

Nasrallah's Malaise

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Articles & Testimony

Hassan Nasrallah is showing clear signs of “dejection, melancholy and depression,” according to the editors of the Lebanese daily al-Safir, who are counted among the most steadfast supporters of the leader of Hizballah. Alongside a tiresomely long interview with him, published on September 5, they note that the man radiates a sense of “disappointment and distress.”

It is no trifling matter that Nasrallah, who is always punctilious in demonstrating self-confidence and determination, comes across this way to those visiting him in his hideout. “I myself don’t even know where I am,” he told his interviewers. “They have moved me from one hiding place to another dozens of times.”

Nevertheless, his words were as polished and considered as usual, and included the now-familiar remarks about Ehud Olmert’s “stupidity,” fictional accounts of his ongoing communications with fighters on the frontline during the war, and wild exaggerations about his achievements in the last round. This is the same Nasrallah that we have known for years, and at the same time, a different Nasrallah than we have seen before. An analysis of the text helps solve the riddle of why Nasrallah is so frustrated even as he claims “victory,” and what the source of his anxiety is, even though, in his assessment, he succeeded in “defeating” the Israeli army.

The impression given is that Nasrallah is worried about not being able to continue the armed muqawama, or resistance, in the new framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1701. He understands that in South Lebanon, in the area below the Litani River and on the slopes of Mount Hermon along the contours of the Hazbani, his people will no longer be able to set up open military camps. In addition, they have lost the numerous positions they had seized close to the border with Israel following the Israeli withdrawal of May 2000, and from now on, they will have to conceal their weapons in secret mountain caches, outside the villages. Hizballah’s southern “Nasr” (Victory) unit will no longer be able to move freely in the area, where the 15,000 soldiers of three regular brigades of the Lebanese Army will be manning roadblocks and carrying out patrols, bolstered by the troops of an upgraded UNIFIL force.

There are already signs that Hizballah has started moving its military equipment from the South toward the Lebanese Bqqa. In other words, Nasrallah understands that the South has ceased to be “Hizballahstan” and he is conceding the role that he had taken upon himself in the past, to serve as the guardian of Lebanon’s border.

Moreover, Nasrallah fears that under these circumstances, he stands to lose control over portions of the Shiite community. Indeed, there is growing evidence of disaffection with Hizballah, and reservations on the part of some of the Shiite middle class, and among the local village leaderships, about the disaster visited upon them by Nasrallah’s belligerent adventurism. Nasrallah’s promises to provide generous and speedy compensation to the thousands of families who lost their homes are not being realized. So far, only a few hundred families have received downpayments on the \$12,000 each is supposed to receive to cover a year’s rent pending the rehabilitation of their permanent homes. At least 30,000 families, most of them Shiite, are expecting funds from Nasrallah’s “Construction Jihad” organization—a huge financial burden even for Iran, and all the more so considering that the Lebanese government will receive hundreds of millions of dollars from the Arab states and other donor nations to compete with Hizballah for the hearts and minds of the victims.

Nasrallah is now forced to rely more than he would like on his partner/rival in the Shiite sector, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, a sleek and shrewd politician who heads the more secular “Amal.” Nasrallah has suddenly taken to calling Berri “my big brother,” and is advising all the other actors in the Lebanese arena to accept the aid of Berri’s “infinite wisdom.” All this smacks of Nasrallah conceding his seniority, if only temporarily, in the Shiite leadership.

What’s more, Nasrallah fears rising tensions between the Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon. He is trying with all his might to avoid open confrontation, but Sunni public opinion, under the leadership of the Hariri family and its loyalists, has turned largely against him. Hizballah is now forced to rely on second echelon Sunni elements in Tripoli and other places, but at this stage, he has squandered any opportunity of getting the central pillars of the Sunni minority to identify with his positions.

Surprisingly, Nasrallah’s standing among the Christians is somewhat better for now. That is because of the alliance he struck before the war with the strongest Maronite, Gen. Michel Aoun. Together they are pressing to rout the anti-Syrian government headed by Fuad Siniora, or at least to broaden the coalition by adding more partners from Hizballah, along with Aoun’s faction (the Patriotic Current) and other figures such as the Christian Suleiman Franjeh from the north, the Druze Majid Arslan and the Sunni Omar Karamah. But the Aoun-Nasrallah alliance is not firm and may not hold up over time. And herein lies Nasrallah’s concern that he will be left without any powerful allies in the Lebanese arena, amid growing pressure on him to disarm, as demanded by the March 14 anti-Syrian coalition.

Nasrallah has apparently come to the conclusion that he was too hasty in pulling the trigger on July 12, and admits that he did not expect so strong an Israeli reaction. From his perspective, the war did not end with the cease-fire, and the results will only become clear once the dust kicked up by the internal wrestling in Lebanon has dispersed.

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