

## International

# Hezbollah: Iran is able to bomb Israel with ferocity and force

## 'When Americans understand war could wipe out Israel, they will reconsider'

BEIRUT: The head of Lebanon's Tehran-backed Hezbollah said Friday that US ally Israel would not be "neutral" if a war broke out between the United States and Iran. And "Iran is able to bombard Israel with ferocity and force," Hassan Nasrallah said in an interview broadcast on Hezbollah's Al-Manar television. His remarks came after weeks of increasing tensions between the United States and Iran, and as US President Donald Trump steps up his war of words with the Islamic Republic.

"When the Americans understand that this war could wipe out Israel, they will reconsider," Nasrallah said. "Our collective responsibility in the region is to work towards preventing an American war on Iran," he said. He said neither Saudi Arabia nor the United Arab Emirates had any interest in a conflict erupting. On Friday, the US House of Representatives voted to restrict Trump's ability to attack Iran, voicing fear that his hawkish policies are pushing toward a needless war.

Hezbollah is considered to be a terrorist organization by the United States, and is the only faction not to have disarmed after the Lebanese 1975-1990 civil war. But it is also a major political player in the small Mediterranean country, taking 13 seats in parliament last year and securing three posts in the current cabinet.

Nasrallah also said he had decreased the number

of his movement's fighters supporting the Damascus regime in neighboring war-torn Syria. "The Syrian army has greatly recovered and has found that today it does not need us," he said. "We are present in every area that we used to be. We are still there, but we don't need to be there in large numbers as long as there is no practical need," he said. The head of the Iran-backed Shiite movement, which has been fighting in Syria since 2013, did not give details on the extent of the reduction.

Backed by Russia and Iran, the Damascus government has taken back large swathes of territory from rebels and jihadists since 2015, and now controls around 60 percent of the country. Nasrallah spoke after Washington announced fresh sanctions Tuesday against Hezbollah, targeting elected officials from the movement for the first time. Nasrallah said none of his fighters were currently

involved in fighting in Syria's northwestern region of Idlib, where regime and Russian forces have increased deadly bombardments on a jihadist-run bastion since late April. But "if there was a need to return, all those who were there would go back" to Syria, he added.

**Tel Aviv 'within range'**

Responding to a question about repeated Israeli air strikes on Syria, he said the Israeli Prime Minister



An image grab taken from Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV shows Hassan Nasrallah, the head of Lebanon's militant Shiite movement Hezbollah, giving an interview in Lebanon. —AFP

Benjamin Netanyahu was "deceiving his people." "He is playing a game of brinkmanship, because Iran will not leave Syria," he warned. Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes in neighboring Syria against what it says are Iranian and Hezbollah military targets. It has vowed to keep Iran from entrenching itself militarily there.

Nasrallah's interview came to mark the start of his movement's 2006 war with Israel, which killed more than

1,200 Lebanese, mostly civilians, and more than 160 Israelis, mostly soldiers. Both countries are still technically at war, and a UN peacekeeping force has said three tunnels have been found to have dug under the border from Lebanon into Israel since late last year. The group's leader warned that key Israeli installations along the Mediterranean coast including Tel Aviv were "within range of our rockets." —AFP

## Iraqi Ex-PM Abadi hints at comeback

BAGHDAD: Iraqi ex-prime minister Haider Al-Abadi is eyeing a sequel to his turbulent single term, he hinted to AFP, warning a failure to tackle sectarianism and corruption risks seeing his country "fall apart". As the government of incumbent Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi faces growing criticism over poor services, Abadi has been working in the wings to secure a second term, according to multiple sources. "We have good intentions," he said coyly, when asked about his ambitions in a wide-ranging AFP interview at his home in Baghdad's "Green Zone".

The 67-year-old, who came to office in 2014 without an election as Iraq reeled from the Islamic State group grabbing a third of the country, has sent out feelers to major political blocs who may help him win allies in parliament, a government source said. "He may take advantage of a wave of summertime protests if they happen," said the source. Soaring summer temperatures - paired with crippling electricity shortages, which restrict refrigeration and air conditioning - often provoke significant unrest in Iraq.

Abadi has even reached out to Iraq's powerful Shiite clerics, who can make or break a politician's career, said intermediaries close to the religious establishment. The rumors of his return have gained so much traction that Abdel Mahdi has repeatedly had to deny allegations he was preparing to resign.

## Mistaken identity: Eritrean cleared in a trafficking case

PALERMO: An Italian court ruled Friday that an Eritrean accused of being a human trafficking kingpin known as "the General" was telling the truth when he claimed it was a case of mistaken identity. Carpenter Medhanie Tesfamariam Berhe was arrested in Sudan in 2016 on suspicion of being at the heart of one of the world's largest migrant trafficking networks, but after a 21-month trial the court ruled that police had the wrong man.

Berhe was accused of being Medhanie Yehdego Mered, known as "the General", and was extradited to Italy. But the Palermo court accepted his argument that this was a case of mistaken identity. It did however give him a five-year prison sentence for aiding illegal immigration.

The judge ordered he be immediately set free, having spent more than three years behind bars already. Berhe's friends hugged and cheered in the court gallery as the sentence was read out inside a massive bunker, built in the 1980s for a trial against the mafia. His sister, who was wearing a T-shirt calling for his liberation, wept with joy. Berhe quietly thanked and shook hands with his interpreter. He was then taken by police van to prison to collect his belongings.

"I believe they have found a solution," his lawyer, Michele Calantropo, told reporters, adding that the recognition of mistaken

Abadi oversaw both the fight against the Islamic State group and a tough response by Baghdad to an independence referendum by the country's Kurds, but his bloc fared poorly in national elections last year.

Abadi painted himself as an opposition figure who could help "guide" the current government. The chief priority should be tackling corruption, he said, in a country ranked by Transparency International as the world's 12th most corrupt. "There is a new kind of state corruption now - selling positions, which happened secretly in the past but now goes on in the open," Abadi told AFP. "Everything has a price." Graft is endemic across Iraq, where parliament estimates that \$228 billion has vanished into the pockets of shady politicians and businessmen over the last 15 years. Abadi himself was accused of failing to curb corruption during his term.

The ex-premier said the government should also tackle the spectre of sectarian violence, which ravaged Iraq's diverse communities over a decade ago. "In the past, sectarianism was used as a weapon in the conflict between factions to divide up the spoils of war," he said.

"If Daesh (IS) or another terrorist group returns, or if a cocktail of terrorists and politicians is formed, it'll be so dangerous that everything will completely fall apart," Abadi himself declared IS defeated in December 2017 after a draining three-year military campaign, a moment that will likely define his legacy. Several months earlier, he had ordered federal troops to retake disputed territories and adjacent oil fields from Kurdish forces after an independence referendum in the autonomous region that saw an overwhelming vote in favor of secession.

identity had dealt a "big blow" to the defense. Calantropo said he had applied for asylum on behalf of Berhe as they feared he could be deported upon release. Berhe had been accused of running a vast trafficking network, with branches in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Europe.

**'Made a mistake'**

Italy, Sudan and Britain at the time hailed his capture as the stellar result of a joint operation which had dealt a significant blow to the people smuggling business. Despite differences in appearance between the two men, and DNA evidence supporting Berhe's case, Italian prosecutors stuck to their guns throughout and had called for a 14-year jail sentence. On Friday, they said they would wait for the court's reasoning to be published before deciding whether to appeal.

Mered ended up on an international wanted list after being identified as the man who organized the packing of migrants onto a boat that sank off Italy in October 2013, killing at least 360 people in one of the worst such disasters in the Mediterranean. The "cynical and unscrupulous" Mered had been "continuously and constantly reaping vast profits while showing a contempt for human life," according to a joint statement by Sudan, Italy and Britain announcing his arrest in May 2016.

But the images broadcast by Italian police of a thin young man with frizzy hair, looking frail as he walked off the plane in handcuffs, sparked confusion and disbelief within the Eritrean diaspora around the world. Those who had had dealings with Mered said it was not him. Berhe's family



BAGHDAD: Iraq's former prime minister Haider Al-Abadi speaks during an interview with AFP on July 3, 2019. —AFP

**'Where are the revenues?'**

Abadi remains largely disliked by the autonomous Kurdish regional government (KRG), led by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which he indirectly criticized. "I have no problems with Kurdish citizens," he said. "But there is a problem with some of the parties which control the region, its wealth and its oil," Abadi said.

He accused the KRG of exporting nearly double the agreed amount from their northern pipeline without federal authorization, asking: "Where are the revenues?" Abadi's poor ratings in the north notwithstanding, he is one of the rare figures in Iraq widely respected by both the country's Shiite majority - from which he hails - and its Sunni minority. And in the

regional tug-of-war between the US and Iran, both allies of Iraq, Abadi has been seen as closer to Washington's camp.

Tensions between the two countries have skyrocketed since the US reimposed tough sanctions on Iran last year, which Abadi had pledged to implement as prime minister. That stance cost him his premiership, observers say, and parliament voted in Abdel Mahdi to replace him. This month, Abdel Mahdi ordered the Hashed Al-Shaabi, a collection of mostly-Shiite, pro-Iran paramilitary units, to integrate into the state's security forces by July 31. Abadi, who issued a similar decision in 2017, told AFP the decision was too little, too late. "I believe we lost a year and a half," he said. —AFP



PALERMO: A man believed to be Eritrean Medhanie Yehdego Mered, the head of one of the largest migrant trafficking networks, but claims his identity has been mistaken and to be Medhanie Tesfamariam Berhe, is pictured at the end of a session of his trial. —AFP

recognized him instantly.

According to American, Italian and Swedish investigative journalists, Mered spent part of 2016 in prison in Dubai for using a false passport and now lives in Uganda. DNA evidence also suggested the wrong man was behind bars: tests on Berhe's mother showed the defendant was her son.

Further tests, on Mered's three-year-old son, who lives in Sweden, showed the defendant was not his father. A New Yorker investigative reporter was told by "the General" himself in 2017 that the Italians had the wrong man. "They should just have said 'we made a mistake'," lawyer Michele

Calantropo told AFP on Thursday head of the verdict. Calantropo insisted that the man behind bars has only one thing in common with the trafficker: his first name, Medhanie.

"This is one of the biggest injustices on the face of the earth," he said. Medhanie was the name flagged by Britain's National Crime Agency in 2016 when it heard someone going by that name calling the tapped phone of a suspected smuggler in Libya. The man who made the calls was tracked down and arrested in Khartoum.

But while prosecutors said the calls were made to organize migrant trips, Calantropo said his client was just looking out for loved ones heading to Europe. —AFP

## Istanbul's new mayor faces stiff road ahead

ISTANBUL: Turkey's main opposition scored a major blow against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan last month when it won control of Istanbul, but now faces a wounded government reluctant to relinquish power. With Erdogan expected to stay in office until at least 2023, the new mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoğlu of the secular Republican People's Party (CHP), knows he must find a way to work with the president. But the signs are mixed.

After Erdogan's ruling AKP party lost Turkey's largest city in a rerun vote on June 23, the president congratulated Imamoğlu and described the vote as the "will of the people". But just days later his government moved to strip Imamoğlu of key mayoral powers of patronage. The show of strength raises strategic questions for Imamoğlu, who has vowed to work "in harmony" with Erdogan but is also talked about as a future presidential challenger.

Having called for a meeting with Erdogan to address the urgent problems of the 15-million-strong metropolis, the new mayor has so far remained fairly vague about his plans. He has promised to crack down on alleged lavish spending at the municipality and bring in international-standard auditors to assure transparency, warning that the city faces bankruptcy if urgent action is not taken.

Imamoğlu also said he would create green belts in Istanbul, and return trees and grass to Taksim square in the heart of the city - echoing the demands of protesters who triggered a mass anti-government movement over the redevelopment of neighboring Gezi park in 2013. Urban planners remain sceptical about his promises. "Istanbul's green space problem is not only about hostility to nature - it's also a question of the economy," said Sedat Durel, environment engineer at the Chamber of Environmental Engineers.

Durel said nothing will change without a fundamental change in the current governing mentality, which favours mass commercial development over natural spaces. Imamoğlu, who started out in his family's lucrative real estate and restaurant business in western Istanbul, does not appear to have an obvious background to shift that mindset. "Although there is hope it will not continue this way, we have yet to hear anything concrete," said Durel.

**'Political maneuvering'**

After failing to mount serious challenges in elections for decades, Turkey's main opposition has been revitalized by Imamoğlu's win. Aside from the sky-high expectations, his biggest challenge may be overcoming a municipal council dominated by AKP members and its right-wing ally, the MHP, which together control 25 of 39 city districts. Ege Seckin, an analyst at IHS Markit, said Imamoğlu's new job would be an "uphill struggle".

"The government will go to great lengths to impede his work, seeking to validate their longstanding claim that the AKP is the only game in town when it comes to delivering basic services, and that all alternatives, including the CHP, are incompetent," Seckin said. The first sign of trouble came immediately after the June 23 election, when Erdogan's government issued a circular shifting the power to assign managers of municipal companies from the mayor to the council.

"We were informed of a change in legislation," Imamoğlu told reporters this month, warning against "political manoeuvring" to limit his power. The first municipal council meeting chaired by Imamoğlu on July 8 - which was aired live, as part of his efforts at greater transparency - nonetheless saw positive messages from the AKP rank and file. One AKP councillor, Tefvik Goksu, assured that the party would avoid "negative" attitudes and support any project that serves Istanbul. —AFP