

Israel on a high after Nasrallah killing, as mood for an invasion grows

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A man stands among the rubble of buildings near the site of the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut's southern suburbs, Sunday, September 29, 2024 [Hassan Ammar/AP Photo]

Tel Aviv, September 30 (RHC)-- Israel has largely been fractured over the past year, divided over what went wrong during the Hamas-led attack on October 7, what the priorities of its war on Gaza should be, and whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the right man to lead the country.

But the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut last Friday has provided Netanyahu with a major win, say analysts, and has united many of Israel's politicians – and its public. That ballast for Netanyahu is likely to encourage Israel to push forward with a ground war on Hezbollah and Lebanon, according to some experts.

Opposition leaders have lined up to salute the killing of Nasrallah, carried out by a barrage of bunker-buster bombs that levelled several large residential buildings.

Yair Lapid, a former prime minister and the current leader of the opposition, congratulated the Israeli military and said that Israel's enemies should “know that whoever attacks Israel is a son of death”. And Benny Gantz, a rival of Netanyahu's who stepped down as a war cabinet minister in June, called the killing “a matter of justice” that was an opportunity to “advance the war's objectives”.

Israel has defined its objectives for the war as the release of captives held in Gaza, the defeat of Hamas and the return of Israelis to their homes in the north of the country — from where about 60,000 Israelis have been displaced since the start of the Gaza war and the onset of the crossfire between Israel and Hezbollah.

Nasrallah's killing has bolstered the view within Israel that the time is right to target Hezbollah still further, and seek a decisive victory against the armed group. That's despite Israel's growing international isolation over the death of more than 41,600 civilians in Gaza, and the rising death toll in Lebanon, where more than 700 people have been killed in recent days.

“On Friday we killed an archenemy, one who has killed many Israelis, Americans and others,” Israeli pollster and former aide to a number of senior politicians, Mitchell Barak, said of Nasrallah's death. “It's what we've been saying for years: we will punish and kill anyone who tries to harm us.”

Barak said a new confidence had taken hold across many parts of Israeli society, as enthusiasm for a land invasion grows — along with the desire for the final destruction of what many within Israel saw as an enduring foe.

“We know this is the time to continue into Lebanon and not allow [Hezbollah] to regroup,” Barak said. “Killing Nasrallah and the attacks upon their beepers and walkie-talkies of last week ... has left them weak, but they're still armed and they're still dangerous. We need to push them back, at least to the Litani River [in southern Lebanon], maybe further.”

In 2000, Israel ended an 18-year occupation of southern Lebanon, though it has since engaged in numerous attacks on its northern neighbour — and in turn faced missiles from Hezbollah. In 2006, Israel and Hezbollah fought a war.

Now, some in Israel are arguing that an Israeli presence on the Lebanese side of the border is necessary to allow for the return of civilians who have had to leave northern Israel as a result of rocket fire from Lebanon.

“They want to see a buffer zone that they know Hezbollah can't enter,” said Mairav Zonszein, Crisis Group's senior analyst in Israel. “That could be where things are going right now.”

In the last few weeks, Israel's Northern Command, which borders the frontier with Lebanon, has been bolstered. On September 18th, the 98th Paratroop Division was deployed to the border, with two reserve divisions subsequently mobilised to augment the forces there.

Any decision on a ground invasion of Lebanon will likely be determined by how far Israel judges Hezbollah's capabilities have been degraded as a result of the killing of much of the movement's leadership, air attacks on its positions and weapons caches, and the undermining of its mobile communication systems, say analysts.

Within Israel, some cautioned against assuming a large-scale land invasion was already a given. Political scientist Ori Goldberg pointed to what he described as the dichotomy that continues to define Israel's actions in Gaza and Lebanon. "We behave like a bull in a china shop, then we pride ourselves on our precision," he said from Tel Aviv.

"It's the same with a land invasion. Right now we're on a high and we want to push into Lebanon. At the same time, we're terrified of becoming bogged down and fighting on a second front.

"We're basically, Schrodinger's Israel," he said, referring to the philosophical quandary of determining whether a cat locked in a soundproof box was alive or dead, first proposed by physicist Erwin Schrodinger in 1935.

"We're preparing to invade and we're also not," Goldberg said. "There's no vision, no strategy, no end game."

What there is in plenty at the moment in many parts of Israeli society is raw confidence, after a string of successes against Hezbollah, including the explosion of thousands of pagers and walkie-talkies largely used by the Lebanese movement.

The explosions in mid-September killed dozens and injured thousands of Lebanese, both Hezbollah members and civilians, and underscored the depth of Israeli infiltration into Hezbollah's communication network.

Yet Zonszein cautioned that while there was a general feeling of satisfaction among the Israeli public after the attacks on Hezbollah, there was still wariness of potential reprisals – particularly from Hezbollah's main backer, Iran.

"There's still a bit of waiting period to see how Iran will react, or to see if Hezbollah still has the capacity [to respond] and will use it," Zonszein said.

In anticipation of potential reprisals in the wake of Nasrallah's killing, public gatherings have been capped at 1,000 people across much of Israel, with those numbers restricted even further in the north.

Many Israelis seem to be prepared to accept further war restrictions in return for a further military push against Hezbollah, particularly as the feared barrage of missiles deep into Israel has not yet materialised, said experts.

For supporters of the war, it's a question of ending the threat from Hezbollah once and for all, taking advantage of an opportunity to knock out a weakened enemy.

"No one was calling for a ceasefire from October 8 when [Hezbollah] started firing the first of their 8,000 rockets into the north," Barak said. "Only when Israel began to eradicate the threat of the rockets in the past few weeks did the international community wake up to prevent us from defending ourselves."

Still, the widening of the war to Lebanon – and the recent string of what many within Israel regard as unalloyed successes against Hezbollah – don't mean that Israel has forgotten about the captives in Gaza who were taken there by Hamas and other Palestinian fighters on October 7, Goldberg said.

"They're not off the radar," Goldberg said of the captives and their families, who have staged regular protests throughout the war on Gaza. "Right now, Israel regards itself as potent and mighty."

“It’s an unspoken understanding across Israel that the war in Gaza is pretty much over,” he said. “We just don’t want to say we’re done. There’s nothing else that can be achieved there. Many think the time’s right for a deal.”

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