

Lebanon

Analysis

Pager and walkie-talkie attacks on Hezbollah were audacious and carefully planned

Dan Sabbagh, Lili Bayer and Dan Milmo

Israel is widely believed to be behind the operations - but who made the devices, and how did they explode?

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Blasts linked to walkie-talkies reported across Lebanon - video report

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It may be years before the full story is told of how the coordinated explosions of thousands of pagers and walkie-talkies used by [Hezbollah](#) were orchestrated. But, even without Israel publicly admitting responsibility, it is clear that the attack must have been carefully planned - however uncertain its consequences.

Experts generally believe a small amount of stable explosive was carefully implanted into each sabotaged device. Alan Woodward, a professor of cybersecurity at Surrey University, said: “There wouldn’t need to be much explosive, as proximity to a human body means it would cause injury even if it was a few grams.”

The first wave of explosions - which occurred from about 3.30pm local time on Tuesday - appear to have been triggered by a special message from Hezbollah leadership, implying, Woodward argued, a specific modification of the pagers’ embedded software. This meant it would trigger an explosion when the appropriate message was sent.

It may have been a default setting on the pagers, but the trigger message came with a cynical twist. Eyewitnesses say the pager beeped, then paused, then detonated - [giving enough time for them to be brought closer to the owner’s face](#) - which is why Lebanese doctors reported treating multiple hand and eye injuries after the blast.

Apollo AR924 pager

90g weight	A message, appearing to be from
Rechargeable lithium battery powered	Hezbollah leadership, reportedly caused the pagers to detonate

Devices beeped for several seconds ...

... before detonating simultaneously at 3.30pm local time on Tuesday

5cm

2.7cm thick

7.3cm

Guardian graphic. Source: Gold Apollo, Guardian research

Twelve people were killed and about 2,800 injured in Tuesday’s explosions, and 14 died in a second wave of blasts that followed on Wednesday when walkie-talkies starting blowing up. This suggests the attacks amounted to a concerted attempt to disrupt Hezbollah’s communications - the kind of activity that could be a prelude to a bombing raid of south [Lebanon](#) or other conventional military attack.

Sabotaging the pagers is not a trivial undertaking, and amounts to a compromise of the supply chain, said Oleg Brodt, a director at Ben-Gurion University’s Cyber Labs. It may even have required either the cooperation of the manufacturers, or for Israel’s Mossad spy agency - or whoever carried out the attacks in Lebanon - to have manufactured the doctored pagers themselves, though this is speculative.

The pagers bore the logo of an apparently hapless Taiwanese manufacturer, Gold Apollo. Its founder, Hsu Ching-Kuang, said his company had **subcontracted the manufacture** of the AR-924 model involved in the attack to the little-known Budapest-based BAC Consulting KFT, a deal he said had been struck three years ago.

From here the trail goes strange, then cold. BAC Consulting was registered in Hungary in 2022 and provided a Budapest address on its website, the same address used by multiple companies. Its chief executive is Cristiana Bársony-Arcidiacono, according to her profile on LinkedIn, and she is described as a graduate of the London School of Economics (LSE) and a native speaker of both Hungarian and Italian.

Danube

BAC Consulting
Szónyi Road, a primarily residential street in the Zugló district

Margaret Island

City Park

When the Guardian called, Bársony-Arcidiacono asked how the reporter had got the number and then hung up. However, she **confirmed** to NBC that her

company worked with Gold Apollo. Asked about the pagers and the explosions, Bársony-Arcidiacono said: “I don’t make the pagers. I am just the intermediate [sic]. I think you got it wrong.” Later, Hungarian officials also said the pagers had not been made in the country.

BAC Consulting’s website went down on Wednesday, but internet archives of the site were full of generic pictures of coastlines and vague descriptions of its work without any reference to pager manufacture. Previous posts by Bársony-Arcidiacono on LinkedIn feature pro-Russian, anti-Ukraine comments and a complaint “how does it make no one says anything about US colonization”?

Making the deadly booby-trapped pagers is only half the story, however. Whoever did so had a good intelligence picture inside Hezbollah - an understanding that the Mossad and Israel’s other security agencies did not have of Hamas prior to 7 October. They knew that Hezbollah had placed an order for about 5,000 pagers, after the group’s leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, had **warned in February against using mobile phones**.

“Your phone is their agent,” the Hezbollah secretary general warned at the time, not anticipating that his group’s enemies would be willing to plant explosives inside pagers instead.

The assailants also knew who would be supplying the sabotaged devices to Hezbollah, and had a way of ensuring they could control their delivery to the militant group - as well as their manufacture or compromise.

“The scale, destruction and precision of the attack suggests a sophisticated operation months in the making,” reasoned Virpratap Vikram Singh and Emile Hokayem from the International Institute for Strategic Studies **in an analysis piece**. Though Israel has not claimed responsibility for the attack, few doubt its security forces were behind the effort - extraordinary because it involved thousands of devices rather than a single booby-trapped phone of the type used to assassinate the Hamas leader Yahya Ayyash in 1996.

Yoav Gallant, the country’s defence minister, called Lloyd Austin, his US counterpart, “several minutes” before the pagers began exploding to tell him that an operation in Lebanon was coming, according to the Axios website. No specifics were shared, and the state department said the US had not been forewarned of the attack plan - though Gallant’s phone call comes close to an acknowledgment of responsibility.

But however sophisticated the planning, the reality is that many civilians were harmed as the pagers exploded. One video captured a pager exploding in a grocery store; others showed adults and children in hospital with severe penetrating traumatic injuries to their heads, bodies and limbs. Human Rights Watch, a monitoring group, said human rights law “prohibits the use of booby traps ... precisely to avoid putting civilians at grave risk”.



■ CCTV captures pagers simultaneously exploding across Lebanon - video report

In the immediate aftermath, Yossi Melman, a co-author of Spies Against Armageddon and other books on Israeli intelligence, asked “why would you waste a valuable intelligence asset that could be used in a more urgent time?” amid fears of an all-out war between Israel and Hezbollah. But it appears Israel has been wanting to step up its attack on the militant group, two days after its security cabinet said allowing 60,000 displaced people to return safely to their homes in the north of the country was now a war aim.

Singh and Hokayem also argued that the pager operation, followed now by the walkie-talkie attack, “represents a humiliating blow and a major operational security failure for Hezbollah”, already reeling from the assassination by airstrike of its top military commander in July.

“The large number of casualties and their distribution across the country have had a deep impact on Lebanese society and on Hezbollah’s constituency,” he concluded. But it is also likely to risk retaliation, and an intensification of hostilities, as both sides teeter on the brink of war.

Additional reporting by Michael Safi

This article was amended on 20 September 2024 to make clear that the comments from the International Institute for Strategic Studies came from an analysis piece written by both Virpratap Vikram Singh and Emile Hokayem.

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