

Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah Huffs and Puffs

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The Hezbollah leader imitates the puff adder, so-named because it puffs itself up to scare its enemies.

The story is at the *Jerusalem Post* here:

Marking 20 years since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in late May warned Israel of "the great war that will open all fronts at once," saying that it would be "the end of Israel." The Hezbollah leader stressed, however, that there are "no indications that Israel intends to launch a war against Lebanon."

Nasrallah claims that "all fronts at once" will be opened in the coming "great war" with Israel. But Egypt now finds Israel a useful ally in fighting both the Muslim Brotherhood and

regrouped remnants of the Islamic State in the Sinai. General El-Sisi on "60 Minutes" spoke openly of that Egypt-Israel cooperation. Furthermore, the Egyptians feel they have sacrificed quite enough, in three wars (1948-1949, 1967, 1973) for the Palestinians, who have proven ungrateful. Besides, Egypt lost the Sinai twice to Israel, and would not wish to lose it for a third time. There will be no Egyptian front.

As for a future "Syrian front," that is just as unlikely. After nine years of civil war, the Syrian state is exhausted. It has lost nearly 200,000 fighters. A total of 700,000 Syrians have been killed. More than 11 million have fled the country or are internally displaced. Syria owes tens of billions of dollars to Iran, money it does not have. The Syrian army remains in the north, in Idlib Province, where it hopes to prevent any further advance into the country by Erdogan's Turkish troops. The Syrian regime knows that it will take at least \$350 billion to reconstruct the country. Given such catastrophic circumstances, why would Syria risk an entanglement with Israel and the certain destruction it would bring? Syria, too, needs to look after itself, not sacrifice further on behalf of the Palestinians. Like Egypt, Syria lost three wars with Israel. It does not need to risk a fourth defeat.

Even in Lebanon, it is most unlikely that the country would wholeheartedly support Hezbollah if that terror group drags the country into war with Israel. Lebanese remember the destruction wrought by Israel on the country during the 2006 war with Hezbollah. That was unavoidable because Hezbollah had hidden its weapons and outposts throughout civilian areas. Since 2006, Hezbollah has acquired a huge armory of 140,000 missiles that are similarly hidden in civilian areas, and the Lebanese fear the consequences to their country and themselves if Hezbollah starts a war with Israel. Many Lebanese – not just Christians and Sunnis, but also many Shi'a Muslims – have lost all faith in Hezbollah. For Hezbollah has prevented the

Lebanese National Army from deploying in southern Lebanon. Worse still, during the recent widespread protests against the Lebanese government for its mismanagement and corruption, Hassan Nasrallah took the side of the government, and ordered his fighters to suppress, violently, the protesters. He is now seen clearly as a defender of the corrupt governing elite, willing to use violence on peaceful protesters.

The statements were made during an interview with the Al-Nour Radio Station on Tuesday night, which was broadcast by the Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Manar TV Channel.

Nasrallah warned that any Israeli air strike on Lebanon would “not pass without a response,” adding that the terror group has “military capabilities that did not exist before 2006” and would respond if any Hezbollah terrorist was killed anywhere.

But in August 2019, two drone attacks by Israel in Lebanon, one on a Hezbollah stronghold and the other on an outpost of Hezbollah's ally the PFLP, did pass “without a response.” And Israel has made hundreds of attacks from the air on Syrian, Hezbollah, and Iranian forces in Syria. So much for Nasrallah's claim that the group would respond if any Hezbollah fighter were killed “anywhere.” They have been killed, in Syria, and Hezbollah made no response, but Nasrallah is apparently hoping few will remember.

It is true that Hezbollah now has many more missiles – a total of 140,000 – though only a few dozen are precision-guided. Nasrallah chooses not to recognize that Israel itself has made astonishing advances in anti-missile defense systems, as well as in cyberwarfare.

In reference to an airstrike on a Hezbollah vehicle along the Lebanon-Syria border a few weeks ago, Nasrallah stressed that Israel did not make a mistake in the strike and was not trying to kill the terrorists in the vehicle, because they

knew that Hezbollah would respond if the terrorists were killed.

In attacking the Hezbollah vehicle, the Israelis deliberately sent a missile hurtling to the ground nearby, in order to warn the three occupants to flee. They did so, and even had time to return to the vehicle to retrieve their satchels before fleeing again, just before the IAF's second strike demolished the vehicle. Nasrallah is right: at this point, with so much else on its plate, including the likely formal annexation of territory that could lead to an upsurge of terrorism in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel does not want a full-scale war with Hezbollah.

In possible reference to a series of airstrikes in recent years on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria which were blamed on Israel, Nasrallah stated that while the Syrian leadership believes that it is not in the country's interest to be drawn into a war with Israel, the "patience and endurance of the Syrian leadership with Israeli aggression has limits."

Again, given Syria's current state, it is impossible to imagine that Syria will go to war against Israel. With 200,000 of its fighters killed, its air force decimated, its army tied down in Idlib in a face-off with Turkish troops, and hundreds of billions of dollars needed for reconstruction, the "patience and endurance of the Syrian leadership" with what Nasrallah calls "Israeli aggression." is likely to last for many years, until the country, and its military, can get back on their feet.

Nasrallah also referred to a drone attack in the suburbs of Beirut last year that was blamed on Israel, saying that such an operation has not been repeated since and warning that Israeli aircraft in Lebanese airspace would be shot down.

Sightings of Israeli aircraft are reported in Lebanese airspace by local media on a weekly, if not daily, basis. A couple of quadcopters have been shot down near the border, but larger aircraft have reportedly flown in the airspace undamaged, with claims that air strikes on Syria have been carried out by Israeli aircraft from Lebanese airspace.

Both Hezbollah and Israel have the ability to initiate a conflict, said Nasrallah, but the balance of power created by the terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon takes into account a number of calculations, preventing a conflict at present.

“The Israeli enemy did not target us at the beginning, and it was providing support to the Syrian armed groups, not all the opposition,” he said, deeming that “Israel’s venturing into a battle between the wars in Syria was a victory for the axis of the resistance, and this is what made the Israeli resort to air strikes.”

In a convoluted answer that is not easy to parse, it seems that Nasrallah is suggesting that Israel became entangled in the Syrian civil war. It did not. It never had Israeli fighters inside Israel. It engaged only in air strikes in order to prevent Iran from creating its own bases inside Syria, and to foil the delivery of precision-guided missiles by Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Nasrallah rejected calls for Hezbollah to surrender its weapons, asking those calling for such a measure to look at the “state of deterrence, a deterrence that is the protector of Lebanon,” and asking anyone with a better method to state it. he claimed that the “level of support for the choice of resistance among the Palestinian people is higher than ever.”

Nasrallah is wrong. The “level of support” for the “resistance” – that is, Hezbollah – is not at a historic high,

but rather, way down from what it was in 2006. The Lebanese realize that without an armed and aggressive Hezbollah in Lebanon, Israel would have no need to threaten or carry out attacks on Lebanese soil. It is Hezbollah that has itself created the conditions against which it claims to offer “resistance.”

In Lebanon, however, Nasrallah admitted that “there was never national unity around the resistance in order to say that it once had a wide audience that it had lost. Even in 2000, the internal situation was not better than today.” The secretary-general added that some Lebanese people believe Hezbollah is connected with Syria and Iran and isn’t a Lebanese group at all.

Nasrallah argues that support for Hezbollah has not decreased; it was always lower than people are now claiming in order to focus on that putative “decrease.” He insists that “in 2000 the internal situation [in Lebanon] was not better than today.” He then notes that “some” (i.e. almost all) Lebanese people” believe “Hezbollah is connected with Syria and Iran” and “isn’t a Lebanese group at all.”

Goodness. Could that be because Hezbollah has fought for the Syrian regime for nine years, losing several thousand men in that country’s civil war? Might it be because Hezbollah has received 140,000 missiles from Iran, and even shares some military bases with both Syrian and Iranian forces in Syria? Could that “connection” of Hezbollah to Iran have been made because Hezbollah has dutifully fulfilled the anti-Israel tasks assigned to it by its paymasters in Iran? Hasn’t Hezbollah prevented the Lebanese Army from deploying its forces in the south? Might these be the facts that lead many in Lebanon to regard Hezbollah as not truly “a Lebanese group at all”?

Nasrallah insisted that Hezbollah is not trying to get the

United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon to leave the country, but questioned why Israel does not have any UNIFIL forces on its side of the Blue Line.

The reason there are no UNIFIL troops on the Israeli side of the “Blue Line” that demarcates Lebanon’s southern border is that, once the UNIFIL forces had ensured the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon, UNIFIL took on another of its tasks: that of helping the Lebanese Army return to southern Lebanon, replacing Hezbollah troops who were supposed to pull back. That never happened. According to U.N. Resolution 1701, UNIFIL was supposed to assure that southern Lebanon – from the Litani River to Israel’s northern border – was free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the government of Lebanon.” This it has not done. It has failed to lodge a single complaint against Hezbollah for its amassing of an armory of 140,000 missiles, or for the terror tunnels Hezbollah build from southern Lebanon into Israel.

The Lebanese Army is keenly aware of its weakness vis-à-vis Hezbollah, and has not dared to antagonize or challenge Hezbollah forces. Some Israelis even argue that, given how ineffectual it has been, the UNIFIL forces in southern Lebanon might as well be withdrawn.

Nasrallah left, for the very end of his remarks, a brief discussion of domestic problems – that is, the protests all over Lebanon against the government for its corruption. He again made clear his opposition to those protests, claiming that the problem must be left to “be addressed by the judiciary” (and not by the enraged populace). Since the Lebanese judiciary is full of judges who owe their jobs to the government ministers who need to be investigated, it’s not clear how well “the judiciary” will “address” this systemic corruption that has brought the Lebanese state to ruin.

Nasrallah’schutzpah is unrivaled: “corruption must be

addressed” says the man who has amassed a personal fortune of \$250 million, mostly from drug-smuggling by Hezbollah operatives who operate from South America to the Middle East and Europe. He also warns that Lebanon’s “sectarian divide” must be addressed, a “divide” that has been deepened mainly by the all-Shi’a terror group itself. However, perhaps that “divide” will not be quite so stark in the future, for many Shi’a have joined with Christians and Sunnis, sharing their fury with the Lebanese government and their disgust both with Hezbollah, and with Hassan Nasrallah himself, for defending that government and putting down protests. Hassan Nasrallah has at long last brought Lebanese of all sects together, but not in the way he had in mind.

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