

Hizbollah

'Hizbollah is voiceless': Lebanon's most powerful force reels from loss of leader

Israel's assassination of Hassan Nasrallah shakes militant group and raises fears of civil strife in a fragile nation

Raya Jalabi in Beirut 6 HOURS AGO

Over the past two decades, Lebanese of all political persuasions got used to a familiar routine: whenever a significant national event took place, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah would address them and signal the direction his movement would seek to push the country.

But this weekend, Lebanese woke up with their fragile nation in crisis and without the man who had for years [dominated their news feeds and towered over their elected leaders](#).

“I am in complete shock,” said a tearful May Saad, a social worker, of [Nasrallah’s assassination by Israel on Friday](#). “I don’t agree with Hizbollah’s politics or anything, but he was like a father for the nation . . . even when he did things we didn’t like.”

Whether they loved or loathed him, Nasrallah held the nation captive, its fractured politics revolving around him and the militant group he built into Lebanon’s most powerful force.

Days after his killing, many Lebanese were still reeling from the news that their political north star was dead. “I think I’m still waiting for him to come out and tell us what to think about his own assassination,” said Saad, a Sunni Muslim from the southern city of Saïda.

Lebanese leaders from across the political spectrum were privately reaching out to one another and publicly calling for unity, a response that reflected fears the assassination could send their country sliding into civil strife.

With a powerful arsenal and tens of thousands of men at its command, the Shia Islamist Hizbollah movement has loomed large over the Lebanese state for decades.





Hizbollah fighters at a funeral in January © Hussein Malla/AP

But with Nasrallah dead and his militant group reeling, the future is uncertain.

The veteran leader maintained a cohesive and disciplined organisation, and was mindful of the role Hizbollah played in a multi-religious society. Now many question whether the group might fragment or become more extremist and whether other armed groups will seek revenge against it.

While celebrated across the nation's fiercely divided religious communities for pushing Israeli forces out of southern Lebanon in 2000, Hizbollah has been increasingly reviled by Christians and Sunnis who accuse it of undermining traditional sectarian power-sharing.

Some Lebanese see Hizbollah as the country's sole protector against a rapacious Israel, but others denounce the militants for cannibalising the state and violently quashing domestic opposition.

Hizbollah was widely blamed for the assassination of Lebanon's then-premier Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Three years later, it violently occupied west Beirut for several days, in a dramatic showdown with the government.





Mourners at the 2005 funeral procession of late premier Rafiq Hariri © Jamal Saidi/Reuters

Divisions over Hizbollah have sharpened since the group began firing rockets at Israel the day after the Palestinian militant group Hamas's October 7 attack triggered the war in Gaza.

The conflict was, until recently, widely contained to clashes on Lebanon's border. But Israel's shift to a nationwide bombing campaign has worsened the febrile atmosphere of a country already on its knees after five years of economic and political malaise.

Analysts say that if the country's strongest force is seen as severely weakened, others are likely to be emboldened to try to fill the void — particularly groups marginalised by Hizbollah in recent years.

“Lebanon now faces two threats: the continued Israeli aggression and possible invasion of the south, and the risk of clashes between the Lebanese,” said Rym Momtaz, an expert on Lebanon at the Carnegie Europe think-tank.

The sense of national unity that emerged after Israel caused thousands of Hizbollah's pagers and walkie-talkies to explode is being challenged by the realities of wider war.

Since Nasrallah's death, an uncomfortable tension has hovered over the capital, which was divided into a Muslim west and Christian east during a 1975-1990 civil war that still haunts Lebanese.

“This war has nothing to do with us,” said Therese, a Christian real estate agent from Keserwan in northern Lebanon, who has refused requests to help rehouse displaced Shia Muslims. “I don't see why we Christians should be helping them, not after everything Hizbollah has done to destroy this country.”

Some Sunnis and Christians celebrated Nasrallah's death within earshot of members of Hizbollah's Shia core constituency, many of whom were sleeping in the streets of the capital after fleeing an intense Israeli bombardment of the group's stronghold in southern Beirut.

Momtaz said the army and some political parties were working to keep the peace and quell fears of clashes, and added that some communities were worried that hosting potentially armed Hizbollah partisans could lead to Israel bombing them

potentially armed HIZBOLLAH PARASITIC could lead to ISRAELI BOMBING them.

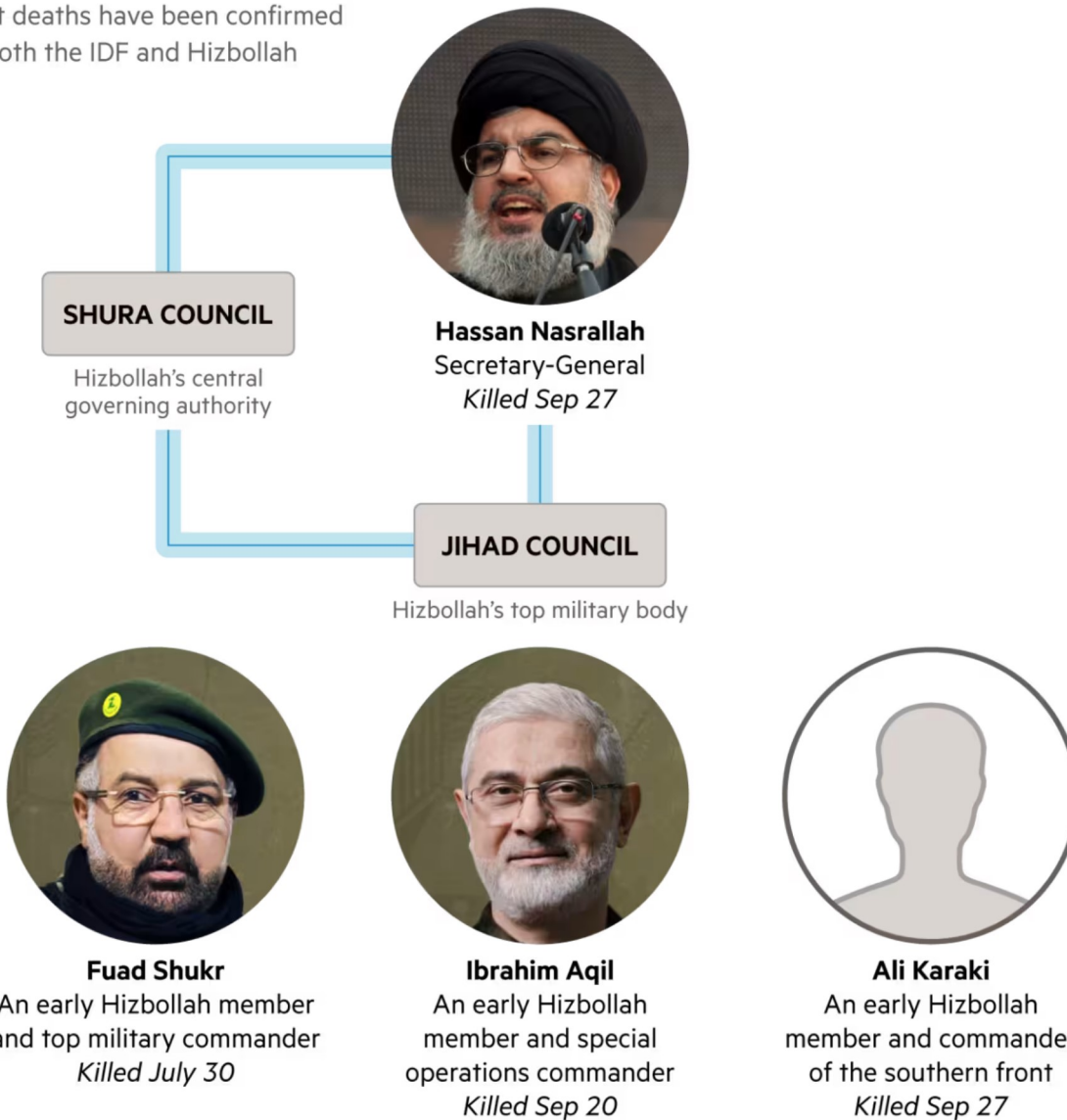
Lebanon's troubles are exacerbated by the absence of the state. A caretaker cabinet with limited powers and even more limited funds has presided over the country since elections in 2022 and it has been without a president for nearly two years.

Hizbollah and its vast social services network have been the one remaining constant in the embers of a failing state. But the movement has been largely quiet since the killing of its charismatic leader.

While it is still launching volleys of rockets against Israel, people familiar with the group's thinking said it had yet to fully process the magnitude of its losses amid the collapse of its communications systems and the relentless air strikes taking out its senior leadership.

Israeli strikes since Oct 7 have killed several top-ranking Hizbollah members

Most deaths have been confirmed by both the IDF and Hizbollah



The FT is seeking confirmation of the status of other Jihad Council members.

**OTHER LEADERS IN
THE MILITARY WING**



Wissam al-Tawil
Radwan force commander
Killed Jan 8



Taleb Sami Abdallah
Nasser unit commander
Killed June 11



Mohammad Naameh Nasser
Aziz unit commander
Killed July 3



Ibrahim Qobeissi
Led projectiles force
Killed Sep 24



Mohammad Srur
Aerial force commander
Killed Sep 26

Sources: IDF; Hizbollah;
Reuters; FT reporting
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Nasrallah had long personified the movement and without the 64-year-old cleric, “Hizbollah is voiceless”, said Amal Saad, an academic and expert on the group.

Israel said on Sunday that at least 20 other high-ranking Hizbollah members were also killed when its military dropped about 80 bombs on what it said was the group’s command centre in a densely populated neighbourhood of southern Beirut.

Senior politicians who regularly communicate with Hizbollah say they have been unable to reach their regular contacts for days.

While the group has been severely damaged, experts said it was not yet defeated and still had a powerful arsenal and battle-hardened fighters. Hizbollah is also deeply rooted in Lebanon's social fabric.

"Hizbollah has been bloodied and bruised, but it remains intact and with a renewed sense of defiance," Saad said, adding that the group would now benefit from having decentralised some operations in recent years.

Hizbollah would maintain its "strategic military culture", but faced with an unrelenting enemy "their strategy will change", she said.

Rebuilding Hizbollah's leadership and operational strength will be difficult given how deeply Israel's intelligence services have penetrated its ranks.

Fear of enemy infiltration has gripped the group as it investigates the miscalculations that left it so vulnerable.

"It is ironic that Hassan Nasrallah did not meet his end in a war with Israel over Lebanese land, but rather as a result of October 7th, an attack he was said to have deemed strategically misguided," Momtaz said.

Nasrallah "miscalculated Israel's increased risk appetite and intelligence penetration of his organisation, as well as Iran's weakness and retreat," she said.

Few potential candidates to replace Nasrallah as leader have the charisma, religious and political credentials that made him so effective.

The leading contender is Hashem Safieddine, a fellow cleric and cousin of Nasrallah who is thought to have been groomed for the job in recent years. Safieddine is considered a hardliner and has strong ties to Iran, Hizbollah's patron: his son is married to the daughter of Qassem Soleimani, the powerful Iranian commander who was [assassinated by the US in 2020](#).



Hashem Safieddine, who has strong ties to Iran, is the leading contender to take over as leader of Hizbollah © Aziz Taher/Reuters
Loyalists hope Hizbollah will appoint a leader soon. With its stronghold under attack, a public funeral for Nasrallah seems unlikely for now. Its members, suffering both displacement and the loss of a near-mythical leader, needs something to look forward to.

“They also need to start crafting their response for Nasrallah’s murder,” said one of the people familiar with Hizbollah’s thinking, adding that it would be “fiercer than anything they’ve done so far”.

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