication networks makes a sustained campaign unlikely. This year alone, more than 27 high-ranking Hezbollah commanders, along with two senior Revolutionary Guards commanders who may have coordinated between the resistance groups, have been killed. The explosion of the pager and the destruction of Hezbollah's communication infrastructure have further hampered its operational coherence till they find an alternative.

Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) indicates that over the past year, Israel and Hezbollah have engaged in approximately 7,500 confrontations, with Israel responsible for over 80% of the strikes, targeting critical infrastructure and missile sites. This disruption in Hezbollah's logistics and communication networks renders a significant retaliatory strike improbable in the immediate future. However, Hezbollah's organizational resilience cannot be underestimated—it is capable of quickly restructuring and appointing new leadership.

As for Hamas, which has suffered substantial military losses over the past year, its focus has shifted to safeguarding its remaining assets, not creating a new leap. The Houthis, despite possessing long-range missiles and drones capable of reaching Israel, face challenges due to the cost and difficulty of breaching Israel's robust defense systems. Nevertheless, several rockets from the Houthis and Iraqi resistance groups have already penetrated Israeli airspace.

Iraqi resistance groups, with their capacity to mobilize from the Anbar-Mosul line to the Deir Ezzor corridor, and from there to the Golan Heights, have also signaled their readiness to intervene. Commanders have claimed they can deploy thousands of fighters from Jordan to Israel, though whether this is genuine or mere propaganda remains uncertain. Iraq's Islamist resistance key involvement in such a conflict would introduce significant political and strategic complications, as many political leaders—both Shiite and secular—may be reluctant to entangle Iraq in a broader regional war while the actions of these groups are likely aligned with Iran's broader strategy, which currently does not appear to call for a full-scale war with Israel.

Iran now faces a delicate balancing act. Should it retaliate, it risks igniting a regional war—an outcome it seeks to avoid. However, failure to respond could undermine its influence over its regional allies, particularly as it has yet to avenge Haniyeh's death. In the wake of the October 7 assault, Israel has regained its military and strategic upper hand, and the next move lies with Iran: Will it push the region toward a full-scale war or opt for a more restrained, symbolic response?