



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, September 18*

**Headlines:**

- **Gallant's Dismissal Delayed Due to Rising Tensions on Hezbollah Front**
- **Hezbollah Admits to 'Biggest Security Breach' after Pager Blasts**
- **Israel Didn't Tell US Before Hezbollah Pager Attack, Officials Said**
- **Hezbollah Suspicions Forced Israel to Expedite Lebanon Pager Attack**
- **Iran's Envoy to Lebanon Wounded in Hezbollah Device Blasts**
- **Harris Calls for End to War in Gaza, No Israeli Reoccupation**
- **UN Considers Resolution Demanding Israel End Its Occupation of Palestinian Territories**
- **Palestinian Poll Finds Big Drop in Support for Oct 7 Attack**

**Commentary:**

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "The Finger that Pushed the Button"**  
- By Ronen Bergman
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "A Declaration of War"**  
- By Avi Issacharoff

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# News Excerpts

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## Ha'aretz

### **Gallant's Dismissal Delayed Due to Tensions with Hezbollah**

Senior officials involved in negotiations between Prime Minister Netanyahu and opposition lawmaker Gideon Sa'ar estimate that the plan to remove Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and replace him with Sa'ar could be postponed, potentially until after Netanyahu's return from the UN General Assembly next week. The delay comes amid escalating tensions on Israel's northern front, raising concerns over a possible military conflict with Hezbollah. Sources suggest that Netanyahu is reluctant to proceed with the political move until it becomes clear whether Israel faces an imminent large-scale military campaign. Another senior official likened the current situation to the events of October 11, when the security cabinet convened to decide whether to launch a full-scale war against Hezbollah. At that time, National Unity's Gantz and Eisenkot were brought into the cabinet and, along with Arye Dery, advocated for a cautious approach that eventually prevented an escalation.

## Ynet News

### **Hezbollah Admits to 'Biggest Security Breach' after Blasts**

Footage from Lebanon showed pagers detonating across the country, reportedly injuring hundreds of Hezbollah operatives, including in a supermarket in Beirut, among many others. A Hezbollah official told Reuters that the explosion of the terror organization's communication devices across Lebanon represents "the biggest security breach." Israel hasn't claimed responsibility for the incident, which Arab media outlets are calling a "mysterious Israeli operation." A Hezbollah official told Qatari news outlet The New Arab that "Israel infiltrated the organization's operatives' communication devices and detonated them. This is a serious breach, and we'll investigate it. There are casualties but no fatalities." According to a Lebanese source, Hezbollah operatives were instructed to dispose of their communication devices following the detonations.

## Axios

### **Israel Didn't Tell US Before Hezbollah Pager Attack**

Israel didn't inform the Biden administration ahead of its intelligence operation that included exploding thousands of Hezbollah members' pager devices, two US officials said. The explosions killed at least eleven people, including a child, and wounded 4,000 others, among them many members of Hezbollah and its military units. The US "was not aware of this operation and was not involved" in it, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said, adding that the US is "still gathering information" about the explosions. The operation also shut down a significant part of Hezbollah's military command and control system. Hezbollah accused Israel of conducting the attack and pledged to retaliate.

## **Hezbollah Suspicions Forced Israel to Expedite Pager Attack**

Israel carried out the pager attack against Hezbollah, following intelligence information it gathered that two members of the Iran-backed group caught wind that the pagers had been breached. High-level regional intelligence sources said that the decision to carry out the operation was “forced” on Israel following the intelligence lapse. Hezbollah vowed to retaliate for the attack. The intelligence sources described an intense debate within the Israeli security apparatus in recent days before the last-ditch decision to execute the attack. The sources revealed that thousands of pagers Hezbollah acquired for its members were booby-trapped by Israel before they were delivered recently to the organization. The sources did not specify if Israel manufactured the devices or shipped them to the Lebanon-based group but confirmed that the Israeli intelligence apparatus had infiltrated the devices. The New York Times reported that while Hezbollah fighters used wireless pagers for years, the organization had switched its rank-and-file members from cell phone use to pagers more recently as the low-tech devices are less susceptible to hacking and infiltration.

### I24 News

## **Iran’s Envoy to Lebanon Wounded in Hezbollah Blasts**

Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Mojtaba Amani was wounded in the alleged Israeli attack that caused Hezbollah devices to explode, according to Iran's Mehr agency. More than a thousand people were wounded as the devices exploded, apparently at the same time. People could be seen with injuries to their waist, where the devices were secured, as well as to their hands and faces. The attack was not isolated to Beirut's Dahieh neighborhood, which is largely under Hezbollah control. Reports of blasts were noted from around the country, with the Lebanese Red Crescent saying it was on high alert. Four people riding in a vehicle in Damascus, Syria, were also injured such an explosion, according to Syrian reports. [Read More “Shin Bet Says It Foiled Hezbollah Attempt to Kill Former Top Israeli Security Official” Dig Deeper “While Still in Gaza, Israel Has No Good Options in Lebanon. But It May Invade Anyway” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

### Jerusalem Post

## **Harris Calls for End to War in Gaza, No Israeli Reoccupation**

Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris called for an end to the Israel-Gaza war and said that Israel must not reoccupy the Palestinian enclave once the nearly year-old conflict comes to an end. Speaking in Philadelphia to the National Association of Black Journalists, she called for a ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian Hamas militants, a two-state solution and Middle East stability in a way that does not empower Iran. At least 41,252 people have been killed and 95,497 wounded in the Israeli offensive in the Hamas-ruled strip since Oct. 7, the Gaza health ministry said. The war began when Hamas attacked Israel, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking about 250 hostages. [Read More “Harris: US Used Military Aid as Leverage on Israel during War, Gaza Cannot Be Re-Occupied” \(Ha’aretz\)](#)

Associated Press

## **UN Considers Resolution Demanding Israel End Its Occupation of Palestinian Territories**

The UN General Assembly is considering a Palestinian resolution demanding that Israel end its “unlawful presence” in Gaza and the occupied West Bank within a year and calling for sanctions and an arms embargo against the country. It will be put to a vote in the 193-member assembly as Israel’s war against Hamas in Gaza approaches its first anniversary and as violence in the West Bank reaches new highs. The war was triggered by Hamas attacks in southern Israel on Oct. 7. The resolution, if adopted by the General Assembly, would not be legally binding but the extent of its support would reflect world opinion. There are no vetoes in the assembly, unlike in the 15-member Security Council. It follows a ruling by the top United Nations court in July that said Israel’s presence in the Palestinian territories is unlawful and must end. In the sweeping condemnation of Israel’s rule over the lands it captured during the 1967 war, the International Court of Justice said Israel had no right to sovereignty over the territories and was violating international laws against acquiring the lands by force. The resolution demands Israel withdraw its forces, immediately halt all new settlement building and evacuate all settlers from the Palestinian territories. The measure also calls for Israel to pay reparations to Palestinians for the damage caused by its occupation. It urges countries to take steps to prevent trade or investments that maintain Israel’s presence and implement sanctions, “including about settler violence.”

Reuters

## **Palestinian Poll Finds Big Drop in Support for Oct 7 Attack**

A majority of Gazans believe Hamas' decision to launch the Oct. 7 attack on Israel was incorrect, according to a poll pointing to a big drop in backing for the assault that prompted Israel's devastating Gaza offensive. The poll, conducted in early September by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), found that 57% of people surveyed in the Gaza Strip said the decision to launch the offensive was incorrect, while 39% said it was correct. It marked the first time since Oct. 7 that a PSR poll found a majority of Gazan respondents judging the decision as incorrect. It was accompanied by a drop in support for the attack in the West Bank, though a majority of 64% of respondents there still thought it was the correct decision, the poll found. PSR's previous poll, conducted in June, showed that 57% of respondents in Gaza thought the decision to be correct. PSR said it surveyed 1,200 people face-to-face, 790 of them in the West Bank and 410 in Gaza, with a 3.5% margin of error. PSR polls since the Oct. 7 attack have consistently shown a majority of respondents in both Gaza and the West Bank to believe the attack was a correct decision, with support generally greater in the West Bank than Gaza. PSR said the latest poll marked the first time since Oct 7. that its findings had shown simultaneously in the West Bank and Gaza a significant drop in the favorability of the attack and in expectations that Hamas will win the current war. Overall, the poll found a majority of 54% of respondents in Gaza and the West Bank thought the decision was correct.

## **The Finger that Pushed the Button**

By Ronen Bergman

- **When asked what Israel knows about Hizbullah’s situation after the pagers exploded and whether it was likely to respond over the course of the night, an IDF officer said, “Hizbullah appears currently to be in a state of shock, fear, and humiliation. [The attack] wasn’t dramatic in terms of fatalities. Many hundreds of people sustained light to moderate injuries. Nearly every family has someone who was wounded or a wounded friend. They’re mainly trying to assemble a picture of the situation and, in my opinion, they’ll convene to think.” In other words, the officer said that it was his opinion, at that juncture in time, that the defense establishment and the entire Israeli public were in for a quiet night. The enemy, which is considered to be Israel’s most powerful and threatening enemy (barring Iran, but it doesn’t have a border with Israel), is now licking its wounds.**
- **One can only imagine the impact of an operation of this kind—which simultaneously hurt so very many people that there weren’t enough ambulances to get them to the hospitals, which were at full capacity—on the organization that controls Lebanon, an organization that always has the best health-care services, and which was now forced to place beds and blankets in parking lots outside hospitals and even to ask Christian doctors for help. But notwithstanding the night that has just passed, which was anticipated to be quiet, it seems that no one in the defense establishment would be prepared to sign off on a high-probability intelligence assessment for the days ahead, including given the fact that the Iranian ambassador to Lebanon, whom Israel believes to actually be a high-ranking Revolutionary Guard’s officer, also carried a pager that exploded, wounding him.**
- **This was an operation that is sure to appear as a chapter of its own in the annals of the shadow war between the resistance front—Iran, Hizbullah, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Houthis and all of the other militias across the Middle East—and Israeli intelligence, if Hizbullah’s accusation that Israel is behind the operation is correct. If Israel truly was responsible, the pager attack was certainly one of the most original, surprising and painful moves in this shadow war. This is the kind of operation that is reserved for use in cases of emergency only. The operation was fully successful, and Hizbullah was gripped by shock. “But,” said the high-ranking officer, “I’m not sure that this incident, which was 100% successful, truly will make any contribution to state security because, ultimately, the important thing is to get back to their homes in the north the tens of thousands of people whom the state evacuated or who left voluntarily.**
- **And it isn’t clear to me at the moment what the strategy is, and what line connects that attack to getting the residents back home. I can see a clear line connecting today’s attack and a serious worsening of the situation because Hizbullah, which is convinced that Israel is behind the incident, will decide that it won’t swallow it, but will respond powerfully, and then Israel will respond to that, and it will respond to the response. That has a name, those exchanges of blows—war.” Yesterday we [Bergman] reported in Yedioth Ahronoth that “senior officials in the IDF and other arms of the defense establishment have warned against ‘hasty steps being planned by the Israeli government**

in the north.” If, as per Hizbullah’s accusation, Israel was behind this complex operation when the above warnings were brought to our [Bergman’s] attention on Monday evening, they may have been referring to the event that befell Lebanon like a bolt out of the blue. If that is the state of affairs, the defense officials’ warnings from Monday evening about an operation hang in the air even more powerfully in its wake.

- The operation, if Israel was behind it, is similar but different from other operations ascribed to Israel in the past and which were the product of ever-increasing synergy among the various organizations that form the Israeli intelligence community, which up until roughly two decades ago were relatively hostile towards one another. For instance, in an operation that with time would come to be referred to as the Stuxnet operation, which damaged centrifuges used in the Iranian uranium enrichment program, Israeli and American intelligence agents infected internal computers, which supposedly were not connected to the internet or to the outside world at all, with spyware that made the centrifuges operate in a way that was out of control, irresponsible and very damaging, spinning themselves to death and self-destructing.
- Operations of that kind, according to foreign reports, require intelligence that is based on technology, SIGINT and cyber capabilities, which was collected by UNIT 8200. That intelligence then needs to be used to map out the target, to obtain the technical specifics about the machines and the tunnels, to establish just how far along the project has come and to find out who has access to the internal computers. It also requires agents on the ground who are then able to plant the removable disc in the right place. As far as is known, Israel was the first to use a personal communication device not only for collecting information but as a means of assassination, with the assassination of Yahya Ayyash in early 1995, when it planted roughly 300 grams of explosives in his cellphone. Assassination by means of a personal communication device, a telephone, or a pager has a clear advantage. The device in question is kept next to the target’s body, and the chances of innocent casualties are low. But that advantage comes with a disadvantage: the quantity of explosives that can be concealed in a device like that is limited, and also requires access to the device to plant the explosives as well as a transmitter/receiver.
- Nasrallah and his intelligence officers have all been deeply averse to using cell phones ever since the Ayyash assassination. Hizbullah issued and honed guidelines prohibiting entry into closed compounds with cell phones, including access routes to important bases. In times of emergency, all personnel are prohibited from carrying cell phones at all. There were some cases, including in the past year, in which Hizbullah information security officials forcibly confiscated cell phones from operatives who were in areas in which their use was prohibited. According to foreign reports, this is how the operation was executed: Hizbullah has been using a network of pagers for some time. That network was used to inform operatives and to call up a large number of operatives in a single moment with the press of a button. That network had a lot of advantages. Pagers are small and aren’t cumbersome, are considered to be relatively secure in terms of information security, and are not dependent on cellular networks that can be destroyed by the enemy in the event of war.

- If Israel truly was behind the operation, its intelligence operatives must have come to learn about Hizbullah's desire to replace its pagers with a newer model that was better encrypted. Presumably, somewhere along the supply chain, the devices were replaced by human hands with other devices that also contained explosives and transmitters/receivers. That facilitated turning 4,000 pagers that were on Hizbullah operatives' persons into 4,000 ticking bombs. That kind of operation, which is known as a "button" operation, involves preparing a means that can be activated on D-Day, even years in the future, with the press of a button that [in the current case] produces a series of transmitted instructions to all 4,000 pages, leading to an explosion.
- Presumably, Hizbullah has been left with the question as to whether this operation was a precursor to a broad Israeli assault, and it placed all of its troops in a state of readiness. But it never anticipated that the attack would begin at its waistline. If this was the work of Unit 8200, one cannot rule out the possibility that this was a moment of personal [sic] closure for the unit versus Hizbullah. In February 1999, Hizbullah deliberately left a cell phone behind in one of the IDF's outposts in the security zone. The telephone was not inspected before being taken, amid a series of mistakes and acts of negligence, to the most secret laboratory in Unit 8200 headquarters.
- Members of the unit believed they would be able to retrieve telephone numbers and other information from it, but the phone exploded the moment they plugged it into the electricity socket—an event that has remained traumatic for Unit 8200 to this day. Hizbullah and Iranian intelligence successfully got a bomb into the unit's holy of holies and seriously wounded two officers, one of whom lost his arm. But the big question remains whether pressing that button was justified, regardless of the brilliant operation to create that button. Another question is how one can explain the change in direction taken by the prime minister and the decision to add Lebanon to the list of war objectives.



## **A Declaration of War**

By Avi Issacharoff

- The highly unusual attack in Lebanon appeared to be taken straight out of a science-fiction movie: an all-but simultaneous detonation of thousands of pages that wounded 4,000 Hizbullah operatives. That sounds like a surreal screenplay. This operation, which Hizbullah has ascribed to Israel, showcased a combination of sophistication, precision, and lethality and was very embarrassing for the other side to understate matters. Hizbullah top brass realizes how easily it can be penetrated and mainly just how vulnerable it is after the thousands of rockets and missiles that have been fired out of Lebanon at Israel in the past 11 months after Israelis have been killed and wounded in Hizbullah attacks and after Hizbullah's brazen attempt to kill retired former senior Israeli security officials.
- Regrettably, reality is more complicated than in the movies. An attack on thousands of Hizbullah operatives simultaneously is a declaration of war, one that Hizbullah probably will be unable to ignore. Yesterday, senior Hizbullah officials said that Israel, which they blamed for the attack, would suffer the consequences. A full-scale war against Israel will take a severe toll—a very severe toll. Hizbullah isn't a small organization like Hamas (which proved just how lethal it could be almost a year ago); it is an army with an arsenal of 150,000 precision-guided missiles and rockets, along with a diverse range of other lethal weapons. A large-scale war with Hizbullah will result in a high number of casualties across Israel since the fighting will not be restricted only to the northern border area.
- A war of that kind will have enormous economic repercussions, will take a heavy toll in human life and will make it hard to provide adequate educational and health-care services. The question that the Israeli government headed by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu needs to ask itself quickly is: What is the goal of a war of this kind against Hizbullah? What are its attainable objectives? Can quiet be restored to the northern border, and can Hizbullah's operatives be forced away from the border? The operation that has been attributed to Israel will not prompt Hizbullah to stop its attacks on Israel's northern civilian communities but to escalate them. Nor does Hizbullah have any intention of withdrawing to the north of the Litani River. Given that, we appear to be in for days and possibly even weeks of escalating hostilities that might ultimately force the IDF to launch a ground operation, even as the IDF is still operating on the ground in Gaza and is still taking losses, including yesterday.
- Hizbullah's retaliation might be slow in coming, though not for lack of will but for lack of ability. The extent to which Hizbullah is vulnerable to intelligence penetration, as it now recognizes itself to be, might prompt it to decide to prioritize first getting a handle on what exactly happened and establishing how the Israelis (if it was Israel) were able to penetrate Hizbullah's ranks so deeply—and only then to act. That said, it is clear that Hizbullah retaliation isn't a question of if but of when. Added into the mix of all this is the most recent political development, which appears to be taken out of a particularly bad movie of the kind that only Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu could write.



- **It is hard to believe that just Netanyahu was focused on nothing less than firing his own defense minister, Yoav Gallant. But this time he was joined by a man who ought to know better than anyone else: Gideon Saar. Saar, along with Zeev Elkin, who knows Netanyahu just as well, gambled once again on the man who previously put them through torture and abuse before throwing them to the dogs. Saar and Elkin are gambling on the most dangerous person in Israeli politics: the man with the dirtiest tricks and the man who clearly and obviously is ultimately going to throw them once again to the dogs. Saar, instead of repudiating Netanyahu, chose to join forces with him in one of the most despicable political gambits this country has ever known, especially in a time of war. And he has done that only so that he can stay on the proverbial political “wheel.” Shame, anyone?**