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Hizballah's Identity Crisis in the Wake of Nasrallah's Assassination

Eitan Ishai

At sunset on Friday, September 27, 2024, an airstrike in southern Beirut's Dahiya district targeted Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah's Secretary General. By the following day, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) confirmed his death, and Hizballah reluctantly acknowledged the loss. Nasrallah's assassination marked the end of nearly a year of clashes between Israel and Hizballah. Despite his reputation as a shrewd strategist, Nasrallah miscalculated on every front. He clung to mutual deterrence and long-standing formulas but failed to recognize Israel's evolving strategy in the weeks leading up to his assassination. Thus, Nasrallah's death symbolizes one of the greatest strategic miscalculations in the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict. This miscalculation stemmed from the inherent dilemma within Hizballah's conflicting identities, as both a resistance movement committed to mutual deterrence and a political entity operating within a changing domestic environment, which Nasrallah ultimately failed to adapt to. Over the past year, his strategy reflects an attempt to balance these conflicting identities, ultimately failing to understand that the strategic "rules of the game" had shifted.¹

¹ Hizballah is simultaneously a paramilitary organization and a political-ideological movement. In this article, it will be related to sometimes as one and sometimes as the other.

Hizballah's Dilemmas

Hizballah was established in the early 1980s by Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps as part of its policy of exporting the Islamic Revolution. It embodies a revolutionary theological ideology that elevates the principle of Resistance (*muqawama*) and strives ultimately to realize a vision where Islam (specifically Shi'i Islam) governs the world under the authority of the Supreme Leader (*Velayat-e Faqih*). In this vision, the Lebanese state—its borders, institutions, and political arrangements—has no role. In other words, Hizballah was founded within Lebanon but not as part of Lebanon. The organization's very existence—at least in its early years—was fundamentally at odds with the existence of the Lebanese state.²

However, through a gradual process that began in the early 1990s, and especially after Nasrallah was appointed the organization's Secretary General in 1992, Hizballah began to transform. Its revolutionary Islamist doctrines were watered down to some extent, and the organization started adopting a national Lebanese identity, even integrating into the political system and state institutions. This process is often described as the “Lebanonization” of Hizballah, during which the organization's leaders described their struggle as a patriotic national resistance movement, positioning themselves as the “defender of Lebanon” against threats to the state.³ The transformation of Hizballah from an organization rejecting the existence of the Lebanese state and aspiring to establish an Islamic Republic within it, to one claiming the title of “defender of Lebanon,” was unexpected, and Hassan Nasrallah played a key and pivotal role in accomplishing it.⁴

Indeed, Hizballah has evolved into an organization that is simultaneously part of Lebanon's state apparatus and independent of it. It vehemently refused to disarm, as stipulated in the Taif Agreement

² On the circumstances of Hizballah's founding, see in particular: Shimon Shapira, *Hizballah: Between Iran and Lebanon* (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center, Tel Aviv University, 2021), pp. 135-187; Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Third Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 17-34; Joseph Elie Alagha, *Hizballah's Identity Construction* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 33-44.

³ In this context, Nasrallah advocated a triangular doctrine for the defense of Lebanon: “The people, the army, and the resistance” (al-sha'b, al-jaysh, al-muqawama). He repeatedly invoked this formula to justify Hizballah's existence as an armed organization, positioning it as the representative of “the resistance.” See Lina Khatib, Dina Matar, and Atef al-Shaer, *The Hizballah Phenomenon: Politics and Communications* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014), pp. 73.

⁴ Eyal Zisser, “Hizballah in Lebanon: Between Tehran and Beirut, Between the Struggle with Israel and the Struggle for Lebanon,” in Barry Rubin (ed.), *Lebanon: Liberation, Conflict and Crisis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 157; Alagha, *Hizballah's Identity Construction*, pp. 113-139.

that ended the Lebanese Civil War (1989) and remained the sole armed group in the country alongside the Lebanese Army.⁵ Despite its commitment that its weapons are intended solely for Lebanon's defense against external threats, incidents occurred over the years in which Hizballah turned its weapons against Lebanese rivals. The most notable example is the May 2008 crisis, when Hizballah fighters took control of West Beirut in a week-long series of clashes that left hundreds dead. The crisis was eventually resolved with the signing of the Doha Agreement, which granted Hizballah and its allies institutional control over Lebanese politics by guaranteeing them one-third of the parliamentary seats, effectively giving them veto power over any decision concerning the Lebanese state.⁶

This highlights the core dilemma that preoccupies Hizballah and underscores the persistent tension inherent in its activities, as it must continually justify its existence. This dilemma is twofold: balancing its role as both an Iranian proxy and a patriotic Lebanese organization, and reconciling its identity as a Shi‘i revolutionary resistance movement—aligned with a broader axis committed to exporting the Islamic Revolution and the destruction of Israel—with its self-proclaimed position as “the defender of Lebanon.”

Hizballah and the Iron Swords War: The Dilemma Worsens

The October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas placed Hizballah in a precarious position, compelling it to navigate the conflicting aspects of its identity as both a Lebanese political actor and a member of the regional axis of resistance. This event presented Hizballah with perhaps the most significant challenge in its history, at a time when Lebanon was already suffering from profound economic and political crises.

In recent years, Lebanon has experienced a catastrophic economic collapse. The nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and currency have plunged, unemployment has soared, and the country

⁵ Eitan Azani, *The Hezbollah Movement: From Revolution and Pan-Islamism to Pragmatism and Lebanese Identity* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2005), p. 242.

⁶ Zisser, *Hizballah in Lebanon*, p. 171.

holds the dubious distinction of having the highest debt-to-GDP ratio in the world.⁷ Massive state loans and endemic governmental corruption have exacerbated the crisis, with the World Bank classifying Lebanon's economic collapse as among the ten worst globally since the nineteenth century, and possibly among the top three. This economic turmoil has left many Lebanese unable to access basic necessities, resulting in widespread humanitarian suffering.⁸

Compounding the economic disaster was Lebanon's prolonged political paralysis. Between October 2022-January 2025, the country has been without a president, and since October 2021, it has been governed by a caretaker government unable to implement meaningful reforms.⁹ The political gridlock only deepened the economic collapse, which led to mass protests by a desperate populace. Hizballah has been a central target of this public anger. Many Lebanese hold the group responsible for the state's decline, arguing that its dominance over the political system and alignment with external powers like Iran have hindered solutions to Lebanon's crises.¹⁰

Against this fraught backdrop, Hamas's declaration of war introduced a new dilemma for Hizballah. Yahya Sinwar might have envisioned the attack as a catalyst for a broader regional conflict, but this posed a serious problem for Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah. On one hand, Hizballah's *raison d'être* is rooted in its resistance against Israel and its solidarity with the Palestinian cause. On the other, a destructive war with Israel would further devastate Lebanon, undermining Hizballah's self-portrayal as the defender of the Lebanese people. This tension placed Nasrallah in a bind: while Hizballah needed to maintain its resistance credentials, it also had to avoid being seen as dragging Lebanon into a war against its interests.

Beginning on October 8th, Hizballah launched a series of cross-border attacks targeting mainly Israeli military positions, prompting Israel to evacuate hundreds of communities along the Northern border. But Nasrallah sought a delicate balancing act. He declared early on that he did not want an all-out

⁷ "[Lebanon and the ILO Release Up-to-date Data on National Labour Market](#)," *International Labour Organization*, May 12, 2002.

⁸ World Bank Group, "[Lebanon Sinking \(To the Top 3\)](#)," *Lebanon Economic Monitor*, Spring 2021.

⁹ David Gritten, "[Army Chief Elected Lebanon's President after Years of Deadlock](#)," *BBC*, January 9, 2025.

¹⁰ Jim Muir, "[Lebanon: Beirut Violence Fuels Fears of Return to Civil War](#)," *BBC*, October 27, 2021.

war with Israel but maintained that Hizballah would not stand by as Gaza was attacked.¹¹ Initially, Nasrallah appeared to believe that Israel would quickly seek an end to the war in Gaza, allowing him to link the two fronts rhetorically while avoiding full-scale escalation. However, as the conflict dragged on and Israel demonstrated no intention of ceasing its operations in Gaza, Nasrallah found himself trapped. His rhetoric had tied Hizballah's actions to events in Gaza, leaving him unable to disengage without appearing to abandon the Palestinian cause.¹²

Nasrallah's strategy relied on calibrating the conflict to avoid escalation. He sought to dictate a set of "rules of the game" that allowed for limited engagements with Israel while preserving an image of resistance. Yet, as the fighting in Gaza intensified, Israel's perspective shifted. The October 7 attacks had created a sense of vulnerability among Israeli civilians in northern Israel, many of whom had become internal refugees. For Israel, restoring a sense of security in the north became a priority, and its leadership began to view a decisive confrontation with Hizballah as necessary to neutralize the threat posed by the group.

Nasrallah appeared to underestimate this shift in Israeli strategy. Even after the assassination of senior Hizballah commander Fuad Shukr on July 30, 2024, Nasrallah seemingly believed that Israel was adhering to the established "rules of the game." He attributed Shukr's killing to a tit-for-tat response following Hizballah's rocket attack that killed children in Majdal Shams and planned a counterattack on the *Glilot* base in Israel. When the counterattack failed, Nasrallah falsely claimed it had succeeded, signaling his desire to de-escalate and return to a controlled conflict.¹³ This uncharacteristic departure from his usual reputation for honesty reflected the intense pressure he was under and his fear of escalation.

The situation took a dramatic turn on September 17-18, 2024, when Israel reportedly detonated explosives embedded in thousands of pagers and other communication devices, killing and injuring

¹¹ "[Nasrallah declares an expansion of operations in the South 'in quantity, quality, and depth': we must continue to keep our eyes on the battle](#)" [Arabic], *Al-Nahar*, November 11, 2023.

¹² Moria Asraf, "[Gantz and Eisenkot were summoned, Gallant pushed, and the Prime Minister opposed: The thwarted preventive strike](#)" [Hebrew], *Reshet 13*, December 23, 2023. Viewed on October 24, 2024.

¹³ "[Main points from Sayyid Nasrallah's speech regarding 'Operation Fortieth Day'](#)" [Arabic], *Al-Manar*, August 25, 2024.

hundreds and completely disrupting Hizballah's communication network, leaving the group stunned. Nasrallah's subsequent speech, characterized by hesitation and visible distress, marked a departure from his typically composed demeanor. He accused Israel of crossing red lines and vaguely hinted at retaliation but avoided making definitive commitments. This ambivalence revealed the depth of the crisis facing Hizballah.¹⁴

Six days later, Nasrallah was killed. Despite a series of assassinations targeting Hizballah leaders in the preceding days, Nasrallah likely believed Israel would refrain from targeting him directly, fearing total war. His miscalculation underscores the unprecedented challenges facing Hizballah. The October 7 attack by Hamas and its aftermath exposed the limits of Nasrallah's strategy and the contradictions within Hizballah's dual identity as a Lebanese political actor and a regional resistance leader.

Hizballah's actions during this period reveal a movement grappling with existential questions. It sought to balance its commitment to the Palestinian cause with its responsibility to a beleaguered Lebanese population, all while navigating shifting regional dynamics. The outcome of this episode will likely have profound implications for Hizballah's future role in Lebanon and the region.

Hizballah and Iran at a Crossroads

The assassination of Nasrallah presents Hizballah and its patrons in Iran with a new type of dilemma. Nasrallah, who had served as the Secretary General of Hizballah since 1992, had become an exceptional figure during his lifetime; his influence far exceeded the scope of his political role, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the organization under his leadership was largely shaped in his image and likeness.

Nasrallah took a leading role in the "Lebanonization" of Hizballah, and over the past three decades, he invested significant efforts in reconciling the organization's Shi'i-revolutionary identity with its

¹⁴ ["Nasrallah describes the Israeli attack as 'a declaration of war': We received an unprecedented blow in terms of security and manpower"](#) [Arabic], *Al-Nahar*, September 19, 2024.

national-Lebanese identity. However, this tension between identities, and the almost desperate attempt to bridge between them, ultimately cost him his life.

The deaths of Nasrallah and his supposed successor, Hashim Safi al-Din, have placed Hizballah and the Iranians at a crossroads. Naim Qassem, a relatively nondescript figure who had served for years as the organization's deputy secretary-general, was eventually chosen to succeed Nasrallah, though he had never had any ambition to do so.

Although he was always under Iranian protection and guidance, Nasrallah also enjoyed a relatively high degree of autonomy in managing the organization's affairs. In this context, the question of the identity and nature of the Shi'i organization under Qassem's leadership becomes all the more relevant. Will the new Secretary-General continue on Nasrallah's path? Even if he wishes to do so, his hands will likely be tied by the regime in Tehran to an even greater extent than his predecessor's. The Iranians' choice of Naim Qassem suggests that they will seek to expand their overt involvement in managing Hizballah in the post-war era. What will the organization's relations with state institutions and various actors within Lebanon look like? How will it continue to justify to the Lebanese its existence as an armed resistance movement separate from state institutions? These and other questions will likely continue to engage the players in Beirut, Tehran, and Jerusalem in the coming years.

Eitan Ishai is a doctoral student in the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He serves as the head of the Middle East and North Africa Program at Mitvim – The Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, and as the Secretary of The Middle East & Islamic Studies Association of Israel (MEISAI).

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