

Air Strike



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Lebanon & Israel Analysis: Assassination of Hezbollah's Chief of Staff on November 23 signals Israel's openness to escalation amid effort to derail Hezbollah's regrouping efforts

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Executive Summary:

- On November 23, Israel assassinated Hezbollah's Chief of Staff in an airstrike in Beirut's Dahiyeh. This comes amid intensifying Israeli strikes in Lebanon aimed at derailing Hezbollah's regrouping efforts.
- The airstrike in Beirut, the first in five months, highlights Israel's openness to an escalation vis-a-vis Hezbollah amid its concerted efforts to prevent the group from reconstituting itself.
- In the wake of the assassination, Hezbollah will face a strategic dilemma on whether to retaliate or show restraint, with the latter being the more plausible scenario in light of its still weakened position.
- Regardless, Hezbollah continues to adhere to its legacy and tries to reconstitute itself amid insufficient Lebanese government action to disarm it. This will continue to be a driving force for Israel's gradual escalation in the coming months, highlighting increased volatility and risk of further escalations.

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Current Situation:

- On November 23, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) confirmed that it had assassinated Hezbollah's Chief of Staff Haytham Ali Tabatabai in southern Beirut's Dahiye neighborhood in an aerial strike.
- According to the IDF, Tabatabai commanded most Hezbollah units and worked "extensively to restore their readiness for war with Israel." He played a "significant role" in developing the elite Radwan Unit and constituted a significant source of knowledge and influence within Hezbollah.
- Reports citing Israeli intelligence officials stated that Tabatabai was the "leading voice" in Hezbollah resisting the LAF's disarmament plan and pushing to resume hostilities with Israel.
- The Deputy Chief of Hezbollah's Political Council stated on November 24 that "this violation cannot be accepted," that the group's leadership is deliberating its response, and that it is "coordinating with the Lebanese state to put an end to this Israeli aggression."
- At Tabatabai's funeral, Hezbollah Executive Council Head Sheikh Ali Damoush stated that Israel made a "big mistake that will keep it worried and on high alert in the face of future responses." He added that it is the Lebanese state's responsibility to protect its citizens and sovereignty.

Background:

1. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have [intensified](#) strikes against Hezbollah targets in Lebanon in recent weeks, particularly following the implementation of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire on October 9, which likely freed up some resources that could be redirected to Israel's northern front. The scope of the targets has included senior Hezbollah operatives, including [Radwan Force commanders and individuals involved with weapons smuggling, in addition to infrastructure specifically used for reconstitution, such as weapons production sites and quarries across southern and eastern Lebanon](#). This gradual intensification most notably culminated in the assassination of Hezbollah's Chief of Staff Tabatabai on November 23, which marked a deliberate escalation on Israel's part.
2. Israel's activity up until this point reflects the assessment among the intelligence apparatus that, despite Beirut's [claims](#) of progress, the LAF's actions are insufficient in neutralizing the group's threat. This is demonstrated by statements from senior Israeli officials. For example, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz warned on November 2 that "the Lebanese government's commitment to disarm Hezbollah must be realized" and accused President Aoun of "dragging his feet," while PM Netanyahu explicitly stated after Tabatabai's assassination that he expects the Lebanese government to fulfil its disarmament commitments.
3. US directives in recent weeks echoed these sentiments. This is underscored by the US Treasury delegation's visit to Beirut on November 9, in which a 60-day deadline was presumably set for several disarmament targets to be achieved to ensure continued US engagement with Lebanon, highlighting a renewed sense of urgency amid a lack of progress. US concerns were also starkly conveyed by US Special Envoy Tom Barrack on October 20, when he described Lebanon's disarmament plans as "more aspiration than reality". They warned that Beirut's failure to act would trigger an inevitable and major confrontation between Israel and Hezbollah. Together with the US State Department's assessment that Iran has succeeded in transferring [one billion USD](#) to the group so far this year, this suggests that Washington shares Israel's assessment that the LAF and Lebanese government are ineffective in both disarming Hezbollah and cutting off its funding sources and ability to regroup.

Assessments & Forecast:

IDF strike against Hezbollah Chief of Staff signals Israeli openness for escalation

1. The IDF strike in Hezbollah's Dahiyeh stronghold against its Chief of Staff, the organization's second in command, marks a clear escalation. It is the most notable and significant demonstration of Israel's policy to eliminate senior Hezbollah personnel who constitute knowledge centers that are critical in the group's efforts to reconstitute, following weeks of strikes against other personnel in the elite Radwan Forces.
2. In contrast to infrastructure, experienced, high-ranking figures are difficult to replace quickly, with limited assurance that their successors will be as effective in the role. In this context, the killing of Tabatabai will constitute a significant blow to Hezbollah, compounding its losses of high-ranking personnel that he reportedly replaced following Israel's Operation Northern Arrows in September-November 2024, which decimated Hezbollah's senior leadership.
3. Israel's ability to identify and accurately strike the group's second in command, when he was reportedly in hiding, also displays Jerusalem's continued intelligence penetration into Hezbollah's upper echelons. This will exacerbate Hezbollah's concerns that it has failed to plug security gaps since the round of previous hostilities and will serve as a further morale blow to the group, in addition to the loss of Tabatabai as a leading figure within the organization.
4. As indicated by PM Netanyahu's statement, the assassination also demonstrates that Israel will target senior figures advocating for Hezbollah to end the ceasefire and resume hostilities. In this context, the assassination of Tabatabai sends a clear message to Hezbollah, in addition to other Iran-aligned regional adversaries, that Israel will proactively strike those advocating for resuming activity that threatens its territory. This aims to enforce the "mowing the grass policy" as part of Israel's new, post-October 7 security landscape and reasoning, in which it will not wait for its enemies to develop significant capabilities and become too large a threat before striking.
5. Overall, the decision to strike Hezbollah's second-in-command in its stronghold in the Lebanese capital is a clear sign of Israel's willingness to escalate vis-a-vis Hezbollah. This is likely based on the aforementioned factors demonstrating Hezbollah's regrouping efforts, the LAF's inability to prevent this from happening, growing frustration from Washington over the matter which may lead to tacit support for Israeli operations, and the understanding that this is a window of opportunity in which Israel is in a position of strength in contrast to Hezbollah and Iran's weakened state.

Hezbollah faces strategic dilemma in responding to Tabatabai's assassination; restraint or limited retaliation more likely

1. The assassination of its Chief of Staff will significantly increase the onus on Hezbollah to retaliate. While the group has refrained from responding to the steady escalation in Israeli operations in Lebanon in recent weeks, Secretary General Naim Qassem warned during an address on November 11 that "everything has a limit" and that Israel cannot be allowed to continue its activity.
2. In this context, Tabatabai's killing will place Hezbollah in a strategic dilemma and augment divisions within the organization between those who have advocated for retaliating against Israeli activity and those lobbying to avoid further hostilities that could significantly set back the group.
3. On the one hand, a direct attack would likely invite a strong Israeli response that would significantly increase the prospects for escalation (see below), which the group likely seeks to avoid at the current juncture. Such a scenario would upend Hezbollah's efforts to steadily reconstitute under limited LAF pressure to enforce the disarmament plan, setting it back further at a time of weakness following the losses incurred in 2024. It would also risk reducing Hezbollah's domestic support, which has already waned following the destruction incurred in the last round of hostilities. This would be detrimental ahead of the May 2026 general elections, which will be a critical test for the Iran-backed group to secure continued political influence in Lebanon following

the election of Western-backed President Aoun and PM Salam in January.

4. However, failing to respond to Tabatabai's death will reduce Hezbollah's deterrence overall and increase concerns that this will increase Israel's appetite to further hunt the Shiite movement's most senior and important ranks. Therefore, despite Hezbollah's clear interest in preserving calm, it still cannot be ruled out that it will orchestrate a calibrated response to exact a symbolic cost for the assassination. In such a scenario, the Shiite movement is more likely to engage in retribution that aims to avoid provoking Israel and risking a renewed round of war.
5. **FORECAST:** This reduces the prospects for a larger-scale attack toward central Israel or major Israeli cities in northern Israel, such as Haifa. A potential Hezbollah decision to retaliate is therefore more likely to involve limited rocket or mortar fire closer to the Israel-Lebanon border, potentially affecting the IDF outposts within Lebanese territory, or areas in the immediate vicinity of the frontier. This is lent some credence by reports indicating that the IDF has increased its level of operational readiness in northern Israel, rather than central Israel, as a precaution against potential retribution by Hezbollah.
6. Another constraining factor is the likely understanding that a Hezbollah decision to retaliate, even if limited in scope, could be used by Israel as justification for a marked escalation, such as the launching of an extensive aerial campaign against Hezbollah. This would enable Israel to capitalize upon Hezbollah's still weakened position and target the group's infrastructures on a more massive scale and in a more expansive geographical scope, likely extending from the Litani River to Beirut.

Continued trajectory of escalation

1. Regardless of Hezbollah's immediate decision vis-a-vis Tabatabai's assassination, the Shiite movement's [efforts to reconstitute itself and not forsake the legacy of its former leaders](#) will continue to be a driving force for Israel's gradual escalation in the coming months. This will be based on a paramount Israeli interest in preserving the geopolitical leverage it gained amid the war and retaining pressure on the Lebanese government to take more substantial steps to constrain the group.
2. Mitigating the threat posed by Hezbollah will likely also factor into Israel's preparedness for any future rounds of hostilities with [Iran](#), amid continued concerns over the status of Tehran's highly enriched uranium stockpile and the gradual reconstitution of its [ballistic missile program](#). This will further incentivize Israel to continue degrading Hezbollah's threat to prevent the group from reestablishing its role as the major player in Iran's ring of fire around Israel and joining the fray during possible future conflicts with Iran, anticipated by Jerusalem.
3. **FORECAST:** These factors are likely to increase Israel's resolve for a continued pressure campaign against Hezbollah, which may include the launch of designated military operations that trigger rounds of hostilities. Such scenarios would likely involve widespread strikes beyond southern and northeastern Lebanon, including Beirut's Dahiyeh and potentially more central areas of the capital where Hezbollah infrastructure has been struck in the [past](#).
4. **FORECAST:** This scenario would significantly increase the prospects for further escalation as it would evoke a stronger Hezbollah retaliation that could include rocket barrages or sporadic missile fire deeper into northern Israel, including major cities like Haifa, and central Israel. It may also trigger a resumption in attacks by other Iranian allies. This is most likely to materialize through sporadic Houthi attacks against Israel, in alignment with its efforts to uphold the unity of the arenas policy, whereby attacks against one ally among Iran's Axis of Resistance will provoke attacks on Israel by others.

IDF STRIKES AGAINST HEZBOLLAH BETWEEN SEPTEMBER 22 – NOVEMBER 14, 2025



Recommendations:

Lebanon:

1. Defer nonessential travel to Lebanon at this time and conduct specific risk assessments before conducting any essential business travel. Contact us at intel@max-security.com for tailored, timely risk assessments and/or tactical monitoring services.
2. Those operating or residing in Lebanon are advised to refresh and retain business contingency plans (BCPs) and security protocols to initiate in the event of further escalation between Israel and Hezbollah.
3. Avoid all travel to Beirut's southern Dahiye neighborhood, which is a Hezbollah stronghold, due to the elevated risk of Israeli airstrikes during periods of hostilities, civil unrest, and heightened anti-Western sentiments, which could result in arbitrary detention.
4. Avoid all travel to the Lebanon-Israel border and areas south of the Litani River due to the increased risk of Israeli airstrikes in this region.
5. Avoid all travel to the Lebanon-Syria border and the Bekaa Valley due to high levels of organized crime, armed clashes between the LAF and criminals, militant infrastructure, the risk of kidnapping, and Israeli airstrikes.

Israel:

1. Those operating in Israel are advised to avoid all travel to the Israel-Lebanon border region over the coming hours and days in light of the elevated risk for retaliatory Hezbollah attacks.
2. Refresh and retain business contingency plans (BCPs) and security protocols to initiate in the event of further armed hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah.
3. Adhere to all Home Front Command (HFC) notifications promptly. Ensure that the HFC or other "Color Red" alert applications such as "Tzofar", "Tzeva Adom", or "Cumta-Red Alerts" are

downloaded to receive timely alerts.