

# Opinion | Pager attacks: In Lebanon, a new kind of war is unfolding

wp washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/09/20/hezbollah-pagers-explosion-israel-war

September 20, 2024



September 20, 2024 at 5:20 p.m. EDT

*On Wednesday, pagers and other communication devices exploded across Lebanon, killing and wounding suspected Hezbollah operatives. Was this the opening salvo of a wider war between Israel and the terrorist group? And what does the operation tell us about what future wars will look like? Post Opinions asked six experts to weigh in.*

## **Niall Ferguson: The war that is no war**

George Orwell memorably and presciently defined a cold war in 1945 as “a peace that is no peace.” His point was that, after the advent of the atomic bomb, an all-out hot war between two nuclear-armed superpowers would be very unlikely. (He correctly assumed that the Soviet Union would soon get a bomb of its own.)

In Cold War I, which ran from the late 1940s until the early 1990s, we inhabited a binary world: Either there was Armageddon, or there was not. Everything else, from Korea to Vietnam to Angola, was a peripheral, proxy conflict. And below that level were the covert operations.

In Cold War II — which began when Americans belatedly noticed that Chinese leader Xi Jinping was intent on challenging the United States' primacy — the situation is different. Because of the proliferation of technologies that were in their infancy during the first Cold War, we now live amid a war that is no war.

Is Israel at war with Hezbollah? Yes, in the sense that Israeli government agencies are regularly killing Hezbollah operatives and Hezbollah is regularly trying to kill Israelis by firing rockets across the Lebanese border. No, in the sense that the level of violence we currently see is relatively low — lower, certainly, than the unambiguous war currently being waged between the defenders of Ukraine and its Russian invaders.

The larger-scale Middle Eastern war I anticipated — what would have been a Third Lebanon War — did not materialize this summer. It might yet happen. Then again, both sides have reasons not to escalate all the way to war proper, with all its unpredictability. If Israel had intended to launch an all-out attack against Hezbollah, the time would have been immediately after the pagers began to explode, when Hezbollah's communications were in disarray.

To speak of “remote warfare,” then, is to miss the point. Ever since men worked out how to operate large catapults, it has been possible to kill enemies from a distance. The missiles that hit Ukrainian cities are weapons of remote warfare. So are the drones the Ukrainians send eastward toward Russian targets. So are the cyberattacks that are launched every day of the week by states against states, terrorists against states, crooks against corporations, and so on.

The Russian term “hybrid warfare” is also often mentioned these days. But in truth, there never was a time when warfare did not include nonmilitary activities such as espionage and disinformation. The big difference is that massive advances in satellite technology and computing, combined with the extreme vulnerability of global communications and supply chains, have hugely multiplied their possibilities.

This week, Israel has shown its enemies that it is still smarter than they are. If they can do this, what else might they have in store for Iran and its terrorist surrogates? The very fact that such a question has to be asked constitutes a notable victory in the war that is no war.

*The writer is the Milbank Family Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution and a columnist for the Free Press.*

## **Kori Schake: Israel is fighting to restore lost deterrence**

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In addition to being a terrifying national trauma, the Oct. 7 terrorist attack was a colossal intelligence and military failure for Israel.

Since then, while grinding out a conventional campaign to destroy Hamas's forces and tunnel infrastructure in Gaza, Israel has also carried out some spectacular special operations, including a high-profile assassination in Tehran and targeted strikes at top-level Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon.

The latest strike, killing Hezbollah operatives by detonating their pagers and walkie-talkies, should be understood in the context of Israel's attempt to reestablish deterrence after the October attack. Israel is trying to convince its enemies that it has the ability to wreak overwhelming destruction on any that harm it.

These Israeli moonshot operations remind both enemies and friends of the creativity and tactical brilliance of Israeli security forces. They also provide a morale boost to Israelis who feel like they are living under siege.

With its north currently depopulated, Israel's war cabinet might have calculated that now is the best time to take the initiative — by both conventional and unconventional means. Israel followed up the daring pager attacks with a show of force, taunting Hezbollah by sending fighter jets to fly over Beirut during a speech by the terrorist group's leader, Hasan Nasrallah. And when a disoriented Hezbollah, deprived of reliable communications networks, ordered a retaliation, Israel appears to have preempted the attack, destroying hundreds of rockets on the ground and further showcasing its intimate knowledge of the group's war plans.

Military analysts have questioned why Israel would initiate the pager operation unless it were the start of a conventional military campaign against Hezbollah. An alternative perspective is that Israel appears to have learned lessons from its ground war in Gaza; it might well have decided not to stretch its ground forces with a move into Lebanon. The pairing of espionage with strikes might be what the much-feared wider war looks like.

*The writer leads the foreign and defense policy team at the American Enterprise Institute.*

## **Mosab Hassan Yousef: Free Lebanon from Hezbollah**

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Lebanon, once considered a beacon of culture in the Middle East, has for decades been held hostage by the terrorists of Hezbollah, who have transformed the country into a launchpad for jihad. Spawned in the 1980s during the Lebanese Civil War, Hezbollah is a powerful proxy of Iran, its ideology steeped in terrorism and aggression.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese people are left to suffer under Hezbollah's control, unable to shake free from the extremist group's grip. Hezbollah's assassination of beloved former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri sparked outrage during the 2005 Cedar Revolution. But the hope for a freer, more open society was short-lived. Hezbollah quickly asserted its dominance over the fragile government in Beirut, and in 2006, it ignited a devastating new conflict with Israel.

Since Oct. 7, Hezbollah has been bombarding northern Israel with its arsenal of more than 150,000 rockets and displacing about 100,000 Israelis from their homes. A Hezbollah attack on the village of Majdal Shams in the Golan Heights in early July killed 12 Druze children in an awful instant.

This week, the daring pager attack widely attributed to Israel wiped out a significant number of fighters in one move. The next day, a second attack exploded a large number of walkie-talkies, killing many more. On Friday, the Israel Defense Forces took out Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force commander, Ibrahim Aqil, one of the planners of the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in 1983 that killed 63.

These types of pinpoint strikes avoid conflict with the Lebanese people, but degrade Hezbollah's terrorist infrastructure. The group's dominance in Lebanon has stifled the country's political freedom, turning what was once a prosperous neighbor into a battlefield for Iranian influence. Lebanese citizens deserve the chance to be free of Hezbollah's malign influence and pursue the democratic values that were so briefly realized during the Cedar Revolution.

The world must support all efforts to dismantle Hezbollah's control over Lebanon so that both countries can move toward a future of peace, stability and mutual respect.

*Mosab Hassan Yousef is the author of "From Hamas to America: My Story of Defying Terror, Facing the Unimaginable, and Finding Redemption in the Land of Opportunity."*

## **Lama Fakih: Weaponizing pagers may constitute a war crime**

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In Lebanon, residents are asking questions that have been haunting victims in Gaza for months: Are the lives of our civilians also not protected under international law?

The rigged devices used in recent attacks have been lauded as "cutting edge" and the attacks themselves marveled at for their "precision." But on the ground, there was widespread panic amid apocalyptic scenes: disfigured faces and amputated limbs of people in their homes, in cars and on motorcycles, walking down the street or in shops.

According to Lebanon's caretaker minister of health, at least 37 people have been killed, including two children and four health-care workers, and nearly 3,000 others injured, including children. The casualties include those who owned the devices and those who

happened to be near them when they detonated. The sheer number of those needing urgent care stretched an already beleaguered health-care system. The fear among the civilian population remains palpable. People worry that more explosions might go off, in the grocery store, on the street, at home — anywhere.

The intended targets of these widespread attacks were apparently Hezbollah members. In a statement, the group said the pagers belonged “to employees of various Hezbollah units and institutions.” They blamed the Israeli government for the explosions. And while much is still unknown about the attacks, it is clear that such attacks violate the laws of war.

Customary international humanitarian law prohibits the use of booby traps — objects that civilians are likely to be attracted to or are associated with normal civilian daily use — precisely to avoid putting civilians at grave risk. Setting off simultaneous explosives in thousands of personal devices that cannot distinguish between civilians and combatants is unlawfully indiscriminate.

U.N. human rights experts have said that the detonation of thousands of electronic devices “could constitute war crimes” and called on countries to “bring to justice those who ordered and executed these attacks.” A prompt and impartial investigation into the attacks should be conducted.

Victims of human rights violations and war crimes in Lebanon have too often been denied justice. When efforts for accountability depend on the identity of who the abusers and the victims are, the credibility of international institutions and international justice is undermined. Invariably, the first victims of double standards are civilians caught in war. But double standards also risk undermining the rules based international order we all rely on to keep ourselves safe.

*The writer is Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch.*

## **Peter Berkowitz: Israel’s retaliation is completely lawful**

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On Thursday, Hezbollah chief Hasan Nasrallah accused Israel of orchestrating the previous days’ attacks against thousands of his militia members by detonating their pagers and walkie-talkies. Although the Jewish state had declined to take credit for the ingenious and unprecedented operation, Nasrallah declared that the carefully orchestrated blasts not only constituted an “act of war” that “transgressed all boundaries and red lines” but also constituted “a war crime.”

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) agrees with the head of the Lebanese Shiite Muslim militia. On X, she wrote that the Israeli “attack clearly and unequivocally violates international humanitarian law and undermines U.S. efforts to prevent a wider conflict.”

The Hezbollah chief and the congresswoman from New York are grossly wrong on the law. Their common error, moreover, perpetuates the ugly practice of maintaining one body of the laws of war for the rest of the world while creating separate laws that criminalize Israel's right to defend itself.

Following Hamas's Oct. 7 slaughter of more than 1,200 Israelis and the kidnapping of an additional 240 people — most of them civilians — Hezbollah launched a campaign of aerial bombardment of northern Israel. The drone, rocket and missile attacks, which have continued for more than 10 months, are acts of war. Most strike civilian areas and have driven more than 60,000 Israelis from their homes. They constitute straightforward violations of the laws of war, which bar targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure.

In contrast, Israel's targeting of Hezbollah communication devices conformed to the three major principles of the international laws of war.

First, Israel's operation was consistent with the principle of *necessity*, which limits military action to means and methods that are essential to the achievement legitimate war aims. Igniting Hezbollah's communication devices was a direct and efficient way of accomplishing the legitimate war aims of destroying the militia's equipment and removing its fighters from combat.

Second, the operation was consistent with the principle of *distinction*, which requires combatants to target combatants and military objects and not civilians and civilian objects. Hezbollah purchased the pagers and walkie-talkies for their commanders and fighters to facilitate their war to destroy Israel.

And third, the operation was consistent with the principle of *proportionality*, which requires that attacks against legitimate targets not cause incidental loss of civilian life and injury to noncombatants that is "excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated." Because Hezbollah unlawfully hides among civilians and operates within civilian areas, Israel's targeting of Hezbollah fighters by igniting their communications devices minimized collateral damage to a remarkable degree. The small explosions largely confined injury to those carrying or using the pagers and walkie-talkies.

Israel should be congratulated for its ingenious efforts to defend itself consistent with the international laws of war from a fanatical adversary that utterly repudiates the international laws of war.

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**Tara D. Sonenshine: Focus on what's important**

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Explosive pagers detonate in Lebanon, Iranian drones buzz the Russian-Ukraine battlefield, Houthi rebels intercept maritime targets, China and the Philippines are at loggerheads, and one of the hottest summers on record reminds us of the enormity of the climate challenge.

Against this backdrop of global cacophony, the United States is reeling from a deeply divisive electoral season that has seen two apparent assassination attempts on the life of former president Donald Trump. To quote the U.S. Secret Service: “We live in dangerous times.”

On a human level, danger causes the classic fight-or-flight response that has kicked in for many of us over the past year. Our nervous system gets triggered by news. We experience stress and panic — which affect our behavior and mindset.

The cumulative effect is that we awake anxiously, check our phones incessantly and remain on heightened alert. We live with danger on our minds, anxiously approaching each interaction with strangers. Our distrust creates a corrosive, hardened disdain for others, which is why we shut off, shut out and shut down. Everything becomes “spam,” or “junk” to be reported and deleted. We stand ready to be scammed, hacked, ghosted, doxed or denied service.

These, we say, *are* dangerous times.

But we are not the first nor last to live in such times. C.S. Lewis, writing between two world wars, astutely analyzed the predicament:

*“Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under the shadow of something infinitely more important than itself. If men had postponed the search for knowledge and beauty until they were secure, the search would never have begun.”*

What living in dangerous times most demands is leadership. We need leaders in our families, communities, counties, states, schools and organizations to instill hope in ourselves and others. We don’t need greatness. We need goodness — those small acts of kindness that make another human being feel acknowledged. Even in a world of social media and social isolation, there is room for community renewal. Pain is made to be shared, not spared. Individuals can reach across divides or hunker down in despair.

What makes America unique is its individual and collective leadership and ability to juggle multiple challenges. Each moment is an opportunity to help or be helped. That can mean sharing wisdom, seeking solace, showing compassion — or simply opening our hearts and minds.

Living in dangerous times should prompt us to protect one another, knowing that each of us remain vulnerable to unseen, unforeseen, unanticipated new realities. Let's hope, as Americans, that we can find the spirit and goodwill to respond to this moment in new and creative ways.

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