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Hezbollah leader threatens next war could draw fighters from Iran, Iraq and Pakistan

Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, said on Friday that a future war waged by Israel against Syria or Lebanon could draw thousands of fighters from countries including Iran and Iraq.

His comments indicated that the same array of Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias – but not countries – currently fighting in Syria in support of President Bashar Assad could take part in any conflict with Israel.

Tensions have risen between Hezbollah and Israel in recent months since Donald Trump became US president with his tough talk against Iran. Israel's air force chief, Maj.-Gen. Amir Eshel, said his country will use all its strength from the start in any war with Hezbollah.

Nasrallah said in a televised speech, "The Israeli enemy must know that if an Israeli war is launched against Syria or Lebanon, it is not known that the fighting will remain Lebanese-Israeli, or Syrian-Israeli."

"This doesn't mean there are states that might intervene directly. But this could open the way for thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of fighters from all over the Arab and Islamic world to participate – from Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan," he said.

Nasrallah has repeatedly warned Israel against attacking Lebanon, where the Iran-backed Shi'ite group is based, and from where it sends fight-

ers to support Assad against insurgents.

Experts on the group say the warnings are part of a policy of deterrence that has also included revealing some of its military capabilities.

Nasrallah said in recent months that Hezbollah's rocket arsenal can hit any target in Israel.

He said any Israeli war with Lebanon or the Gaza Strip, which is run by Hamas, would be "very costly" and that Israel would not be able to win.

Israel has targeted senior Hezbollah commanders in air raids on Syrian soil. But there has been no major confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon since the month-long Second Lebanon War in 2006. (Reuters)



HEZBOLLAH CHIEF Hassan Nasrallah addresses supporters via video link during a rally marking al-Quds Day in South Beirut on Friday. (Aziz Taher/Reuters)

An alarming threat

ANALYSIS

• By SETH J. FRANTZMAN

In a startling revelation on Friday, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said the next war with Israel could see thousands of Shi'ite militia fighters join forces with Hezbollah to fight Israel.

"This could open the way for thousands, even hundreds of thousands of fighters from all over the Arab and Islamic world to participate – from Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan," he said in a television speech.

This threat marks a major development and turning point in Hezbollah's threats against Israel. The following are five reasons that Hez-

bollah's latest statement has ramifications for Israel and the region.

1. The threat confirms what security experts and commentators have predicted.

In recent years, Iran has been accused of attempting to create a route to the sea via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. This would link Tehran with its allies in Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut. These allies include the Iraqi based Shi'ite militias called the Popular Mobilization Units (Hashd al-Shaabi), which became an official arm of the Iraqi government in 2016. Iran is also the main backer of Syria's Bashar Assad and Hezbollah in Lebanon. It

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has transferred missiles and other weapons, as well as training and technology to Hezbollah.

As Iran's influence grew in the region and it strengthened its relations and power in Iraq and Syria, it seemed destined to control a swath of territory that would provide a physical link by land to the sea. Although Israeli and foreign experts warned about this "road to the sea," few Iranian or Hezbollah officials discussed it openly. After Syrian regime soldiers reached the Iraqi border near Tanf and the Popular Mobilization Units reached the Syrian border near Sinjar earlier this month, the ability of a physical "link-up" came closer to being fulfilled.

2. Hezbollah's threat builds on the model used in Syria.

In Syria, a weakened regime has relied on foreign soldiers, many of them recruited by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah's fighters, to bolster its manpower shortages in the six-year war to defeat the rebellion. These include thousands of recruits from Shi'ite Hazara communities in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

When Nasrallah specifically mentioned Afghanistan and Pakistan he was referencing the recruits that helped prop up Assad. Hezbollah has suffered thousands of casualties in Syria and it knows in any war with Israel it lacks the manpower to fight the IDF. It makes up for that with a missile threat of some 100,000 missiles.

By bringing together an alliance of Shi'ite militias throughout the region, Hezbollah hopes to make up for its losses

in the Syrian conflict and use the successful model that saved Assad to save Hezbollah in any future war with Israel.

3. Nasrallah wants to drag Israel into a regional war with multiple states and provoke Russia and the US.

Now Nasrallah is indicating that any war with Israel will involve front lines in Syria and Lebanon and that it has strategic depth that it never had in Lebanon, which is a small country, by relying on Shi'ite militia allies from far and wide and the vastness of Syria and Iraq.

Hezbollah wants to drag Israel into a large conflict spanning a crescent from Beirut to Tehran, where Israel's advantages, such as its air force and technology, will be less useful. Israel will be forced to contend with striking Hezbollah allies in Syria, Iraq and potentially Iran and Yemen, leading to a regional conflict. Hezbollah hopes Israel would be dragged into attacking the Syrian regime that would provoke Russia. A previously acknowledged Israeli raid near Palmyra was challenged by Syrian air defenses.

Russian "de-confliction" with Israel that has worked well near the Golan would not necessarily exist for Israel if it had to deal with enemies deeper in Syria. Similarly the US would oppose any Israeli military activity confronting Shi'ite militias in Iraq, who are part of the Iraqi government, which is allied with the US. The US has invested heavily in Baghdad's central government and its Prime Minister Haider Abadi. Involvement of Iraq's Shi'ites militias in a conflict with Israel would strain relations with Washington.

4. Nasrallah is engaged in a war of words with Israel.

Israeli politicians and generals have been in a war of words with Hezbollah in the last few months, trying to stave off a conflict. At the Herzliya Conference at the Interdisciplinary Center IAF Commander Maj.-Gen. Amir Eshel said on Wednesday that the Israel Air Force could crush Hezbollah in 48 hours. He said Israel would do more damage in 48 hours than it did in 34 days in the 2006 Lebanon war.

Education Minister Naftali

Bennett said in March that a war with Hezbollah would involve all of Lebanon because Hezbollah is so deeply entwined with the Lebanese state.

Hezbollah has responded to these threats with threats of its own. Because Israel claims it can destroy Hezbollah infrastructure in Lebanon, Nasrallah is indicating that such a war won't be so easy or go according to Israel's plans.

The "surprise" in store for Israel, Nasrallah claims, is that up to 100,000 or more fighters will come from afar to aid Hezbollah. These numbers are likely exaggerated since the Revolutionary Guards has only been able to recruit 30,000 fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight in Syria, and there are only 100,000 members of the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq, they can't all be brought to the Golan to help Hezbollah. But even a small contingent of fighters coming from Iraq and Iran complicates a war with Hezbollah.

5. A silver lining? Will the US wake up to the Shi'ite militia threat in Iraq and will Nasrallah's comments bring Israel closer to Saudi Arabia?

The bombastic threats from Beirut mean Israel's common interests with Sunni Arab powers, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are once again reinforced. Nasrallah's mention of Yemen puts Israel on the same side as these governments who are fighting Houthi rebels in Yemen, which are allied with Iran and Hezbollah.

The US supports the Iraqi government, which includes Shi'ite militias and which is close to Tehran. The statements by Nasrallah reveal the reality of the Iranian threat of a "road to the sea" and should encourage US policy-makers to see the implications of the powerful Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq. This means the US may finally wake up to the danger that Iranian influence in Iraq and beyond means in the post-Islamic State era that is forming.

Israeli policy-makers and experts who have been warning the US about Iran for years, may find more open ears in Washington in the wake of Nasrallah's comments.