

Reinforcing the deterrent message to Israel and various other issues raised in Hassan Nasrallah's interview after several months of media silence

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Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in the interview to Lebanon's Al-Mayadeen Channel
(Al-Mayadeen Channel, January 26, 2019)

Overview

- ▶ On January 26, 2019, Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah gave a detailed interview to the Lebanese (pro-Hezbollah) Al-Mayadeen Channel. The interview was granted after several months during which Hassan Nasrallah refrained from giving interviews (this was especially conspicuous during Israel's Operation Northern Shield, which recently ended). The interview was broadcast live, probably in order to refute the rumors on Nasrallah's health problems. The interview was conducted by Ghassan Ben Jeddou, who is closely connected to Hassan Nasrallah and to Hezbollah's leadership (Ben Jeddou already interviewed Nasrallah).
- ▶ Beyond refuting the rumors on Nasrallah's health problems, in the ITIC's assessment, the interview was intended **to reinforce the deterrent message to Israel in the Lebanese and Syrian arenas**, possibly out of the assessment that this message has eroded following the Israeli achievement of uncovering the tunnels in Operation Northern Shield. The message was reinforced by Nasrallah's **emphasis on Hezbollah's military capabilities**, mainly the **rockets and precision missiles** (which, according to Nasrallah, can reach any spot in Israel and hit within a few meters from their target). Another military capability stressed by

Nasrallah was **attacking Israel's Galilee from Lebanese territory** not through the tunnels (according to Nasrallah's claim, 1,500 Hezbollah operatives are capable of penetrating into the Galilee, and for that purpose, the organization does not need tunnels). **Nasrallah maintained ambiguity with regard to Hezbollah's responsibility for digging the offensive tunnels** and continued Hezbollah's line of propaganda **playing down the importance of the tunnels.**

► Another issue on which Nasrallah elaborated was the developments in the Syrian arena **and the campaign waged by Israel in Syria** against the transfer of weapons and equipment to Hezbollah in Lebanon. According to Nasrallah, **Israel failed in its efforts to prevent the transfer of [Iranian] capabilities to Lebanon [for Hezbollah].** Nasrallah adds that Israel's continuation of its policy in the Syrian arena harbors **great risks**, for several reasons: The recovering Syrian regime may decide to "act differently"; The Russians will not give Israel "carte blanche" in Syria; and **Hezbollah may respond, especially if its operatives are killed in Syria or Lebanon. The message addressed by Nasrallah to Netanyahu**, in the end of his comments on the Syrian arena, is that **"he should be careful in his actions in Syria and he should not miscalculate and drag the region into war (*harb*) or to a large-scale confrontation (*muwajaha kubra*)."**

Main points of the interview

► Following are the main points raised in the interview:

◆ **Nasrallah's state of health:** The interview opens with the question why Nasrallah kept silent for over three months and gives an interview only now. Nasrallah replies that **there is no connection between his silence and his health.** According to Nasrallah, **he has no health problems at all** and everything said about that is **complete lies.** He adds that there were also rumors of his death, and therefore he decided to appear in a live broadcast in order to refute those rumors.

◆ **Hezbollah's response to the IDF's Operation Northern Shield (uncovering the tunnels on Israel's northern border):** Nasrallah notes that following the press conference of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the outgoing Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot, he consulted his men regarding the (media) response to the Israeli operation. They concluded that it would be better to let the Israelis say "whatever they like" and not to react. **Therefore, Hezbollah decided not to react publicly until the**

end of the operation. Later on, Nasrallah is asked about his reaction to the [existence] of tunnels on Lebanon's border [with Israel]. He refrains from giving a direct answer, noting that **he does not wish to comment.** He adds that the Israelis provided no proof for their allegations. He claims that digging some of the tunnels started even before the Second Lebanon War, but Israeli intelligence failed to uncover them. When asked whether all the tunnels were uncovered, Nasrallah refuses to reply and notes that he keeps this information to himself. He then adds that **there was a consensus in Lebanon to refrain from confrontation with Israel over the tunnels.** He adds that Israel's attempt to internationally profit from submitting the tunnel issue to the UN Security Council failed.

◆ **Building the fence along the Israeli border with Lebanon:** The interviewer asks about Nasrallah's opinion on Lebanon's attitude regarding the building of the fence. Nasrallah replies that the State of Lebanon believes that the fence is built on its own territory and therefore it was decided in Lebanon to prevent Israel from erecting the fence in certain areas. The Lebanese army, Nasrallah says, is ready to act accordingly. **Hezbollah kept abreast of this matter** but it doesn't wish to do anything in order not to be accused of dragging Lebanon into war. According to Nasrallah, the issue of the border **is the state's responsibility.** The whole matter will be discussed between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government, and not in the media. Nasrallah stresses that Hezbollah has many means for operation and that the organization is always ready to act and formulate a defense strategy.

► **Clarification of Nasrallah's "equations of response:"** According to Nasrallah, **Hezbollah will retaliate on any elimination of Hezbollah operatives in Lebanon or in Syria. Killing a Hezbollah operative will be considered by Hezbollah as "aggression."** According to Nasrallah, even if Israel considers any [IDF] attack as "reduced in scale," Hezbollah will decide how to react (in other words, not every "reduced-scale" attack, in Israel's view, will necessarily be considered as such by Hezbollah). According to him, **in case of miscalculation by Israel, Hezbollah is poised for action;** and if the Israelis attack in one site or another, **Hezbollah will know how to react.** In this context, Nasrallah says that **he excludes the possibility of Israeli action in Lebanon,** but it is possible that such an action will take place in Syria or in the Gaza Strip, "and Hezbollah will respond according to the circumstances."

► **Reinforcing the deterrent message to Israel by stressing Hezbollah’s offensive capabilities in two fields:**

◆ **Attacking Israel’s Galilee by Hezbollah:** According to Nasrallah, if Hezbollah says that it will enter the Galilee, **it will enter**. The steps taken by Israel on the Israeli-Lebanese border (building a security fence) **demonstrate that Israel believes** that Hezbollah will enter the Galilee. He says that the IDF commanders understand that **Hezbollah does not need tunnels in order to enter the Galilee**. He adds that Hezbollah’s “Operation Galilee” is not limited to tunnels only, but he is not willing to reveal the rest. According to him, **after the experience acquired by Hezbollah in Syria**, “everything will be easier for it.” **He claims that 1,500 Hezbollah operatives are able to enter (Israel) through Lebanon**, and wonders whether Hezbollah needs four tunnels for that (sic). According to Nasrallah, **the issue of the tunnels was “taken out of proportion” and Operation Northern Shield does not eliminate even 10% of Hezbollah’s planned operation in the Galilee**.

◆ **Firing rockets and precision missiles at Israel:** Nasrallah reviews the development of Hezbollah’s rocket and missile capability. He claims that **in every war that breaks out, all of Israel will be a war zone**. He notes that **the precision missiles can hit several meters from the target at which they were fired**. He says Israel can attack as it wishes in Syria; however, **Hezbollah (already) has a sufficient quantity of precision missiles for the next war. Nasrallah declares once again that in the next war, Hezbollah will be able to hit any target that it wishes**.

► **Pointing out the risks for Israel as a result of its attacks in Syria:** Nasrallah claims that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu **recorded a devastating strategic failure in achieving his goals in Syria**: he “gambled” on “terrorist elements” (i.e., the Syrian rebel organizations) and supported them with the intention of toppling the Syrian regime – but failed. Israel also failed in its attempts to prevent the transfer of [Iranian] capabilities to Lebanon [for Hezbollah]. Netanyahu also failed in his efforts to bring about the removal of Iran from Syria.

► Nasrallah stresses that **Syria is becoming stronger and from now on there is a possibility that it will take a decision “to act differently” in response for Israel’s “acts of aggression.”** Nasrallah also notes **the improvement in Syria’s air defense and points out that the Russians will not give Israel “carte blanche” to act in Syria**. Nasrallah makes it

clear that **the message addressed to Netanyahu is that “he should be careful in his actions in Syria and he should not miscalculate and drag the region into war (harb) or to a large-scale confrontation (muwajaha kubra).”**