

Middle East & Africa



Supply-chain sabotage

Pager wars

DUBAI AND JERUSALEM

A stunning attack on Hizbullah may not change Israel's strategic dilemma

FIRST IT WAS pagers; then, walkie-talkies. On September 18th another wave of explosions rocked Lebanon: two-way radios detonated in homes, offices and even at a funeral, a day after some 3,000 pagers blew up across the country and in Syria. In both cases the devices were used by members of Hizbullah, the Shia militia that has fired rockets at Israel for almost a year.

At least nine people were killed and 450 injured in the latest attack, on top of 12 killed and nearly 3,000 hurt, many badly, in the pager blasts. Hundreds of people were blinded because they looked at their pagers just before the devices exploded. Others lost fingers and hands.

Israeli officials have not said much, and they surely will not claim responsibility. But no one else has both means and motive to carry out such attacks. "I said that we would return the residents of the north safely to their homes, and that is exactly what we will do," said Binyamin Netanya-

hu, the Israeli prime minister, in a statement after the second round of explosions. Yoav Gallant, the defence minister, said the war had entered a "new phase" focused on Israel's northern border with Lebanon.

All of this raises three questions: how these devices were made to explode; why Israel detonated them when it did; and what this means for its year-long conflict with Hizbullah.

The answer to the first question leads from a bunker in Beirut to an office park outside Taipei. Earlier this year Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbullah, urged

the group's rank and file to stop using mobile phones, warning that Israel could hack the devices for surveillance and to target assassinations. Instead the militia ordered pagers that seemed leakproof: they can only receive messages, not transmit them.

In photos from Lebanon, the devices that exploded on September 17th seemed to bear the trademark of Gold Apollo, a Taiwanese company. But its founder denied making the pagers and said a Hungarian firm, BAC Consulting KFT, had a "long-term partnership" to produce them. "Our company only provides the brand trademark authorisation and is not involved in the design or manufacturing," Gold Apollo said in a statement the day after the blasts.

From there, the story gets weirder. Before it was taken offline, BAC's buzzword-laden website said the firm was a consultancy working on sustainability and development. On LinkedIn, the firm's purported CEO claims to have worked for the UN's nuclear agency, supported small businesses in Libya and helped women in rural Niger adapt to climate change. She neglects to mention any side business in pager manufacturing. The firm's address is a villa on a residential street in Budapest. Calls to the number listed went unanswered.

Wherever they were built, it seems clear that Israeli agents hid explosives inside the pagers before they reached Lebanon, and

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► did the same with the walkie-talkies. Thousands of the militia's operatives were unknowingly carrying small time-bombs on their bodies, which Israel then detonated almost simultaneously.

Despite the operational success, the timing underscores Israel's strategic dilemma. Wounding lots of Hizbullah members and damaging the group's communications would have been an ideal prelude to a major Israeli offensive. Since October 7th there have been voices calling for this, in order to reduce Hizbullah's arsenal of long-range missiles and occupy a buffer zone inside Lebanon. But the government has not approved an incursion; instead, a low-level war of attrition has set in.

Israeli generals still talk of war in terms of when, not if, but the timing is hotly debated. Some want to take advantage now of the presence nearby of American aircraft-carriers and fighter squadrons, which would help shield Israel from Hizbullah's missiles. But with their army still fighting in Gaza, albeit at a lower intensity, others would rather take time to rest and refit.

That Israel activated the bombs without any further action indicates that, for now, it is not rushing to all-out war. It may also suggest that Israeli spies feared that Hizbullah would soon discover the vulnerability, and they decided to act before the militia swapped out the pagers.

Hizbullah may not rush to war either. People close to the group describe a state of shock. It has been obvious for months that Israel had penetrated the militia: it has had no trouble assassinating a string of top commanders. But the back-to-back bombings are by far the biggest security breach in its history. "Hizbullah's military arsenal is virtually paralysed," says Lina Khatib of Chatham House, a think-tank.

The group will need to spend months repairing its communications network and searching for leaks—hardly ideal conditions for a major attack against Israel. The attack also highlights a broader vulnerability for Iran and its allies: their reliance on imported electronics. Militias across the region will be nervous about what other devices might be compromised.

Members of Hizbullah often keep their affiliation secret. Mothers, wives and siblings will have discovered this week that their loved ones were part of the militia. That could cause tensions between Hizbullah and its constituents, some of whom are frustrated with the group's war against Israel. It could also produce new intelligence for Israel in intercepted phone calls and social-media videos from Lebanon.

None of this, though, changes Israel's dilemma. On September 16th the Israeli cabinet updated the official aims of the war. They had been to defeat Hamas in Gaza and free the Israeli hostages held there. Now ministers also pledge to "return

A Palestinian theatre

Staging protests

JENIN

A theatre in a Palestinian refugee camp offers a different kind of resistance

THE EXISTENCE of a theatre in the middle of any refugee camp would be unusual. But in Jenin, in the occupied West Bank, it is particularly striking. The camp and its adjacent city have long been a symbol of deadly terror for Israelis and fierce—often violent—resistance for Palestinians. And yet the Freedom Theatre has become the symbol of a different kind of Palestinian resistance.

The theatre was established in 2006 by Zakaria Zubeidi, a former militant, and Juliano Mer-Khamis, an actor born to a Jewish Israeli and a Palestinian Christian. Their vision was of cultural resistance. "We are like fighters, but our weapon is the theatre," says Ranin Odeh who runs the theatre's youth programmes. They put on everything from Shakespeare to plays written by those living in the camp.

And yet today the thespians of Jenin are caught between an increasingly aggressive Israel which is pursuing deadlier raids into the restive camp, and a

growing number of uncompromising Palestinian militants who see armed resistance as the only way to respond.

Those involved in the theatre have become targets—for both sides. Mr Zubeidi is serving a lengthy sentence in Israel for attacks committed during the second *intifada*. Mr Mer-Khamis was assassinated by a masked gunman thought to have links to Hamas in 2011. Another of the theatre's staff has been in an Israeli prison since December.

It is growing ever harder for the theatre to function. Israel's most recent raid on the camp left 21 people dead. The theatre survived unscathed, but around it the streets are filled with craters and stained with blood. And it is hard to justify its role when the bullets are flying, Ms Odeh admits.

And yet the weekly workshops for children are still full. Dozens of youngsters relish a few hours' relief from the grinding misery of the camp. That in itself is a kind of resistance.



Not full of sound and fury

the residents of the north safely to their homes". It seems no coincidence that the pagers exploded the next day.

Since October 8th, when Hizbullah began firing rockets at Israel, the prevailing view has been that only a ceasefire in Gaza will end those hostilities. But the prospects of a deal look dim. Israel thus wants to decouple the two fronts. It hopes the exploding pagers and radios will remind Mr Nas-

rallah of the damage that Israel can do to his militia and its standing in Lebanon.

For Lebanese, the blasts reinforced a feeling of despair. Many drew comparisons to the massive explosion at Beirut's port in 2020, another ordinary Tuesday on which death seemed to arrive from nowhere. Whatever their views on Hizbullah, they are nervous about what comes next and feel powerless to do anything about it. ■

Israel's Supreme Court

Politicians v judges 2.0

JERUSALEM

Israel's government is trying once again to hobble the Supreme Court

FOR NEARLY a year, Israel's Supreme Court has been without a president, as the country's right-wing government has tussled with the judiciary over the court's powers. As soon as it was elected at the end of 2022, the government of Binyamin Netanyahu presented plans for "judicial reforms" which would limit the powers of the Supreme Court and give politicians control of the appointment of judges. The proposals prompted huge protests and were abandoned when the war in Gaza began. But they are back on the agenda.

The justice minister, Yariv Levin, has provoked the most recent crisis. Mr Levin wants the judicial appointments committee, which he co-chairs, to abandon the tradition whereby the senior serving judge on the Supreme Court is appointed president. His reason? He is determined to prevent the top judge, Yitzhak Amit, a vocal opponent of his reforms, from getting the job.

Having tried—and failed—to change the make-up of the committee, Mr Levin has refused to convene it since the previous president retired. The Supreme Court has now ordered him to present his candidate by September 15th and then convene the committee. So far, he has refused to do so, accusing the judges of "an unlawful usurpation of the minister's powers".

Mr Levin and other members of Mr Netanyahu's government have long sought to rein in what they regard as an activist court. In the past it has overridden government decisions and laws on grounds of constitutionality. With Israel now at war, the role of Supreme Court has become even more contentious. It is the only forum where questions about how Israel is conducting the war, such as its obligations to supply humanitarian aid to the civilian population in Gaza and the treatment of prisoners, are being investigated, a fact that has not endeared it to the coalition's hardliners.

The court's president has a crucial role in scheduling such hearings, and in appointing any national commissions of enquiry. So far Mr Netanyahu has withstood public pressure to create such a body. If the prime minister were to relent, perhaps to fend off his possible prosecution in the International Criminal Court, the president would decide who is on the commission.

If Mr Levin persists in his obstructionism, the court could order the other committee members to convene without him.

But that would be an unprecedented clash between the branches of government and could in turn encourage other ministers to defy legal rulings. That is already happening. Itamar Ben-Gvir, the hard-right politician in charge of the police, has proceeded with the promotion of a police officer accused of throwing a stun-grenade at protester, despite instructions from the attorney-general and a court order to wait until an investigation is concluded.

The government and court are also at odds over a ruling to draft rabbinical students into the army and end funding for their seminaries. This is a red-line for the ultra-Orthodox parties in Mr Netanyahu's coalition and his ministers are in no rush to carry out the court's orders.

"The Supreme Court judges created this confrontation at a time of war," insists Simcha Rothman, chair of the the Law Committee in the Knesset, Israel's parliament and one of the architects of the coalition's judicial reforms. "Instead of trying to reach a compromise with the justice minister, they are forcing a vote. This constitutional crisis is on their heads."

Others disagree. "Beneath the radar, while the guns are firing, the government is taking advantage of the lack of attention to legal issues to try once again to achieve the objective of the legal reform," says Yaniv Roznai, a constitutional law expert at Reichman University in Tel Aviv: "power without limits". ■

Crime in Kenya

Daylight robbery

NAIROBI

Nairobi's reputation for crime is outdated. Don't rush to thank its police

THERE IS AN era in the history of many cities that is inextricably linked, in the public imagination, to crime and lawlessness—think 1920s Chicago or 1980s New York. For Nairobi that period is the 1990s. In the old business district, carjackings were a daily occurrence, remembers Farida Ali, a shop owner there. Violent crime was so common that residents dubbed the Kenyan capital "Nairobi robbery".

For years Nairobi was spoken of in the same breath as Johannesburg or Lagos, two of Africa's most dangerous cities. A survey in 2000 suggested that Nairobians were more likely to be robbed or assaulted than people who lived in central Johannesburg. Not much had changed by the 2010s. Robert Ocho, a Kenyan security wonk, says the gangs which emerged in the middle of that decade were so lawless "they would rob their own relatives".



Caption to come

Kenyan tabloids still paint their capital as hopelessly crime-ridden. And official statistics suggest little improvement. But speak to experts as well as ordinary residents—not to mention the city's perennially security-conscious expats—and a different picture emerges. Stories of "home invasions" in wealthy neighbourhoods are much rarer than a decade ago. It is now generally considered safe to drive, if not yet walk, at night in all but the most notorious neighbourhoods. Mrs Ali's part of the central business district is no longer deemed a no-go zone. "Violent crime has gone down overall," says Mutuma Ruteere, director of the National Crime Research Centre and the country's foremost crime expert. "We've come from 'Nairobi robbery' to a fairly safe city."

What might explain this? New technologies, including the spread of CCTV, have probably helped. More controversial is whether Kenya's police force can take any credit. In 2009 its reputation for corruption and lawlessness was so terrible that the UN dispatched a special rapporteur to investigate it. (The resulting report denounced the use of police death squads to eliminate suspects and a "climate of impunity".) Even today few Kenyans believe their cops do much to prevent crime. Statistics on wrongdoing are so unreliable largely because most poor Kenyans do not trust the police enough to report it.

Kenyans do, however, seem often to approve of their more heavy-handed tactics. When lawlessness in the central business district runs amok, says Benjamin Maina, a shop owner there, the police "kill two to three people, and once they do that, crime completely goes down". These kinds of execution-style killings have a long history, dating back to the early days of Kenya's independence (and, indeed, before). In the 2000s an undercover squad of killer cops ►►

► was credited with dismantling some of Kenya's most notorious gangs, such as the Mungiki sect which at its peak is thought to have had over a million members. Sometimes they killed innocent people, but overall "these guys were really effective at combating crime," argues Mr Ochalo.

The current government has tried to scrub up the police's image. William Ruto, Kenya's president since 2022, disbanded an elite special unit soon after taking office, accusing it of "killing Kenyans arbitrarily". He also offered to send 400 officers to gang-racked Haiti to lead an international peacekeeping mission. In June America designated Kenya a "major non-NATO ally", the first in sub-Saharan Africa.

But their overseas deployment has put Kenya's police in the international spotlight just as they have been dealing with demonstrations back home against Mr Ruto's proposed tax rises. The ensuing crack-down, in which police have so far killed scores of protesters, and abducted dozens more, reveals how little there actually is to show for 15 years of police reform. And a growing number of police are involved in criminality themselves, such as human trafficking or lending their guns to gangs.

Still, there have been some improvements. Over the past two decades the police have received gradually higher pay and more resources. This has helped reduce some of the worst corruption in its ranks, says John Githongo, a prominent anti-graft campaigner. Others point to the growth of "community policing", initiatives to improve relations between cops and the people they serve. Giving residents more "ownership" over their own security has helped make poorer areas safer, argues Kennedy Odede of SHOFCO, a NGO working in Kenyan slums. In such places the spread of neighbourhood watches, "community justice centres" and self-help groups among former gang members may have done more than the police to reduce crime.

Some local efforts simply fill a vacuum where the state should be. In rich areas, security is overwhelmingly the job of private firms, not the police. Streetlights, which make it safer to walk around at night, are typically installed by residents, not the government. And in some areas, justice is often handed down by vigilantes, not the courts. Mrs Ali reckons "mob justice" is the main reason crime is down in her neighbourhood. Videos of lynchings in which suspected criminals are forced inside burning tyres appear on social media.

The prevalence of such practices points to a deeper problem. Currently, when crime spikes in one area, the police or local mobs move in and use force to contain it. That may work temporarily. But the more fundamental causes of crime—which include high levels of inequality and youth unemployment—are far harder to fix. ■

Nigerian floods

A perfect storm

MAIDUGURI

Floods in Nigeria's north-east are exacerbating a humanitarian crisis

THE AMBULANCE rolled into the main teaching hospital in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state in north-east Nigeria. Through the open back door two limp, swollen legs were visible. Skin that was once brown was ashen and wrinkled. The body had the telltale signs of drowning. Medics took it to the mortuary, one of the few parts of the hospital still functioning.

Flood warnings had been ringing out across Nigeria's north-east for weeks. Schools in Maiduguri were closed for a fortnight as the torrential rains came. The reservoir of the Alau Dam began to overflow; yet the state government continued to insist that the area was safe. But in the early hours of September 10th, the dam collapsed and brought the worst floods the city has seen in 30 years. Houses and farms have been completely submerged and livestock have drowned. Corpses floated out of the cemetery and reptiles escaped from the zoo. Flooded roads have left entire towns inaccessible. So far, around 400,000 people are estimated to have been displaced and more than 30 to have died. The true numbers are almost certainly higher. Rescue efforts are still going on.

Many people in Maiduguri had already been forced to flee from their homes to avoid murder or kidnap by Boko Haram, a jihadist group. The government had tried to close refugee camps in the city's centre in hope of restoring some sense of normality. Now those camps have had to reopen.

They are already overwhelmed by crowds of newly displaced people seeking shelter.

Children shout "hunger" at the trucks bringing in food. Even before the floods, hunger was already the worst it has been in north-eastern Nigeria for nearly 15 years, according to the World Food Programme. Its treatment facilities have seen a 70% increase in the number of malnourished people from last year, with children and mothers worst affected. Hopes that the upcoming harvest would provide relief have faded; over 115,000 hectares of farmland throughout the country have been ruined by the deluge so far. "Goats, rams, sheep, turkeys, chickens, most of the domestic animals we rear, we couldn't rescue them," says Balad Mutiza, a teacher, who fled his home with his family in the middle of the night when the floods came.

One camp is currently hosting over 16,000 people. Buses of those who have been rescued from the floods are still arriving. Overcrowding and disrupted water supplies mean the risk of cholera and other waterborne diseases is growing. With Borno's biggest hospitals still only partially open, those who become ill have limited options. A nine-day-old baby who had not been able to breastfeed for three days was turned away at the teaching hospital. Medical staff cannot make it to work.

Much of the city is expected to remain waterlogged for weeks, as heavy rains continue. A dam in neighbouring Cameroon, which has also been damaged by the rains, could wreak further devastation on other parts of north-eastern Nigeria. This year's rainy season has been particularly bad in Nigeria, as it has been in much of the Sahel. The country's National Emergency Management Agency says that almost 1m people have been affected nationwide. A region reeling from one humanitarian crisis has been pitched into another. ■



Caption to come