1 OCTOBER 2024 / Israel’s escalation

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Israel has sent tanks to its border with Lebanon. Iran has started to attack Israel, according to the IDF. Biden is sending thousands of additional troops to the region. So we asked Stephen Kalin from *The* *Wall Street Journal* if this is officially that war we’d been trying to avoid:

STEPHEN KALIN (*The Wall Street Journal* foreign correspondent): Yeah, we're definitely in the war that we've spent a year trying to avoid and hoping that wouldn't come.

SCORING <The Back Car On a Hovertrain>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZdCXC1ubOw)*> DW NEWS: Fears are growing of a wider conflict in the Middle East.*

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: Hezbollah says it's fired 150 rockets into northern Israel and the occupied Golan Heights.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cClHIJyVnbI)*> SKY NEWS: <BOMB SOUND> In a display of power and military might the Israelis unleashed a massive aerial bombardment*

*<CLIP> CBC: Hassan Nassrallah has been killed in an israeli attack.*

*<CLIP> ABC: Iran has just launched a retaliatory missile attack targeting Israel …*

SEAN: The escalating escalation on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> ARABIC, THEN ENGLISH: You’re listening to Today, Explained.*

SEAN: Stephen Kalin, you’re in Beirut. You’re visiting the very places Israel is striking. I’m sure this feels, to you and to everyone you talk to, like a war. But what is Israel saying? They haven’t formally declared a war, have they?

STEPHEN: They haven't. They've… their military spokesman has come out and talked about the sort of limited – he uses the word limited – incursions, limited raids across the border.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWsBJvuCSIk)*> IDF SPOKESMAN DANIEL HAGARI: The Israel Defense Forces is conducting limited and targeted raids along Israel's northern border against the threat Hezbollah poses to civilian[s] in Northern Israel. These localized ground raids will target Hezbollah strongholds that threaten Israeli towns, kibbutzim, and communities along our border.*

STEPHEN: They're trying to be quite careful about messaging that they don't plan to go deep into Lebanese territory, at least right now. And they want to keep this limited in scope. They're saying that they're going after Hezbollah infrastructure in southern parts of Lebanon, which which has been used to target northern Israel, where tens of thousands of Israelis have been evacuated from their homes for nearly an entire year. It's now one of the war goals of the Israeli government to move those people back to their homes.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWsBJvuCSIk)*> HAGARI: We will not let 7th of October happen again on any one of our borders. We will continue doing whatever necessary so that Israeli families can return to their homes in safety and security.*

SEAN:Israel wants to make sure that, you know, people living in the north of the country are safe from rocket fire. And to do that, they have to clear out southern Lebanon of, of Hezbollah forces. Is that possible long term? Do they have a realistic objective here?

STEPHEN: It is a very difficult goal. There is a U.N. Security Council Resolution, 1701, which basically says that the… Lebanon’s southern border needs to be secured by the Lebanese army. That's really not been implemented because Lebanon state institutions are very weak. Its army is one of the strongest ones, but it's it's not strong enough to impose that on Hezbollah, which operates in that area. So it is conceivable that Israel could destroy Hezbollah infrastructure, push them back from the border far enough while Israeli troops are present in southern Lebanon. But once the Israeli troops leave, it's hard to see what stops Hezbollah from just going back and rebuilding and reestablishing themselves.

SEAN: Hm. Could it look like a permanent occupation?

STEPHEN: That's possible. Israel has said that it doesn't want to do that, and the US is certainly against that.

SEAN: Ok.

STEPHEN: But there is precedent for it.

SEAN: Israel is escalating upon escalation here in the past few weeks and obviously playing with fire here, with Iran closely watching, backing Hezbollah. Does Israel want this to turn into a broader regional war with, with multiple parties involved?

STEPHEN: Well, I mean, what they say publicly is that, no, they don't… they don't want a broad regional war:

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJVv87TiAlQ&t=129s)*> BBC, ISRAELI DEFENCE MINISTER YOAV GALLANT: <translation> We have no interest in expanding the war. We have no interest in looking for additional fronts…*

STEPHEN: It's something that the Americans are also very keen to avoid. And they have been supporting Israel in, in their campaign in Gaza and now in Lebanon with weapons and and other support. But the Americans have also sent more troops to the region in an effort to deter Iran from getting involved. I think the Israelis want to address the …what they see as a very intense threat to especially residents of the north, but the entire country, really from, from Hezbollah. And they see this as an opportunity. They've been at war for a year in Gaza and they want to eliminate the other threats that they see around them. The challenge is that they're they've been fighting a war for a year in Gaza. They've got issues in the West Bank, security issues that they're trying to address. They've now got this escalated front in Lebanon. They're also getting drone fire from Iraq and Syria sometimes. They've got missiles coming at them from the Houthis in Yemen. And then, of course, there's Iran itself, which supports a lot of these, these groups that are attacking Israel and sent a few hundred missiles over to Israel back in April, which really didn't do that much damage. But there is that, that sort of looming threat of a more direct confrontation with Iran.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOHG2TdSOVg)*> AL JAZEERA, ISRAELI PM BENJAMIN NETANYAHU, UN: I have a message for the tyrants of Tehran. If you strike us, we will strike you. There is no place – <applause> There is no place in Iran that the long arm of Israel cannot reach, and that’s true of the entire Middle East.*

SEAN: Has Iran said anything since this limited incursion, ground invasion, war began – whatever you want to call it?

STEPHEN: Yes. The latest we've heard from the Iranians was on Monday, actually, before the invasion – the ground operation – began. The foreign ministry spokesman, he was asked whether Iran would send volunteers or forces to Lebanon to help Hezbollah confront Israel. And he said that basically it received no request and they know that, that Hezbollah doesn't need the help right now.”

SEAN: “Hezbollah doesn’t need the help right now.” Their leader was just KILLED!

STEPHEN: Right. Exactly, Yeah. <laughs>

SEAN: We’ll talk about that.

STEPHEN: Yeah. But the US Defense Secretary yesterday spoke with his Israeli counterpart and the summary of that meeting from the Pentagon included a message, basically indicating that… it was sort of a warning to Iran that the US would… was ready and willing to address any Iranian involvement, direct Iran involvement and try to head off Iran from getting involved.

And so you know, the White House is talking about an imminent ballistic missile attack from Iran against Israel …

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYjKvTM-J5k)*> ABC IRAN HAS JUST LAUNCHED A RETALIATORY MISSILE ATTACK TARGETING ISRAEL. A U.S. SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TELLING ABC NEWS NOW THAT IRAN IS EXPECTED TO FIRE 240 TO 250 MISSILES AT FOUR TARGETS IN ISRAEL.*

is exactly the sort of thing that the US has been preparing for, and the US has said that it would come to Israel's aid in that case.

SEAN: What is a leaderless Hezbollah, for all intents and purposes, doing right now? How are they reacting?

STEPHEN: Yeah, I think it's been a very challenging couple of weeks for for Hezbollah. They were taken totally by surprise when the sort of pager/walkie talkie attack happened in in the middle of September. A lot of their members were directly impacted – thousands of them – and also their communications network was was clearly infiltrated at that point. And then there have been a series of, of airstrikes targeting very senior leaders of basically an entire echelon of senior military leaders ~~t~~has been killed in the past few weeks. And the latest of that was was the secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah himself. And so the organization is, unable to meet each other safely, unable to speak safely over telecommunications. I mean, their their operational strength has definitely been weakened significantly in the past few weeks. And question is. Are they too impaired to hold off an Israeli offensive or are they basically planning to launch an insurgency and and make it very difficult for the Israeli troops that enter south Lebanon? And that's really what we're waiting to see in the coming days.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCOTzu2qD0w)*> FRANCE 24 - NAIM QASSEM: <translation> We are ready for any scenario. If Israel decides to launch a ground invasion, our forces – the forces of the resistance – will be ready on the ground. We will choose a secretary general of the party shortly. And, in accordance with the structures of the organization, designate a new chief to the post of leader.*

SEAN: After taking a lot of Ls, it feels like Benjamin Netanyahu has had a lot of wins. Is Nasrallah the biggest of them all?

STEPHEN: Yeah, I think he just might be.

SCORING <ick.>

STEPHEN: Netanyahu has been… had made it a goal from the beginning of the conflict in Gaza to eliminate Hamas's leaders. And Israel has done some of that. They've gotten to some of the leaders. But Yahya Sinwar still seems to be out there and that is a target that has eluded the Israelis and frustrated them. To be able to get Nasrallah is quite significant symbolically, but it has also going to have a very clear operational impact on Hezbollah. They’re… they were already in disarray after these pager attacks that nobody expected. And then many senior leaders, senior military leaders were eliminated. And then to top it off with getting Nasrallah really just, I think, has left the organization in a state of shock. That's precisely when Israel chose to send forces into southern Lebanon.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Stephen Kalin is a foreign correspondent at *The Wall Street Journal*. The dead head of Hezbollah, when we return on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. Stephen Kalin from *The* *Wall Street Journal* is gone. But Jared Malsin from *The* *Wall Street Journal* is here, because he co-wrote a little bio of Hassan Nasrallah over the weekend. It was called “Hassan Nasrallah’s Death Deprives Hezbollah of Its ‘Beating Heart’”.

JARED MALSIN (reporter, Wall Street Journal): Hasan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah was one of the most important figures in the Middle East. He became the leader of Hezbollah in 1992. And since then has led this transformation of Hezbollah from a militia group into a powerful political organization that has elected MPs to the Lebanese parliament that has members of the cabinet and is also the most important arm of Iranian influence in the region. On the one side, he was a charismatic leader who was seen as one of the few leaders in the Middle East who stood up to Israel militarily. On the other side, he was labeled a terrorist by the United States and Israel. So there's going to be a lot of people celebrating his death and a lot of people mourning him

SEAN: Can you tell us how he got to be that towering figure. Where does his story begin?

JARED: His story begins in the early 1980s with the formation of Hezbollah.

SCORING – Lordy I Hope There Are Drums

JARED: So in the 1980s, like Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982...

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyV1Edrrt7c&t=26s)*> AP: The Israeli tanks roll into Southern Lebanon. Israel’s invasion was the biggest development in the region since the 73 war*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1p9gTlt4Ng)*> NBC: Hezbollah meaning party of god in Arabic emerged from the country’s huge and impoverished Shiite muslim population GUNFIRE*

JARED: And at that time, this was a small group that was like operating in cells and didn't even announce its presence publicly for a few years. In 1978 and 79, you have the Iranian Revolution where there was an uprising against the Shah of Iran that was just an earthquake that shook the region.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDeaOOmfxZ8)*> NBC: The end of IRan’s monarchy came early today when Khomeni’s followers took control of the palace of the Shah. The imperial guards there gave up without a struggle.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1p9gTlt4Ng)*> NBC: As they paraded through the streets of Tehran, their liberated weapons held high there was an air of celebration*

JARED: Nasrallah he studied in Iran and rubbed shoulders with a lot of, you know, people who were involved in that movement and there was kind of this awakening of if ordinary people protesting in Iran could overthrow the Shah of Iran. It was this idea of like, we can do anything. And he returned to Lebanon where he went into this kind of guerilla movement.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sldgx9VaRE0)*> MIDDLE EAST EYE: Nasrallah: SPEAKING ARABIC*

*[[They (Israel) are fighting a hidden power that can surprise them on any day with a great number of rockets.]]*

SCORING OUT

JARED: The other thing to explain why was Nasrallah so important is that he was a charismatic public speaker where every time he got on TV, it was an event. And I have seen this over the course of more than a decade of reporting in the Middle East that when he would get on TV, you know, here in Lebanon, Palestinians, you know, even in places like Egypt and Jordan, people listened to what he said.

*<CLIP> 60 minutes: Openly calling for terrorism against Israel, Nasrallah in this speech is urging suicide operations. In Palestine, he’s saying, these operations are the only way to root out the Zionists.*

JARED: He was very charismatic. And, you know, he would give these speeches where he's like sitting at a desk and speaking to either a room full of people or an auditorium and like everyone kind of hanging on his every word and like he liked to crack jokes, …

*<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/Aldanmarki/status/1741111964527374369)*> NASRALLAH: ARABIC*

JARED: … during the Bush administration, he's talking about John Bolton.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/Aldanmarki/status/1741111964527374369)*> NASRALLAH: ARABIC*

JARED: He says, this is the American Ambassador Bolton or whatever his name is. He's a very funny looking guy with his mustache and so on. And then there's like uproarious laughter.

CLIP *<*[*CLIP*](https://x.com/Aldanmarki/status/1741111964527374369)*> NASRALLAH: ARABIC*

JARED: In addition to being the leader of the world's most heavily armed militia and one of the most powerful political parties in Lebanon. He was also, he had this ability to directly connect with the public that kind of broadened his appeal.

SEAN: Can you tell us what, like, about some of his biggest wins in his time in power?

SCORING IN – Because we care

JARED: There's one main win and its the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, which was the culmination of this 18 years of insurgency that Hezbollah had been fighting against the Israelis. They launched these attacks on Israeli forces, there was an insurgency, and then the Israelis withdrew without a peace treaty.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sael3VJ0czg)*> AP: guerrillas who fought Israelis and their allies for nearly two decades are celebrating their departure.*

JARED: And no one else in the region was able to do that.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sael3VJ0czg)*> AP: Military outposts were dismantled to prevent them falling into the hands of Hezbollah guerrillas.*

JARED: I mean, Israel has a qualitative military edge over every other country around it. They have nuclear weapons, they have fighter jets. And here is a group of guerrillas who, you know, with the help of Iran, but, you know, fighting with small arms and so on, was able to achieve that. And that inspired a lot of people.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50KhMMXlEiU)*> AP: SOUNDBITE: (Arabic)*

*"This is a lovely day. A day of celebration."*

JARED: The other one is 2006 when Hezbollah captured some Israeli soldiers in a raid across the border and took them back into Lebanon.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mQH6n2zRR4)*> i24 New English: a crossborder ambush of an idea force on July 12th 2006 and the abduction of the bodies of two Israeli soldiers quickly led to a full-on conflict which lasted 34 days.*

JARED: It bordered on military disaster for the Israelis because they went into Lebanon. Israeli military officials will tell you this, that they were unprepared at that time for what they found, which is that you had a group that… they're fighting for their own country. They know the terrain…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzVEduKGUws)*> Hezbollah guerillas hiding in the surrounding hills and villages fired their anti tank missiles at the Israeli tanks advancing below*

JARED: They had anti-tank missiles that they were able to use to pierce the armor of more than 20 tanks.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzVEduKGUws)*>* after 33 days of war Israel had failed to achieve its goals of destroying Hezbollah and winning back two of its soldiers captured at the very beginning of the latest fighting.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Okay, so those are some of the biggest wins. That might be why, you know, he'll be missed in the coming months, years, whatever it might be. But you also alluded a few times now to people celebrating his death. Why will people be celebrating, including not just Israelis, but Arabs in the region and around the world, I think we've seen in the past few days. Why are people celebrating his death?

JARED: Right, this is really important. I mean, you saw over the weekend, for example, like people celebrating in rebel-held Syria…

<[CLIP](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMtYNa1DOUk)> SBS NEWS: IN militia-held parts of Northern Syria the death of Hezbollah’s leader a moment of mutual joy. The man they blame for scores of civilian deaths by bolstering the Syrian regime– now gone.

JARED: Nasrallah decided to send his troops into Syria to fight with the regime because they made a decision to say, look, like we're going to side with these states that are backing us, even if it means siding with a brutal regime that was repressing its own people. It was a turning point, where instead of, you know, fighting as a guerrilla force against an invading army, they were acting as an invading army, fighting against the Syrian rebels. And so that's why across the region, it's just incredibly polarized. There's going to be a lot of people celebrating his death and saying, you know, good riddance. Even here in Lebanon, for example, and if you talk to people here there are people who absolutely loved him. There are people who absolutely hated him. And I think there are a lot of people who feel genuinely mixed about it.

SEAN: Is there another Nasrallah waiting in the wings? Do we know what comes next for Hezbollah?

JARED: So we don't know yet. They have not named a successor yet, but. There have been a whole series of senior Hezbollah leaders who have been killed in the last few months. So really, we're talking about close to a generation of senior leaders, the kind of founding members of the group that have already been killed.

SEAN: You know, we had a guest on the show last week, Jared, who said, you know, it's important to remember

*<CLIP>* NICK PATON WALSH (chief international security correspondent, CNN) *destroying their adversary's capabilities in the immediate future, that doesn't leave you safe in the longer term, because, you know, dead men have sons who come back more angry.*

SEAN: I'm wondering if this is only creating more enemies or if this does meaningfully wipe out an enemy for Israel?

JARED: No, there's no wiping out Hezbollah. We've seen this with the war in Gaza, for example, with Hamas, which is a much smaller, much less well-armed, less well-trained group has been able to outlast a massive Israeli military operation in a tiny place, which is the Gaza Strip, And Hezbollah is a larger group that is much more heavily armed, has many more advantages in terms of geography, in terms of its ability to re-arm itself, and that has a history of regenerating over the years.

SCORING IN – Users Lose Drugs (sad, relaxed, lofi) -01

JARED: So over the long term, Hezbollah isn't going to go anywhere, even if it is significantly weakened.

SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Jared Malsin. W S J dot com.

I’m Sean Rameswaram. Our program today was produced by Peter Balonon-Rosen and Amanda Lewellyn with help from Miles Bryan. We were edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact-checked by Laura Bullard and mixed by Andrea Kristinsdottir and Rob Byers.  
  
Sorry we don’t have better news on your 100th birthday, Jimmy. The Vice presidential debate tomorrow on *Today, Explained.* [10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]