

Report: Iran replaces Hizbullah's Nasrallah for sparking 2006 war in Lebanon

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LONDON — Iran was said to have reduced the authority of Hizbullah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah.

The London-based A-Sharq Al Awsat daily said Nasrallah was removed as commander of the Hizbullah military wing. The newspaper said Hizbullah fighters have come under the command of Nasrallah's deputy, Naim Kassam, who became the leading liasion to Teheran.

"Kassem isn't only Hizbullah's second-in-command but also [Iranian supreme leader Ali] Khamenei's representative in Lebanon and Palestine," the newspaper said on Dec. 13.

The article was the latest in a series of reports that Nasrallah's authority was reduced in wake of the 2006 war in Lebanon. A day before A-Sharq Al Awsat, the Israeli daily Maariv published a similar report.

In late 2006, Western intelligence sources reported that Iran imposed direct control over Hizbullah units in wake of severe criticism of Nasrallah's handling of the war. The sources said Teheran blamed Nasrallah for sparking a premature war with Israel.

A-Sharq Al Awsat said Khamenei ordered the reduction of Nasrallah's authority. The newspaper, quoting sources close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, said Kassem and Nasrallah had been engaged in a dispute over Hizbullah's military wing.

Hizbullah was said to have received \$1 billion from Iran over the last 18 months to help the militia recover from the 2006 war. The militia has a budget of \$400 million.

A-Sharq Al Awsat reported that Khamenei formed a panel of IRGC commanders to restructure the intelligence and combat units of Hizbullah. Two members of the panel were identified as IRGC Quds Brigade commander Kassem Suleimani and Hizbullah external intelligence chief Imad Mughniya.

Hizbullah has denied the reports on Nasrallah. The organization suggested that the articles were part of a disinformation campaign.

"We believe that the talk about the presence of a problem in the Hizbullah leadership comes following the international intelligence shock resulting from the widespread support for Hizbullah all over the region in view of the status of its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, as a leader on the Lebanese, Arab, Islamic, and international arenas and the role of the holy warriors who are committed to their position in confronting the occupation, in addition to the fact that the position of Hizbullah leadership is giving a greater glimpse of hope for the wronged people and freemen day after day," the statement said.

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