

Lebanon: After Nasrallah

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Hassan Nasrallah's death was announced on Saturday, 28 September, the anniversary of the death of the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, the father of Pan-Arabism. Nasser died of a heart attack in 1970, three years after his humiliating defeat in the Six-Day War, the 'naksah' or setback that led to Israel's conquest of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the Sinai. Nasrallah was killed under a fusillade of eighty bombs dropped by the Israeli air force on his headquarters in Haret Hreik, in the southern suburbs of Beirut. A few hours earlier, Benjamin Netanyahu had addressed the UN General Assembly, denouncing the organisation as a cesspool of antisemitism and vowing to press on with his war in Lebanon. 'He wasn't just another terrorist. He was the terrorist,' Netanyahu said, after it was announced that Nasrallah was dead.

Netanyahu's American enablers – Joe Biden, Kamala Harris and the secretary of defence, Lloyd Austin – swiftly echoed the Israeli prime minister's celebration of Nasrallah's death. Never mind that Netanyahu hadn't consulted them about the bombing, which made a mockery of the American and French push for a ceasefire between Israel and Hizbullah, to which Netanyahu had privately given his approval. Never mind the Americans' frequent warnings about the dangers of escalation, and their stated desire to avoid a confrontation with Iran. For Biden, the killing of Nasrallah provided a 'measure of justice' for Hizbullah's victims, from the 1983 bombings of the US embassy and the Marine Corps barracks in Beirut to the present. Harris called Nasrallah a 'terrorist with American blood on his hands', as though Netanyahu and his cabinet colleagues had kept their hands clean during the killing of tens of thousands of people in Gaza and the violent displacement of more than 90 per cent of its population – to say nothing of the wave of settler attacks and demolitions in the West Bank, or the bombardment of southern Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley and Beirut after the grisly pager and walkie-talkie attacks two weeks ago. But 'Arab blood' does not have the same value as American or Israeli in the moral calculus of the West.

Among his supporters in Lebanon, and for many outside the West, Nasrallah will be remembered differently: not as a 'terrorist', but as a political leader and a symbol of defiance to American and Israeli ambitions in the Middle East. Although Hizbullah remained a military organisation notorious for its spectacular attacks against Western interests, the Party of God and its leader underwent a complex evolution after the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990. It wasn't an unusual trajectory in the region. Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, former leaders of the Likud, Netanyahu's party, both started out as 'terrorists'. Begin was behind the 1946 bombing of the King David Hotel, which killed nearly a hundred civilians; Shamir planned the 1948 kidnapping and assassination of the UN representative Folke Bernadotte. Yitzhak Rabin, revered among liberal Zionists as a peacemaker, oversaw the deportation of tens of thousands of Palestinians from Lydda and Ramle in 1948. In graduating from violence to politics, Nasrallah was following in the footsteps of his Israeli enemies, whose careers he is said to have studied closely.

Nasrallah became Hizbullah's leader in 1992, after Israel assassinated his predecessor, Sheik Abbas al-Musawi. He was 31 years old, and though he had been a leader in Hizbullah's shura council for five years, he was little known outside the movement's inner circles. To say that he proved more

capable than al-Musawi is an understatement: Nasrallah was a leader of historic proportions, one of the figures who defined the Middle East of the last three decades. A Lebanese writer told me recently that it was Lebanon's curse – and a symptom of the crisis of the secular elite – that the country's most talented political leader was a Shia fundamentalist.

Nasrallah was a close ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran and a follower of the *velayet-e faqih*, Iran's system of clerical rule, but he was far from the fanatic 'devoted to jihad, not to logic' as portrayed by Jeffrey Goldberg in the *New Yorker* in 2002. On the contrary, he was a calculating, intelligent leader who seldom allowed his fervour to overwhelm his capacity for reason; he was always careful to consider the psychology of his enemy across the border. He understood that Lebanon's people, including its Shia population, were not religious zealots, and that an Islamic state was not on the agenda in the foreseeable future. He never tried to impose sharia on his followers; women in his fiefdom in the southern suburbs of Beirut were free to dress as they pleased without being harassed by morality police. After Hizbullah's liberation of the south from Israeli occupation in 2000, Nasrallah made it plain that there were to be no extrajudicial reprisals against Christians who had collaborated with the Israelis. Instead they were taken to the border and handed over to Israel. Shia collaborators, though, saw some retribution.

Until he led Hizbullah into the Syrian war on the side of Bashar al-Assad's regime, attracting the hatred of many who had once admired him, Nasrallah appeared to be the last Arab nationalist, the only Arab leader outside Palestine willing to stand up to Israel. He was often compared to Nasser, but unlike Nasser, whose air force was pulverised on the first day of the 1967 war, he fought Israel to a standstill in 2006, and even treated the people of Lebanon to a televised speech announcing an impending attack on an Israeli ship, which went up in flames as he spoke (he even briefly became an improbable object of adulation in the Sunni Arab world). But though he took pride in Hizbullah's performance on the battlefield, he was chastened by the ferocity of Israel's bombardment, and acknowledged that his movement's cross-border hostage-taking operation had offered Israel a pretext to destroy large parts of Lebanon, a mistake that he vowed never to repeat.

Hizbullah was established in 1982, with assistance from Iran (and Syria), after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. There had been a ceasefire between Israel and the PLO since July 1981. But when terrorists employed by Abu Nidal, Yasir Arafat's sworn adversary, tried to kill Israel's ambassador in London in June 1982, the Israeli defence secretary, Ariel Sharon, seized the opportunity to justify war against Arafat's PLO and invade Lebanon, where the PLO was based. Some of the Shia in the south, exasperated by the heavy-handed presence of Palestinian fighters, at first welcomed Israel's efforts to remove the PLO's 'state within a state'. But Israel rapidly made itself an enemy, provoking a revolt by young Shia men.

Nasrallah, born in 1960, was one of them. Hizbullah is often described in the West as an 'Iranian-backed militia', which it is, but most political groups in Lebanon have cultivated foreign sponsors (American, French, Saudi). And, as Hizbullah's leaders often point out, the Shia are less likely to have second passports, or second homes in Paris and London. Whatever their ties to Iran, they are 'sons of Lebanon'. Nasrallah grew up in a working-class, largely Armenian quarter of Beirut, until his family was expelled by Christian militias at the beginning of the civil war in 1975. They resettled in the south, in the village near Tyre where his father had been born. Nasrallah shared his father's admiration of the Iranian-born cleric Musa al-Sadr, whose Movement of the Deprived had promoted the empowerment of the oppressed Shia in Lebanon before he mysteriously disappeared on a trip to Libya in 1978. Like many young Shia, Nasrallah also found himself drawn to Khomeini's revolution in Iran. And in 1982, the Islamic Republic arrived on his doorstep, when a 1500-member contingent of the Revolutionary Guard began to organise the militia that became known as Hizbullah in the Bekaa Valley. Nasrallah was one of its earliest members. On 23 October 1983, the organisation made itself known to the world with a pair of suicide bombings in Beirut targeting US and French peacekeepers,

in which more than three hundred were killed. Two years later, Hizbullah published a communiqué in *As-Safir*, announcing its determination to 'expel the Americans, the French and their allies definitely from Lebanon, putting an end to any colonialist entity on our land', and to replace the country's political system with an Iranian-style Islamic state.

When Nasrallah became secretary general in 1992 he led Hizbullah into politics, prevailing over members who argued that the movement should confine itself to resistance in the south and avoid getting drawn into Lebanon's sectarian system, though he tried to remain personally aloof. His stature increased after his 18-year-old son, Hadi, died fighting Israel in 1997. 'My son had the extraordinary opportunity to die as a martyr,' he said. 'If I am suffering at a personal level, at a national level, I am happy.' From then on, Nasrallah was known as 'Abu Hadi'. After the US assassinated Qasem Soleimani, the leader of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, in 2020, Nasrallah became the most influential leader in the Iranian axis - second only to Ayatollah Khamenei, according to some analysts. As Hizbullah got increasingly embroiled in the Lebanese political system it had once excoriated, Nasrallah became keen to extend his influence, sending Hizbullah operatives to train allies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. He gave the impression of having outgrown his small country.

Before he was forced to go underground in 2006, Nasrallah occasionally made himself available to foreigner reporters. I managed to land an interview with him for the *New York Review of Books* in 2004. At his office in Haret Hreik, my translator and I were greeted by a journalist from Hizbullah's television station, al-Manar, and, after a thorough but polite search, we took the lift up a few floors. The reception room was decorated with photographs of al-Musawi, Khomeini and Khamenei. At the entrance was a photograph of Hadi Nasrallah. (For all of Hizbullah's efforts to style itself as the beating heart of Arab nationalism, there were no photographs of Sunni Arab leaders, a reminder of the party's inability to shed its sectarian origins.) During our conversation I was struck by the casual authority Nasrallah displayed: his colleagues respected him but didn't seem to fear him. If he was intransigent in his views, he was also affable and unpretentious, and never boastful. His arguments were meticulously formulated, reflecting his reading of history and his study of his enemy; religion never came up. (He responded to my questions in Arabic through the translator - a Lebanese Shia woman who worked for the UN - but clearly understood English.)

His pride in his movement's achievement was evident. Four years after Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, Hizbullah was still basking in the glow of victory. The party had a \$100 million annual budget, much of it supplied by Iran, and ten seats in parliament; it continued to increase its military power in the south and the Bekaa Valley. Nasrallah was emphatic that Hizbullah had to retain its weapons in case Israel decided to return to Lebanon.

Israel, however, wasn't Nasrallah's only enemy or his only worry. In Lebanon he remained a divisive figure, even among those who were grateful for his battle against the occupier. There were rumours that he had taken part in the killing of Lebanese communists in the 1980s, as well as in the violence and hostage-taking aimed at Western interests. As Hizbullah grew into a state within a state far bigger and more powerful than Arafat's had been, Nasrallah's enemies in Lebanon multiplied. He didn't hesitate to use his power to exploit the sectarian political system that Hizbullah had denounced in its 1985 communiqué, or to intimidate and sometimes murder opponents, including Shia critics of the party, such as the journalist Lokman Slim. Hizbullah was also implicated in some of the great calamities to befall Lebanon in recent years, from the 2005 assassination of its former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, to the 2020 explosion at a Beirut port warehouse where Hizbullah had reportedly been storing ammonium nitrate. He tried to position himself as a kingmaker above politics, but he also called vehemently for an end to various high-profile investigations, and even defended Riad Salameh, the disgraced head of the central bank, after the 2019 financial collapse. Nasrallah may have been right to lead Hizbullah into politics, but his critics were right to warn that

the Lebanese system would corrupt the party and chip away at his own reputation for integrity.

But no decision by Nasrallah was more damaging to his party's standing than his intervention in the Syrian war on behalf of the Assad dictatorship: not surprisingly, some of Assad's victims have expressed joy at Hizbullah's recent humiliation. Nasrallah's reasons may have been pragmatic: Assad was part of the so-called Axis of Resistance, and if he fell from power Hizbullah would not be able to transport weapons from Iran over the Syrian border into Lebanon. But Nasrallah had styled himself as a defender of the oppressed, and many were unhappy to see Hizbullah fighters assisting a ruthless war of repression.

Nasrallah's decision helped preserve the Assad regime. It also strengthened Hizbullah's ties with Russia. But it proved as ruinous as Egypt's intervention in the civil war in North Yemen in the 1960s, which Nasser described as 'my Vietnam'. Not only did Hizbullah lose thousands of fighters: the party of resistance was now the party of counterinsurgency against fellow Arabs, and its collaboration with Syrian and Russian intelligence left it susceptible to penetration by the US and Israel. Hizbullah had targeted soldiers in its fight against Israel, but appeared to make no attempt to avoid civilian casualties in its scorched earth campaign in Syria. After 2006, Hizbullah took part in only occasional tit-for-tat exchanges with Israel, usually involving the Shebaa Farms, a sliver of Lebanese territory still under Israeli control. Otherwise, the border was relatively quiet – so quiet that Sunni radicals in Lebanon accused Nasrallah of being one of Israel's border guards. All of that changed, however, on 8 October 2023, when he decided to open a 'northern front' in support of Hamas and the people of Gaza.

Israeli commentators, on both left and right, have argued that Hizbullah had no reason to fire rockets at northern Israel, that it chose to launch this conflict. Nasrallah took a different view. Hizbullah, he believed, was 'at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This is one whole, and you cannot partition it. It is ultimately one reality.' As he saw it, he was assuming his responsibilities within the Axis of Resistance to reduce the pressure on his ally in Gaza. Hizbullah's attacks on northern Israel, which led to the evacuation of more than fifty thousand Israeli civilians, were denounced as terrorism in the West. But many Palestinians appreciated Nasrallah's support, especially since none of the other Arab leaders was doing anything to defend the people of Gaza. Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's crown prince, spoke for many of them when he told Antony Blinken, shortly after 7 October: 'Do I personally care about the Palestinian issue? I don't, but my people do, so I need to make sure this is meaningful.'

Nasrallah's gamble was that by targeting military and defence infrastructure, and largely avoiding civilian casualties, he could show a measure of support for the people of Gaza and force Israel to reach a ceasefire with Hamas, without leading to an escalation on the Lebanon-Israel border. He knew that a war with Israel would be opposed by most people in Lebanon, including many Shia, as well as by his allies in Tehran, who wanted to reserve Hizbullah's arsenal in case there was an Israeli assault on Iran. But he also had to safeguard his movement's image as a defender of the Palestinian resistance, a reputation that would have been destroyed if he'd failed to act. Hence his insistence that this was not a final apocalyptic battle with Israel: Hizbullah merely intended to deter Israeli aggression in Gaza and would stop firing its rockets as soon as Israel accepted a ceasefire.

Nasrallah repeatedly stressed that he had no desire for a wider war, as did his allies in Iran, notably the country's conciliatory new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, who struck an incongruously Gandhian tone in his appeals to end the fighting in Lebanon during his visit to the UN General Assembly. And their responses to Israel's provocations – especially to the assassinations of Hizbullah and Hamas leaders in Beirut, Damascus and Tehran – were restrained. But Nasrallah, who had earned the respect not only of Arabs but also of Israelis for his analysis of the intentions of Israel's leaders, for once misjudged his enemy, while also revealing a surprising streak of naivety about the

true balance of forces. Although Hizbullah had succeeded in creating a state of mutual deterrence with its neighbour, Israel had only grudgingly accepted this situation. With his attempt to link northern Israel and Gaza on 8 October, by launching rockets 'in solidarity' with the Palestinians, Nasrallah offered Israel the pretext it had long sought to rewrite the 'rules of the game' that had governed the border since 2006.

After 7 October Israel's defence minister, Yoav Gallant, reportedly wanted to strike Hizbullah first, not Hamas. Netanyahu rejected Gallant's advice, but the war on Hizbullah, for which Israel had been preparing for nearly two decades, remained part of the discussion, even as Netanyahu pretended to defer to the Biden administration's warnings about a regional conflagration. He knew that Biden and Blinken would ultimately capitulate, with a feckless ceremony of 'concern' and 'caution' over 'the best way forward'. Over the next eleven months, Israeli pounded southern Lebanon, killing several hundred people and forcing nearly a hundred thousand to flee their homes, but this troubled the Western conscience far less than the flight of Israelis on the other side of the border. Israel carried out 80 per cent of the attacks along the border, but once again this disparity was hardly remarked on in the American press, where the exodus of Arabs under Israeli violence is treated as a natural catastrophe and described in the passive voice.

With the pager and walkie-talkie assaults, which killed dozens of people and injured thousands more, it became clearer that Israel was closing in on Nasrallah and Hizbullah. The attacks didn't only destroy Hizbullah's communications system: they revealed the sheer extent of Israeli penetration into the organisation, throwing it into a state of paralysis. Then came the murderous bombardment of Lebanon, on the first day of which more people died than on any day since the end of Lebanon's civil war, followed by the assassinations of Nasrallah and much of Hizbullah's high command. A million people in Lebanon have been displaced from their homes, and nearly as many have been killed as in the 2006 war. Hizbullah isn't the only target: Israel has carried out strikes against leaders of Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in Lebanon, as well as against the Houthis in Yemen. And while the world's attention is fastened on Israel's wars abroad, the people of Gaza are dying in airstrikes and entire neighbourhoods in the West Bank are being flattened by Israeli bulldozers. The Biden administration has stood by Israel, even as it has been humiliated by Netanyahu's defiance, either because it believes American pressure could endanger Harris's chances of victory, or because it tacitly welcomes Israel's onslaught as a way of weakening Iran's line of defence in Lebanon. Having reassured the administration he has repeatedly lied to that Israel's ground offensive will be 'limited', Netanyahu has now sent the army into southern Lebanon, where they will be greeted by well-trained Hizbullah fighters who, however much their capacities have been degraded, have been preparing for this fight since 2000, and know the terrain far better than the Israelis.

Israel claims it had no choice, which is demonstrably false. It could have worked to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza. It could have embraced the US-French proposal for a 21-day pause in fighting between Israel and Hizbullah, which might eventually have led Hizbullah to retreat to the Litani river. As the US national security spokesman John Kirby pointed out, the proposal 'wasn't just drawn up in a vacuum. It was done after careful consultation, not only with the countries that signed onto it, but Israel itself.' Instead, as he has done repeatedly in the Gaza negotiations, Netanyahu helped the Americans to draft a ceasefire proposal he had no intention of honouring, while conspiring to kill the Arab leader with whom the ceasefire was to be reached: first Ismail Haniyeh, the former leader of Hamas's political bureau, killed in Tehran on 31 July, and now Nasrallah. Netanyahu is alleged to have had hesitations about assassinating Nasrallah, but agreed to the hit as he boarded the plane to New York.

Hizbullah is not a personality-driven organisation, or claims not to be, but in Nasrallah it had a leader of unusual gifts, and his death is an enormous, if not a mortal, blow; it is also a huge setback

for Iran. Iranian leaders have promised a 'decisive reaction' to the killing, and this can hardly be ruled out, but the fact that Khamenei called on 'all Muslims' to respond meant that Iran itself has no intention of doing so anytime soon. None of Nasrallah's potential successors – his cousin Hashem Safieddine, the head of Hizbullah's Executive Council, and the religious scholar Naim Qassem, the party's deputy leader, are the two top candidates – can match him. Netanyahu's popularity in Israel, already buoyed by the pager attacks, is soaring. But Israel's euphoria may prove short-lived. Like other secondary wars carried out in times of quagmire – the French bombing of Tunisia in the late 1950s, the American bombing of Cambodia in 1969-70 – the assault on Lebanon is unlikely to provide more than a fleeting consolation: a dazzling victory on the battlefield in a much larger, unwinnable war. Killing Nasrallah isn't likely to hasten the defeat of Hamas in Gaza, or the return of the remaining hostages (in whose fate Netanyahu appears to have lost all interest, except as a talking point), much less the surrender of the Palestinian people to Zionist aspirations. Hizbullah will slowly rebuild, and Nasrallah and his cadres will be replaced by a new and no less embittered generation of leaders who will remember the furies unleashed by Israel in Lebanon: the killings, maimings and displacement caused by one of the most intensive bombing campaigns in the 21st century. Nasrallah's death is as humiliating a setback for his movement as Nasser's defeat in 1967 was for the Arab cause. But nothing feeds resistance like humiliation.

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