

Middle East conflict

Israel kills elite Hizbollah commanders in Beirut strike

Air strike on Ibrahim Aqil and Radwan Force follows a wave of deadly blasts in Lebanon



The Israeli air strike hit the southern suburbs of Beirut on Friday © Anwar Amro/AFP/Getty Images

Raya Jalabi in Beirut and **James Shotter** in Jerusalem 2 HOURS AGO

Israel has killed senior Hizbollah commanders in an air strike on the militants' stronghold of southern Beirut in a devastating assault that has heightened fears of a full-blown war.

Hizbollah's special operations commander Ibrahim Aqil was killed along with at least 10 members of the "senior chain of command of the Radwan Force", an elite unit within the group, the Israel Defense Forces said on Friday.

The militant group [confirmed](#) late on Friday that Aqil was killed in the Israeli attack and described him as one of its "greatest leaders". It added on Saturday that another senior commander, Ahmed Wehbi, had also been killed.

Aqil's death is arguably the most damaging blow Israel has struck against [Hizbollah](#), Lebanon's dominant political and military force, since the movement's formation in the early 1980s.

The Radwan Force is the arm of Hizbollah responsible for cross-border operations into Israel and defending southern Lebanon against a ground invasion. Israel has been targeting the Radwan for months, with the stated aim of pushing it back from the border.



Undated photo of Ibrahim Aqil who is said to have been the target of Israel's air strike
© US Department of State

Striking Hizbollah's top commanders on such a scale would also deal a blow to Iran, which considers the Lebanese group its main proxy and closest ally in the region.

Iran has refrained from directly intervening to support Hizbollah, owing to concerns about sparking an all-out regional war. There is also speculation in Tehran that Israel aims to draw the Islamic Republic into a conflict that could prompt a US strike against Iran.

Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araghchi, speaking on his arrival in New York for the UN General Assembly, said that Israel "will surely not achieve its goals of escalating and spreading war" but warned that it "will receive an answer to its crimes", according to the official state news agency IRNA on Saturday.

The attack came after Israel said it was entering a ["new phase"](#) of its nearly year-long conflict with Hizbollah, which had been largely contained to the Israeli-Lebanese border region.

It will increase pressure on Hizbollah to respond robustly, even though it is in disarray after consecutive days of assaults on its military capability and wary of being drawn into full-blown war with a far more sophisticated army.

Lebanese authorities on Saturday said that 31 people were killed in the strike, including three children and seven women. Dozens more were wounded. Hizbollah said at least 14 more of its members were killed, but did not specify their ranks.

Health minister Firas Abiad said he expected the death toll to rise as rescue teams continue to pull out bodies from the rubble.

Lebanon's state-run news agency reported that an F-35 warplane launched four missiles into the southern Beirut suburb of Dahiyeh, striking a residential building. Israel's military said the commanders were killed while conducting a meeting under the building.

The strike capped a week of deadly mass detonations of Hizbollah's [communications devices](#) that killed 37 people and injured thousands more. Hizbollah has blamed the attacks on Israel, which has not directly commented.

The Israeli assault was the second targeting of a senior Hizbollah commander in southern Beirut since the conflict erupted last October. A July strike on a residential building in the capital killed Fuad Shukr, Hizbollah's top military commander.



The aftermath of an Israeli attack on Lebanon's capital © Mohamed Azakir/Reuters

Aqil, like Shukr, was one of the group's founding members and sat on Hizbollah's jihad council, its highest military body, according to four people familiar with Hizbollah's operations. After Shukr's killing, Aqil took over some of the slain commander's responsibilities, said the people.

The US suspected Aqil of involvement in attacks 41 years ago in Beirut at the US and French barracks, which killed 307 people, and the US embassy, which killed 63.

The strike came amid intensifying salvos between Israeli forces and Hizbollah, which have been exchanging cross-border fire since the group launched rockets at [Israel](#) on

October 8, the day after Hamas's attack on the Jewish state.

The UN's special co-ordinator for Lebanon, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, called the attack "another alarming escalation". "We are witnessing an extremely dangerous cycle of violence," she said. "This must stop now."



On Thursday night, the Israeli military said its jets struck about 100 rocket launchers in Lebanon that were due to fire at Israel "in the immediate future". It was one of Israel's heaviest rounds of strikes on Lebanon since the start of the war.

Hizbollah fired more than 140 rockets at Israeli-controlled territory on Friday, according to the Israeli military, sparking fires in several areas. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Following the strike on Beirut, Hizbollah said it had launched more rocket salvos targeting what it said were defence installations, including a military intelligence headquarters it said was "responsible for assassinations".

US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said Washington still did not see a wider war as "inevitable".

"We don't want to see escalation. We don't want to see a second front in this war opened up," Kirby said. "Everything we're doing is going to be to try to prevent that outcome."

Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati, who condemned the "criminal" attacks this week, said he had requested an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council. "All the communications I received yesterday from senior international officials confirmed that the Israeli enemy crossed red lines," he said.

Mikati said he would head to the US for talks on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly “to assert that there is still space available for a diplomatic solution”.

Additional reporting by Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper in Beirut, Felicia Schwartz in Washington and Najmeh Bozorgmehr in Tehran

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