

Exploding pagers: What was the point?

By Gwynne Dyer

The exploding pagers that killed at least 12 people and injured 2,800 others in Lebanon and some adjacent places on Tuesday were mostly just a new wrinkle on the exploding cellphones that Israel has used to assassinate its opponents in the past, but there was one major innovation.

You expect competence and ingenuity from Israel's Mossad spy agency, so it's no surprise that it knew Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based Islamist organization, was planning to replace the mobile phones of its planners and commanders with old-fashioned pagers. (One-way pagers cannot transmit, so do not reveal the holder's location.)

More impressively, Mossad found the information early enough to use it. Its operatives quickly turned to an obscure Hungarian firm called BAC Consulting that manufactures pagers under license from a Taiwan company called Gold Apollo.

Gold Apollo's founder, Hsu Ching-kuang, denies it made the pagers used by Hezbollah, claiming that BAC Consulting had bought the rights to manufacture its pagers in Europe. "The product was not ours. It was only that it had our brand on it," Hsu said. "We are a responsible company. This is very embarrassing." Indeed.

Now come the speculative bits. Was BAC Consulting a front organization set up in Budapest by Mossad? That seems likely, because sabotaging 5,000 pagers is an industrial-scale operation, not easily hidden. It is not something that can be done by three guys working in a garage.

And how on Earth did Mossad persuade some senior Hezbollah officials to order 5,000 Gold Apollo Model AR-924 pagers from a dubious Hungarian company? Hezbollah will be tearing itself to shreds today as it frantically hunts for the traitors, and some of its senior officials will be facing ruthless interrogations and probably even torture.

Speculations aside, the rigged pagers were all delivered to Hezbollah a couple of months ago and have been in daily use ever since. The obvious question is: what was it all for? The answer to that lies in another question: why so many?

Normal Mossad assassinations target one or two key figures in militant Arab organizations. There seems little point in targeting thousands of mid- and low-level officials, all of whom will automatically be replaced by their immediate subordinates. Unless, of course, you want to take out as many as possible of them on a single designated day.

The technical brilliance of the Mossad operation was not in how the pagers were manufactured nor in the way the explosive was disguised or concealed. It was in the fact that all 5,000 pagers, widely dispersed across Lebanon and nearby countries, could be detonated simultaneously by a single coded signal.

That is exactly what the Israeli government would want to do on the day it finally launched its long-threatened invasion of Lebanon to 'destroy' Hezbollah.

True, such an operation is unlikely ever to succeed. After eleven months of fighting, the Israel Defence Force (IDF) has not even managed to destroy Hamas, a far weaker foe. But for Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government, which cannot think of anything else to do, attacking Hezbollah is an almost irresistible displacement activity.

If he finally decides to go down that road, then thousands of pagers exploding and killing or maiming thousands of Hezbollah's key cadres on the first day of the attack would make perfectly good sense.

So why have the Israelis jumped the gun? According to their own leaked explanation, it was because they thought Hezbollah was

about to discover that its pagers had been sabotaged. Use them or lose them, even if using them without an accompanying invasion is a far less effective action resulting only in a few thousand shredded hands, faces and groins.

To maximize the damage, Mossad reportedly sent a message alert to the pagers less than a minute before the actual 'explode' command in order to ensure that as many Hezbollah commanders as possible would be looking at their pagers at just the right time. However, the pagers that stayed in trouser pockets did almost as much damage to stomachs and genitalia.

On Wednesday (Sept. 18) afternoon, the Israelis blew up several thousand Hezbollah walkie-talkies that it had also rigged to explode on command in a separate, probably much earlier operation. Most walkie-talkies were in storage and would only have been issued if Israel actually invaded, so there were few casualties from those explosions.

The whole thing is just a footnote in history, really, though a fascinating one. Most of the victims were actual combatants, for once, and the only message it sends is that Israel is not yet ready to invade Lebanon. Whether it ever will be ready remains to be seen, but doing so without crippling Hezbollah's communications first would be a very big mistake.

To shorten to 700 words, omit paragraphs 4 and 15. (?Gold...indeed?; and ?On Wednesday...explosion?)