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An analysis of threats against Israel made by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah



Hassan Nasrallah in a speech on the annual memorial day for the three high-ranking Hezbollah shahids (“the shahid commanders”) Sheikh Ragheb Harb, Abbas Mussawi, and Imad Mughniyeh. The figures of the three shahids, whom Hezbollah has turned into symbols of sacrifice, appear on the left (Al-Manar, February 16, 2017)

Overview

1. In his speech on the anniversary of the killing of Hezbollah’s three high-ranking shahids (Sheikh Ragheb Harb, Abbas Mussawi, and Imad Mughniyeh), and in an interview with an Iranian TV channel, **Hassan Nasrallah referred at great length to the issues of war with Israel**. According to Nasrallah, Israel considers Hezbollah a paramount strategic threat, and therefore it often threatens with war and elaborates on the heavy damage that will be caused to Lebanese infrastructures in that war (the so-called Dahiya doctrine). Nasrallah says that threats of this kind have been made in the past, but they recently increased in number after Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Nasrallah notes that **he doesn’t believe that Israel intends to go to war**. He says once again that **Israel is deterred from going to war because it is well aware of Hezbollah’s military capabilities**, which will prevent it from achieving a decisive victory in the next war.

2. To demonstrate these capabilities, **thereby strengthening the message of deterrence**, Nasrallah emphasizes **the ability of Hezbollah's precision missiles to inflict heavy damage on Israel**. He points out his own "contribution" to the transfer of the ammonia tank from Haifa Bay, and boasts (based on monitoring Israeli media) **that even if the ammonia tank is transferred to another site, Hezbollah will hit it**. **Nasrallah adds that Hezbollah is able to hit the ship the carries the ammonia to Haifa Bay**. In addition, he notes that **Hezbollah is able to hit the nuclear reactor in Dimona and inflict heavy damage on Israel**. As he points out, Israel is aware of the fact that **"if [Hezbollah's] missiles hit this reactor, it [i.e., Israel] will be hit, their entity will be hit"**. To the Iranian interviewer's question whether Hezbollah will really attack Dimona, Nasrallah replies, **"We are ready to carry it out and we have the courage to do so..."**

Analysis of the background and the significance of Nasrallah's statements

3. In the ITIC's assessment, at the background of Nasrallah's statements are the regional and international developments, which raised the level of fears of Hezbollah (and Iran, Hezbollah's sponsor). **In the United States**, a new president came to power, who is perceived as pro-Israel and as one who may resort to a more vehement policy towards Iran. **In Syria**, Hezbollah carries on with its deep involvement in the civil war, while investing a lot of resources in it and sustaining many casualties,¹ and is harshly criticized in Lebanon and in the Arab world. **In the regional arena**, a struggle is going on between the Shiite axis under the leadership of Iran and the Sunni axis led by Saudi Arabia. Hezbollah, which is **Iran's "long arm"**, is involved in supporting Iran's proxies in the various arenas (Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen).

4. In the ITIC's assessment, the rising level of fear has caused Nasrallah **once again to send messages of deterrence against Israel**. Nasrallah's statements on the heavy damage that Hezbollah is capable of inflicting on Israel, **which he has repeated over and over again during the recent years, are based on the upgrade of Hezbollah's military capabilities after the Second Lebanon War**. Part of this upgrade **is the supply of state-of-the-art weapons by Iran, including long-range precision missiles**. In addition, Hezbollah possesses **drones** that can be launched

¹ According to an article in the Israeli daily Haaretz, Israeli Army Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot said in the Israeli Knesset's Foreign Relations and Defense Committee that Hezbollah had had 1,700 dead and over 6,000 wounded in the war in Syria (article by Amos Harel, Haaretz, February 24, 2017).

against pinpoint targets in Israel. These capabilities allow Hezbollah to **seriously hit strategic targets inside Israel, causing many losses among civilians in wartime.**

5. The availability of these capabilities in Hezbollah's hands allows Hassan Nasrallah in recent years to threaten Israel over and over again in order **to deter it from a military move against Hezbollah.** In his statements he points out that **Hezbollah has a pool of targets, the hitting of which "can turn the lives of hundreds of thousands of Israelis into hell."** This pool of targets includes, according to Nasrallah, **targets of civilian, economic and industrial nature, including power stations and nuclear facilities** (Al-Mayadeen Channel, September 3, 2012). One such statement was Nasrallah's speech about a year ago, in which he threatened hitting the ammonia tank in Haifa, claiming that the effect of such hit will be similar to a "nuclear bomb".²



Cartoon of Hassan Nasrallah standing on coffins of Hezbollah's operatives while saying, "We are in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria" (Twitter account of someone calling himself in Arabic "ex-Hezbollah member", February 16, 2016)

6. The ITIC believes that, given the regional and international developments, **Nasrallah wishes to strengthen once again the message of deterrence against Israel.** This message, from Hezbollah's perspective, relies on Hezbollah's advanced military capabilities, **mainly its arsenal of rockets and missiles, which creates an "equation of deterrence" between Hezbollah and Israel.** **The main point of this equation is that both sides refrain from military initiatives against each other for fear from the damage that the other side can cause them.** This "equation of deterrence", from Nasrallah's perspective, is the basis for the calm in the Israeli-Lebanese border, which allows Hezbollah to deepen its involvement in the war in

² See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from February 25, 2016: "Hassan Nasrallah's "Ammonia Speech:" The Threat for Israel and its Significance."

Syria without having to fear that Israel would seize this opportunity to engage in an offensive initiative against Hezbollah in the Lebanese arena.

Appendices

7. This document includes three appendices:

- a. **Appendix A:** Reference to Israel in Hassan Nasrallah's speech on the annual memorial day for the three high-ranking shahids of Hezbollah (February 16, 2017)
- b. **Appendix B:** Reference to Israel in Hassan Nasrallah's interview with Iranian TV, Channel 1 (IRIB1) (February 20, 2017)
- c. **Appendix C:** Commentary in the Lebanese daily Al-Akhbar, expressing Hezbollah's positions (February 24, 2017)

Appendix A

Reference to Israel in Hassan Nasrallah's speech on the annual memorial day for the three high-ranking shahids of Hezbollah (February 16, 2017)



Hassan Nasrallah in a speech on the annual memorial day for the three high-ranking Hezbollah shahids (“the shahid commanders”). The three shahids (on the left) are Sheikh Ragheb Harb, Abbas Mussawi, and Imad Mughniyeh. Hezbollah has turned them into symbols of sacrifice (Al-Manar, February 16, 2017)

1. On February 16, 2017, Nasrallah delivered a speech in which he examined, among other things, the way in which Israel perceives Hezbollah, whether Israel intends to go to war against it, and what deters Israel from going to war. During his speech, **Nasrallah boasted about Hezbollah's military capabilities, which, according to him, serve to protect Lebanon and deter Israel from going to war against it.** Following are the highlights of Nasrallah's speech:

a. **Israel regards Hezbollah as a “strategic threat,”** the most serious one among the threats it is faced with. Nasrallah claims that in Israel's opinion, the Arab countries do not represent danger; The Syrian Army, which represented a threat in the past, is busy with an internal war, **and therefore Hezbollah remains the first and foremost threat.** According to Hezbollah, **Iran, which is distant thousands of kilometers from Israel, is the second important threat, from Israeli perspective, while the “Palestinian resistance”** (i.e., the Palestinian terror organizations) **is the third important threat.**

b. Ever since the Second Lebanon War, Israel has threatened Hezbollah to exert constant pressure on the “[supporting] environment of resistance in Lebanon” and the Lebanese people. It does so by referring to a war against Lebanon, in which the “Dahiya doctrine” would be implemented, and Lebanon’s infrastructures would be destroyed. According to Nasrallah, **this kind of talk was heard more frequently after the election of Donald Trump for president of the United States, although such talk was heard also in the past.** According to Nasrallah, in spite of this talk, the eleven years that passed since the Second Lebanon War were characterized by security and calm in south Lebanon and in the rest of the Lebanon, with the exception of “a few violations” which happen from time to time.

c. **The main message in Nasrallah's speech was that Hezbollah's strength is what prevents Israel from going to war against Lebanon.** According to him, the main question is **“whether the Israelis will gain from this war... Will they achieve a clear and complete victory in it ... with the least number of losses among the enemy and on the home front?”** Nasrallah says that **the answer to this question isn't related to President Trump or the US support of Israel, but to the power of the “resistance” (i.e., Hezbollah) and the “supporting environment” that it enjoys in Lebanon. “This is what protects the country [i.e., Lebanon] and this is what prevents war. Not the American veto, nor the American approval”.**

d. **As proof for the argument that it is Hezbollah which protects Lebanon and prevents Israel from going to war against it, Nasrallah boasts about Hezbollah's ability to inflict heavy damage on Israel by hitting vital infrastructure targets such as the ammonia tank in Haifa and the nuclear reactor in Dimona:**

1) Nasrallah claims that the Israeli decision to remove the ammonia tank from Haifa has been received due to the threat in his speech a year ago, in which he said that the ammonia tank is "like an atomic bomb."³ In his current speech, he threatens that **even if the tank is transferred to another site, Hezbollah will hit it** and that Hezbollah has the ability **to hit the ship that carries the ammonia** (the issue of the ship carrying the ammonia has repeatedly been mentioned in Israeli media). He adds that "of course, the residents of Haifa thanked Hezbollah. For 20-30 years they have been begging [that the tank be removed] but no one answered them."

2) **Nasrallah notes that Hezbollah is capable of hitting the nuclear reactor in Dimona by its missiles and calls on Israel to dismantle the reactor.** According to Nasrallah, the reactor is old and non-functioning "and there's no need to use many missiles [in order to cause damage to the reactor]." Nasrallah adds that Israel is well aware that if [Hezbollah's] missiles hit this reactor, it [i.e., Israel] will be damaged, their entity will be damaged." **He boasts of Hezbollah's ability to turn the nuclear threat on the part of Israel into an opportunity [for Hezbollah] and a threat for Israel:** "We will turn it into a threat for Israel, its entity, its inhabitants, settlers and occupiers, who are holding occupied Palestine."

e. **Nasrallah threatens with "surprises" for Israel that Hezbollah has in store, which will be used in the next war.** According to him, these "surprises" are part of Hezbollah's strategy in preparation for the next war: "You will be surprised of what we are hiding. What we are hiding can change the course of any war, which will be foolishness if started [by the Israelis]."

f. **Israel is deterred from going to war against Hezbollah for fear of Hezbollah's capabilities:**

³ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from February 25, 2016: "Hassan Nasrallah's "Ammonia Speech:" The Threat for Israel and its Significance."

1) Nasrallah mentions that there are people who believe that Israel's decision to remove the ammonia tank from Haifa indicates an imminent war against Lebanon. This is indeed a possibility, **but Nasrallah does not agree**, even though he is not adamant in his opinion. What can be said is that the decision to remove the ammonia tank **indicates Israel's awareness of Hezbollah's military capabilities.**

2) **Israel indeed enjoys superiority in the air, but even this superiority is not a factor that will make it go to war:** "Everybody knows today that a war in the air alone cannot be decisive in any campaign and achieve victory in any place." This has been proved in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Gaza Strip (Operation Protective Edge).

3) **Israel takes protective measures along its border with Lebanon.** These measures include setting up fences, closing wadis, clearing hills from vegetation, securing Israeli communities and practicing the operational plans. These steps are interpreted by Nasrallah **as an Israeli defensive response to Hezbollah's offensive threat:** "Something has changed, something has changed in the Israeli logic, in the Israeli military logic... **The resistance in Lebanon is no longer a resistance that stands while defending its land, stands while fighting and defending its land. No...**" Therefore Nasrallah advises anyone who is afraid of war: **Calm your nerves. Do not be so agitated by anything people say or write...**".

Appendix B

Reference to Israel in Hassan Nasrallah's interview with Iranian TV, Channel 1 (IRIB1)



Nasrallah in an interview with IRIB1 (IRIB1, February 20, 2017)

1. In an interview with Iranian TV, Channel 1 (IRIB1), Nasrallah spoke mainly about Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and its place in the Axis of Resistance (i.e., the axis led by Iran). However, Nasrallah also referred to Israel, **and reiterated several messages that he had conveyed in his speech on the anniversary of the death of Hezbollah's senior operatives** (messages which the ITIC believes are coordinated with Iran). Following are the main points in Nasrallah's interview in reference to Israel:

- a. **Israel designated Hezbollah in early 2017 as the No. 1 enemy representing the main threat against it.** Next to Hezbollah are Iran and the Palestinian "resistance" organizations. Hezbollah on its part considers the Israeli regime "**an illegal terrorist regime**" representing a threat for the security and peace in the region, and it is Hezbollah which is fighting against this threat.
- b. **Hezbollah's "victories" in the previous confrontations with Israel,** including the "historic victory in 2006" (the Second Lebanon War), **created a balance of terror between Hezbollah and Israel:** "The balance of deterrence, balance of fear, and balance of terror between the resistance and Israel." As a result, Israel does not have the courage to go to war or

make decisions on this matter...” Nasrallah expresses his confidence that victory in the next war with Israel would be greater than victory in the Second Lebanon War. “We are not worried, we are always prepared, and we are not afraid of Israel...”

c. **Hezbollah does not see itself committed to any “red lines” in the next war with Israel.** According to Nasrallah, Hezbollah considered itself in the Second Lebanon War committed to “red lines”: “While they attacked cities and civilian sites... we refrained from attacking a central site in Haifa, which is the Ammonia storage facility, although we could take this step at any point in time.”⁴ Even now, Hezbollah refrains from doing that, as “We are not striving for war, we are in a state of defense.” However, if Israel wishes to force war on Lebanon and invade its territory “[...] **then we [will] no longer be committed to any red lines. The ammonia tank and even the reactor in Dimona are not safe. Any site in occupied Palestine can turn into a pile of ashes.**” When asked whether Hezbollah will really attack Dimona, Nasrallah replied “**We are ready to do it and we have the courage to do it...**”.

⁴ **In an attempt to enhance the threat against Israel, Nasrallah boasts of capabilities that he didn't have during the Second Lebanon War.** During that war, Hezbollah had low-precision rockets that could be used firing at large targets (such as cities and communities) and not at pinpoint targets. Therefore, his statements on the “restraint” that he had shown and the “red lines” that he had allegedly adopted during the Second Lebanon War are baseless. Only after the war, Iran provided Hezbollah with long-range missiles capable of precision hits deep inside Israel, whose presence in the hands of Hezbollah is the basis for Nasrallah's messages of deterrence.

Appendix C

Commentary in the Lebanese daily Al-Akhbar, expressing Hezbollah's positions

1. Further reinforcement of the significance of deterrence of Nasrallah's speeches can be found in an article published **in the Lebanese daily Al-Akhbar affiliated with Hezbollah**. The newspaper commentator **Ali Haidar, who monitors the developments in Israel, notes that Nasrallah's messages are "messages of deterrence" which were intended to make the Israeli decision makers worry about going to war against Lebanon**. According to Haidar, **Hezbollah does not intend to attack strategic targets in Israel save in response to an Israeli attack, and the threat of hitting a nuclear weapon is "for deterrence rather than for implementation"** (Ali Haidar's article, Al-Akhbar, February 24, 2017).

2. The commentator believes that Israel also doesn't intend to attack Hezbollah unless it is attacked by the latter. The significance of it, according to the article, is that **Hezbollah's capability of deterrence is functioning**. He concludes the article with the assessment that **the only modus operandi left for Israel is to conduct a "calculated confrontation", i.e., a "limited confrontation that would not cause Hezbollah to carry out its threats."** However, this possibility also harbors a risk, **which is that one of the sides would misinterpret the reaction of the other, and the situation would escalate into war**. This is true "in particular because it is a known fact that, from Hezbollah's perspective, any strike [at Hezbollah] requires an appropriate response that would be sufficient to deter any additional strike."

3. In another article in Al-Akhbar, Haidar writes that **the Israeli home front has become part of the war fronts**. According to him, **this deters Israel because it does not have an interest of waging a long war with an enemy with destructive capabilities**. Ali Haidar notes that one of the scenarios for which the IDF prepares itself is **the penetration of Hezbollah operatives into the Galilee, taking over a community for several hours**. However, this is a "limited scenario," which ignores Hezbollah's capabilities. **Hezbollah has more advanced capabilities, and improved, long-range, destructive, precise missiles** (Ali Haidar's article, Al-Akhbar, February 28, 2016).