

Reactions to the Elimination of Ibrahim Aqil and the Top Command of the Radwan Force

September 22, 2024

Overview¹

►On September 20, 2024, the IDF eliminated Ibrahim Aqil, the head of Hezbollah's military operations and commander of the elite Radwan Force, in an airstrike in the southern suburb of Beirut. The attack killed at least 14 other Radwan Force commanders, including Ahmed Mahmoud Wahhabi, the head of military training and part of the Force's top command. According to published information, they were holding a meeting to plan a ground attack on Israeli territory. According to the Lebanese ministry of health at least 50 people were killed in the attack.

►Hezbollah confirmed the death of Aqil, aka "the great jihad commander," the second senior Hezbollah official granted the title since the current conflict with Israel began in October 2023. The organization called Aqil "one of its greatest leaders," who had commanded operations against Israel since the 1980s.

Senior Hezbollah figures threatened "an appropriate retaliation" and added that Hezbollah would not stop its "support" for the Gaza Strip. Since Aqil's death Hezbollah has claimed responsibility for more than 20 attacks on targets in Israel, including expanding range of its attacks to the Jezreel Valley and the Haifa area. According to Hezbollah, the attacks were not retaliation for the death of Aqil.

▶Iran and the "resistance axis"² organizations condemned the Israeli attack on Beirut. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for four UAV and cruise missile attacks on Israel. The IDF spokesperson said that all threats from Iraq were intercepted.

▶In ITIC assessment, the attack on Aqil and the Radwan Force's top command, in addition to the exploding pagers and walkie-talkies, surprised Hezbollah and are regarded as Israel's deviation from the [Hezbollah-dictated] "rules of conflict" in place since October 8, 2023, and a crossing of red lines. In ITIC assessment, Hezbollah can be expected to

¹ Click <u>https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en</u> to subscribe and receive the ITIC's daily updates as well as its other publications.

² Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, the Palestinian organizations, the Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq.

react strongly, both by further extending the range of its attacks on Israeli territory and by the use of new weapons, and possibly even an attack on a sensitive military target. However, Hezbollah still does not want a total war, especially in view of the significant damage to its most senior military figures, and will try to make Israel return to the "equations" it has been trying to dictate since the beginning of the conflict, while continuing its "support" for the Gaza Strip. Nasrallah will probably also consider Iran's position regarding the nature and strength of the response, partly because at this time Iran also does not want a regional war which could also include a direct confrontation with Israel and the United States. In ITIC assessment, the other "resistance axis" organizations can be expected to increase their attempts to attack Israel in support of Hezbollah.

Elimination of Ibrahim Aqil and the Radwan Force Command

▶On September 20, 2024, at around 4:00 p.m. in the afternoon, the Israeli Air Force struck the Dahiyeh al-Janoubia, the southern suburb of Beirut (al-Mayadeen, September 20, 2024). According to the most recent information from the Lebanese ministry of health (September 22, 2024, as of 4:00 p.m.), 50 people were killed in the airstrike and operations to clear the rubble continue (al-Nashra, September 21, 2024).



The scene of the attack in the Dahiyeh al-Janoubia in Beirut (al-Akhbar, September 21, 2024)

IDF announcement

►The IDF spokesperson confirmed that an attack by Israeli Air Force fighter jets on September 20, 2024, eliminated Ibrahim Aqil, the head of Hezbollah's operations and commander of Hezbollah's Radwan Force. The planes attacked a meeting of commanders held at an underground site in the Dahiyeh al-Janoubia in Beirut. In addition to Aqil, 15 other Hezbollah terrorist operatives were killed in the attack, including senior Radwan Force commanders. Aqil and the others were responsible for orchestrating and executing hundreds of terrorist attacks on Israel, and were planning a Hezbollah invasion and attack on the cities, towns and villages in the Galilee (IDF spokesperson, September 21, 2024).



Aqil's "identity card" (IDF spokesperson, September 20, 2024)

According to reports, Aqil was injured in the explosion of Hezbollah-held communications devices on September 17 and 18, 2024, and was released from the hospital shortly before the meeting (German News Agency, September 20, 2024).³

Hezbollah announcement

►On the night of September 20, 2024, Hezbollah issued its official announcement of the death of Ibrahim Aqil, aka al-Hajj Abd al-Qader. The announcement called him "the great jihad commander," the most complimentary epithet given a Hezbollah casualty since the beginning of the current conflict.⁴ The announcement called him a "martyr on the way to Jerusalem," like the other Hezbollah casualties in the conflict, and called him "one of its greatest leaders" who always had Jerusalem "in his heart, mind and thoughts, day and night" (Hezbollah combat information Telegram channel, September 21, 2024). For more information, see the Appendix.

³ For further information, see the September 2024 ITIC report, "<u>Hezbollah Communications Devices</u> <u>Explode</u>."

⁴ Aqil is the second senior Hezbollah operation to be called a "great jihadi commander." The first was Fuad Shukr, the organization's military commander, who was killed in an Israeli attack in Beirut on July 30, 2024. For further information, see the ITIC report, see the August 2024 ITIC report, "Reactions to the Deaths of Fuad Shukr and Isma'il Haniyeh."



(Hezbollah combat information Telegram channel, September 20, 2024) Hezbollah issued videos and photos of Aqil documenting his activity in the organization. He was photographed with Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah, and Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force, who was killed in an American attack in January 2020 (Hezbollah combat information Telegram channel, 2024).



Right: Aqil with Nasrallah (an old photo). Left: Aqil with Hashem Safi al-Din (Hezbollah combat information Telegram channel, September 21, 2024)



Aqil (right) with Qassem Soleimani (left), the former commander of the Qods Force, and other Hezbollah officials (Hezbollah combat information Telegram channel, September 21, 2024)

Other casualties

▶Hezbollah announced the death of 14 other commanders in the attack on Beirut. The most important was Ahmed Mahmoud Wahhabi, aka al-Hajj Abu Hussein Samir, born in 1964 in the town of Adwan in south Lebanon and a resident of Ba'albek in the Lebanon Valley, who received the epithet "the shaheed commander."⁵ According to the announcement, he joined Hezbollah when it was founded, participated in many operations against IDF forces in south Lebanon and was captured by Israel in 1984. He was one of the commanders in the ambush of the naval force in Ansaria in south Lebanon in 1997, in which 12 IDF soldiers were killed. Wahhabi also held positions in Hezbollah's central training unit until 2007, was in charge of Radwan Force training until 2012 and then served as the supervisor of its main training unit until 2014. In addition, he was one of Hezbollah's commanders in fighting ISIS in Syria and on the Syria-Lebanon border. Until the beginning of 2024 he was responsible for the Radwan Force's military activities as part of the "support" for the Gaza Strip. Following the death of Wissam Hassan Tawil, the Force's acting commander, in January 2024, he returned to head its main training unit (Hezbollah combat information Telegram channel, September 20-21, 2024).



Ahmed Mahmoud Wahhabi

(Telegram channel of Hezbollah's combat propaganda arm, September 21, 2024)

►The IDF spokesperson said Wahhabi was one of the planners and leaders of Hezbollah's plan to attack and occupy the Galilee, and during the first months of the war he planned and carried out numerous infiltration and shooting attacks. It was also reported that some of those killed in the airstrike were commanders of the divisions which were supposed to lead

⁵ This is the fourth time in the current conflict that Hezbollah has called one of the organization's dead a "commander." The previous cases were Wissam Hassan Tawil, the commander of the Radwan Force, who was killed on January 8, 2024; Taleb Sami Abdallah, commander of the al-Nasser unit, who was killed on June 11, 2024; and Muhammad Naama Nasser, commander of the Aziz unit, who was killed on July 3, 2024.

the Radwan Force terrorist raids into Israeli territory (IDF spokesperson, September 21, 2024). A "source close to Hezbollah" also claimed that Aqil met with senior Radwan Force operatives to plan a ground military operation inside Israel in retaliation for the walkie-talkie explosions in Lebanon (Agence France-Presse, September 22, 2024).



Hezbollah's Reactions

Statements

►Ali Fayed, a member of the Hezbollah faction in the Lebanese Parliament, said that in retaliation for the killing of Aqil and the senior Radwan Force operatives, and for the explosions of the communications devices, Hezbollah would respond "appropriately," with responses "from places the enemy expects them and also from places he does not," which would "bring the confrontation to a new level." He claimed the response would be proportional to the escalation, but added that "the resistance and its allies are not interested in an open war." He claimed that the "resistance" had exact considerations for managing the "confrontation," and would "carefully" determine the time, objectives and means of the response (al-'Ahed, September 22, 2024).

►Hassan Fadlallah, a member of the Hezbollah faction in the Lebanese Parliament, said that the organization had entered a new phase in the fight against Israel. He said Israel was trying to paralyze Hezbollah's capabilities to prevent it from "helping" the Gaza Strip, but the response had been "quick and successful" with attacks deep in Israeli territory. He also claimed that "there is no vacuum" in the leadership and that there were "thousands of operatives" who could fill any position, and that was also the case immediately after the attack in Beirut (al-Nashra, September 22, 2024).

►A Hezbollah "parliamentary official" claimed the "aggression" in the Dahiyeh al-Janoubia was part of the "occupation's [alleged] open war of extermination in the region." He said

Hezbollah would continue its "support" for the Gaza Strip and "the reckoning will come, the punishment will be appropriate, and time will tell. We will let the territory have its say, [and] any Israeli violation will receive an appropriate response" (al-Araby al-Jadeed, September 20,

►The Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese daily al-Akhbar, reported following the Israeli attack in the Dahiyeh al-Janoubia, that "no one in the world needs more evidence to prove that the enemy no longer cares about any kind of conflict rules." It also reported that the attack had destroyed any attempt to reach a political settlement and had opened "a new level of conflict that would force the 'resistance' to adopt new methods." In the opinion of al-Akhbar, Israel will continue to attack senior Hezbollah commanders as well as the organization's military capabilities, adding that "the course of the war and the conflict depend on what the resistance decides to do" (al-Akhbar, September 21, 2024).

A "knowledgeable military source" said Hezbollah would respond by attacking vital sites and targets deep inside Israel. According to the "source," Hezbollah will increase its attacks in several areas in northern Israel and launch thousands of suicide drones and thousands of rockets to widen the area of destruction, and will also attack targets more distant than the Galilee. He added that "nothing will stop Hezbollah and the 'resistance' in northern Israel will be more brutal" (al-Diyar, September 21, 2024).

Reactions on the ground

2024).

Since the elimination of Ibrahim Aqil and the other commanders, as of September 22, 2024, at 2:00 p.m., Hezbollah claimed responsibility for 22 attacks on Israeli territory, but the claims did not state they were retaliation for his death. According to Hezbollah, the attacks on September 20 and 21, 2024 were in support of the Gaza Strip and in response to the Israeli attacks in south Lebanon. The attacks on September 22, 2024, which included extending the attacks to the Jezreel Valley and the Lower Galilee (claiming a military airport had been attacked) and the area near Haifa (claiming a military industries' site had been attacked), and the use of new Fadi-1 and Fadi-2 rockets, were in response to the explosions of Hezbollah's communications devices and for Israeli Air Force attacks throughout Lebanon (Hezbollah combat information Telegram channel, September 20-22, 2024).

▶"Knowledgeable sources" claimed the attacks on Haifa's suburbs were retaliation for the Israeli attacks deep in Lebanon, and especially in the Dahiyeh al-Janoubia in Beirut. The "sources" also claimed that Hezbollah's response was "a painful blow for Tel Aviv [i.e., Israel's leadership], when the Israeli media claims that most of Hezbollah's leadership on the ground has been destroyed." According to the "sources," the objective of launching Fadi rockets was to show that Hezbollah could strike deep inside Israeli territory, however, the "sources claimed" the organization was still focused on "helping the Gaza Strip" and did not want to start a total war against Israel (al-Nashra, September 22, 2024).

Reactions in Lebanon

▶In response to the attack in Beirut, Najib Mikati, prime minister of the Lebanese interim government, said that "an attack on a populated residential area proves once again that the Israeli enemy does not have humanitarian, legal or moral considerations" (al-Nashra, September 20, 2024). According to reports, in light of the "developments related to Israeli aggression in Lebanon," Mikati decided to cancel his trip to the UN General Assembly this week. Mikati said he had consulted with Abdallah Bou Habib, the Lebanese foreign minister, regarding a diplomatic course of action at this stage. He said the top priority was "stopping the Israeli enemy's massacres," and he called on the international community to take a clear position (Najib Mikati's X account, September 21, 2024).

A "diplomatic source in Lebanon" stated that the elimination of Aqil "presents a dangerous development in the conflict. He was considered one of the most prominent figures in the organization and a skilled operative prepared to carry out operations against Israel." "The source" added that if Hezbollah decided to respond with force, the region could face a massive escalation on several fronts and it would not be a question of a transitory incident. He called it a severe blow for Hezbollah, adding that the organization might consider a significant escalation (al-Nashra, September 22, 2024).

Reactions of Iran, the Palestinians and the "Resistance Axis"

Iran

► The attack on Ibrahim Aqil and the Radwan Force top command provoked condemnations from senior Iranian officials:

 Abbas Araghchi, the Iranian foreign minister, sent his condolences to the Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah, on the death of Aqil and the other operatives.
He wrote that "the resistance and struggle for the liberation of the Palestinian people from the occupation will continue with greater strength thanks to the sacrifices of the resistance fighters in the Palestinian territories, in Lebanon and in the region." He added that it was his duty to make the voice of the Palestinian people and the Lebanese people heard in the UN General Assembly (al-Alam, September 21, 2024).

- Abbas Araghchi, who is in New York for the annual UN General Assembly session, met with the UN envoy to Syria. Araghchi said that "even though the crimes of the Zionist regime in Lebanon are committed out of desperation, they will not go unanswered" (Iranian foreign ministry's Telegram channel, September 21, 2024).
- Nasser Kanaani, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, strongly condemned the Israeli attack on Beirut. He called it a "blatant violation of international law and of Lebanon's sovereignty, territorial integrity and national security." He accused Israel of seeking to heighten tensions and expand the scope of the war in the region, which constituted a clear threat to international peace and stability (Iranian foreign ministry website, September 20, 2024).
- The Iranian embassy in Lebanon condemned the "Israeli insanity that crossed every border and attacked populated areas, killing and wounding dozens, including women and children." The embassy added that "such terrorist crimes will not affect the determination and faith of the Lebanese people" (Iranian embassy in Lebanon X account, September 20, 2024).

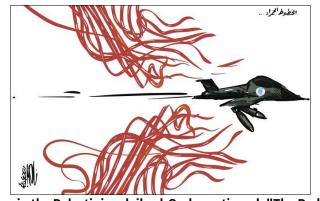
The Palestinians

▶ Hamas condemned the Israeli attack on Beirut, calling it "a cowardly assassination operation carried out by the fascist occupation planes, after [the dead terrorists'] long and honorable journey through the path of jihad and resistance." Hamas said Aqil's death "again emphasizes the unity of our destiny and the path [of "resistance," i.e., anti-Israel terrorism and violence] and we all hold on to faith and confidence in the promise of Allah and his victory over the brutal Zionist occupation, which harms Palestine, Lebanon and regional security and stability." Hamas also warned that the killing [of Aqil and the others] was "an act of nonsense for which the occupation will pay the price, and which will become a flame that will burn the artificial entity [i.e., Israel]" (Hamas Telegram channel, September 21, 2024).

►The Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military wing, praised Aqil's important role for "Palestine" and "the great contribution he made to the Palestinian resistance factions in Lebanon, in addition to his command of the [so-called] "Galilee liberation plan: the first Arab project aimed at liberating part of the land of Palestine." The Brigades also expressed appreciation for Hezbollah's support of the Gaza Strip and their determination to continue fighting until the end of the attacks on the Gaza Strip (Quds Agency, September 21, 2024).

►The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) condemned the "treacherous and criminal aggression carried out by the Zionist enemy" and sent condolences to the Hassan Nasrallah and the organization's operatives. The PIJ said that "the treachery and cowardice of the occupation in attacking heroic leaders [sic] will only increase the steadfastness of the resistance forces, and the steadfastness and determination of the fighters to move forward in the confrontation with the enemy and its crimes" (PIJ media information office Telegram channel, September 21, 2024).

►The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) claimed the attack had been jointly planned by Israel and the United States. The organization called it a policy of deliberate escalation designed to damage infrastructure, civilian facilities and harm innocent civilians "with the unsuccessful aim of breaking the resistance." It claimed that "attacking the commanders will not would break the determination of the resistance, which can compensate for its losses" (PFLP central media information department Telegram channel, September 21, 2024).



A cartoon in the Palestinian daily al-Quds captioned, "The Red Lines" (al-Quds, September 21, 2024)

The "resistance axis"

►The Nobles Movement (al-Nujaba) condemned the "brutal Zionist attack" in the Dahiyeh al-Janoubia, claiming that "its treacherous aggression is a clear continuation of the violations committed by the Zionist occupation forces with the blessing of the West and the support of the United States, the world's largest sponsor of evil." It added that the attacks increased the determination and strong desire "to confront its reckless lack of control through more 11

steadfastness, patience and continued jihad." The Movement threatened to respond with force "and without mercy" (al-Nujaba Telegram channel, September 20, 2024).

Akram al-Kaabi, the al-Nujaba secretary general, eulogized Aqil saying "we knew him as having high moral values and a deep faith, pleasant of speech and manners, whose history is full of jihad and acts of heroism, and his blessed fingerprints are evident on the battlefields, when they toy with the arrogant and the colonialists." He added that Aqil's blood would be a nightmare for the occupiers, and would accompany them until "the elimination of their terrorism, which overshadows the terrorism of ISIS" (Akram al-Kaabi's X account, September 21, 2024).

►The Hezbollah Brigades in Iraq said that the Israeli actions were a sign of "strategic bankruptcy" and that "we are sure from our acquaintance with our brothers in Hezbollah that Israel's treacherous actions will not harm their power." The Brigades said they would continue to help "in issues concerning the Islamic nation, primarily the issue of Palestine" (Hezbollah Brigades website, September 20, 2024).

▶ The Wa'ad al-Haq Militia in Iraq issued a eulogy saying, "Peace be upon you, Hajj Ibrahim Aqil, the great commander. Your brothers in Iraq, in the Houthi movement in Yemen, in the Syrian army, and in the Revolutionary Guards will miss you very much" (Account X of the Wa'ad al-Haq, September 21, 2024).

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed responsibility for four attacks on Israel on September 22, 2024 in retaliation for "the massacres committed by the entity against civilians:" a UAV attack on a "vital target," an attack on "targets in the north of the occupied territories" using al-Arqab cruise missiles, a UAV attack on "targets in the south of the occupied territories" and a UAV attack on a "military base in the Jordan Valley" using UAVs (Islamic Resistance in Iraq Telegram channel, September 22, 2024). The IDF spokesperson confirmed that two cruise missiles launched from Iraq were intercepted as they approached the southern Golan Heights, a UAV approaching from the east was intercepted. No casualties were reported (IDFs, September 22, 2024).

Abd al-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthi movement, said that "the crime of the Israeli enemy in targeting the leaders and members of the mujahideen of Hezbollah, as well as civilians, is escalation, and criminal and cruel aggression." He praised Hezbollah's attacks, which he said "contributed to the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of settlers from the settlements in northern Palestine" and noted that "Hezbollah's effective, influential, large, important role will bear fruit regardless of Israeli aggression" (al-Masirah X account, September 21, 2024).

►Muhammad Abd al-Salam, spokesman for the Houthi movement, expressed Yemen's support for Lebanon and "its courageous Islamic resistance against Israeli arrogance, which has gone out of control." He added that the attack on Beirut and the explosions of Hezbollah's communications devices, which he called "the bloody electronic massacre," made it necessary for the peoples of the region to "take responsibility and confront the criminal entity which aims its attacks at everyone without exception" (Muhammad Abd al-Salam's X account, September 20, 2024).

►Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya, the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon, condemned the "massacre" of civilians in the Dahiyeh al-Janoubia. The movement claimed the attack "crossed all the red lines," but said that it would not cause the fighters to stop following the path of jihad as part of the defense of the lands and residents in Lebanon (al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya in Lebanon, September 20, 2024).

Syria

►The Syrian foreign ministry wrote that "Israel's crimes prove its cruelty and constitute a war crime;" the ministry noted that Syria stood by Lebanon (SANA, September 20, 2024).

International Reactions

►John Kirby, National Security Council spokesman, said that the United States had no advance knowledge about the Israeli attacks in Beirut, and still believed that a diplomatic solution in the Middle East was better. He also said intensive diplomatic efforts were being made to prevent escalation on the Israel-Lebanon border, and called on the Americans not to go to Lebanon (Reuters, September 20, 2024).

►Jake Sullivan, United States national security advisor, said he was concerned about the escalation between Israel and Lebanon, but added that killing Aqil had resulted in "justice for Hezbollah." He said there was still a path to a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip but the United States was not now in a place where it was prepared to put something on the table" (Reuters, September 21, 2024).

► Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, special UN coordinator in Lebanon, warned that the region was on the brink of an "unavoidable catastrophe." She said "there is no military solution that would make one of the parties safer" (Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert's account X , September 22, 2024).

Appendix: Abraham Aqil (al-Hajj Abd al-Qader)

According to Hezbollah's mourning notice, Ibrahim Aqil, aka al-Hajj Abd al-Qader, was born in Bednayel (southwest of Ba'albek) on December 24, 1964. He was one of the founding members of Hezbollah and played a leadership role in the establishment and organization of the first "Islamic resistance" groups in Lebanon. (Telegram channel of Hezbollah's combat information arm, September 21, 2024):

- He commanded operations in the confrontation with the "Israeli invasion" of Beirut in the early 1980s.
- He was responsible for Hezbollah operatives' training in the early 1990s and played a major role in developing their military capabilities.
- He was in charge of Hezbollah's general headquarters from the mid-1990s.
- He took over the responsibility for the operations unit of Jabal Amal from 1997 until the "liberation" and directly commanded many showcase operations.
- He founded Hezbollah's operations headquarters and since 2008 held the position of Hezbollah assistant secretary general of Hezbollah for operational affairs and was appointed to the Jihad Council.
- He was one of the commanders of the resistance to "the Israeli aggression" against Lebanon in 2006 [the Second Lebanon War].
- He oversaw the establishment, development and command of the Radwan Force in Hezbollah until his death.
- He was an important jihad commander who planned and conducted operations against the "infidel groups" [ISIS] on the eastern border of Lebanon, al-Qusair, al-Qalamoun and the other areas in Syria.

• He planned and supervised the headquarters of military operations of the Radwan Force on the Lebanese "support front" since the beginning of Operation al-Aqsa Flood [the war in the Gaza Strip]. • Aqil was also wanted by the American government for his involvement in the deadly attack on the United States embassy in Beirut on April 18, 1983, in which 63 people were killed, as well as in the deadly attack on the American Marine Corps compound in Beirut on October 23, 1983, in which 241 American soldiers were killed and 128 were injured. The United States State Department offered a reward of \$7 million for information leading to his capture or killing (Rewards for justice website, July 21, 2015).



Reward offered by State Department for information on Aqil (United States State Department, July 21, 2015)