

Hizbollah

## **Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah weighs cost of escalating conflict with Israel**



Veteran cleric's pragmatism is being tested by the killing of a Hamas ally in his home turf of Beirut

**Raya Jalabi** in Beirut 8 HOURS AGO

---

A day after a senior Hamas leader was killed in a suspected Israeli drone strike in Beirut, the influential Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah delivered a highly anticipated televised address.

For most of the 80-minute speech on Wednesday, Nasrallah trod familiar ground, berating Israel for its ferocious bombardment of Gaza and the US for offering unbridled support. But in the closing minutes, the cleric's voice grew louder as he threatened Israel for its "very dangerous" [assassination of his ally Saleh al-Arouri](#), carried out in the Lebanese militant group's own backyard.

Diplomats, officials and analysts have for months noted the pragmatism shown by [Nasrallah](#), the enigmatic leader of one of the world's most powerful paramilitary forces, which has traded fire with Israel on an almost daily basis over the past three months. But the killing of Arouri has significantly raised the stakes, delivered a blow to Hizbollah, and thrown into question whether Nasrallah's restraint will still hold.

"Hizbollah has to respond quickly, because in the context of a war, you have to restore the balance of deterrence," said Amal Saad, an academic and Hizbollah expert.

But it must be "a carefully calibrated response, that is at once . . . a qualitative escalation in terms of scope and intensity, but falls short of high-intensity war", Saad added.

This week's events underline the challenges facing Nasrallah, who is due to give another address on Friday, as he navigates the most serious escalation of hostilities with Israel since Hizbollah, the dominant political and military force in Lebanon, last fought the Jewish state in a devastating 2006 war.

Israel responded to Hamas's deadly October 7 attack with a full-scale assault of the Palestinian militant group's base in Gaza. And it is increasingly clear that Israel is also unwilling to return to the prewar status quo with its northern neighbour Lebanon as about 80,000 people have been displaced by the border clashes.

How the 63-year-old cleric, who has led the Iran-backed force for more than 30 years, handles the next phase of the war will go a long way to determining whether the [Israel-Hamas conflict](#) broadens into a full-blown regional conflagration.

Israel’s leaders have shown increasing belligerence towards Lebanon, warning Hizbollah that “what we are doing in Gaza, we can do in Beirut”. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday said Israel “is committed to bringing about a fundamental change on its border with Lebanon”, according to a statement from his office.

Although Israel has said it hoped US-led diplomatic efforts lead to Hizbollah fighters pulling back from their shared border, it has also made clear it is prepared to take military action if its concerns are not addressed.



Hassan Nasrallah addresses supporters in Lebanon in November via a televised screen © Aziz Taher/Reuters

“Some in Israel have been saying ‘it’s now or never’, to deal a crushing blow to Hizbollah,” said Mohanad Hage Ali, a fellow at the Carnegie Center in Beirut. “If they try to do this, it will put Nasrallah in a difficult position, and narrows his ability to manoeuvre.”

Yet few anticipate Hizbollah would willingly cede territory. And with a powerful arsenal and tens of thousands of battle-hardened fighters, it poses a much greater threat to Israel than Hamas.

Within 24 hours of Hamas’s October 7 attack on Israel, Hizbollah had begun attacks over the border, turning southern Lebanon, which it controls, into “a support front” for its Palestinian ally in the Tehran-linked network of militant groups dubbed the Axis of Resistance.

-----

But Nasrallah then stayed uncharacteristically quiet for weeks, even as his fighters died in their dozens. When he broke his silence with two fiery but carefully [calibrated speeches](#) in November, he refrained from declaring war but noticeably kept the door open for an eventual escalation.

“This was not the same Hassan Nasrallah we saw in 2006,” said a senior Lebanese official, when Nasrallah made frequent bombastic speeches throughout the 34-day war with Israel. “In our communications . . . he has been very careful, very strategic, very deliberate.”

Nasrallah has orchestrated a calibrated tit-for-tat response in recent months. The day before a temporary truce in Gaza was to come into force in November, Hizbollah launched its biggest barrage to date in response to Israel’s killing of five of its elite fighters. But its guns then fell silent, allowing the truce to come into force.

“He showed what they could do, without taking it too far,” another senior Lebanese official said. “Hizbollah stuck to targets near the border knowing very well they couldn’t risk a major escalation that would collapse the ceasefire.”

Lebanese officials, analysts and people familiar with Hizbollah’s thinking say the root of the caution is that neither Nasrallah nor Iran want to trigger a full-blown conflict. Nasrallah on Wednesday asserted that while he did not want a war, his group was ready to fight “without limits” if Israel should provoke one.

The Shia cleric has come to be viewed as the most important figure in the Axis of Resistance, after Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, since the killing of powerful Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated by the US in 2020.

His decades at the helm of Hizbollah have granted him an unrivalled position as both public face and key strategist in the axis — “more junior partner than proxy” in the network, according to Saad. Iran’s foreign minister and senior Hamas leaders have travelled to meet Nasrallah in widely publicised meetings.





Hassan Nasrallah, centre, surrounded by bodyguards in a Beirut suburb in 1992 © Ramzi Haidar/AFP/Getty Images





An undated photo of Hadi Nasrallah, son of Hassan Nasrallah. Hadi, 18, was killed by Israeli commandos in 1997 © AFP/Getty Images

Since October 7, he has hailed the increased co-ordination between Iranian-backed militants from Yemen to Iraq. More than 1,000 Hizbollah fighters have also moved back to Lebanon from Syria to reinforce the front line, according to three people with knowledge of the organisation.

“He’s definitely trying to position himself as the speaker of the Axis of Resistance,” said Hage Ali, adding that Nasrallah’s credentials mean he appealed to a broader regional audience, unlike the leaders of other shadowy Iran-backed groups who are less well known.

Yet he is also seen as a prime Israeli target, living largely underground, delivering speeches via secure live feeds to his followers and communicating via emissaries.

Those who have met Beirut-born Nasrallah describe him as having a shrewd mind and commanding presence, someone now both feared and admired for the powerful force he helped build.

By his own description, he was “an observant Muslim at the age of nine”, more preoccupied with his prayers than helping out in his father’s shop.

At 16, he moved to Iraq to attend a seminary for aspiring Shia clerics. There, he came under the influence of Abbas Mussawi, a Lebanese cleric with whom he would eventually found Hizbollah in the early 1980s as a resistance movement to Israel’s occupation of Lebanon.

After Mussawi was assassinated by Israel in 1992, Nasrallah succeeded him as Hizbollah secretary-general. As leader he is credited with growing and professionalising Hizbollah, with the help of Iran, from a guerrilla outfit to a highly disciplined force with a centralised command structure.





Hassan Nasrallah, right, with Saleh al-Arouri, far left, in October. Arouri was assassinated in Beirut this week © Hezbollah Media Office/Handout/Reuters

The death of his teenage son Hadi, killed by Israeli commandos in 1997, saw him assume the role of a wartime leader who sacrificed for the cause.

The 2000 withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon gave Nasrallah and Hizbollah the opportunity to claim that “he achieved what few if any Arab states and armies had done fighting Israel”, according to Saad.

But Hizbollah’s domestic popularity eroded as it turned its military might inwards in an attempt to control Lebanon politically. A spate of assassinations and armed clashes ensured it would soon achieve its goal.

Lebanon’s caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati revealed as much in an October interview when he admitted that any decision to go to war with Israel was “not in my hands personally”, but with Nasrallah.

Yet the Hizbollah leader must also balance domestic national security interests with those of Iran and its proxies. Nasrallah “understands Lebanon can’t afford a destructive war”, said one of the senior Lebanese officials.

Saad summed up Nasrallah’s message this week as “if you take us to war, we’re ready for it”. It was: “We don’t want it, but we’re ready for it and we’ll destroy Israel. So don’t test us.”

*Additional reporting by James Shotter in Jerusalem*

