

Hezbollah Threatens Attacks on Israeli Targets

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BEIRUT, Lebanon - Accusing Israel of killing one of his top commanders, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, threatened Thursday to intensify his group's conflict with Israel and to retaliate against Israeli targets anywhere in the world.

Mr. Nasrallah, who has been in hiding since 2006 because of Israeli assassination threats, spoke to thousands of mourners via a televised image at an emotional funeral for the slain commander, Imad Mugniyah. He was killed in a car bombing on Tuesday night in Damascus, Syria.

"You crossed the borders," Mr. Nasrallah said. "Zionists, if you want an open war, let it be an open war anywhere."

Israel, which has denied involvement in the killing, ordered its military and embassies around the world to heighten security. No one has claimed responsibility for killing Mr. Mugniyah, a famously elusive militant suspected of planning bombings that killed hundreds of Americans in Lebanon during the 1980s.

Mr. Nasrallah's speech - his most belligerent in many months - coincided with another vast public gathering across town, in which Hezbollah's Western-allied political adversaries commemorated the third anniversary of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's killing in a huge car bombing

Together, the two gatherings vividly illustrated the bitter political divisions that have crippled Lebanon's government over the past year and pulled it perilously close to open civil conflict.

Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader, threatened retaliation on Thursday after accusing Israel of killing Imad Mughniyah, a Hezbollah militant. Credit Agence France-Presse - Getty Images via Manar TV

In his speech, Mr. Nasrallah called the killing of Mr. Mugniyah a "big mistake" that would be avenged. "The blood of Imad Mugniyah will eliminate them," he said, referring to the Israelis.

If Hezbollah were to strike at Israel outside the borders of the two countries, it would be a sharp departure from the group's current policy. The last time it did so was in the mid-1990s, when Mr. Mugniyah was accused of planning bombings of Israeli targets in Argentina.

Such attacks are not seen as likely. Hezbollah's patrons, Syria and Iran, "are pursuing strategies of their own, and Hezbollah is not really free to depart from those," said Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Endowment Middle East Center in Beirut.

Iran's close ties with Hezbollah - and with Mr. Mugniyah - were underscored Thursday when Iran's foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, spoke at the funeral, reading a letter from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"These are operations that will shorten their corrupt and filthy life," Mr. Mottaki said, quoting the letter, which was referring to the Israelis and the killing of Mr. Mugniyah. "Their smiles will not last long. The free people and the Lebanese people have lost one hero, but there are a million more Hajj Rudwans ready to join the ranks of the resistance." Mr. Mugniyah also went by the name Hajj Rudwan.

Outside the funeral hall, a cold, steady rain fell as thousands of mourners packed the streets, where uniformed Hezbollah militants and the group's youth brigade marched to martial music.

Inside, four black-clad Hezbollah guards stood beside Mr. Mugniyah's coffin, which was draped in a cloth of yellow, the militant Shiite group's color. A band played the Hezbollah anthem, then the Lebanese national anthem. After prayers and Mr. Mottaki's reading of the letter from Tehran, Mr. Nasrallah appeared on the screen, bringing the audience to its feet. Many wept.

At pivotal moments during the speech, audience members pumped fists in the air and chanted "Labayka, Nasrallah!" - roughly, "Nasrallah, we are ready to fulfill your commands." Outside the hall, loud bursts of celebratory machine-gun fire echoed in the streets.

Among the crowd was Zahra Maladan, the editor of a women's magazine linked to Hezbollah.

"I tell my son, if you're not going to follow the steps of the Islamic resistance martyrs, then I don't want you," she said.

A few miles away, in Martyrs Square in downtown Beirut, another crowd of thousands also gathered to hear speeches - these delivered by Hezbollah's political enemies in the so-called March 14 alliance, which came together after Mr. Hariri's assassination and controls the majority in Parliament.

The commemoration was intended to recall the huge demonstrations that took place in the weeks after Mr. Hariri's death, for which, as with many other political assassinations in Lebanon since, Syria was widely blamed. The protests ultimately succeeded in pressing Syria to withdraw its military from Lebanon after a three-decade presence.

On Thursday, the city virtually closed down for the long-planned demonstration, with shops and restaurants shuttered and most streets blocked. Supporters streamed into the vast central square, some with Lebanese flags painted on their faces, some holding posters of Mr. Hariri.

Speaking to the crowd from behind a glass partition, Walid Jumblatt, the Druse chieftain, who is also a leader of the March 14 group, accused Syria of killing Mr. Mugniyah.

Many had expected Thursday's commemoration to set off violent confrontations with Hezbollah, especially after Mr. Jumblatt and another leader of the March 14 alliance made some warlike comments last week. But both public gatherings appeared to have gone peacefully.

"The crisis could be solved through politics," said Kamil Haydar, 26, who was at the pro-government rally in Martyrs Square. "But if it is not, we are going to do what we have to even if it is war, and if it is what our leaders want us to do, then we are ready to go to war."