

The Day After Nasrallah: Succession and Strategic Opportunities

Description

On October 15, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) released an [interrogation video](#) of the first captured Hezbollah militant since the beginning of Israel's ground incursion in southern Lebanon. Wadah Younis, who was found hiding in a tunnel, describes a demoralized movement mired in fear and internal chaos.

Starting with the [unprecedented pager attack](#) on September 17 that incapacitated thousands of Hezbollah operatives, the unrelenting strikes at all levels of the organization—including the elimination of its decades-long leader Hassan Nasrallah—signal the establishment of a [new equation](#): after a year of tit-for-tat fighting, the IDF has shifted away from a war of attrition toward a forceful offensive designed to return nearly 70,000 displaced Israelis to the country's north. As of this writing, the exertion of constant pressure on Hezbollah has proven effective in crippling the organization by causing it significant losses and severely degrading its operational capabilities and infrastructure. Moreover, the decimation of its senior ranks has merely compounded the mayhem by hindering Iran's appointment of a worthy successor to Nasrallah.

<https://irregularwarfareinsider.podbean.com/>

On October 29, Naim Qassem, Nasrallah's deputy and one of Hezbollah's founding members, was selected as the movement's [new Secretary-General](#). This delayed appointment, however, does not inherently herald the organization's successful regrouping and recovery. Although political science research on high-value targeting and leadership decapitation has often minimized the impact of a leader's elimination on organizational resilience, its conclusions are not necessarily applicable to Shi'i movements. Nasrallah's centralized command structure generated a succession struggle from which Qassem emerged as the inevitable winner. The day after Nasrallah will likely demand a force of personality to ensure Hezbollah's survival despite Iran's backing, Qassem's uninspiring profile may contribute to the organization's collapse. It is within this context that Israel must suppress its tactical impulses and prioritize strategic thinking to dismantle one of its most potent adversaries.

Nasrallah: The Intentional Bottleneck

Hezbollah proves an enduring strategic challenge for Israel as it has become part and parcel of the Lebanese political system. Under Hassan Nasrallah's rule (1992-2024), it evolved from a mere Iranian proxy group into one of the most powerful non-state actors in the world.

Nasrallah achieved this transformation via a high degree of centralization in an organization composed of various councils and committees. Although the seven-member Shura Council serves as the supreme decision-making body, Nasrallah remained the final authority. According to the IDF's Military Intelligence Directorate (AMAN), no significant action could be executed on or from Lebanese soil without his explicit approval. This command structure, which was fueled by Nasrallah's profound [narcissism and paranoia](#), was designed to shroud Hezbollah in secrecy to maintain OPSEC for professed resistance operations. As the leader of a deeply entrenched movement with considerable influence in the Lebanese arena, it also enabled him to control the political landscape by minimizing internal turmoil and pragmatically managing both Lebanese needs and Iranian interests. Maintaining a balance between these often competing priorities is necessary for a local Shi'i movement loyal to the Supreme Leader of Iran. For decades, Nasrallah emphasized one over the other depending on the political dynamics within Lebanon.

However, this bottleneck was only effective under Nasrallah's rare blend of political acumen and charisma. He possessed a talent for psychological warfare, reflected in his grasp of public perception and awareness of the Israeli mentality. For instance, he remained composed during his televised speeches to conceal any sign of emotion or weakness that could be exploited by Israeli intelligence. Obsessed with Israeli media, he was familiar with its journalists and read every news article or analytical piece that pertained to him. Moreover, his dual understanding of tactics and strategy allowed him to deftly maneuver the complex terrain of Lebanese politics by forming alliances and embracing rhetoric that transcended sectarian and ethnic divisions. It also extended to the world stage: well-versed in Israeli and Western policy, he operated with their political and security interests in mind. Although Nasrallah made miscalculations throughout his tenure, he ultimately succeeded in cementing Hezbollah's leading position in Lebanon by inspiring loyalty in its base and fear in its opponents.

Naturally, the loss of Nasrallah's unusual combination of traits and capabilities, coupled with the centrality of his role, induced a month-long succession dilemma for the Iranian regime. While largely responsible for Hezbollah's rise in power, a deliberately Nasrallah-centric approach was not conceived for organizational resilience or longevity.

Qassem: The Last Resort

Naim Qassem never was anyone's first choice to head the Party of God. Despite being Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary-General since 1991, he failed to be promoted to the top role when Abbas al-Moussawi, the second Secretary-General, was assassinated in 1992. He remained deputy when Hassan Nasrallah was selected to lead the movement, suggesting he wanted the skills and personality to be a serious contender. The Iranian regime once again hoped to overlook Qassem in the aftermath of Nasrallah's elimination on September 27, waiting an entire month to announce his successor.

The delay in appointment testifies to the internal havoc within Hezbollah and the absence of viable alternatives to Nasrallah following the liquidation of its senior leadership; in his seminal book *Hizbullah: The Story from Within*, Qassem acknowledges that Hezbollah prides itself on its past organizational resilience. Specifically, he explains that Nasrallah was intentionally elected Secretary-General a mere day after Moussawi's death to prevent Israel from shaking the Party's resolve. Moreover, Hashim Safi al-Din's death in October dealt a severe blow to the movement: reports have emerged since 2006 that he was chosen as Nasrallah's replacement in light of his close ties to Iran and experience as Chairman of Hezbollah's Executive Council. Arguably, this turn of events indicates the effectiveness of Israel's targeting of multiple tiers of leadership rather than one or two high-ranking individuals.

Lacking charisma and leadership qualities, Qassem does not hold the same promise that Safi al-Din was presumed to have. For example, he was mocked for [sweating profusely](#) throughout his first recorded speech after Nasrallah's assassination. Even his attire conveys a diminished stature: unlike the black-turbaned Nasrallah and Safi al-Din, he wears a white turban to signal that he is not a Sayyid or descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

In the Shi'i Muslim context, however, the importance of charisma should not be discounted. Populist figures are why Shi'ism witnessed a major shift in the last 50 years away from historical passivity toward political activism. [Cults of personality](#) have been central to Shi'i identity and ideology, from Imam Hussein during the Battle of Karbala in 680 to Muqtada al-Sadr in today's Iraq. Charismatic leaders can mobilize populations—especially young, disenfranchised elements—and retain their loyalty in the face of setbacks or defeat; unlike Sunnis, Shi'a can benefit from a millennium-long tradition and history of oppression and victimization. Charisma can also compensate for a lack of operational or tactical proficiency, as well as lackluster religious credentials. Even in the Sunni context, the charismatic Osama Bin Laden surrounded himself with Muhammad Atef, Saif al-Adel, and Ayman al-Zawahiri to offset his military and religious deficiencies.

Beyond placating the population within the borders of Lebanon, an engaging Hezbollah leader in the social media era would present a heightened risk to Israel: he could reach all corners of the globe to

manipulate foreign audiences by establishing the so-called resistance (*al-muqawama*) as a priority for the Muslim community (*ummah*). In fact, Qassem [ascribes](#) part of Hezbollah's growth to youth enthusiasm—he believes the preparedness of youth for jihad is the key to resistance. Consequently, a leader who can manipulate social media and attract the younger generations may replenish Hezbollah's ranks.

Notwithstanding, as a Hezbollah veteran, Naim Qassem has some characteristics that may stabilize the organization and help it recover. A prolific intellectual, he can resonate with the frustrated youth of today, both in the Middle East and the West. Specifically, [his writings](#) involve a lot of post-colonial terminology and concepts that frame Hezbollah as a resistance movement against Western imperialism, subjugation, and oppression. Furthermore, his ideology is both rigid and flexible. While he believes Hezbollah should focus on minimizing internal strife within Lebanon and instead promote inter-sect dialogue and cooperation for the sake of liberation, he simultaneously rejects political compromise or involvement in any process or agreement that undermines Hezbollah's interests and objectives. A historical illustration of this would be Qassem's claim that for decades Hezbollah avoided participating in executive government in a ministerial capacity as it did not want to be responsible for a bad government's overall actions.

Despite his political sophistication, his intellectualism may alienate the undereducated segments of Hezbollah's base. Conversely, it could appeal to the pious middle classes or bourgeoisie. According to French terrorism expert Gilles Kepel, [successful Islamist movements](#) retain the support of both the pious bourgeoisie and the young urban poor. Naim Qassem may ultimately be to Hezbollah what Ayman al-Zawahiri is to Al-Qaeda Core.

Israel: The Myopic Tactician

Temporary appointment. The countdown has begun, • [posted](#) former Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant above a picture of Naim Qassem. But is eliminating him a smart strategic move? The timing of the assassination would be as critical as the decision to carry out the act itself; it would be as fickle as the political and operational realities on the ground.

Hezbollah is currently a shadow of its former self, and its new Secretary-General is not nearly as capable as his predecessor. Any action would have to occur within weeks to engender another power vacuum—with every passing day, internal chaos should dwindle. If negotiations for a ceasefire take place, they will likely provide the self-proclaimed Axis of Resistance with breathing room. To add insult to injury, if several years elapse until Qassem is removed, Iran will be able to groom multiple potential successors and implement new preventive measures based on its lessons learned from this

chapter of the conflict.

Although Qassem's elimination would be symbolic by marking the near [extinction of the old guard](#), Israel should not favor political expediency at the expense of long-term strategy. With a reputation for tactical excellence but strategic mediocrity, AMAN may consider seizing this opportunity to examine its core assumptions and kinetic impulses. Allowing Qassem to remain in power could enfeeble the movement and instigate its demise; it may be wiser to leverage this unique moment of vulnerability by focusing intelligence efforts on empowering the opposition and the Lebanese Armed Forces. Anti-Hezbollah factions have been hampered by fear for decades due to [Nasrallah's suffocating grip](#) on Lebanese politics. They may be in a position, with the proper support, to finally start taking back control of Lebanon. A [quasi-failed state](#) with a wrecked economy, Lebanon may be able to step back from the abyss. As Qassem himself admits in [his book](#), Hezbollah felt its resistance operations weakened when the Lebanese Armed Forces were the custodian of security in the south following the 1989 Taif Accord.

The next steps will prove crucial to Lebanon's future. The Israelis have a narrow window of time and need to capitalize on their operational gains before resentment explodes and contributes to the restoration of Hezbollah's ranks. Students of Lebanese history will recall that the Israeli invasions of 1978 and 1982 conduced to Hezbollah's rise—they galvanized eventual recruits into action in the wake of their forced migration from the rural south to the suburban slums of Beirut. An ongoing bombing campaign may reproduce this phenomenon more than four decades later. Worse, it could be the catalyst for a more extreme offshoot to develop should Qassem be perceived as an uninspiring and indecisive leader.

With the ironic righteousness typical of jihadists, Qassem proffers the following advice from Imam Ali to Arab regimes: "For the discontent of the common people ills the satisfaction of the prominent, and the discontent of the prominent is forgiven through the contentment of the common people." Perhaps the Lebanese opposition could remind Qassem of the wisdom of his quote should it present the public with its vision for a post-Nasrallah and eventually post-Hezbollah Lebanon.

Conclusion

Over the past century in the Middle East, states have repeatedly failed to consider the second- or third-order consequences of any policy or action. This has proven especially salient in the case of regime or leadership change. Israel, in particular, has continuously operated with the mentality of a tactician rather than a grand strategist. As its national-security apparatus contemplates "the day after Nasrallah" in the Lebanese arena, its calculus should be rooted in an understanding of Hezbollah's Shi'i context. Not only does the Shi'i notion of authority differ from the Sunni one,

but the decapitation of an influential Shiâ??i leader has direct implications for the Iranian regime.

Targeting Hezbollahâ??s Secretary-General should be predicated on collected intelligence and the predicted succession flow instead of political symbolism. Naim Qassem may provide a strategic windfall for Israel and its Western allies: a leader without the requisite charisma or cunning will inevitably pressure Iran. With greater entanglements than ever, it needs its strongest proxy to manage the Lebanese front while furthering its regional interests reliably. Moreover, weak leadership may jeopardize any chance of full organizational recovery.

The Israeli-Lebanese conflict is at a turning point. If Israel takes advantage of the strategic opportunity before it, it can incapacitate one of its greatest enemies and bolster the Lebanese opposition. Ultimately, the proper sequence of events may enable â??the day after Nasrallahâ?? to go down in the annals of history as â??the day after Hezbollah.â??

Alexandra Veyne is the Chief Human Resources Officer of IWI. She holds an A.B. in Near Eastern Studies with High Honors from Princeton University, where she studied the languages and cultures of the Middle East with an eye toward policy. Her professional background includes working as a writer and editor for cybersecurity companies.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton Universityâ??s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Main Image: Hezbollah fighters at a ceremony, 2018 ([Khamenei.ir](https://www.khamenei.ir), CC by 4.0)

If you value reading the Irregular Warfare Initiative, please consider [supporting our work](#). And for the best gear, check out the [IWI store](#) for mugs, coasters, apparel, and other items.

Date Created
2024/11/18