

After Hezbollah's Miscalculations, It Has Lost Much of Its Power

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Senior Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



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The group's false assessment of Israel's wartime fragility is proving more costly by the day.

Hezzbollah, the formidable Shia militia in Lebanon that for years posed the most imminent and strategic threat to Israel, is suddenly a shadow of its former self. Within days, a spectacular series of Israeli intelligence and military manoeuvres severely degraded Hezbollah's fighting capacity and dismantled its leadership cadre.

Now, with the bombing of Hezbollah's military command headquarters and death of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, it is no exaggeration to say that the Hezbollah of two weeks ago no longer exists. And since Hezbollah was the **backbone** (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks>) of Iran's network of militant proxies, its so-called Axis of Resistance, Iran's strategy of arming and deploying proxy groups throughout the region is suddenly at risk as well.

Nobody (outside Israeli military and intelligence headquarters) saw this coming, certainly not Hezbollah, which believed its **massive arsenal** (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/07/10/hezbollah-weapons-israel-war-border-nasrallah/>) of rockets and missiles served as a deterrent against an Israeli attack on its forces in Lebanon. Last year, three months before Oct. 7, Mr. Nasrallah **threatened** (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/nasrallah-says-israel-will-be-retained-to-stone-age-if-war-erupts/) Israel in no uncertain terms, "You will be returned to the Stone Age if you go to war."

But over the past 11 months Israel became less deterred. First came the horrific Hamas attack of Oct. 7, followed by the cumulative effect of Hezbollah's near daily rocket attacks on northern Israel. Hezbollah's attacks put increasing pressure on Israel, as intended, only that pressure did not lead Israelis to stop targeting Hamas so much as it

chipped away at Israel's fears about the cost of military action to address the military threats posed by Hezbollah. While the trauma of the Hamas attack remains an open wound due to the many Israeli hostages Hamas still holds there, Israelis have also been contending with Hezbollah's rocket attacks and the reality that after nearly a year of war more than 60,000 Israeli civilians remain displaced (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/26/world/middleeast/israel-hezbollah-displaced.html>) from their homes in communities along the border.

Israeli society gradually concluded the situation in the north was intolerable and, as the IDF began to scale back major military operations against Hamas, support grew for the idea that the military should do what it must to enable civilians to return to their homes. To that end, just before the operation targeting Hezbollah's wartime communications gear, the Israeli war cabinet expanded (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/sep/17/israel-war-goals-netanyahu-hamas-gaza-palestine>) its war goals to include the return of displaced civilians to their homes. The new goal was not the destruction of Hezbollah, or even degrading its rocket arsenal, meaning that had Hezbollah stopped firing rockets at Israel, Mr. Nasrallah would likely still be alive and Hezbollah would still be a functioning organization.

While the way Israel has pulled the carpet out from under Hezbollah so quickly is astounding, the fact that they ultimately took action against Hezbollah should not surprise. For months, Israeli officials stated publicly that if the U.S.-led diplomatic effort to get Hezbollah to redeploy away from the border and stop shelling Israel did not succeed, then Israel would forcibly redeploy Hezbollah from the border.

And yet, Hezbollah was very much caught by surprise. Mr. Nasrallah locked himself into an untenable position by conditioning (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/07/17/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-gaza-nasrallah/>) a cessation of Hezbollah rocket attacks on a ceasefire with Hamas. Doing so placed additional leverage in the hands of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar who, according to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, then "reneged" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/30/world/middleeast/blinken-hamas-israel-truce.html>) on commitments" Hamas had made in previous negotiation rounds. (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu then hardened (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgl2370ldxro>) his negotiating position as well.) Meanwhile, Mr. Nasrallah continued to reiterate threats he thought would continue to deter Israel from attacking Hezbollah. In June, he warned (<https://www.npr.org/2024/06/27/g-s1-6384/israel-iron-dome-hezbollah-hamas-missile-defense-limits>) that Israel "knows very well that no place will be safe from our missiles and drones" in the event of a war. But by then, Israeli military and political leaders had turned a corner and no longer took such threats as reason not to attack, but rather the reason to do so forcefully.

It's not just that over time Israelis lost patience with Hezbollah's open-ended rocket attacks that explains how Mr. Nasrallah failed to recognize that Hezbollah's deterrence of Israel had been significantly degraded. It was also a factor of believing deeply in his own assessment, which Oct. 7 and the events that followed seemed to vindicate, that Israel was—in Mr. Nasrallah's words—"weaker than a spider's web" (<https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/spider-web-speech-2:-israeli-media-on-sayyed-nasrallahs-spee>). Israeli society and its military seem strong, he'd argued for years, but in time they would be easily defeated.

Mr. Nasrallah resurrected his "cobweb theory" again last year, some eight months before the Hamas attacks of Oct. 7, arguing that while Israeli infighting over judicial reform and other social and political issues was tearing at the fabric of Israeli society, Hezbollah was gradually becoming increasingly prepared to counter Israeli military superiority. From the delivery of Iranian air defence systems, which Mr. Nasrallah maintained has "eroded the Israeli air force's superiority in the skies" above Lebanon, to the construction of Hezbollah observation towers (operating under the cover of a Hezbollah environmental organization (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1698>)) along the border with Israel. But over the past several months the Israeli military destroyed

nearly all Hezbollah infrastructure along the border, including these observation towers, and Israeli warplanes continued to dominate the skies of Lebanon. Still, the spider web analogy stuck and was **echoed** (<https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2024/01/10/717940/Israel-plea-US-shows-regime-weaker-spider-web-Hezbollah>) by other senior Hezbollah leaders.

As recently as this month, following the explosion of Hezbollah pagers and walkie-talkies, Mr. Nasrallah appeared on Hezbollah's satellite television station and calmly assured "**the reckoning will come**" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECxmR0Kd3k0>). It did, just for Mr. Nasrallah himself and the organization he led.

*Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of its Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. This article originally appeared **on the Globe and Mail website** (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-after-hezbollahs-miscalculations-it-has-lost-much-of-its-power>). ❖*

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