



Hezbollah's Threats on Karish Gas Drilling Rig and Israeli Natural Gas Production – a Potential for a Miscalculation That May Lead to War

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Hassan Nasrallah's public threats to hit Karish gas drilling rig and prevent the production and export of gas from Israel's reservoirs if Lebanon's demands regarding the latter's marine border with Israel constitute a significant escalation in Hezbollah's aggressive rhetoric and may lead to another miscalculation which will ignite a war between Israel and Hezbollah.

In a smug TV interview for the 40th anniversary of Hezbollah's foundation Nasrallah even said that the rocket arsenal in the hands of the organization can hit any target in Israel and projected, as he usually does that the end of the Zionist state is near. Simultaneously, the commander of IRGC threatened that tens of thousands of Hezbollah's missiles are aimed at Israel and if the latter would make a single mistake, they will be launched at it.

Even though the Israeli public has become accustomed to Nasrallah's litigious statements, his latest threats clearly deviate from and escalate the "response formula" Hezbollah has been trying to enforce on Israel within the framework of mutual deterrence and reflect Nasrallah's confidence in Hezbollah's acquired military power.

Unlike previous statements, Nasrallah now specifically threatens strategic gas installations in Israel and the export of same to Europe in a manner that relies on his understanding that the Israeli market relies on this gas production and depends on it for its day to day functions, and the famous saying goes "a gun that appears in the first act will end up shooting in the third".

The prevailing interpretation connects Nasrallah's threats to internal Lebanese considerations in light of Lebanon's insolvency, its dire economic situation and Nasrallah's desire to preserve his and Hezbollah's control over the Lebanese decision making process even though his camp weakened in the last elections.

Nasrallah is well aware of the public criticism against Hezbollah in Lebanon which comes on a bedrock of deep corruption like the one that caused the explosion in Beirut Harbor in 2020 and his bullish behavior that put the state's security at risk when large parts of the Lebanese population opposed the de facto Iranian hold on Lebanon through Hezbollah.

The open perception war Hezbollah wages on Israel relies on the latter's assumption that Israel suffers from a deep internal crisis, loss of governability which are being manifested by repeated elections ever so often and thus the time is ripe to raise the level of threats.

Nasrallah's confidence relies on his assessment that Hezbollah enjoys a win-win situation because of the Americans will be able to broker an agreement between Israel and Lebanon he will leverage it as a Hezbollah achievement which will assist him with keeping a stronghold on the Lebanese political system and provide public legitimacy to allow Hezbollah to keep its weapons arsenal without having to answer to the Lebanese state.

That said, it would be naïve to assume that Nasrallah's latest move is independent, devoid of any connection to Iran and relies solely on internal Lebanese considerations as he stated. If we learned anything about the history of Iran-Hezbollah relationship and the total dependency of the latter on the former, it is clear that Nasrallah's move received the Iranian blessing, was fully coordinated with Iran and is to be considered a part of the campaign Iran conducts vs. Israel.

Hezbollah's threats should also be viewed as an Iranian move to deter Israel from continuing its clandestine campaign against the Iranian nuclear project and a response to Israel's public threats to attack Iran's nuclear installations should the talks between Iran and the superpowers to return to the 2015 agreement fail resulting in turning Iran into a nuclear threshold country.

On a related note, the Iranian strategy has been for years to surround Israel with terrorist organizations, first and foremost Hezbollah, and arm them with a variety of missiles and advanced weaponry to deter Israel from attacking Iran and claim a high price if it does.

Nasrallah's latest threats regarding the gas drilling rigs may be classified as a strategic alert to an impending war as they contain all the basic elements of such alerts (intention, capability and timing), assuming Israel ignores Hezbollah's threats and begin gas production in September 2022, as planned.

It is time the Israeli public will internalize and understand that there has been for quite some time a dangerous process of erosion of the Israeli deterrence and a change in the strategic balance of power driven by Iran and Hezbollah that will unavoidably bring Israel and Hezbollah, sooner or later, into another military clash.

It should be noted, other than the threat to the gas production, Iran, through Hezbollah and other proxy organizations such as PIJ, presents an unprecedented threat to the Israeli home front, through the ever-growing arsenal of accurate missiles that when the time comes will cause severe damage to strategic targets and population concentration in a manner that will prevent Israel from providing basic services to its citizens.

It stands to reason that this time the American brokerage effort will bring a solution to the marine border dispute and thus avoid an immediate confrontation on the one hand and on the other hand allow Nasrallah to claim a perception victory and portray him as the one who brought Israel to its knees and made it improve Lebanon's economic benefits.

However, if Lebanon will harden its position under an Iranian-Hezbollah pressure and Nasrallah will have a hard time getting off the high horse he climbed on there is a possibility for another miscalculation that will lead to a military confrontation like the one that preceded the Second Lebanon War when Nasrallah approved the kidnapping of IDF soldiers at the Israel-Lebanon border.

In an extreme scenario where Hezbollah attempts to hit Karish gas drilling rig Israel will face a harsh dilemma in terms of its response and how to balance such a response during an election period.

A response that will lead to a few days of skirmishes is not an Israeli interest and so is a massive attack in Beirut which, in light of the war in Ukraine and global public opinion regarding attacks on civilian populations, might prove itself problematic.

A Hezbollah hit on the gas drilling rig will provide Israel with legal legitimacy in the eyes of the Israeli public as well the global public opinion to initiate a preemptive attack on Hezbollah's military array in Lebanon to remove a significant to the Israeli home front even before Hezbollah has had a chance to accumulate a critical mass of accurate missiles.

IDF can destroy most of Hezbollah's military infrastructure in Lebanon and it better to be the first one to pull the trigger in a conflict that was forced upon Israel rather than contend with a much grievous threat in a later date. A war with Hezbollah may involve many more casualties and much harder fighting than the campaigns against the terrorist organizations on Gaza, but the continued erosion of Israel's deterrence, especially if Hezbollah will possess hundreds of accurate missiles will be much harder and may bring the State of Israel to the brink of paralysis.

Weakening Hezbollah by hard hitting its military capabilities also serves Israel in terms of the Iranian nuclear existential threat and it is better for Israel to contend with a Hezbollah aggression today than at a time when Iran has nuclear capabilities that will deter Israel from meeting the near threat posed by Hezbollah head on.