

Israel-Hamas war

Killing of senior Hamas leader in Beirut raises stakes in Israel war



Suspected drone attack against Saleh al-Arouri risks escalating hostilities in three-month conflict

Raya Jalabi in Beirut and **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

Senior Hamas official Saleh al-Arouri knew his days were numbered.

“It’s not unusual for the commanders and officers to be martyred,” the militant group’s deputy political leader said last year when asked about Israeli threats to assassinate him. “I think I’ve lived too long.”

Beirut-based Arouri on Tuesday became the most senior Hamas casualty of the [war](#) when he was [killed by a suspected Israeli drone attack](#) in the Lebanese capital, along with two commanders and four other members of the movement.

The death of Arouri, one of the founders of [Hamas](#)’s military wing, marks a significant blow to the group and underscores Israel’s determination to pursue its top leaders in the wake of Hamas’s October 7 attack on southern Israel.

Israel has not admitted involvement. But David Barnea, head of Mossad, on Wednesday said his spy agency was “committed to settling accounts” with everyone involved in the assault, regardless of how long it takes or where they are based.

The strike risks escalating hostilities between the Jewish state and the Lebanon-based militant group Hizbollah, who have traded almost daily exchanges of fire since the [war](#) began. The blast took place in Iran-backed Hizbollah’s south Beirut stronghold, and Arouri was said to be close to the group’s leader Hassan Nasrallah.

The 57-year-old was regarded as a key Hamas figure in the Iran-backed militant network stretching from the Palestinian territories to Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq. He was also integral to Hamas’s operations in the occupied West Bank, where the group has been gaining popularity.

“His death is a significant blow for Hamas,” said Maha Yahya, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center. “Not just as a founder of the Qassam Brigades [the military wing] but also his role in terms of leading Hamas in the West Bank.”





Palestinians in the West Bank city of Ramallah protest on Wednesday against the killing of Saleh al-Aroui © Mohammed Torokman/Reuters

The killings come as Hamas battles for survival in Gaza, where Israel has vowed to “destroy” the group following its attack, in which 1,200 people were killed, according to Israeli officials. The Jewish state responded to October 7 with a [ferocious offensive on Gaza](#), which has killed more than 22,000 people, according to Palestinian officials. Thousands of Hamas fighters are now hunkering down in tunnels fighting Israel’s military.

Arouri joined Hamas not long after the group was formed in 1987, and was soon recruiting, training and arming operatives, according to Israeli and Lebanese security officials and analysts, as well as planning attacks against Israeli targets.

Guy Aviad, an Israeli historian and author of several books on Hamas, said that while Arouri “wasn’t the person who pulled the trigger or planted the explosives” he was “extremely significant” within the movement.

Arouri spent two decades in and out of Israeli prisons, and was eventually released in 2010 on the condition that he left the Palestinian territories. He spent time in Syria, Turkey and Qatar before moving to Lebanon, where he had since lived.

As one of the group’s most senior leaders, he mostly laid low, living and working in the Dahiyeh neighbourhood of Beirut, a Hizbollah stronghold. The US has since 2015 offered a \$5mn reward for any information on his whereabouts. The strike on Tuesday hit a nondescript high-rise building in a residential area, creating a large hole in what appeared to be the third floor of the building.

Arouri was key to his group’s deepening ties to Hizbollah and Iran, said Israeli and Lebanese analysts and officials, and was tasked with maintaining relations even when Hamas and Iran supported opposing sides in the Syrian civil war. He had regularly

Nasrallah and Iran supported opposing sides in the Syrian civil war. He had regularly met with Nasrallah, said Israeli and Lebanese analysts and officials.



Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, left, with Arouri in Lebanon last year. Nasrallah must balance domestic and regional security concerns in deciding how to respond to the suspected Israeli attack © Hezbollah's Media Office/AFP via Getty Images

This relationship proved critical to helping him expand operations in the West Bank, where Arouri was accused by Israel of masterminding lethal attacks from exile. According to Israeli intelligence officials, in recent years, and with Iranian and Hizbollah assistance, he flooded the West Bank with money, weapons and explosives — not only to Hamas operatives — in an effort to escalate violence against Israeli targets.

“[Arouri’s] more important role was operational and military: as the Hamas official closest to the leadership of Hizbollah and Iran,” said Aviad, “and as the operator via remote control of terror cells in the West Bank”.

Arouri’s movements were known to the Israeli government for years, especially his foreign travel and contacts with Iran, said a person familiar with the issue.

This year, intelligence collection on Arouri’s activities had focused on his efforts to turn small cells of Hamas militants in the West Bank into larger squads in refugee camps. This included providing training material, newer weapons smuggled in from Jordan and, specifically, the use of clusters of motorcycles travelling in military formation, allowing them to quickly melt away from soldiers in pursuit.

Since October 7, Arouri helped co-ordinate Hamas operations with the so-called Axis of Resistance, the constellation of Iran-backed militant groups in a war room in

of resistance, the constellation of Iran-backed militant groups, in a war room in Beirut, according to Lebanese officials and people familiar with the operations of Hizbollah and Hamas.

But his relationship with Hamas's Gaza-based leadership was not entirely smooth. One theory for why Yahya Sinwar, the group's leader in Gaza, launched the October 7 attack was his personal rivalry with Arouri.

"Sinwar saw himself sidelined, with others taking the limelight. Gaza was viewed as 'stable' and all anyone wanted to talk about was the West Bank and the potential for an explosion there. This is Saleh al-Arouri. That was the guy," said one person who has met both men.

Inside the Palestinian militant group, and based on more than three decades of Israeli assassinations of its leaders, the expectation is that Arouri's role will be quickly filled.

"In Hamas, there's never a vacuum. Everyone, no matter how senior, has a replacement. We've seen this again and again," Aviad said.

What happens next will depend on Nasrallah, who must balance domestic and regional security concerns.

The Hizbollah leader publicly warned Israel in August that "any assassination on Lebanese soil against a Lebanese, Syrian, Iranian or Palestinian will be met with a decisive response". His group has also vowed to respond to Tuesday's killing and said it had its "finger on the trigger".

Nasrallah has previously been keen to contain the conflict with Israel, mindful of the need to avoid a full-scale regional war. But the killing in the heart of a Hizbollah-controlled area of Beirut has significantly raised the stakes for the militants.

In an address late on Wednesday, Nasrallah said the strike that killed Arouri was "very dangerous" and marked the "first time something like this has happened since 2006".

The "crime", he added, "will not go unpunished".

Additional reporting by Mehul Srivastava in Tel Aviv

