

Israel's Orwellian Strategy in Lebanon

Turning pagers and walkie-talkies into weapons of war is a new escalation in growing war in the Middle East.

Despite some hand-wringing and platitudes about avoiding an even wider war, it appears that the Biden Administration is largely backing Israel's Orwellian strategy in Lebanon: "[escalate to de-escalate](#)."

The upsurge in violence followed the [controlled explosions](#) detonated by Israel of pagers and walkie-talkies on September 17 and 18. In an attack that targeted Hezbollah members, Israel had [concealed](#) explosives inside the batteries of pagers brought into Lebanon. The attacks killed dozens of people—including children and health care workers—and wounded thousands, including [at least](#) 300 critically.

In the United States, media pundits and members of Congress from [both parties](#) are praising Israel for a supposedly targeted campaign aimed at killing "terrorists." However, it appears only a minority of the overall casualties of the explosions in Lebanon were fighters. In addition to innocent bystanders, victims [included](#) members of Hezbollah's political wing and [employees](#) of Hezbollah-run social services, including medics.

When even [Democratic](#) members of Congress start defending assassinations of people simply due to their political affiliations (even if those are with a decidedly reactionary group like Hezbollah), it reveals a stunning contempt for the rule of law and a dangerous authoritarian mindset.

International humanitarian law clearly [indicates](#) that simultaneous attacks on thousands of devices without knowing who possessed them at a particular time is illegal, since it fails to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. International legal statutes also prohibit booby-trapping otherwise harmless portable objects with explosives and engaging in violence with an intent to spread terror among civilians.

The attacks in Lebanon also constitute a dangerous precedent, raising the specter that other governments, terrorist groups, and extortionists with access to similar technologies could utilize everyday electronic devices as vehicles for mass killings.

Israel's mass sabotage was a precursor to a dramatically escalating bombing campaign of Lebanon, [raising](#) serious concerns about more civilian casualties. Such massive air strikes are unlikely to make Hezbollah end its shelling of northern Israel. All of this is not without risk to Israel: Hezbollah has [tens of thousands](#) of missiles which are [more sophisticated](#) in terms of range, accuracy, and firepower than any of Hamas's weapons. And the Lebanese group has far greater military and economic support from Iran than Hamas does. While escalating its barrage of rockets into Israel immediately following the pager incident, Hezbollah has thus far held back from launching all-out attacks, which could hit anywhere in Israel and the Occupied Territories and could kill many hundreds of Israelis, both military and civilian, within hours.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is willing to take that risk, however, as the threat from a stronger enemy helps reduce the growing [protests](#) against his far-right government and pressure from the international community over his [refusal](#) to accept the U.S.-authored ceasefire plan, which has been endorsed by the United Nations and [largely accepted](#) by Hamas. In addition, conflict with Hezbollah makes it easier for Israel to appear as a victim relative to its ongoing war on the Palestinians under occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, where civilian casualties continue to mount.

While President Joe Biden has [discouraged](#) Israel from launching a wider war, he has [sent](#) between 2,000 and 3,000 additional troops and military equipment to the region to protect Israel from any possible retaliatory attacks from Iran. As Daniel DePetris of the *Chicago Tribune* [noted](#), “U.S. opposition to a wider war in Lebanon notwithstanding, Netanyahu assumes the United States will inevitably support him in the event of one. The United States talks a big game about not wanting a conflict but won’t do anything, short of anonymous leaks in the press, to stop it.”

Hezbollah has [made clear](#) it would stop attacking Israel if Israel stops attacking Lebanon and Gaza. Despite the Biden Administration’s [claims](#) that it is working hard for de-escalation, Biden has been hesitant to withhold military aid, in contrast to former President [Ronald Reagan](#), who successfully did so following Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Former President Barack Obama also successfully pressured Israel to halt military offensives in Gaza in [2012](#) and [2014](#).

There is a risk that Iranian-backed militia groups in Syria and Lebanon, angered at U.S. support for Israel’s war on their Lebanese ally, could end up attacking U.S. forces in those countries and bordering areas of Jordan. Furthermore, there is anger among progressives, Arab Americans, Muslims, and young voters over yet another endless war in the Middle East. This could lower voter turnout or encourage third party voting among those traditionally-Democratic constituencies, thereby enabling Donald Trump to narrowly defeat Harris in some critical swing states.

Indeed, this may be another reason why Netanyahu, who would clearly prefer Trump to Biden, appears so eager to escalate the violence.