

Middle East war**Hizbollah reels as Israeli
assassinations test 'strategic patience'**

Uptick in strikes against Shia militant group risks reigniting war in Lebanon

Raya Jalabi in Beirut

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Over the past year, Lebanese militant group Hizbollah has passively absorbed blow after blow as near daily Israeli air strikes pick off its operatives, destroy its remaining infrastructure and intimidate its base.

But the assassination on Sunday in a busy Beirut neighbourhood of the group's top military commander Haytham Ali Tabatabai — the most senior figure killed since a US-backed ceasefire formally ended the Israel-Hizbollah war a year ago — raised the stakes to a new level.

For Hizbollah's supporters the killing, seen as further confirmation that Israel has continued the war in all but name, raised an urgent question: how much longer can the Shia militant group hold back?

“Hizbollah is facing a paralysing dilemma right now,” said one official who regularly speaks to the militant group. “Does it continue to keep its head down and quietly rebuild? . . . Or does it retaliate against Israel and risk dragging Lebanon back into a more brutal war that could threaten to annihilate both them and the country?”

Long viewed as Lebanon’s dominant military and political power and the crown jewel in Iran’s network of regional proxy forces, Hizbollah’s strength has waned since the conflict, which began after the group started firing into Israel after Hamas’s October 7, 2023 attack.

Many, both inside and outside the group, now see this as a fatal, strategic error — one that left it in disarray and vulnerable to domestic and international pressures.



Mourners at Haytham Ali Tabatabai's funeral on Monday. Four other people were killed in the Israeli strike on the suburb of Dahiyeh
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After Israel escalated tit-for-tat cross-border attacks into a full blown war, it assassinated its longtime leader Hassan Nasrallah, launched a ground invasion, and a bombing campaign devastated the Shia communities in its heartland, killing thousands.

Under the terms of the ceasefire, Hizbollah agreed to move its weapons out of its bastion in southern Lebanon, with Israel agreeing to the phased withdrawal of its troops from the area.

However, while Israel, the US and the new Lebanese government expect the militants to disarm as part of the agreement, Hizbollah has never expressly agreed to it.

Lebanese officials have touted progress in dismantling Hizbollah infrastructure and weapons caches in the south, with the group's tacit co-operation. But the militants argue that their weapons remain necessary as long as Israel continues its aggression.

Analysts and people familiar with the group's thinking said it has relied instead on a doctrine of "strategic patience", and has prioritised quietly reconstituting itself, filling senior positions left vacant by last year's assassinations and bolstering militarily.

Though its supply routes were largely cut after the fall of Syria's Assad regime last year, several trucks full of rockets have in recent months been intercepted crossing into Lebanon from Syria.

Israel, meanwhile, continues to occupy five "strategic" outposts in southern Lebanon, preventing residents from returning and rebuilding what remains of their homes.

It has repeatedly insisted that it will act unilaterally to target the militant group against any perceived threats, claiming to have killed more than 300 Hizbollah operatives since the ceasefire. The attacks have killed at least 127 civilians, according to the UN.

Lebanese army soldiers secure the site of an Israeli air strike that targeted a building in the southern Lebanese village of Deir Kifa last week © Mahmoud Zayyat/AFP/Getty Images

The latest uptick in strikes has raised fears that Israel could be planning a larger assault, one that would risk reigniting the war.

“Hizbollah is rebuilding its capabilities at a faster pace than the Lebanese army is able to reduce them. That’s why we are striking and increasing the pace of enforcement,” Nadav Shoshani, an IDF spokesperson, said.

“We cannot allow such a situation, and we learned very well from the events of October 7 — we will not allow Hizbollah to pose a threat to us again.”

The stand-off has created an intractable problem for Lebanese authorities, who say Israel has refused to engage with offers to negotiate directly and fear that trying to force Hizbollah to disarm risks triggering civil strife.

“Over the past year, their focus, and Iran’s focus, has been on rebuilding Hizbollah’s military capabilities,” said Nicholas Blanford, an expert on the armed group at the Atlantic Council think-tank.

But its doctrine of patience “could snap”, Blanford said, with some officials publicly saying Tabatabai’s assassination “crossed a red line”.

While some analysts and people familiar with the group’s thinking see that as typical Hizbollah bluster, others see a deepening divide over their future direction.

“Since the war ended, there have been internal divisions with some in the political leadership doubting the assessments of Hizbollah’s military branch,” said Mohanad Hage Ali, a senior research fellow at Carnegie. “In the past, the military commanders were telling the leadership that they’re capable of deterring Israel — that was all proven terribly wrong.”

That discord is creating yet more internal divisions, that could push Hizbollah towards retaliation, Hage Ali said.

Hizbollah’s Iranian sponsors are also grappling with what role the group will play in a post-October 7 regional order. While its deterrence factor has been shattered, “clearly the Iranians see the utility in rebuilding Hizbollah”, Blanford said.

“Iran doesn’t have a firm plan for what they want to do with Hizbollah yet — maybe they’ll be useful for staging another range of attacks on Israel in a future confrontation. But until they have decided, there’s no reason not to rebuild an asset that could still prove itself useful.”

And a successful confrontation with Israel “would help Hizbollah convince Tehran it is still worth having around”, the official speculated.

Additional reporting by James Shotter and Andrew England in Jerusalem

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