

## Hezbollah says can fight Israel without arms from Syria

By Dana Khraiche, Thomas El-Basha

BEIRUT: Hezbollah's chief said Saturday the Lebanese resistance group was fully equipped to combat Israel in any future war, even in the event its allies in Syria and Iran could not lend it support.

Sayed Hassan Nasrallah also refused to comment on Bulgaria's accusation that members of Hezbollah were behind the 2012 bombing that claimed five Israeli tourists in the European country.

"Today, the resistance in Lebanon is fully equipped. We have everything we need here in Lebanon and we don't need to transport anything from Syria and Iran," he said in a televised speech marking the annual commemoration of the party's "Martyred leaders."

Last month the Syrian Army accused Israel of launching a strike on a military research facility in the area of Jamraya, near Damascus, about 15 kilometers from the Lebanese border, amid reports that the strike had in fact targeted a shipment of weapons headed to Hezbollah.

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said earlier this month that his country was increasingly concerned that chaos in Syria could allow the resistance group to obtain sophisticated weapons.

Nasrallah refuted claims in local and Arab media and by political figures that his party was vulnerable due to the unrest in Syria, one of the group's primary allies.

"They say the resistance in Lebanon is going through a moment of weakness and confusion and thus think that an opportunity has presented itself to [Israel] to launch an attack, an aggression

or even a war,” Nasrallah said.

“To those I say: You are completely mistaken,” he added.

Nasrallah also voiced doubt that Israel would wage war against Lebanon over its alleged role in the July 18 bombing in the Black Sea resort of Burgas, Bulgaria, and said Tel Aviv should think seriously before taking any such action.

“Hours after the Bulgarian bombing, [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu immediately accused Hezbollah. Did he wage a war or aggression? No,” he said.

Sofia has accused two men with links to Hezbollah in the Burgas bombing.

Nasrallah said Israel was divided over whether to launch an offensive against Lebanon out of fear of the results of previous engagements with the resistance group.

“I tell this enemy with certainty that, yes, you should think a thousand, a hundred thousand and a million times before waging a war [against Lebanon],” Nasrallah said.

He also said that Israel is aware of such a risk.

“Israel knows all that we are saying is true and this is why it is devoting all it can toward intelligence [operations] and attempts security breaches and [launches] aerial reconnaissance jets and warplane over flights,” he said.

The Hezbollah chief also warned that his group would retaliate to any Israeli attack on Lebanese soil, threatening to target key infrastructure in the Jewish State.

“They know this: that their airports, ports and power plants need only a few rockets,” he said.

“Is Israel or the Israeli economy ready to tolerate over six months of darkness?” Nasrallah asked. “They know we are serious in everything we say.”

On the alleged role of Hezbollah in the attack in Burgas, Nasrallah said: “I don't want to comment on the Bulgarian accusation. This issue is being looked at in a patient and calm manner and we will see later how to deal with it depending on the outcome.”

Turning to local politics, Nasrallah reiterated his party's readiness to vote in favor of the controversial Orthodox Gathering electoral proposal if it is put to a vote in Parliament, saying

Hezbollah understood the concerns of its Christian allies.

“Stemming from our belief in true partnership [between Christians and Muslims] and true equality and because we think that the Orthodox Gathering law is one way to achieve such equality, we will vote for it,” Nasrallah said.

The Orthodox Gathering draft law, which projects every sect as electing its own MPs based on proportional representation, has received the backing from most Christian parties in the country but has been fiercely opposed by the Future Movement, Progressive Socialist Party, the country’s president and prime minister, and number of Christian lawmakers.

Nasrallah said his support for the Orthodox Gathering law was aimed at safeguarding the interests of his Christian allies who have voiced concerns that the present law marginalizes them at the political level.

Nasrallah said his stance also serves as a rebuke to recent comments by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri who accused Hezbollah Thursday of supporting the Orthodox proposal for the sake of holding onto its arsenal rather than a genuine gesture toward its allies in the March 8 coalition.

“Is it shameful for Hezbollah to go along and listen to the concerns of its allies and to preserve their interests?” the Lebanese leader asked.

“We are also convinced in the Orthodox Gathering law because we want Lebanon to be treated as a single district based on a system proportional representation,” he added.

Opponents of the controversial proposal argue that its adoption will allow for the rise of extremists and endanger the principle of partnership in Lebanon.

Nasrallah dedicated the bulk of his speech responding to Hariri's remarks, accusing the head of the Future Movement of hypocrisy for urging the resistance group to abandon its weapons.

He alleged that Hariri had offered to withdraw his calls for the resistance group to disarm if it agreed to keep him in power following the fall of his National Unity Cabinet in 2011.

Addressing Hariri, who has repeatedly called for Hezbollah to disarm, Nasrallah said: “You are the one [who offered] to put aside the arms issue so that you could remain prime minister but we refused.”

He was referring to the 2011 initiative by Qatar and Turkey to resolve the government crisis after March 8 ministers resigned from Hariri's Cabinet, forcing its collapse.

Nasrallah also said that the late Rafik Hariri, Saad's father, had voiced his full support for Hezbollah retaining its arsenal during a conversation between the late statesman and the Hezbollah leader.

"Months before Feb. 14 [the day Rafik Hariri was assassinated] ... he told me that he supported the resistance and the liberation of the Shebaa Farms and Kfar Shuba Hills and that he wanted the resistance's arms to remain until there is a comprehensive and fair peace [with Israel]," Nasrallah said.

Minutes following the end of Nasrallah's speech, Saad Hariri said the Hezbollah chief had not right to speak of his father's history.

"The protector of the suspects involved in the killing of the martyr Rafik Hariri does not have the right to talk about the prime minister's history," he wrote on his Twitter feed.

The head of the Future Movement has repeatedly asked Nasrallah to hand over four Hezbollah members indicted by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in the killing of his father.

Nasrallah has said that the four will never be apprehended.

During his speech Saturday, the Hezbollah head also praised and offered condolences over the recent death of an Iranian official killed en route from Damascus to Beirut.

"I want to stop for a moment of respect and wish to offer praise over the martyrdom of Hussam Khoshnevis for his great efforts while heading the Iranian Committee for Reconstruction in Lebanon," Nasrallah said.

"Iran has always supported the resistance in Lebanon, in liberating and supporting Lebanon," he added.

In a statement issued late Wednesday, the Iranian Embassy in Lebanon said Khoshnevis, the head of the Iranian Committee for Reconstruction in Lebanon, was killed at the hands of "armed terrorist groups" while making his way from Damascus to Beirut.

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