



February 25, 2016

Hassan Nasrallah's "Ammonia Speech:" The Threat for Israel and Its Significance



Hassan Nasrallah speaking at a memorial ceremony on the anniversary of the deaths of three senior Hezbollah operatives, pictured at the right. The Arabic at the left reads, "The resistance will not be defeated" (Al-Manar, February 16, 2016)

Overview

1. On **February 16, 2016**, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech at a ceremony held in the southern Shi'ite suburb of Beirut. The speech, which lasted for an hour and a half, was broadcast on a giant screen. It marked the anniversary of the deaths of three senior Hezbollah operatives (Sheikh Ghareb Harb, Abbas al-Mussawi and Imad Mughnieh).
2. Behind Nasrallah's speech were the **developments in the Syrian civil war, where Hezbollah is deeply involved**. For several years the organization has found itself mired in the Syrian morass, sending thousands of trained operatives to the various combat zones: the areas around **Aleppo** (where its operatives are involved in the current Syrian ground offensive), **the Qalamoun mountain region** (where Hezbollah controls most of the Syrian-Lebanese border), **Damascus** (where Hezbollah operatives defend the shrine of Al-Set Zaynab), and **the Golan Heights** (where Hezbollah is trying to establish a

terrorist infrastructure to attack Israel). Along with Iran, Hezbollah is entangled a regional titanic struggle (political, ethnic and religious) against Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab countries. In Lebanon itself Hezbollah is the object of harsh criticism because of its involvement in the Syrian civil war, the losses incurred and the strongly negative consequences on Lebanon's internal affairs of the Iranian-Saudi struggle.¹



Nasrallah stands on the coffins of Hezbollah operatives and declares, "We [are] in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria" (Twitter account of someone calling himself "Hezbollah defector," February 16, 2016).

3. Given the difficulties and complexities of the current situation, Nasrallah's speech **was an attempt to respond to two central threats**, in an Israeli context:

1) **The political-strategic threat** based on the fear that Israel will improve its relations with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab countries. Hezbollah is concerned lest such **collaboration be turned against Iran and Hezbollah**. Nasrallah did his best to prove that **Israel, and not Iran or Hezbollah, was the Sunnis' "real enemy."** His most prominent argument concerned the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Nasrallah claimed Israel occupied Palestine, which is Sunni Muslim land and most of whose

¹ The difficulties came to the fore on February 19, 2016, when Saudi Arabia halted the transfer of \$3 billion in financial aid for military equipment for the Lebanese army through France. Saudi Arabia also cut off \$1 billion for the internal Lebanese security forces. The Saudi announcement was made because of the campaign waged against Saudi Arabia by Iran and Hezbollah. The Saudi actions may increase the already-existing internal Lebanese criticism of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and its role as an Iranian proxy.

inhabitants are Sunni. He also claimed that Israel was "defiling" Al-Aqsa mosque and the Cave of the Patriarchs, both Sunni endowments. **He ended by warning the Sunni Arab world that "if Israel becomes a friend and ally of the Sunnis, Palestine, the Palestinian people and their legitimate rights will be lost forever."**

2) **The military threat**, based on the fear that **Israel will try to exploit Hezbollah's involvement in Syria** to initiate a military strike against it. To deter Israel he claimed Hezbollah had guided missiles that could **hit the ammonia storage facility in the Haifa Bay area**, which would result in the loss of many Israeli lives. Haifa Bay, said Nasrallah, was **home to about 800,000 Israelis, and tens of thousands of them would die if the ammonia plant were hit by a missile.**² He quoted an unnamed Israel expert who said **such a hit could cause an explosion comparable to an atomic bomb.** Nasrallah equated Hezbollah's capability to cause severe damage to the Haifa Bay area with Israel's ability to use its air force to attack the Dahia [the southern Shi'ite suburb of Beirut, Hezbollah's stronghold]. That capability was noted by Israeli Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot, at the time (2008) commander of the Northern Command.³

4. Nasrallah's "ammonia threat" was inspired by **an intensive media discourse held in Israel in recent years about the dangers inherent in the factories and facilities polluting the Haifa Bay area, including the ammonia storage facility.** The discourse, participated in by experts, journalists, civilians and politicians, has used **the metaphor of a nuclear bomb** to describe the results of direct missile hits on various facilities in the densely-populated Haifa Bay area, including the ammonia tank. Hassan Nasrallah, who follows the Israeli media, is aware of the discourse and **used it to attempt to deter Israel**

² Ammonia is one of the world's most important commercial and industrial materials. In concentrated form is dangerous and inhaling large amounts can cause serious lung damage and death.

³ Gadi Eizenkot, today the chief of staff of the IDF, when he was commander of the Northern Command (2008) coined the term "Dahia doctrine." According to the doctrine, "every Shi'ite village in south Lebanon is a military site. Dozens of rockets are hidden in village cellars and attics. Dozens of local and external operatives are deployed for a defensive battle and to fire missiles into Israel. We know Hezbollah will attack with far more fire than in the Second Lebanon War, and we will respond accordingly. Every village from which Israel is fired upon will be attacked with disproportionate force and be subject to an extreme amount of destruction" (Ynet in Hebrew, October 2, 2008). The interview appeared in the Israeli daily paper Yedioth Ahronoth in an article written by Alex Fishman and Ariella Ringel Hoffman on October 3, 2008. **The fact that Nasrallah quoted Eizenkot shows the remark made a deep impression on him.**

and increase the concerns of the Israeli public. In fact, there were immediate reactions in the internal Israeli arena to his threat, adding fuel to an already-burning fire and fanning already-present fears.

Nasrallah's "Ammonia Threat:" Intention and Capabilities

5. Nasrallah repeatedly stressed that **Hezbollah did not intend to open a new front against Israel**, and that his statement about Hezbollah's capability was meant only to deter. He said, "**We do not aspire to war, we do not want that kind of war.**" However, he added, **Hezbollah had to be ready for war to prevent one** and that if a war did break out, **Hezbollah would win it**. Nasrallah ended his speech repeating his main message for Israel, which was that "**we are prepared to defend our country against the Zionist enterprise even while we are busy in Syria and other places.**" In ITIC assessment, **the message is genuine**, that is, at the present time, **with Hezbollah invested in the fighting in Syria, neither it nor its sponsor, Iran, has an interest in violating the current lull on the Israeli-Lebanese border, which would risk opening a new front with Israel.**

6. Nevertheless, Hassan Nasrallah made reference, and not for the first time, to the significance of Hezbollah's **technical capability for firing precise missiles**. Thus, Hezbollah does in fact have the capability to make good on its threat. After the Second Lebanon War **Hezbollah began upgrading its rocket arsenal with the addition of long-range guided missiles** which could hit pinpoint targets. To the missiles a network of unmanned guided UAVs was added, which could also hit pinpoint targets. **Those weapons, given to Hezbollah by Iran, can hit pinpoint targets deep within Israeli territory, and cause extensive loss of life and widespread damage.**

7. **The threat of the mass killing of Israelis and attacks on civilian industrial facilities is not new. For example, in the summer of 2012 Nasrallah boasted Hezbollah could hit Israeli civilians and Israel's civilian infrastructures with its missiles:**

1) In a speech given for Jerusalem Day, an event initiated and sponsored by Iran, Nasrallah boasted that Hezbollah had **"precise missiles, a small number of which can hit pinpoint targets."** He added that Hezbollah had several precise missiles which could hit a large number of targets in Israel, whose coordinates were in Hezbollah's hands. Hitting those targets, he said, would **"turn the lives of thousands of Zionists into a living hell."** He said there would be **"tens of thousands of Israelis killed, not 300 or 400 or 500"** (Al-Manar TV, August 17, 2012).

2) In an interview he was asked what he meant when he said Hezbollah could turn the lives of thousands of Israelis into a living hell, he answered that in the next military campaign Israel would not be able to destroy Hezbollah's arsenal with a single blow. He said that was because even after Israel's first blow, **Hezbollah would still have "a few rockets" that could turn the lives of hundreds of thousands of Israeli into a living hell. He added that Hezbollah had a "bank of objectives" which included civilian, economic and industrial targets, among them power plants and those of a nuclear nature. "They have power plants in the center [of Israel] which, if attacked, would not only cause a blackout, but would have severe economic consequences as well."** Nasrallah said that **"every target in the width and breadth of occupied Palestine...could be hit by the missiles of the resistance..."** (Al-Mayadeen TV, September 3, 2012).

8. For the main points of Nasrallah's speech, see the Appendix.

Initial Responses to Nasrallah's Speech in Lebanon and the Arab World

9. So far there has been little response to Nasrallah's "ammonia speech" in Lebanon and the Arab world, despite his harsh criticism of Saudi Arabia and the Sunni camp, and despite the potential for entangling Lebanon because of the threat against Israel. Responses mainly focused on the sectarian and religious aspect of Nasrallah' speech and Hezbollah's involvement in Syria (which worries the Arab world in general and Lebanon in particular), ignoring Nasrallah's threat against Israel.



Cartoon attacking Nasrallah, who wages war in Syria and sacrifices Lebanon by violating its traditional neutrality (Twitter account of Turqi al-Dasouri , February 22, 2016).

10. Some of the responses to Nasrallah' speech were the following:

1) **An editorial on the Lebanese forces website**, run by the anti-Hezbollah camp, **supported the struggle of the Sunni camp** [headed by Saudi Arabia] **against Iran and its collaborators [i.e., Hezbollah]**. According to the editorial, Iran was **interfering in the internal affairs of all the Arab countries to destabilize them and cause unrest among the Shi'ites living there** (Website of the Lebanese forces, February 17,2016).

2) **Ahmad Fatfat, a member of the Lebanese parliament** and of the anti-Hezbollah camp, paid a visit to the Saudi embassy in Beirut in a show of solidarity. While there he criticized Hezbollah for its attacks on Saudi Arabia (Website of the Al-Mustaqbal movement, February 24, 2016). He used his Facebook page to attack Nasrallah's speech, which he said was intended to sow hatred between Shi'ites and Sunnis. He accused Nasrallah and Hezbollah of rejecting their Arab identity in favor of ties with Iran, completely ignoring internal Lebanese affairs (Facebook page of Ahmad Fatfat, February 19, 2016).

3) **Ashraf Rifi, the Lebanese minister of justice**, accused Nasrallah of collaborating with Israel in the fighting in Syria. According to his Twitter account, **anyone who fought in Syria "in the shadow of the Russian-Israeli agreement" should "shut up and be ashamed"** (Edoror, February 17, 2016). On February 21, 2016, two days after Saudi Arabia

said it would no longer send money to Lebanon, Rifi resigned because of the obstacles Hezbollah raised for the functioning of the Lebanese government (RT news website, February 21, 2016).

4) **Saudi Arabia's Tmm24 digital newspaper** posted an article criticizing Nasrallah's speech. It called Nasrallah **an "Iranian soldier" who aspired to turn Syria and Lebanon into** an Iranian country. Nasrallah's castigation of the Sunni camp, it said, and his claims that the Arab states were collaborating with Israel, were baseless. His remarks, according to the website, were intended to create schisms within the Arab-Muslim world and to deepen sectarian hatred (Tmm24.org, February 22, 2016).

Appendix



Hassan Nasrallah speaking at a memorial ceremony on the anniversary of the deaths of three senior Hezbollah operatives (the "ammonia speech") (Al-Manar, February 16, 2016).

The Main Points of Hassan Nasrallah's Speech

1. The following are the main points raised in Hassan Nasrallah's speech (Al-Manar, February 16, 2016):

1) **Israel's aim is to replace the Syrian regime, which threatens it:** Syria is a threat to Israel because it is a **pillar of the "Islamic resistance,"** which, according to Nasrallah, along with Hezbollah, is an "existential danger" for Israel. In addition, **changing the Syrian regime will, in Israeli perception, deal a "mortal blow" to the "axis of resistance" (i.e., Iran-Syria-Hezbollah) and undermine the ability of the Syrian army to participate in any future confrontation with Israel.**

According to Nasrallah, Israel would like to overthrow the Assad regime, but since Israel realizes that is impossible, it strives to divide Syria into four states based on ethnicity, sectarianism and religion, with which it could sign treaties in the future ("They talk about a Sunni state, an Alawite state, a Druze state and a Kurdish state.").

2) **The dangers inherent in collaboration between Israel and the Sunni camp in the Middle East:** The Israelis think they have an opportunity to establish relations with **the camp of Sunni Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia.** Such collaboration will serve Israel's interests.

However, according to Nasrallah, the "real enemy" of the Sunnis is neither Iran nor Hezbollah, but Israel. He uses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as his main argument for rejecting collaboration between Israel and the Sunni countries. "The Israeli entity" is the occupier of the land of Palestine, which is Sunni land, harming the Palestinians, most of whom are Sunni, and defiling Al-Aqsa mosque and the Cave of the Patriarchs, which are Sunni endowments. He asks the Arab regimes, "How can you accept Israel as a friend and ally after what it has done?" He warns that **"if Israel is received as an ally and friend of the Sunnis, Palestine will have been lost forever. The Palestinian people and their legitimate rights will have been lost forever."**

3) **Justification for Hezbollah's involvement in Syria:** In response to internal Lebanese criticism Nasrallah stresses the importance of Hezbollah's involvement in the fighting in Syria. **One of his main arguments is that Hezbollah has contributed to the failure of ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front ("both branches of Al-Qaeda") in Syria.** On the other hand, he claims, the United States, Europe and Saudi Arabia are helping tens of thousands of foreign fighters to reach Syria. He also claims ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front have received millions of dollars and arms from the Gulf States, Turkey and the Europeans. He says, **"We in Hezbollah are proud of having contributed to the best of our ability to the struggle against the dangerous plot [of our enemies] against Lebanon and Syria...Our shaheeds in Syria are like the soldiers of the Second Lebanon War, who caused the failure of the American-Israeli-Saudi Arabian enterprise against Lebanon"** [Cheers from the audience].

2. **Hassan Nasrallah then spoke about the interaction between Hezbollah and Israel:**

1) **Hezbollah is not planning to open a new front against Israel, rather the opposite – it is Hezbollah that is facing an ongoing Israeli campaign against it:** Nasrallah asks, **"Is Hezbollah planning to open a new front against Israel?"** and answers, **"In truth, no."** He claims Hezbollah is **the central danger to Israel:**⁴ Hezbollah, he says,

⁴ Nasrallah makes the fine distinction between Hezbollah as the central danger to Israel and Iran as an existential danger.

"endangers the settlement project and every facet of the Zionist enterprise. It is a danger to Israel's regional aspirations and an obstacle to its plans **Therefore Israel desires to neutralize the danger.** That Israel cannot erase Hezbollah was proved in the Second Lebanon War. That is why Israel is employing "Plan B," its long-term plan to enforce a political, media and economic "siege" on Hezbollah. Part of the siege are Israel's activities to turn Hezbollah into Satan in the eyes of the world, attack its leaders and try to infiltrate it with spies.

2) **Hezbollah and its force are what deter Israel:** Since the Second Lebanon War, "Israel will go to war only if it can ensure a rapid victory which will achieve its objectives." What prevents a "third Lebanon War" is Hezbollah's military power, which is capable of keeping Israel from winning it [Cheers from the audience]. Nasrallah repeats that Hezbollah will not be deterred, and will **continue developing its already-excellent military and technological capabilities.** By representing Hezbollah as the "defender of Lebanon," deterring Israel and keeping it from attacking Lebanon, he provides a kind of response to the internal Lebanese criticism of the legitimacy of the military force Hezbollah is building with Iranian support.

3) **Hezbollah has the capability to kill tens of thousands of Israelis by hitting the ammonia storage facility in Haifa with a missile ("Hezbollah's quasi-atomic bomb"):**

A. As an example of Hezbollah's capability, which he claims deters Israel from initiating a a third Lebanon War ("Israel will think a thousand times before going to war"), Nasrallah quotes an "Israeli expert" who said residents of the Haifa Bay were afraid of a lethal attack on the "ammonia tanks [sic]." He claims **the tanks hold more than 15,000 tons of gas which could cause the deaths of tens of thousands of people.** He claims that in the "July war" [the Second Lebanon War] Hezbollah held off on attacking the tanks.⁵

⁵ **Nasrallah raised a false argument,** because in the Second Lebanon War Hezbollah had **ordinary non-guided rockets with a low level of accuracy.** Hezbollah could not aim its rockets at pinpoint targets, and fired them at large areas such as towns and cities, indiscriminately attacking without distinguishing between civilian and military targets. **The situation basically changed after the Second Lebanon War when Iran provided Hezbollah with long-range guided missiles which could pinpoint targets deep within Israeli territory.**

B. According to Nasrallah, the "ammonia tanks," which hold more than 15,000 tons of gas, can kill tens of thousands of Israelis. He claims **an Israeli expert likened the "ammonia barrels" to an "atomic bomb."** Nasrallah says, "Today Nasrallah has an atomic bomb." He laughs and says, "[the combination of] Hezbollah's missiles and the ammonia barrels in Haifa [equal] an atomic bomb." He claims that **if a few missiles hit the "barrels" in a region of 800,000 people, tens of thousands will be killed.** He adds that Israeli Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot could destroy the Dahia [the southern Shi'ite suburb of Beirut] with the Israeli Air Force, but Hezbollah could do something equal with "several missiles."

11. 5. Nasrallah ends by reiterating that **Hezbollah does not seek war against Israel but has to prepare for one**, "to avoid it, and if [it breaks out] to be able to deal with it...and foil [the measures taken by the enemy] and win it." **He ends by reiterating his main message: "We are prepared to defend our country against the Zionist enterprise even while we are busy in Syria or other places."** The message was also expressed by the banner next to him, which reads, **"The resistance will not be defeated."**