

## **Events in Israel Reinforce Nasrallah's "Spider Web" Theory**

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**The internal crisis and the widespread protests in Israel, together with the escalation of Palestinian terror, reinforce Nasrallah's perception that Israel's internal weakness is overwhelming, and persuade him of Hezbollah's ability to deter and confront Israel in the event of a military conflict. Invoking his previous spider web metaphor regarding Israeli society, he declares that Israel is on the brink of a civil war and that the state is approaching its end. This perception also underlay the dispute with Israel over the agreement with Lebanon on the maritime border, which as Hezbollah sees it, was signed because of the organization's threats to use military force against Israel unless it recognized Lebanon's rights. Israel's current internal crisis could infuse Nasrallah with unfounded confidence that fails to take account of the real balance of forces between the parties and the intensity of how Israeli society unites in the face of external threats. However, it appears that Nasrallah is not interested at this stage in an all-out military conflict with Israel, although it is possible that he will try to provoke Israel along the border and with terror attacks within Israel, perhaps with Palestinian collaboration, and spark military friction and escalation.**

Internal events in Israel since the formation of the new government, and above all the internal crisis that has deepened the rifts in Israeli society, with serious economic and political implications, together with the rise in the scope of Palestinian terror incidents and internal disputes over how to deal with them, are perceived by Hezbollah as clear signs of Israel's growing weakness. Nasrallah is rejoicing, while referring explicitly in recent speeches to Israel's domestic turmoil. On February 16, 2023, he described these events as severe crises, caused by Israel's "current silly government,"

which is pushing it toward two large conflicts: one within Israel and the other between Israel and the Palestinians, with the potential to ignite the region. He said that many elements in Israel – President Herzog, former prime ministers, chiefs of staff, and all the generals and historians – were speaking about an approaching “civil war,” and quoted the President on an unprecedented situation and an emergency. According to Nasrallah, Israel is on the brink of an implosion and its citizens are gripped by existential concerns, since they have no trust in the army, the political leadership, or the judicial system, and there are signs of “desertion” and migration.

Nasrallah also spoke about this in a series of speeches of last week. On March 6, in a speech marking “Wounded & Prisoners’ Day,” he repeated his assessment that given these internal events, the end of “the Zionist entity” is approaching. He referred explicitly to the legislation in the Knesset on the death penalty for terrorists, and said that this would not deter “people like us,” who perhaps fear prison but rush toward death without hesitation and are active even when death is certain. In a speech on March 10, he stressed that underway were historic events that must be monitored closely, and “the events in Israel arouse great hopes.” He also attributed the crisis in Israeli society to the strong opposition in the region. In his view, “the Zionist entity is facing internal struggles and external threats that will lead to its destruction, and it will last no longer than 80 years,” like the ancient Jewish kingdoms that did not survive longer than that. He called on the countries of the region to help the Palestinian efforts (against the background of the attack in central Tel Aviv on March 9) to destroy Israel. Nasrallah’s dream, as he described it in an interview in July 2022, is that masses of Israelis will pack their belongings and abandon Israel to move overseas. This is his heart’s desire, and joins his familiar idea that Israel is a spider web of a country that is destined to dissolve and disappear.

It appears that this sense of confidence was also behind Nasrallah’s threats of July-September 2022, before the signing of the agreement marking the maritime border between Israel and Lebanon, that Hezbollah would attack Israel if it began production of gas from the Karish gas field before Lebanon’s rights were secured. Nasrallah gained a sense of achievement

since, as he sees it, his threats, without the use of force, were what defeated the Israeli government and forced it to sign the agreement in accordance with Lebanon's demands. This joins the organization's progress in building Lebanon's air defense capability with Iranian help, which has limited the activity of the Israeli Air Force in Lebanese air space and reinforced his confidence in his ability to deter Israel and confront it in the event of future military conflict.

Nasrallah's heightened confidence is apparently behind his recent increase of the presence of Hezbollah operatives close to the border with Israel – albeit in civilian clothes – and the erection of numerous new observation towers under the guise of the “Green without Borders” organization. There have also been several clashes with IDF soldiers working along the border (completing the fence, leveling the land, and marking the border). On March 5, UNIFIL soldiers prevented a skirmish following Lebanese claims that IDF soldiers engaged in routine activity had crossed the Blue Line into Lebanese territory near the village of Aita a-Sha'ab, and on March 7, there were reports of a similar incident, in which an IDF soldier's magazine was grabbed as a group of Lebanese men gathered round soldiers engaged in engineering work. The magazine was displayed on al-Manar television as IDF plunder. On March 6, Nasrallah claimed that Israel was trying to move the Blue Line by a few meters, but Lebanon would not give up one iota of land. At the same time, Hezbollah is promoting a campaign on social media praising the abilities of its fighters who are able to penetrate Israeli territory and take control of areas within its borders.

These remarks by Nasrallah, who is perceived by himself, Iran, and others as an expert on Israeli matters, once again reflect how closely he monitors events in Israel through reports in Israeli media that reinforce his perception of its shaky state. His conclusion that the current internal crisis is weakening Israel increases his confidence in the ability of Hezbollah to deter the IDF and confront it successfully. However, his interpretation does not necessarily reflect the reality in Israel and could even be misleading, since he fails to consider the real balance of forces between the IDF and

Hezbollah, and the strength of Israel unity in the face of external security threats.

Moreover, and in spite of the ongoing protests in Israel, the assessment is that Hezbollah has no interest in a military clash at present. Apart from recognizing the dangers to itself and to Lebanon of large-scale conflict with the IDF, the organization is also influenced by the grave situation within Lebanon, which is suffering the worst economic crisis it has ever known, as well as a political crisis and problems of governance. Since the last parliamentary elections in May 2022, and especially in recent months, Hezbollah's political status in Lebanon has declined. The organization can still veto government decisions, but it has difficulty imposing its position on its political rivals on issues such as the composition of the government and the appointment of a new president, which has been delayed since October 2022. All Nasrallah's efforts to bring about broad agreement over the election of the pro-Syrian Hezbollah supporter Suleiman Franjeh have so far failed entirely. Nasrallah is disturbed by this, but still trying to avoid the use of weapons to promote his own solution to Lebanon's internal problems.

In this situation, Nasrallah is clinging to the strategy that has guided him in recent years with respect to Israel – establishing the “deterrence equation” between Hezbollah and the IDF. Hezbollah's actions and Nasrallah's statements are also intended to bolster the organization's public status as the defender of Lebanon, but first and foremost to deter Israel from changing the rules of the game on the ground, in the air, and at sea. While Nasrallah is not interested at this stage in an all-out military conflict with Israel, he is eager to provoke Israel along the border and apparently with terror attacks within Israel, perhaps with Palestinian collaboration, and lead to military friction and escalation due to miscalculation on both sides.

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