

## Exclusive: Hizbollah 'stronger than before' and ready to strike Israel

Contributed by David Blair in Tyre, the Telegraph  
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The political and military group's senior commander in southern Lebanon said in a rare interview that Hizbollah was far stronger now than when it fought the Israeli army in a conflict in 2006.

Sheikh Nabil Kaouk, who leads Hizbollah's forces on Lebanon's border with Israel - the crucial battlefield of any future war, was speaking in the port city of Tyre. "The resistance is now stronger than before and this keeps the option of war awake. If we were weak, Israel would not hesitate to start another war," he said. "We are stronger than before and when Hizbollah is strong, our strength stops Israel from starting a new war... We don't seek war, but we must be ready."

Hizbollah, whose missiles killed 43 Israeli civilians during the war of 2006, is considered a terrorist organisation by the US and Britain.

Other sources say Hizbollah has trebled its arsenal in the last two years &ndash; from 10,000 missiles to about 30,000. These new weapons have longer ranges and heavier warheads. They include the Zelzal missile, which could strike as far south as Tel Aviv, and the C802 anti-shipping missile, capable of sinking Israeli warships.

Any American strike on Iran, for example, could be the trigger for a Hizbollah attack on Israel.

Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah's overall leader, started the 2006 conflict with the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers whose corpses were recently returned to Israel.

Mr Kaouk did not deny that Hizbollah was reliant on Iran for military hardware and support. "We are proud of our friendship with Iran and with Syria and every country which helps us to gain our rights," he said. His remarks will be examined closely in Washington as Iran presses ahead with its nuclear programme.

Iran is currently weighing its response to the West's latest offer of incentives to suspend the enrichment of uranium but has signalled that for now it is not about to change its stance.

Asked where Hizbollah's weapons came from, Mr Kaouk said: "All parties in Lebanon are getting weapons. No one asks from where."

Iran is Hizbollah's supplier and paymaster. Tehran's regime and Hizbollah are fellow Shias and their alliance is a crucial power factor in the Middle East. Iran delivers the missiles to southern Lebanon through Syria. Meanwhile, Hizbollah fighters travel to Iran for military training.

If the US attacked Iran's nuclear facilities, Hizbollah could retaliate by firing its missiles into Israel. Hence Iran possesses a vital interest in building this arsenal. Asked how Hizbollah would respond to an attack on Iran, Mr Kaouk replied: "I doubt that Israel will attack Iran because they know the consequences."

Mr Kaouk said the 2006 war, which claimed 1,100 Lebanese lives, had been a success. "Israel didn't achieve any of its goals. The known goal of Israel is 'death to Hizbollah'. Hizbollah is still here."

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/2484324/Exclusive-Hizbollah-stronger-than-before-and-ready-to-strike-Israel.html>