

Iran, Hizballah upgrade war preparations, new Israel front line commander

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Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah has quietly placed Hashim Safi Al-Din, his cousin and heir apparent, in command of southern Lebanon and its border with Israel, further upgrading Iran-backed preparations for an armed clash, DebkaFile's exclusive military sources report. This week, Safi Al-din was recalled from his post in Tehran as head of Hizballah's Liaison Office and immediately assumed the reins from Sheikh Nabil Quouk, the 2006 War commander.

Our intelligence sources say this appointment is the most ominous sign to date of the seriousness Iran and Hizballah attach to their plans for an early war with Israel. Three further developments point in this direction:

1. Tehran, Damascus and Nasrallah are tensely watching the clock ticking for the UN Special Tribunal on Lebanon - STL to deliver indictments against top Hizballah officials before the end of this year or early January. Hizballah has threatened to block their extradition by seizing Lebanon's government and strategic centers.

This action that could quickly ignite the inflammable Lebanese-Israeli border, an interconnection Hizballah's leader eagerly embraced in his latest speech of Thursday, Nov. 11.

Shouting at the top of his voice, Nasrallah threatened to "chop off the hand that dared to accuse or detain members of the 'Hizballah gendarmerie.'" He went on to yell: "We await the day the indictments will be released." And in the same breath ranted, "We are ready for any Israeli war on Lebanon and will again be victorious, Inshallah. Whoever thinks that threatening us with another Israel war will scare us is mistaken. On the contrary, whoever speaks of another war is bearing good news not threatening us."

2. Tehran views the newly appointed South Lebanon commander, Hashim Safi Al-Din, as its most stalwart partisan in the Lebanese Shiite Hizballah leadership since Imad Moughnieh passed away two years ago in an exploding car in Damascus. Safi Al-Din is therefore trusted most of all Hizballah's leaders to do as he is told by Iran in a direct confrontation with Israel.

Iran did not get this sort of obedience in the 2006 War: Nasrallah went his own way regardless of strategic and military instructions from Tehran. For instance, he ordered Israeli towns and villages blasted by his rockets at the rate of 500 a day whereas Iranian experts wanted the rocket fire concentrated on the Israeli troops driving into Lebanon. To appease his Iranian sponsors, Nasrallah then appointed Mughniyeh war commander in the middle of combat.

But Tehran is taking no chances of any more insubordination from its proxy. Nasrallah will be kept in line by Iran's obedient loyalist in the key command position in South Lebanon and Iran will stay in control of a future confrontation with Israel from the word go.

3. At the same time, the appointment of his cousin confirms Hassan Nasrallah as the Hizballah strongman capable of bringing to fruition the ambition Tehran and Damascus cherish of establishing their man in Beirut as boss of Lebanon.

Hashim Safi Al-Din also enjoys Nasrallah's trust. They also look remarkably alike. DEBKFile revealed in an exclusive report in 2007 that Nasrallah was using his cousin as his look-alike to throw would-be assassins off the scent. Their resemblance was close enough even to fool fellow members of Hizballah.

With Safi Al-Din's appointment to the South Lebanese command, Tehran has deployed a troika for running the next war with Israel on its behalf: Nasrallah, his cousin and their direct controller, Iran's own Al Qods Brigades officer Gen. Hossein Mahadavi.