

### “Resisting” in Damascus Tracking Syria in Nasrallah’s Speeches

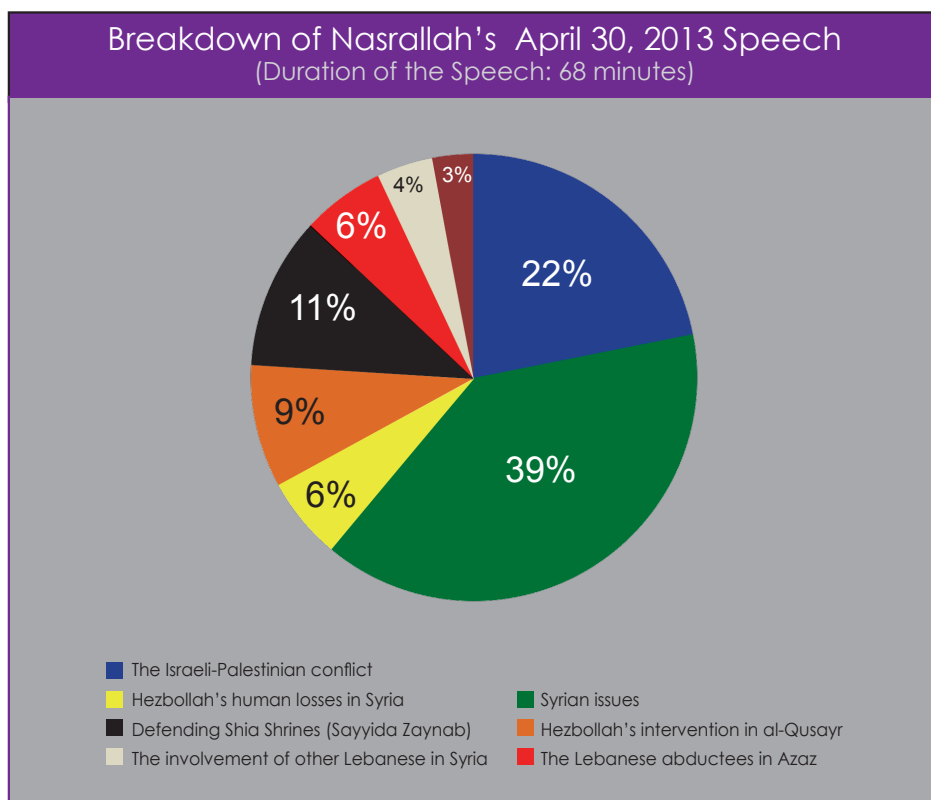
Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah discarded any intention he may have had about being subtle in his recent May 9 speech. In that presentation, which followed his April 30 diatribe that opened the door for further Syrian intervention, he confirmed the organization’s overwhelming support of the Syrian regime and its access to “game-changing” weapons.<sup>1</sup> Although this “icon of the resistance” is known for the intensity of his anti-Israel, pro-Syria orations, his speeches indicate a marked change in the organization’s rhetoric about the situation unfolding just across Lebanon’s border with its neighboring country.

Unlike his previous attempts to obscure the organization’s role in the ongoing conflict or his suggestion that Hezbollah members were fighting there of their own accord, Nasrallah introduced the possibility—dramatically—for full-scale Hezbollah intervention on behalf of the Bashar al-Assad regime. “Just as Syria stood by the Lebanese people and gave moral and financial backing to its people’s resistance, we announce that we stand by the side of the Syrian popular resistance.”<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, Nasrallah carefully chose the phrase “popular resistance” in an attempt to connect the goals of the two groups and downplay the sectarian nature of Syria’s

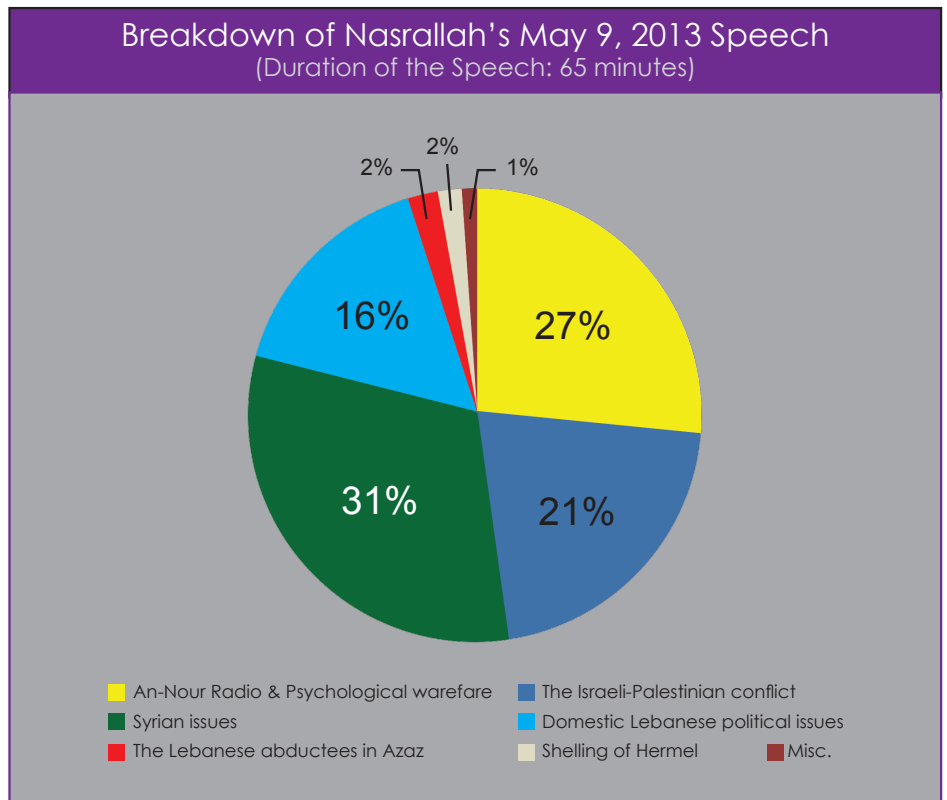
conflict. Nasrallah is expected to round out his recent series of Syria-themed speeches with a third commentary that will likely coincide with Hezbollah’s May 25 celebration of “Liberation Day,” which commemorates Israel’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

Nasrallah’s May 9 speech was given ostensibly to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the organization’s *an-Nour* radio station. He devoted the first 17 minutes of that speech to congratulating the radio station for its 25 years of dedicated service: “In the same way the resistance developed in the field, [its] media outlet has come to possess the same spirit, seriousness, loyalty, and creativity.”<sup>3</sup> He added that since *an-Nour* does not exist as a



competitive radio station, it offers honest news “even when waging psychological warfare.”<sup>4</sup> As with all of Nasrallah's presentations, his May 9 speech began with references to Lebanon's Southern “enemy” in a clear attempt to reinforce the central rationale behind Hezbollah's “resistance” on behalf of its Palestinian brothers. “The Zionist enemy wants all Arabs, not just Palestinians, to recognize the Jewish nature of the state they have made.”<sup>5</sup> This portion of the speech, which lasted nearly 14 minutes, focused primarily on discussing how the Arab Spring has affected Israel and its Arab neighbors which, Nasrallah claimed, prefer to kill each other than burden themselves with the Palestinian cause.

Ultimately, the speech was a clear response to Israel's recent bombing of targets in Syria and Hezbollah's response to those attacks. In fact, his assessment of that situation consumed the majority—more than 20 minutes—of that presentation. To review, on Friday, May 2, Israeli warplanes—perhaps the very same aircraft that have been flying nightly sweeps over South Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs for the past week—bombed a convoy allegedly transporting missiles from Syria to Lebanon. Then on Sunday, May 4, Israeli forces attacked military complexes in Damascus.<sup>6</sup> During his speech, Nasrallah stopped just short of appointing himself spokesperson for the Syrian regime when he fastidiously presented the response to be taken in the event of Israeli intervention, which includes supplying Hezbollah with “game-changing weapons,” opening “the Golan front” and preparing “rocket launch pads.”<sup>7</sup> Nasrallah did not expound on what was meant by “game-changing weapons,” but it is not difficult to deduce that he was



hinting at Assad's highly controversial chemical weapons, about which the international community is legitimately concerned.<sup>8</sup> Notably, the statement issued by Israel's Foreign Ministry paid little heed to the speech: “We don't respond to words. We respond to actions.”<sup>9</sup>

Thus, it is obvious that Hezbollah is distancing itself from explicitly Lebanese issues, as Nasrallah spent only 13 minutes—just 20% of the total speech—discussing the various topics that currently plague the Lebanese government and the upcoming elections. The Lebanese Shia who were abducted in Azaz are becoming far less important, as this topic garnered only 90 seconds of Nasrallah's attention during the 13 minutes he dedicated to Lebanese issues. On that subject, Nasrallah stated simply that recovering the pilgrims is a governmental matter about which he was “not going to comment further on.”<sup>10</sup> The conclusion he reached on that topic represents an about face from his original fervor on the matter. Finally, just one minute was dedicated to the fights along the border with Hermel. Thus, it becomes apparent that for Hezbollah, Lebanon represents a mere footnote compared to its involvement in Syria.



A sample of Hezbollah's Syria related martyr literature. The A4 folded invitation card to attend the Seventh Day commemoration of "Brother Moujahid Joyful Martyr Mohammad Ahmad al-Obeid (aka Ali al-Mortada)".

Nasrallah's recent speech also marked a turning point in Hezbollah's rhetoric on the Syrian situation. Notably, the address he gave last April 30 was the first time it had been confirmed that Hezbollah fighters, under the direction of the organization, were fighting in Syria. Before then, Nasrallah's speeches had merely hinted that Hezbollah fighters might be present in the country, and then only because they made individual decisions to join the fight, as opposed to Hezbollah having organized such an effort. Interestingly, this tacit reference to Hezbollah involvement followed the organization's outright denial of such actions. On June 10, 2011, Hezbollah issued the following official statement:

Some Arab and Israeli media outlets as well as some [Internet] websites have focused lately on spreading rumors about the participation of Hezbollah in

the military standoffs taking place in some Syrian regions, mentioning that Hezbollah had several martyrs in these [confrontations]. They even...[published] the names of these martyrs and where they came from. Hezbollah categorically denies these rumors and considers [them] part of the confessional and sectarian instigation efforts...that [target] Syria and the resistance [movement, despite them] knowing that we never hide our martyrs. To the contrary, we are proud of them and we announce their martyrdom in the daylight. We would like to draw... attention that those parties who are spreading these rumors have no credibility at all, and in spite of this fact, we find ourselves forced to deny these lies because we fear that some [well-intentioned] people will believe it. [That] said, we believe that with God's will the Syrian leadership, people and army will overcome this crisis firmly and wisely.<sup>11</sup>

In his April 30 speech, however, Nasrallah confirmed the veracity of widespread rumors regarding Hezbollah's involvement. Then on May 9, he took this a step further by acknowledging the presence of fighters in Syria. He also implied that Hezbollah would intervene in the future on behalf of the Assad regime.

Less than a week before that speech, Israel shot down yet another drone over the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>12</sup> In response to Israeli accusations that the drone belonged to Hezbollah, Nasrallah suggested in his speech three possible sources of the aircraft, all of which were intended to avoid the issue. While simultaneously suggesting that the drone *might* have come from Hezbollah, Nasrallah denied firmly that it had. He also hinted that the drone could have come from another source but insinuated that it had been sent—and destroyed—by Israel in an attempt to blame Hezbollah.<sup>13</sup>

Actually, Nasrallah's April 30 comments about the latest drone incident were little more than idle chatter intended to shift the focus away from the more important issue of Hezbollah's

role in Syria. This is evident because he spent just 15 minutes discussing Israeli-Palestinian issues while he dedicated 51 minutes (of his 68-minute speech) to addressing Syria. Nasrallah has shown consistently strong support for Hezbollah's staunch ally but until the April 30 speech, he had either denied or studiously avoided discussing Hezbollah's official role in the civil war that has gripped Syria since March 2011.

Unlike Bashar al-Assad, Nasrallah has not yet characterized the opposition movement as being run by terrorist groups. Still, he observed:

It could be said that the goal of anyone standing behind the war in Syria, is destroying Syria so that a strong, centralized state would not be established in it, and so that it would become too weak to take decisions related to its oil, sea, or borders.<sup>14</sup>

Based on that observation, he offered three explanations for his organization's now undeniable presence in Syria. First, he spoke plainly and for a full six minutes about Hezbollah's intervention at al-Qusayr, an area that has recently attracted a substantial amount of attention. There, Hezbollah commandos have aided regime soldiers in reclaiming the contested region from opposition groups. "We will not leave the Lebanese residents of al-Qusayr to stand alone and we will do anything to help them, especially since the Lebanese state has failed to protect these towns located on the border with Syria."<sup>15</sup> Nasrallah's statement, however, offered little more than a passing distraction, as it is known generally that Hezbollah's presence in Syria is not restricted to al-Qusayr. The second justification he offered—this one nearly eight minutes long—was the need to protect Shia shrines in the country, particularly the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.<sup>16</sup> Yet this is another example of blatant exaggeration, as it offers an ideological premise for such intervention. Indeed, assuming Hezbollah is genuinely concerned with protecting such sacred locations, why has it not deployed fighters to Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain (among other countries) to

protect indigenous Shia shrines? The last reason Nasrallah offered for Hezbollah's intervention in Syria (which received the least amount of time at just over four minutes) is at once the most ambiguous and the most honest: "Syria has real friends in the region, and the world will not let Syria fall into the hands of America, Israel, or Takfiri groups."<sup>17,18</sup> Here again, Nasrallah nominated himself to be the mouthpiece for the Iranians, the Russians and all other Assad supporters.

Indeed, Nasrallah has lately been busy rubbing shoulders with many of the Assad regime's strongest allies. Just days before his April 30 speech, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov visited Nasrallah (April 27) during a weekend tour of Lebanon. Despite reports that the Minister asked Hezbollah to pull its forces out of Syria, the two politicians apparently discussed Hezbollah's stance on the Syrian conflict. Critically, Russia has remained a stalwart supporter of the Assad regime despite increasing international condemnation of the civil conflict. In addition, it has played a key role in squelching international intervention by leveraging its membership on the United Nations Security Council. Nasrallah also visited last month with Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Iran. The two supposedly discussed an "Iranian-Syrian defense system" and their roles in the Syrian conflict.<sup>19</sup>

Importantly, Nasrallah's recent speeches have been blatant attempts to link Hezbollah's self-preservation "resistance" philosophy (vis-à-vis Israel) to the need for intervention in Syria. Unsurprisingly, those sentiments were echoed in statements made recently by other Hezbollah leaders. For instance, the Chairman of Hezbollah's Executive Board Sayyed Hashem Safieddine stated on April 28: "We believe that our stance in Syria is a strength for the resistance and that the confrontation taking place in Syria is targeted against the resistance and its weapons."<sup>20</sup> He added, "It is the same battle, the same cause, and the same objective."<sup>21</sup> Safieddine's counterpart, Hezbollah MP Mohammad Raad said, "[T]he assault on



Over the years, Hezbollah has developed, refined and in some ways reconstituted elements of its media wing. As noted by Secretary General Hassan

Nasrallah, these “news” sources play an increasingly important role in Hezbollah’s arsenal, as they help implement the psychological aspects of Hezbollah’s agenda and warfare efforts. Hezbollah considers an-Nour (The Light) and al-Manar (The Beacon) its two official news sources and employs them to diffuse its propaganda daily through a host of programs that address different target groups. Clearly, however, Hezbollah makes no attempt to use these news sources exclusively, as it has adopted a creative approach to the management of its media outreach strategy. In fact, Hezbollah has developed an entire collection of conventional and unconventional media outlets, both hard and soft. A good example of Hezbollah’s predilection for reshuffling its media resources can be found in the decision made several years ago to cease publishing hard copies of its official weekly al-Ahed and instead reestablish it as a news website. Additionally, the organization now relies heavily on al-Akhbar newspaper which—despite its claim of being “independent” and being among the youngest outlets to join Hezbollah’s media collection—plays a leading role. Based on the combination of these official and unofficial news mediums, one must admit that Hezbollah has indeed been successful in prosecuting several media wars.

our people on the border of Hermel has the same goals as the southern Israeli enemy. [This assault] is challenging us from behind [in order] to distract us from the Israeli enemy....”<sup>22</sup> Clearly, Hezbollah is touting intervention as a means to “protect its back” while it remains focused on Israel—its “true” enemy.

Of course, while these speeches are not the only instances in which Nasrallah has addressed the crisis in Syria, they are the most direct. As mentioned previously, Hezbollah first denied any involvement in Syria in June 2011, just after the now two-year-long struggle began. As time passed, however, that story began to change. Nasrallah affirmed his support for the Assad regime during a February 16, 2012 speech to commemorate Martyr’s Day: “As for us, and setting out from the methodology which we believe in, I say that yes we are now and we stood with Syria. Can anyone argue that the Syrian regime is not a resistant regime?”<sup>23</sup> He also added, “This regime did not submit or yield

to American and Israeli conditions. It did not forsake the resistance in Lebanon. It did not forsake the resistance in Palestine. It did not sell the resistance in Iraq.” By using the word “resistant,” Nasrallah was obviously referring to the regime’s resilience and was attempting to intimidate opponents by pointing directly at Assad’s allies. Just over a month later, Nasrallah reaffirmed his position that any resolution in Syria should be a “political solution, for the interests of Syria, the Syrian people and Syria’s strategic position.”<sup>24</sup> He underscored that position again on August 1, 2012 and September 3, 2012.<sup>25,26</sup> Nasrallah also cautioned against US military intervention but rephrased that message as a threat, when he stated on July 19, 2012, “The US and Israel consider Syria as a problem, because Syria is a true supporter of the resistance.”<sup>27</sup>

Over time, rumors surged that Hezbollah fighters were actively engaged in Syria despite Nasrallah’s strong support for a political solution. On October 11, 2012, he vehemently denied having provided any manpower support to the regime: “Until [this] moment, we have not fought alongside the Syrian regime. It has not asked us to do so, and who said that we have an interest in that?”<sup>28</sup> Nasrallah confirmed that Hezbollah would provide support if the time came, but also insinuated that despite his statement to the contrary, Hezbollah fighters were likely massing along the border. “I cannot prevent anyone, whether they belong to Hezbollah or not, from staying in the border areas.” Again, the primary focus of that speech was Israel’s interception and destruction of a Hezbollah drone in Israel. The mere fact that Hezbollah, despite internal strife in Lebanon and increasing friction along the border, launched a drone into Israel begs the question: Was Hezbollah simply trying to anger its southern neighbor, or did send the aircraft into Israeli airspace in order to distance itself from its larger woes?

Sayyed Nasrallah continued to remark on the situation in Syria until the end of the year, but on January 3, 2013, he finally turned his attention

to the Lebanese state. Nasrallah expressed hope that the country would “develop” (read: evolve) its policy of disassociation from the Syrian crisis: “I’m not asking the Lebanese government to abandon its disassociation policy...but to develop Lebanon’s political stance to put pressure and help those who support a political reconciliation and dialogue in Syria.”<sup>29</sup> His viewpoint apparently included lobbying international actors to review their actions relative to the Syrian crisis, which he claimed is also harming Lebanon. Nasrallah blamed such external pressures and the Syrian opposition for the growing refugee population when he characterized them as being “responsible for the people’s displacement...[for] the bloodshed and [the] political impasse...”<sup>30</sup> He also stated that all Syrian refugees, regardless of their political allegiance or sect, should receive humanitarian aid provided by the Lebanese government: “The Syrian families should be taken care of by the Lebanese government, whether they are with the opposition or the regime or in between.”<sup>31</sup> Apparently, Nasrallah was trying to play the “good guy” by feigning concern for the growing humanitarian crisis even as he glossed over the impact Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria would have on Lebanon (although rumors were circulating about the organization already having deployed fighters there). On February 16, 2013, while offering remarks in behalf of Hezbollah’s Martyr’s Day observance, Nasrallah sought to assuage doubts that the organization continues to rely on Syria for military support. “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.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite the organization’s best attempts to justify its role in Syria, not everyone is buying into the logic. According to *al-Monitor*, “a state of confusion is clearly prevalent in Hezbollah’s ranks...[due] to the party’s position regarding the ongoing hostilities in Syria.”<sup>33</sup> This is due largely to the increasing number of deaths among Hezbollah fighters whose parents, the paper states, believed their sons joined the

organization to fight Israel rather than defend the Assad regime. Similarly, it seems even the Palestinians are losing faith in Hezbollah. In a religious critique of the organization, commentator Khalid Amayreh (a self-proclaimed former supporter of Hezbollah) stated:

[T]he truth of the matter is that Hezbollah is exposing its sectarianism by blatantly aiding and siding with the anti-Islam regime of Bashar Al-Assad, which really [demonstrates] Hezbollah’s moral bankruptcy and refutes its purported religious claims of adherence to the values of Islam.<sup>34</sup>

The same concerns about fomenting sectarianism were reiterated by Hanin Ghaddar: “Hezbollah is dragging Lebanon into the sectarian war in Syria and dragging the Shia into another war they don’t want. Resisting Israel is one thing, but fighting the region’s Sunnis is something else.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the longer Hezbollah attempts to conceal its intervention in the Syrian crisis, the more likely it is that its constituents, Lebanese and others, will begin to question the organization’s validity.

Ultimately, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah’s speeches were little more than preemptive justification for Hezbollah’s escalating involvement in Syria. At the same time, those presentations were attempts at coming clean and admitting the role the organization has been playing in Syria, particularly since there is now irrefutable evidence of its presence on the battlefields of that war-torn country. Nasrallah has also tried frequently to explain to his constituents the actions Hezbollah has been taking to counter the increasing scrutiny being focused on the organization.

Likewise, his speeches have attempted—rather unceremoniously—to obfuscate the border that separates Lebanon and Syria. Indeed, the border is already recognized as being extraordinarily porous, but Nasrallah’s public sentiments have all but erased (at least symbolically) the remaining sovereignty associated with the territories situated on either side of the border. Clearly, the Lebanese government’s ineffectual

disassociation policy is simply wishful thinking at this point. Instead, Lebanon should brace itself during the summer months for increased

reports about Hezbollah martyrs in Syria and the unstable security situation along the country's border.

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Kelly Stedem contributed to this article.

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