



INSIGHTS

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A Wagner Group Delivery to Hezbollah: Russia and Iran Reaffirm Mutual Objectives via Proxy Groups



Lebanon's Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah appears on a screen as he addresses his supporters during a ceremony to honour fighters killed in the recent escalation with Israel [Mohamed Azakir/Reuters]

As the Israel-Hamas War continues, questions loom as to whether Hezbollah, a strong ally of Hamas and Iran, will enter the fight against Israel. Both regional and international actors remain concerned of escalation as assistance provided by countries like Iran and Russia arrives in the Levant. On 3 November 2023, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that, according to U.S. intelligence, [Russia's Wagner Group is planning to provide the Pantsir-S1 system to Hezbollah](#). This comes as Hezbollah's leading figure, Syed Hassan Nasrallah, [gave a public speech](#) the same day, praising the organization's fallen fighters, asserting support for Palestinian efforts in the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict, and blaming the United States for the war. Since then, Nasrallah's [speeches](#) have not given strong indication of Hezbollah fully joining the conflict or receiving any Pantsir system. However, Nasrallah affirmed there are ongoing responses against Israel after the killing of senior Hamas member [Saleh al Arouri](#) and senior Hezbollah commander [Wissam al-Tawil](#). So far in 2024, Nasrallah has regularly scrutinized Israeli actions, given warnings of vengeance and retaliation, and claims Hezbollah is ready to escalate if Israel escalates first.

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IWC MISSION: The IWC serves as the central mechanism for developing the Department of Defense's (DOD) irregular warfare knowledge and advancing the Department's understanding of irregular warfare concepts and doctrine in collaboration with key allies and partners.

Violence and cross border attacks between Hezbollah and Israel continue, with [at least 4,733 attacks](#) in the area from October 7, 2023, and mid-March of 2024. Despite these events, both Israel and Hezbollah appear to want to [avoid further escalation but vocalize their readiness](#) in the event escalation happens.

Wagner does not seem to have already provided the Pantsir-S1 to Hezbollah as of mid-April 2024, according to publicly available information. However, the system is still expected to enter Hezbollah's arsenal via Iran or Syria soon. In January 2024, an article from Alma Research and Education Center, an Israeli non-profit think tank, highlighted [strikes against Hezbollah-affiliated structures](#) near the border that could have potentially concealed the Pantsir system, if it was delivered. The [Kremlin quickly dismissed](#) *The Wall Street Journal's* reporting on the delivery, and yet has not condemned the Hamas attacks of 7 October publicly. At the same time, the Wagner Group, now supposedly dissolved and under full Kremlin control, has yet to reply to journalist requests for comment, or make any public statements about any plans to distribute the Pantsir S-1.



Pantsir-S1 / Pansyr-S1 / SA-22 Greyhound, medium-range mobile air defense cannons/missiles system-Russia.
Source: ArmyRecognition.com

anti-air cannons, and a transporter-loader. The system is capable of engaging aircraft, subsonic cruise missiles, and high-speed air-to-ground (ATG) missiles at ranges of 7 to 20 kilometers and altitudes spanning 6 to 10 kilometers. It can engage two targets simultaneously, while attacking up to 12 targets in a single minute. The two dual 2A38M 30mm autocannon guns are capable of engaging targets up to 4,000 meters away.

First [appearing to the public in 1995](#) at an airshow near Moscow, the Pantsir-S1 is designed in Tula, Russia and manufactured in Ulyanovsk, Russia. Multiple countries in the Middle East have ordered and/or deployed the Pantsir-S1 since May 2000, including the United Arab Emirates, Syria, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Oman, along with other countries outside of the Middle East.

WHAT IS THE PANTSIR-S1 (SA-22)?

The [Pantsir-S1](#), also known as its NATO name of SA-22, is an air defense missile-gun system capable of protecting against low and extremely low altitude air attacks. The [mobile version](#) of the system is capable of firing from both stationary emplacements and on the move. This mobile version includes a weapons platform vehicle, surface-to-air guided missiles, 30mm



HEZBOLLAH'S CURRENT MILITARY CAPABILITIES

Despite the ongoing war with Hamas in Gaza, Israel sees the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah militia as its most serious threat. The group consists of approximately 40,000 fighters and maintains state-like military capabilities, according to [DNI's Counter Terrorism Guide](#). While Hezbollah's leader Syed Hassan Nasrallah [claims the group has approximately 100,000 fighters](#), this figure is very likely inflated. Hezbollah [maintains proficiency](#) in a variety of both asymmetric and conventional applications, ranging from ambushes, kidnappings, bombings, caching explosives, assassinations, and more. According to the [Associated Press](#), Israel estimates that Hezbollah currently has around 150,000 rockets and missiles, all of which are intended for use against Israel. Hezbollah's arsenal also includes drones, surface-to-sea missiles, anti-tank missiles, anti-aircraft missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and more. Although the majority of Hezbollah's arsenal is constituted by unguided rockets and missiles, [Nasrallah has claimed](#) that it has significantly expanded its arsenal of precision guided systems capable of striking specific targets, including critical Israeli infrastructure. Concern continues to rise regarding Hezbollah's drone capabilities, which are currently focused on reconnaissance efforts and delivery of small ordinance payloads. Should these capabilities improve, Hezbollah may be able to increase the intensity of an offensive by using one-way drone bombs against Israeli and Western targets. These capabilities are bolstered by the hundreds of millions of dollars that Iran provides to Hezbollah every year. These resource flows are a supplement to Hezbollah's internal funding capacity, which generates revenue through various illicit means, [according to both](#) the U.S. State Department and Israel's Defense Minister. These illicit funding mechanisms widely vary across the globe and span from criminal activities, [money laundering schemes](#), illicit uses of hawalas, [blood diamond](#) and high-value art smuggling and trade, [narcotrafficking](#), selling counterfeit cigarettes and goods, and more.

As Hezbollah's capabilities expand, the potential acquisition of Pantsir-S1 systems from Russia only intensifies the challenges Israel currently faces in Gaza. Recent publicly available information claims that Hezbollah has nearly doubled its air defense equipment and capabilities over the past five years, primarily through the acquisition of Iranian and Russian air defense systems like the [SA8 and SA22](#). On 29 October 2023, Hezbollah claimed to have used a surface-to-air missile to [shoot down an Israeli drone](#) in Lebanon. On 28 October, only one day before, Israel claimed to have prevented a surface-to-air missile attack against an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), though no specific locational data was provided.

WHAT IF WAGNER WERE TO SUPPLY THE PANTSIR-S1 TO HEZBOLLAH?

Wagner's delivery of the Pantsir S-1 system to Hezbollah from Syria potentially further enhances the group's capacity to counter Israeli low-altitude aircraft, equipment, and missiles. Israel, Hezbollah, and Hamas have all used various drone models for surveillance and attacks throughout the current conflict. Drones like the [Heron TP, Hermes 900, and the smaller fixed-wing Herman 450](#) are only a few examples of the drones deployed by the Israeli military, and that Hezbollah may use the Pantsir S-1 to neutralize. Hezbollah has already used surface-to-air missile capabilities [to fire at Israeli drones](#) over the past five years. However, air defense systems like the Pantsir S-1 could present a new threat by bolstering Hezbollah's capabilities against Israeli air forces, further enabling Iran, Russia, and Syria to continue [destabilizing the region](#). Not only does this equipment potentially assist Hezbollah in defending against Israeli air power along the Israeli border, Hezbollah could also use these medium-range systems to counter Israeli actions in Syria. If Hezbollah receives any Pantsir S-1 systems, Israeli attack aircraft and UAVs used for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) become much

more vulnerable. This may require Israel to focus on suppressing Hezbollah's air defenses via other means prior to using their air capabilities, posing additional risk to ground forces. However, given the Pantsir S-1's reliance on radar, Israel can counter this equipment through the use of anti-radiation missiles.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: HEZBOLLAH'S ALIGNMENT WITH RUSSIA AND IRAN

Hamas' attack on 7 October may not have been directed by Russia, but the Kremlin is almost certainly using the horrific event to its benefit. As of April 18th, 2024, Russia has still not condemned the Hamas attack, nor confirmed any plans to send the Pantsir S-1 or other equipment to either Hezbollah or Iran. Simultaneously, Iran has continued to view Hamas' and Hezbollah's actions in a positive manner. This is potentially due to the Russian and Iranian governments' views of the attack as beneficial to both country's overarching objectives. Russia, Syria, and Iran maintain close ties that assist one another in achieving various objectives in multiple regions.

Plenty of articles cite Wagner's potential delivery of the Pantsir S-1 to Hezbollah, but barely mention Syrian President Assad's calculus in providing the system. Syrian President Assad's close relationships with Russia and Iran, including Syria's relationships with Wagner and Hezbollah, have assisted the Assad regime for years against the Syrian opposition. Due to the ongoing sanctions against Russia and Iran, Russia may be relying on Syria to provide a Pantsir S-1 previously provided to the Assad regime. Not only would this assist Russia in attempting to avoid further sanctions or some sort of sanctions violation, but this also reduces travel distance and time to provide the system. Russia providing this equipment to Hezbollah also helps the Syrian government indirectly marginalize Israeli capabilities and puts some amount of strain on U.S. and Western entities in the region. Hezbollah, or other Iranian proxies, could use Russian and Iranian equipment to target Israel while simultaneously using it against U.S. forces in Syria, facilitating their intended removal. If so, the Assad regime could work on regaining control over its territory, while achieving Russian and Iranian objectives of reducing the West's influence in the region.

The attention towards Wagner's possible delivery also helps detract attention away from Russian actions and Iranian support to Russia for the war in Ukraine. Russian support for Iranian objectives, like providing air defense equipment to Hezbollah, could cause the Kremlin to gain clout with the Islamic Republic, resulting in increased reciprocal efforts to support its war in Ukraine. [Iran has already provided drones](#) to Russia, which have been used in Ukraine. As Russia continues to support Iranian objectives in the Middle East, Tehran is considering [bolstering Russia's arsenal with additional ballistic missiles](#). Similar to the Iranian-provided drones, Russia would almost certainly continue assisting groups like Hezbollah and Hamas in the Middle East to detract attention from the war in Ukraine.

In an effort to achieve these broader objectives, Russia and Iran have already provided material support to groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, attempting to marginalize or destroy Israel and reduce Western influence. [Hezbollah has worked with Russia](#) in reportedly official capacities in the region since at least 2016 in Syria, according to pro-Hezbollah Lebanese site Al -Akhbar. Various entities have either confirmed or accused Russia and Iran of providing various support to both Hezbollah and Hamas. Some examples include:

An [interview](#) of Hamas leader Khaled Mashal on 26 October 2023 shows Mashal claiming the attack helped keep the United States distracted from Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. Mashal

went even further, claiming that “the Russians have said that the attack would be taught in military academies,” and espoused hopes of Hezbollah joining the war to diffuse Israeli attention towards two different fronts.

[Ukrainian partisans](#) were quick to claim Russia’s Wagner Group was involved in assisting Hamas, claiming they are the group’s only ally with experience in explosive-equipped drones. The same article claims that Wagner even provided small unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and assault tactics to Hamas.

Earlier, on 18 October, Israel’s National Unity Party MK Ze’ev [Elkin claimed](#) Russia may have provided Hamas with weapons, though uncertainties exist about whether they were specifically intended for use in the 7 October attacks. Both Elkin and Ukrainian intelligence have called out Russia for changing “the rules of the game,” alongside Iran, to benefit.

[Ukrainian intelligence](#) has previously claimed that Russia gave Hamas weapons that were captured in their country to fuel a disinformation campaign against Kyiv.

Reporting by [The Kyiv Independent added further information](#) on Moscow’s contributions to Hezbollah’s arsenal, claiming the group may have received Russian-made, anti-ship missiles. If so, the missiles are likely Yakhont missiles with a range of approximately 186 miles. The Kremlin also dismissed these claims. It is, however, not out of the realm of possibilities, given Hezbollah’s relationship with Assad. The Syrian regime may approve the provision of Russian equipment to Hezbollah, via a Wagner Group delivery mechanism, to reduce spillover of the Gaza war and marginalize Israel in the region. This would also likely show Russia and Iran that the Syrian government remains as a close ally in protecting all three parties’ interests in the region.

In February 2024, Iranian media outlet [Tasnim News](#) said that Hezbollah showed evidence of using Iranian-made Almas anti-tank missiles against Israeli critical infrastructure.

Also in February 2024, the [Telegram channel for Israeli website Detaly.co.il](#) claimed that Russia, Iran, and Syria made the decision to create a committee to help the Assad government counter Israeli intelligence. This committee supposedly incorporates Hamas, Hezbollah, IRGC, and other officials into the effort.

A Wagner delivery of the Pantsir S-1 to Hezbollah militants or Iran would also indicate enhanced Kremlin control over the Wagner Group since Prigozhin’s death. The Russian government [does provide funding to the Wagner Group](#), and maintains some level of ambiguous control, though the Kremlin has yet to claim full authority over the organization. Since Wagner’s rebellion in June 2023, it is [still unclear to what extent](#) that the Russian government has absorbed Wagner personnel, assets, and to what level the Kremlin maintains operational control over them. Since the Kremlin’s attempts to absorb the group, the Russian government continues to [claim there is no legal basis](#) for mercenary groups like Wagner to operate inside of Russia. These claims remain relatively vague, leaving plenty of room for speculation as to what current and absorbed Wagner personnel can or may be doing to enable plausible deniability for Russian policy in various regions.

ISRAEL FIGHTS BACK

Though cross-border fires continue, Hezbollah has yet to fully join the Israel-Hamas war. In November 2023, Hezbollah conducted over 100 attacks against Israel, while the Israeli Defense Forces conducted [more than 660 attacks](#) against the group’s enclaves in southern Lebanon. Since then, the cross-border attacks have continued. Of the [4,733 attacks from October 7th last year until March 15th](#),

[2024](#), Israel conducted approximately 83 percent of the attacks (3,952 incidents), while Hezbollah and other groups conducted 781 attacks. The hostilities remain constrained to the border between Israel and Lebanon, indicating at least some level of desire to prevent a larger conflict. Should Hezbollah continue to provoke and attack Israel from Lebanon, Israel remains ready to defend its borders, likely with both air and ground capabilities. This makes acquiring the Pantsir S-1 from Russia even more appealing to Hezbollah militants. If received, Hezbollah may use the Pantsir S-1 to counter air attacks along Israel's northern border thereby limiting or preventing Israeli air superiority. Hezbollah's lack of commitment to fully participate in the Israel-Hamas war poses questions as to why the group specifically desires the Pantsir S-1. Hezbollah could be acquiring the system as a means of deterrence against Israeli air operations, whether strikes or ISR activities. At the same time, Hezbollah may be seeking the Pantsir S-1 as an option for layered defense against Israeli forces while simultaneously joining Hamas in offensive attacks.

Israel has been targeting and defeating various sites and weapon systems used by Hezbollah and its affiliates for years. In Israel's April 2024 strike against the Iranian embassy compound, [Iranian-operated Pantsir systems in Syria were reportedly ineffective](#) in downing Israeli aircraft. Additionally, in a slightly older example, Israel's Defense Forces struck an SA22 inside of Syria at an Iranian-aligned military site in 2018, per [an IDF social media post](#). Russia responded to the incident, offering that there are only [two reasons](#) why the Pantsir S-1 system was hit: (1) the system already expended any ammunition it carries; or, (2) the system's radars were turned off. Former Russian Air Force Deputy Commander-in-Chief Aytech Bizhev further claimed that the system requires about three to five minutes to become fully operational. Without the system and radar fully running, Israel effectively targeted the Pantsir S-1 reportedly at low altitudes without entering the air defense envelope.

IMPACTS AND END STATES

While concern should exist about the assistance being provided to Hezbollah, a broader concern also emerges. The increasing coordination between Russia, Iran, and Syria in the Middle East illuminates coordinated efforts to create risks and dilemmas targeting the United States, Israel, and Western interests. Wagner's involvement in delivering any Pantsir S-1 systems to Hezbollah is unlikely to cause Russia to be dragged directly into the Gaza war, even if a new front emerges between Israel and Hezbollah in the north. The delivery would show some level of assurance between Russia and Iran, while potentially letting the countries leverage each other's proxy groups for their own respective strategic objectives. The Russian government's denial of Wagner Group being an officially recognized Russian entity allows the Kremlin to maintain plausible deniability of involvement. However, a confirmed delivery via Wagner to Hezbollah would almost certainly trigger international condemnation of Russia. If the Pantsir S-1 arrives in southern Lebanon to Hezbollah, that would be a sign of substantial Russian backing for Hezbollah. This not only strengthens Hezbollah's defenses but also expands Russian and Iranian influence in the region, introducing a new aspect to Israel's strategic considerations for border management and regional security.



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