9/24/24; War in Lebanon?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <Focal points>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): It was just under a year ago that Hamas attacked Israel and there was a new war in Gaza. But throughout that war, everyone’s been trying to avoid a broader regional conflict. We’ve heard it a million times:

*<CLIP> SECRETARY OF STATE ANTONY BLINKEN: As we said from day one. We have an intense focus on preventing this conflict from spreading.*

SEAN: Now, as we approach the one year anniversary of those initial attacks in Israel, it looks like we’ve never been closer to that broader conflict.

*<CLIP> CBS:*

*LEE COWAN, CORRESPONDENT: Thousands of pagers, exploded in the hands and pockets of suspected members of Hezbollah.*

*<CLIP> PBS NEWSHOUR:*

*NICK SCHIFRIN, CORRESPONDENT: The attacks were aimed at Hezbollah militants, but exploded in civilian areas. Even in Beirut living rooms, affecting families across the country.*

*<CLIP> SKY NEWS:*

*JOHN SPARKS, CORRESPONDENT: It seems the fiery path to all out war has begun in the hills of southern Lebanon. The Israelis unleashed a massive aerial bombardment.*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: On *Today, Explained*, we are heading to Lebanon.

[THEME]

SEAN: To find out what’s going on in Lebanon right now, *Today, Explained* reached out to Sarah Dadouch – a correspondent from Semafor. Because she’s … in Lebanon right now.

SARAH DADOUCH (CORRESPONDENT, SEMAFOR): Life in Beirut right now is teetering between being on pause and people trying to figure out how they can continue with their day to day activity.

*<CLIP> WION*

*Anchor:The Lebanese health ministry has said at least about 550 people have lost their lives during…*

*<CLIP> CNN: \*AIRSTRIKES\*  
Reporter: Israeli airstrikes battering southern, eastern lebanon [ARABIC voices] It’s the most intense bombardment of lebanon since the 2006 war. And the deadliest*

*<CLIP> BBC News*

*Anchor: Many people in southern Lebanon have chosen to flee. These pictures show a mass exodus of cars heading to Beirut in the north.*

SARAH: Schools are closed today and they're going to be closed tomorrow after the attacks on Monday that killed nearly 500 people. And usually that's an indication of – to people as to whether they should stay at home or not. But there's this sense that this is going to be a long winded, slow war. And so I think, I think the general sense in Beirut is to what extent do we continue living our day to day life while, while, you know, anticipating that at any moment where we are could could be struck?

*<CLIP> BBC NEWS:*

*ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU: Now, starting this morning the IDF has warned you to get out of harm's way. I urge you: Take this warning seriously. Don't lry Hezbollah endanger your lives and the lives of your loved ones. Don't let Hezbollah endanger Lebanon. Please, get out of harm’s way now.*

SEAN: Hm. It's interesting you say this there's a sense that this is going to be a long winded, slow war because it feels like a lot of the conversation around what's happening in Lebanon right now is about whether this is a war. But, but are you saying that people there have already accepted that they're in a war?

SARAH: I think it depends on who you talk to. But but objectively speaking, I think if we step back, Lebanon has been at war with Israel, in this new stage of war, since October 8th. We have a we have an armed group here, you know, Hezbollah is a paramilitary that that is also a political party And this actor has been striking Israel nearly daily since October 8th. The numbers of casualties, a lot of them have been have been combatants, but a lot also a lot of those combatants have been killed and their homes or in their villages while, while not on active duty, but by pure numbers and by pure attacks. Israel and Hezbollah have been at war. I think a big part of the reason why people kept saying “when the war comes” is because there's this kind of disconnect, this purposeful disconnect that has happened between the South and the Beqaa Valley and the rest of the country because the war was contained in those areas with the occasional strikes in on the outskirts of Beirut. But the war has has definitely, you know, been here.

SEAN: Can you tell us how it's escalated in the past week?

SARAH: So last Tuesday, thousands of pagers exploded around Lebanon. There was, there was 12 people that were killed. Two were children and four were medical workers. So at least half of the people killed were civilians and thousands were injured.

SCORING IN <Letting It Sink In (slow, minimal, round, long, minimal, drone)>

SARAH: The pagers that were, you know, held by Hezbollah members and operatives exploded. And not just, you know, in underground tunnels and in meeting rooms, but in offices in Beirut and supermarkets, just wherever the person, you know, who was holding the pager was at the time.

SARAH: And since that happened, the next day, we saw walkie talkies that exploded.

*<CLIP> PBS NEWSHOUR:*

*NICK SCHIFRIN, CORRESPONDENT: As thousands mourned at a Hezbollah funeral, they had to plan another one. Hezbollah walkie talkies across the country exploded in Hezbollah members hands.*

SARAH: In response, we saw an escalation of, of strikes from, from Hezbollah towards Israel. But really, the brunt of the attacks have been coming. It has been coming from Israel towards Hezbollah. We've been used to like a tit for tat match of, of raising the specter of attacks, and Hezbollah tends to match it.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS:*

*BRITT CLENNETT, CORRESPONDENT: Video showing the moment of a suspected Israeli strike on a building yards away from where a funeral was being held for a Hezbollah soldier. The Iran backed group saying it retaliated to this with rockets towards Israel's Kiryat Shmona. This is really part of daily exchanges of fire between the IDF and Hezbollah.*

SARAH: But what Israel has done in the past week, the pager attacks, the walkie talkie attacks, and then the strikes, the targeted strikes on the Dahir, the suburb of Beirut, to take out a Hezbollah commanders, some of which were successful. You know, some weren’t. Those things, Hezbollah has not been able to match.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: The pager thing was shocking to essentially everyone around the world because it felt like something we had just never seen before. How did they do it? What do we know at this point?

SARAH: So when it comes to the pager stuff, Reuters has had the majority of the of the scoops on on the, you know, the back story. Basically, you know, they found out from sources that Hezbollah was still handing out its members Gold Apollo branded pagers just hours before they blew up on Tuesday.

SEAN: Wow.   
  
SARAH: That's a sign that the group was confident, even though they did a sweep of electronic equipment to identify threats, they were confident that these were safe. One member of Hezbollah said received a new pager on Monday. So just the day before. And that's a big infiltration into into Hezbollah's capabilities. I mean, there's Western sources that said that Israel's secretive military intelligence unit, 8200, was involved in the planning. And what we do know is that the batteries of the walkie talkies were laced with a highly explosive compound and that a few grams of explosives were hidden in the pagers and those had gone undetected for months because when the pagers were brought in, they just were they just went through a very generic routine sweep of equipment. I think that, you know, that showed that's a big, big security gap for, for Hezbollah. But also it shows how unaware and unprepared they were for, for such an attack from from Israel. The pagers have been delivered starting into 2022. So it's unclear how long these pagers have been, have been bugged and how long they've been, you know, sleeper death agents, basically.

SEAN: And now we’ve got these, I guess more conventional, airstrikes? Who or what is being targeted?

SARAH: The majority of them are landing in the south. There have been a few strikes in different mountainous areas, but lot a lot of them are falling in residential neighborhoods and residential villages.

*<CLIP> BBC News*

*Orla Guerin: [bombing and screaming] [arabic] For one man too late…   
[arabic] My siblings and their children were all killed here, he says.*

SARAH: There's been, I think from the nearly 500 or, you know, over 500 that have been killed. There's 150 that are women and children. We don't know how many of them were combatants. Yesterday, there were videos that were coming up of strikes falling alongside the roads that people were on.

*<CLIP> Al JAzeera:*

*Reporter” OK There’s a lot of panic, people are making their way out of this area. A few minutes ago there’s been another airstrike you can see the smoke…*

SARAH: People were taking a road that usually takes maybe three hours from the south to Beirut. And last night, it was taking, you know, 7 to 8, nine hours for people to get to Beirut. A lot of people slept on the on the on the road in their cars. And those were families with a lot of children. We were, we were watching videos of strikes falling not very far from, from these, from these very jam-packed roads.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA:*

*REPORTER: <sirens> There’s a lot of chaos here, they are worried that there’s going to be another strike.*

SARAH: So there is definitely this sense that a lot of this is psychological war. There's no sense as to whether all of these strikes are, in fact, hitting strategic Hezbollah locations or if it's also kind of a driver to get people to evacuate the south in order to place pressure on the government and Hezbollah to meet Israel on the, on the negotiating table.

SEAN: So how is Hezbollah responding so far?

SARAH: In the last week they've escalated the strikes on on Israel. But I think yesterday we didn't see any casualties in Israel. So so they've just been striking back, but nowhere near at the same level. They're not doing any targeted attacks per say. We saw the leader of Hezbollah came out and gave a speech that more or less said, “we will continue to exist no matter how many of us they take out.” It wasn't as inflammatory as it could have been. It wasn't as angry as it could have been. There's a lot of us think that that speech was prerecorded. But in comparison, it's really paled to what the Israelis are or are doing in Lebanon with what operations are executing.

SEAN: Are people in Lebanon right now worried that there might be an all out ground war? And if so, is, is Hezbollah ready for that?

SARAH: I think there aren't that many fears that there's going to be an all out ground war. And if there was, that wouldn't be something that the Lebanese are worried about as much as the Israelis, I think are worried about. And here we're talking in an official capacity. The Hezbollah knows the terrain so much better than the Israelis. They have tunnels everywhere. The Israelis know this. there's a reason why it's been very focused on an aerial assault. And I think the indications we've seen from Israel show that they're going to continue on that path. A ground invasion, I think– especially I mean, at least right now, might put Hezbollah ahead of Israel.

SEAN: You know, for one year now, Sarah, we've heard that no one in the region wants this war to escalate. We don't want an escalation. We don't want a regional war. And yet everything we've seen in the past week in Lebanon looks like an escalation. It looks like something akin to a regional war. How is Israel justifying this escalation?

SARAH: Israel made it very clear from the beginning of the war that the status quo that existed before October 7th will no longer exist after this, this war is over.   
  
SEAN: Mm.   
  
SARAH: And they've made that point very clear, both when it comes to Hamas and when it comes to Hezbollah.

SCORING IN <Nightwatch Beetles (drone, low bells, dissonant, repetitive, slow build)>

SARAH: There is a very, very, very big push to return residents to the north. That's a very big priority for Israel. And so once they added that as a war objective, that was, that was a message being sent to Lebanon, that we're turning our eyes towards you now. And that was last Tuesday. So and they've kept that promise. But they have they have said before repeatedly the status quo with Hezbollah is not going to continue. What that looks like is that's what we're going to find out when this when this war is over. Eradicating Hezbollah as an entity is just not a realistic goal. I think the question to be answered is what will it need to happen in order for for Israeli citizens to return to the north? And what does that deal or lack of deal look like with Hezbollah.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Sarah Dadouch is Semafor’s Saudi correspondent, based in Beirut and Riyadh. She spoke to us from Beirut. Find her work at Semafor dot com.

When we’re back on *Today, Explained*, we’re gonna try and understand the strategy here.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NICK PATON WALSH (chief international security correspondent, CNN): My name is Nick Paton Walsh. I'm chief international security correspondent at CNN. And I lived in Beirut for about six years until about 2017.

SEAN: We spoke to Nick Monday night, after the deadliest day in Lebanon in decades. We asked him if he had any sense of Israel’s strategy.

NICK: I think it's important to remember here that, you know, you can never really tell what somebody's strategy is while it's playing out. The initial act which began all this, the extraordinary assault across Lebanon of these pager blasts, which also appear to have been targeted, yet also laden with an indiscriminate nature, which meant that civilians and children, too, according to Lebanese health officials, were killed in these explosions as well.

SCORING IN <Because we care>

NICK: This clearly was designed to, to shake this very secretive, very proud group, very obsessed with its own operational functionality and security to shake them to their core. And then that was followed up 24 hours later by bigger blasts that seem to have, actually, have killed more Hezbollah members. Some of the reporting seems to suggest in walkie talkies, a yet more low tech device.

*<CLIP> ITV NEWS:*

*CORRESPONDENT: Hassan Nasrallah’s speech was to two audiences, the allies shaken by the past days, and enemies who've brought such harm to his organization.*

*HASSAN NASRALLAH, HEZBOLLAH LEADER: (translation) The Israeli enemy targeted thousands of pagers. They were detonated at the same time. The enemy crossed all the rules, laws and red lines.*

NICK: So you've got to, I think, remember what that's going to do to the ability for Hezbollah to even plot a response. And they will be wondering who they can ring, who's safe, who's unharmed and questioning their entire communication network. And so I think it's really important to assess this as a moment where potentially, despite Israel's, kind of, callous disregard at times, it seems, for civilian casualties in Lebanon, they have pursued a path here that's sophisticated and able to wreak significant damage on their foe, and might be exposing Hezbollah as not quite the hundred foot giant that many in the region felt that they were. A lot of the standoff has been predicated on the idea that if those two sides really went for each other after 18 years, that these two had really built themselves up for a conflict, that both sides will find utterly horrific. And here we have it.

SCORING OUT

NICK: Here we have this moment where Israel is throwing, it seems, what they have at Hezbollah. And all of Lebanon, too, it seems. Or much of Lebanon. And as yet, we've yet to see the sort of formidable Hezbollah response that made many fear this particular moment. It may be coming. But we're definitely seeing that Hezbollah are not capable at this point of the kind of fiery response that many had feared.

SEAN: What do they have? Hamas has tunnels and hostages. What does Hezbollah have?

NICK: On the ground, it has an extensive and probably still pretty experienced series of fighters and a trap, certainly waiting for Israel in southern Lebanon. Now, you know, be in no doubt about this at all, Hezbollah lost a lot of people during Syria's civil war when they fought alongside the Assad regime.

*<CLIP> CHANNEL 4 NEWS:*

*JONATHAN MILLER, CORRESPONDENT: They have rallied to the cause of their patron, Iran, and ridden to al-Assad's rescue. Hezbollah's operations in Syria have been decisive. Entire rebel held cities recaptured for Assad.*

NICK: But Hezbollah, I don't think, have necessarily recovered to their fullest of strengths. But they also, too, have been on the receiving end of a lot of Iranian rocket technology. You know, we don't have full transparency on the strength and quality of the arsenal, but there appear to be medium range rockets that can hit key cities in Israel. Even longer range ones that might be able to hit the south of Israel. Whether or not the Iron Dome is fully equipped to handle those, we'll find out probably in the days and weeks ahead. So they have – if they launch all of these over 100,000 rockets or a significant number in a similar time, the capacity to overwhelm Israel's air defenses, it seems. But then you can't make that move too many times. It's sort of a limited trick they can play. And so I think the question we're going to find out in the days ahead is whether Hezbollah feel they're at a point where they have to play that card.

SEAN: Now, of course, we've seen this story play out before: rocket strikes are met with airstrikes. Thousands upon thousands have died in Gaza as a result of airstrikes. Do we think Israel has the appetite to go after a similar strategy in Lebanon?

NICK: I think the Israelis are going to have to end up pursuing a somewhat different strategy in Lebanon. The strategy in Gaza has been at times brutal and horrific for the civilian population there. And I think some of that is being eased for Israel in terms of the lack of media access inside that particular area, because reporters haven't been able—or outside reporters haven't been given free access across the area. That's somewhat limited, the amount of information. There have been some extraordinarily brave Palestinian and other reporters based there, permanently trying to do that job and doing it very well. But the information flow has been restricted. That's less likely to be the case in Lebanon. And I think that they're going to have to come to a point where they ask for something from Hezbollah or the Lebanese as a way of stopping this wave of airstrikes.

SEAN: And what do you think they may ask for?

NICK: I imagine they’ll ask Hezbollah to pull back up towards the north of the Litani River. I think that's going to be tough for Hezbollah to agree to, given the extraordinary position they've been put in, of weakness, over the past week or so. But look, we're dealing with, you know, a time which is going to likely redefine people's perceptions of what both sides are capable of. And so I think it's going to be interesting to see exactly how much restraint Israel feels global opinion puts upon it.

SEAN: Obviously, this is escalating as we approach the one year anniversary of Hamas’s attacks on Israel, but also as we approach the United States’ election. I imagine neither candidate wants to see this blow up into an all-out war in the, in the weeks before the election, or at all. But does the U.S. have a hand to play in this – for the moment – escalating conflict?

NICK: I think the shortest answer is increasingly no. We've seen the U.S. just openly, publicly, and I'm sure very vocally, privately beg the Israelis to back off on a wider confrontation with Hezbollah, there wasn't necessarily an urgent immediate need for Israel to escalate this in the degree that they have. They would say they do need to do this because they need to ensure that their tens of thousands of civilians can go back to their homes in northern Israel, which is a legitimate security demand that I'm sure if many countries were facing that threat to the north of their country, they would feel the need to do something about it. It may be that they are trying to be harsh, fast, so Hezbollah and the Lebanese respond in the way that they wish. But we're clearly seeing a moment where US diplomacy is has run its course, has not been able to slow this. We still hear the same talking points from the White House about the need for de-escalation, about how there isn't really a military solution to this. And, you know, they are correct. And while they may be able to impose some kind of peace through 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.

SCORING IN <Canopy dust>

NICK: The really important thing about conflicts like this is they don't just stop. You don't do damage to your adversary that changes their position, and then off and just say, I'm just going to pack up and go home. No. It comes back. They reequip, they regroup. They have memories. They seek revenge. And I think this is part of the the weakness of the Israeli strategy is they may be able to do a lot of damage in the short term, but where does this take them a year from now, two years from now?

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Nick Paton Walsh is the chief international security correspondent at CNN. Find them wherever you find your cable news.

Our show today was produced by Haleema Shah and Hady Mawajdeh with help from Peter Balonon-Rosen, edited by Miranda Kennedy, fact checked by Laura Bullard and Amanda Lewellyn, and mixed by Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

I’m Sean Rameswaram and this is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]