

Revisiting Nasrallah

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Amira Howeidy examines the content of El-Sayed Hassan Nasrallah's speeches during the war

"Don't underestimate the significance of Hizbullah flags and posters of Nasrallah in an Arab capital like Cairo," one senior Arab official told Al-Jazeera's Lebanon Bureau Chief Ghassan Ben-Jedo privately last week.

Ben-Jedo, the only journalist to interview Hizbullah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah during the war, was speaking to Al-Ahram Weekly by phone from Beirut on Monday noon, the day the UN ceasefire came into force, ending 34 days of war. Despite the destruction surrounding him in what remained of Beirut's southern suburb of Al-Dahia, a Hizbullah stronghold, Ben-Jedo declared Hizbullah, and by extension its secretary-general, "stronger than ever".

And not just in Lebanon, Ben-Jedo argued, recalling his conversation with the Arab official. "He said we won't fully realise the impact Nasrallah has had on the Arabs for a while but he feels it is profound."

A few hours later, as tens of thousands of displaced Lebanese flocked back to their homes in southern Lebanon, Baalbek, Al-Bikaa and Beirut's Al-Dahia, and amid a debate within political circles over disarming Hizbullah, Nasrallah made his second TV appearance in a week.

His speech, the first since the ceasefire and the ninth since the start of the war on 12 July, lasted exactly half an hour. Nasrallah adopted a statesman-like tone, speaking alternately as the commander of the armed resistance, as a freedom fighter, political leader and Lebanese citizen. In 30 minutes the 46-year-old leader quietly, yet assertively, took post-war matters into his own hands.

"What I said in the first days of the war [about reconstruction] wasn't to help you hang on," said Nasrallah. "Today is the day to be true to these words and to deliver on the promise. God willing, you won't need to ask favours of anyone or queue up or go anywhere [for financial assistance]. Our brothers, who are your brothers, will be at your service starting tomorrow morning everywhere in towns and villages."

He announced Hizbullah's readiness to rebuild what Israel has destroyed and offered direct financial assistance to the displaced and victims of the war.

And no, he won't wait for the government to start its own reconstruction and rescue efforts. Instead he announced a two-phase plan. The first is to provide a "reasonable" sum of money to every family that needs to rent a flat for a year and furnish it "adequately". The second phase involves the reconstruction of all destroyed homes "within months".

He then moved on to the issue of Hizbullah's weapons, arguing the case in what Cairo-based Palestinian researcher Mazen El-Naggar describes as a "refined" and "intelligent" discourse. When he spoke about the war and the resistance, Nasrallah alluded to the "feelings" and "sentiments" of

the “large sectors of society that believe in the resistance”, denouncing those who are seeking to open a public debate without “any regard to the feelings of all those people who have lost loved ones in this war”.

What Nasrallah was indirectly emphasising is that these “large” sectors of society are Lebanon’s Shia whose views on the matter should not be underestimated.

“Do you think these people are without feelings? How are they supposed to understand what some of the elite, seated in air-conditioned rooms, are saying about disarming the resistance regardless of the validity of their argument.”

What is “strange”, said Nasrallah, is how some voices within Lebanon are contesting the presence of the armed resistance north of the Litani River when to the south it will be replaced by the Lebanese army and International Forces as per UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

“Decisions like this [disarming the resistance] cannot be discussed in such a rushed way,” he cautioned. “We know that the most important objective of the US-Israeli war on Lebanon was disarming, finishing off and isolating [the resistance]. I would invite you to read and hear what the Israeli foreign secretary said on how the most powerful army in the world cannot disarm Hizbullah.”

In a televised speech on 9 August, before United Nation’s Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1701 was issued, Nasrallah said Hizbullah — whose fighters are concentrated in Lebanon’s south — agreed to the Lebanese army being redeployed in the south, explaining that despite his fears for the army’s safety, Hizbullah accepted the arrangement in order to stop Israel’s war on Lebanon.

Two days later the UNSC issued 1701, calling for a halt to the fighting between Israel and Hizbullah and authorising the deployment of 15,000 foreign troops to help the Lebanese army take control of southern Lebanon.

The resolution calls on Israel to begin withdrawing all its forces from Lebanon “in parallel” with the deployment of UN peace-keepers and 15,000 additional Lebanese troops. It mandates the international force to use firepower but does not allocate it any explicit role in disarming Hizbullah, leaving the fate of the resistance group’s arms to a future political settlement.

On 12 August, Nasrallah made another televised speech reaffirming Hizbullah’s commitment to the deployment of the Lebanese army. Although he described UNSC 1701 as “unjust” in holding Hizbullah responsible for the escalation without any mention of Israel’s atrocities, he argued that given the “declared and undeclared objectives of the US- Israeli war, it was a”reasonable” outcome.

Although he didn’t elaborate on what will happen to Hizbullah’s weapons once the Lebanese army redeploys in the south, Nasrallah hinted that his organisation is unlikely to disarm any time soon and will continue the resistance as long as there is “Israeli occupation and aggression”. He added that Hizbullah will stick to the Israeli- Lebanese April 1996 agreement which allows both parties the right of self- defence.

That the speech was timed to coincide with a meeting of the Lebanese cabinet to discuss UNSC 1701 was interpreted by observers as sending a message to officials on where Hizbullah stands, well before members of the 14 March group, which wants Hizbullah disarmed, began to renew their demands.

But then, says Al-Jazeera’s Ben- Jedo, every one of Nasrallah’s nine TV appearances during the war was perfectly timed.

“When he makes a TV appearance it is for a reason,” he said, “and that applies to every one of his [nine] speeches since 12 July.”

That the 14 March group began to call for Hizbullah to be disarmed early this week may explain why Nasrallah devoted the second half of his latest speech to the issue. What he did not say in his 9 and 12 August speeches he spelled out on Monday 14 August: there will be no disarmament until there is a “strong” and “just” Lebanese state capable of protecting its borders and its citizens.

This will not be Nasrallah’s last speech, but the frequency of his TV appearances is likely to lessen now that the war is over. The impact of his discourse throughout the war, analysts say, is as important as Hizbullah’s strategic and military achievements during the conflict..

Nasrallah, who is also a powerful Shia symbol, now enjoys the admiration and respect of the vast majority of the Arab world’s public opinion, which ironically is largely Sunni. This is unprecedented, says El-Naggar, but it’s more significant within Lebanon’s Shia community because now they have secured a victory that is unrivalled in the Arab- Israeli conflict. “This is to their credit.”

“Hizbullah dramatically changed the status of Lebanon’s Shia who were traditionally perceived as society’s underdogs. This was felt when the Israeli occupation forces pulled out from south Lebanon in 2000,” argued El-Naggar.

This time around, however, Hizbullah achieved what Nasrallah described as a “historic strategic victory” over Israel when previously all the combined forces of the Arab armies failed.

“This victory which is felt across the Arab world as well as in Lebanon, could be changing something in the Shia psyche for the first time in centuries. Their reference is no longer just the tragedy of Karbala [where Prophet Mohamed’s grandson Imam Al-Hussein was brutally slain by the Umayyads in the late seventh century, and contributed later to the formation of the Shia sect in Islam],” said El-Naggar. “The Shia are no longer the ‘wretched on earth’, they are capable of triumphing over the Israelis. They are greatly admired for their steadfastness and defiance.”

Despite carefully avoiding a Shiite discourse over the past month, Nasrallah who adopted a strictly pan-Arab line during the war, slipped once.

In his 21 July interview with Al-Jazeera’s Ben-Jedo, Nasrallah employed a famous Karbalaa quote on the people of Iraq who let Imam El-Hussein meet his tragic fate: “their hearts are with him but their swords are against him” - to deliver an angry message to Arab leaders who criticized Hizbullah for abducting the two Israeli soldiers on 12 July. Saudi Arabia and Egypt said that Hizbullah’s action was a “miscalculated adventure.”

“We don’t want your swords or even your hearts,” he said, “just get off our backs.”

The words stuck. Two days later, the independent Egyptian weekly El-Destour appeared with the headline “To Arab leaders: get off our backs.”

In his first address “to the nation” on 14 July, just two days after the war, a defiant Nasrallah delivered one of his more memorable speeches.

Israel had begun its wide-scale destruction of Al-Dahia and claimed it liquidated Nasrallah.

“To the Zionists I say, you will soon discover just how stupid and foolish your new government is... Bomb Al-Dahia and we’ll bomb Haifa.. You wanted an open war, we are going to the open war and we are ready for it.”

To the Arab leaders he said “I won't talk about your history. But a brief word: we are adventurous.. but we are adventurous since 1982 [when Israel invaded Beirut, triggering the resistance]. You and the world said we're mad and we proved we are wise.”

Again, the words stuck. Today “adventurous” in the Arabic political lexicon carries Nasrallah's connotations.

“It's very sophisticated thinking on his part to place Haifa as the equivalent of Beirut's Al-Dahia, and later, downtown Beirut with Tel Aviv,” argued El-Naggar.

But the 14 July speech was especially memorable says Ben-Jedo because it was the first time in history that a military order was issued on air.

Winding up his address, Nasrallah declared the beginning of a series of “surprises.” “They start now. Now, in the middle of the sea, the Israeli war ship that targeted our infrastructure, our homes and citizens, watch it now burn and sink with those on board. This is the beginning and until the end, there is much more to be said.”

Seconds later, the warship sank with those on board.

But it was perhaps his interview with Al-Jazeera that revealed more about what Hizbullah's leader sought to achieve -or defeat- in the war.

The international community, he said, gave Israel the “green light” to end the resistance in Lebanon. “But they don't want Hizbullah's resistance [only], they want to put an end to any resistance of any sort... They want to delete the word “resistance”, render it taboo. [The same applies to] martyr, jihad, steadfastness, combat, liberation, freedom, dignity, pride, honour.. All these meanings have to be removed from the Lebanese dictionary, from the press, from political debates, from the political mind and from the popular psyche. This is what Israel is actually doing. America needs this to reshape the region.”

Two days later, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice seemed to confirm this when she announced -as Israel destroyed Lebanon- the birth of a new Middle East.

Did Nasrallah know all along? His 25 July televised speech seemed to imply this. “Two weeks [into the war] there is now evidence to expose the reality of this war... it's a new US-Israeli Middle East. Does anyone really think it was born in the past few days only when took hostage two soldiers?” he asked. The US, he said, detected “obstacles” to the new Middle East: “the resistance in Lebanon and Palestine and both the Syrian and Iranian regimes.” And this, he argued, what the war was really about. The surprise was that Hizbullah already knew of a secret US-Israeli plan to attack Lebanon - specifically the Litani River and Hizbullah's basis- next October.

But he declared that “our resistance will change reality in the region.”

Despite its importance, this speech didn't get the attention it deserved. Al-Jazeera's Ben Jedo argued that the western media had no interest in publicizing this specific address and the Arab media “deliberately” ignored it.

Now that the war is over, there is evidence in a Seymour Hersh piece published in the New Yorker on 21 August that Nasrallah was saying the truth.

Israel, wrote Hersh, “had devised a plan for attacking Hezbollah — and shared it with Bush Administration officials —well before the July 12th kidnappings.” It's not that the Israelis had a trap

that Hezbollah walked into, "he said," but there was a strong feeling in the White House that sooner or later the Israelis were going to do it. "Hizbullah's 12 July operation was dubbed "Truthful Promise" in reference to Nasrallah's pledge earlier this year to exchange Lebanon's prisoners in Israel with Israeli hostages. But now that we know from Nasrallah what Israel's war -thwarted by the resistance- was about, could Hizbullah's leader have meant to deliver a promise bigger than just a prisoner exchange?

P.S.

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