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Beyond the Threats: Nasrallah's Recent Statements

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Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah recently made two media appearances in close proximity. The first, a recorded speech aired on February 16, 2016 in memory of the organization's soldiers killed in combat, included his threat that Hezbollah was capable of targeting the ammonia tanks in Haifa Bay. The second speech was a March 21, 2016 interview on Hezbollah-affiliated al-Mayadeen network, in which Nasrallah referred again to the threat posed by Hezbollah to Israel's sensitive facilities, including its nuclear facilities. Nasrallah, who customarily speaks to the political and public discourse in Israel, here too referred to issues on Israel's security agenda. However, although he addressed Israel directly and devoted a large portion of his remarks to it (in contrast to his speeches in recent years, which have been focused primarily on the war in Syria), his remarks were not aimed solely at Israel, but elsewhere as well: first and foremost to the Lebanese public, followed by the greater Arab world. Despite the possibly fateful meaning of his words in the Israeli context, Nasrallah's appearances and the meaning of his statements should be examined in the greater light of events on the strategic level.

Overall, Nasrallah's remarks can be seen as directed at his various enemies and referring to different dimensions. The first dimension, which affects Nasrallah to the greatest extent, is the war in Syria. Nasrallah has naturally taken the side of his allies (Assad, Iran, and Russia) while assuming an aggressive stance toward his enemies in this theater (the United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the many factions opposing Assad). The February 16 speech came at the height of the international effort in the Geneva talks to reach a ceasefire arrangement in Syria. Predictably, Nasrallah praised the Assad regime and its importance to the integrity of Syria, and tried to exert pressure on the negotiators to reach understandings that would safeguard Hezbollah's interests in Syria. By the second media appearance, the larger picture had changed, with the ceasefire entering into effect, Russia's surprise announcement that it was (partially) withdrawing its forces from Syria, and the withdrawal of certain Iranian forces. The Russian move prompted the United States and its regional allies to question the future of the fighting by the Shiite axis in Syria. Nasrallah addressed that point, stating that he had been briefed in advance

about the measure, as he had been briefed when Russia entered the campaign. He thereby attempted to demonstrate the strength and unity of the Hezbollah-allied axis, as if a chain of well-orchestrated and carefully timed steps had been planned to achieve positive results in the war in Syria. He stressed the effectiveness of the Russian move, and the fact that an important advantage was achieved for Assad and his allies, thereby again portraying Hezbollah's involvement as contributing to the defense of Lebanon.

The second dimension focuses on the actions of Hezbollah's enemies, which in Nasrallah's perspective are linked with each other: the United States; the Sunni Arab world, with Saudi Arabia and Turkey playing the key roles; and Salafi-jihad organizations led by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Aside from familiar accusations of subversion by Saudi Arabia and Turkey and their support for terrorism, and criticism of the United States for not realizing that the alternative to Assad is the Islamic State or Jabhat al-Nusra, a new factor was added to the equation, namely, the measures against Hezbollah led by Saudi Arabia: Riyadh's decision to withdraw its financial support for the Lebanese army and threats to take further measures in this direction; restrictions on citizens of the Gulf states visiting Lebanon; and the Arab League's classifying Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. The Saudi measures were designed to punish Lebanon for its inability to take Saudi Arabia's side, or in other words, Riyadh's view of Lebanon as a country completely controlled, politically and militarily, by Hezbollah and its interests. Saudi money carries great weight in the Lebanese economy, as do the local Sunni financial magnates whom Saudi Arabia supports, and thus the slashed support constitutes a dramatic step, and requires Nasrallah, as the accused party, to refute the domestic criticism. Moreover, the idea among Hezbollah's opponents in Lebanon that the organization's involvement in the Syrian civil war will bring the war into Lebanon itself has only become stronger. In response, Nasrallah clung to his defiant posture of "business as usual."

The third dimension, closely related to the previous levels, involves the internal Lebanese sphere. Despite Hezbollah's dominance and the gradual weakening of its opponents in the country, the organization has not yet succeeded in bringing about the election of a president by the Lebanese parliament. May 2016 will mark two years since President Michel Suleiman left the presidential palace, and the presidential vacuum remains. The March 14 movement, dominated by the Sunnis and led by Saad al-Hariri, is supporting Suleiman Frangieh as its candidate for presidency. For its part, Hezbollah persists in its support for Michel Aoun, and was helped by the withdrawal of his bitter enemy, Samir Geagea, who decided to throw his support to Aoun. The deadlock has not been broken, however, and no solution is in sight, which for Hezbollah highlights the limitations of its political power within Lebanon, despite the strengthening of its position. Realizing this, Nasrallah is trying to reach understandings that will pave the way towards a sustainable

solution in the presidential palace. It is by no means certain that a head-on collision with Saudi Arabia, as consistently reflected in his remarks, is the right way for him to bring about an end to the presidential crisis.

Finally, there are Nasrallah's comments to and about Israel. Nasrallah's threats are presumably sincere and reflect his intentions, as illustrated on more than one occasion in the past. In any event, it appears that there is little dramatically new in the substance of what he said. Hezbollah's firepower capabilities in range and accuracy for reaching these targets are well known to the military and political echelons in Israel, and it is hard to believe that his words took anyone by surprise. Nasrallah's statements do not necessarily mean, however, that Hezbollah will be in any rush to hit the targets he mentioned, and it is clear that he will have to take Israel's response into account. Hezbollah's firepower should not, of course, be taken lightly, and military preparations (offensive and defensive) are needed to reduce the potential damage. Israel should also prepare for other strategic surprises hinted at in the past, such as underground infiltration and/or seizure of an Israeli community in northern Israel. Most important at present, however, is not only the question of whether Hezbollah is able and wishes to damage sensitive installations in Israeli territory when a major conflict with Israel develops, but why Nasrallah is mentioning it now.

As is clear from an array of contexts, Hezbollah is engaged in both a battle for survival in the regional campaign and in power struggles on its home territory. Nasrallah's threats to Israel are designed to remind the organization's supporters and critics that the bedrock of its existence is the principle of resistance, i.e., the struggle against Israel. Flaunting the organization's military capabilities reminds constituents of Hezbollah's success against Israel during the Second Lebanon War, when it succeeded in disrupting daily life in northern Israel with ongoing rocket fire for more than a month. Nasrallah has good reason to mention this, since that war was not only the most recent significant success of the Arab world against Israel on the battlefield (at least so it was perceived at the time), but also the last time that the Arab consensus favored Hezbollah and the organization enjoyed overall support from the Sunni countries – an achievement that appears unimaginable in the current situation. As the tenth anniversary of that war approaches, it appears that Hezbollah is trying to remind itself and other actors in the Middle East of this fact, thereby restoring to Hezbollah some of the legitimacy it gained in 2006. In addition, although Nasrallah emphasized in his latest speech that he does not foresee a conflict with Israel in the near future, it is entirely possible that he senses that Israel is bound to initiate a conflict with Hezbollah. He is trying to erect a solid wall of deterrence in order to convince Israel not to attack.

Thus when Israel tries to understand Nasrallah's remarks, it is important to consider the overall context in which his statements were made. It therefore follows that his speeches constitute not only a warning to Israel about the damage it can expect in the next war, but also, and chiefly, the absence of any desire for escalation, and a wish to postpone the next conflict through deterrence against Israel.

