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Hizballah's Narrative in the Service of Legitimizing Military Action

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On June 5th, a Greek-owned drilling ship arrived at its destination: the "Karish" gas field near the Israeli-Lebanese border. The ship's arrival reignited the dispute about the two countries' maritime border.¹ Lebanon delineated its Southern maritime border at the UN in 2011, calling it the "23 line". Israel quickly rejected the Lebanese claim and claimed its border as the "1 Line", which created 860 km² of disputed space between the two borders.

In the same year, the Lebanese government submitted a request to the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office to conduct technical research about location of the Lebanese maritime border. This research claimed that the real Lebanese maritime border is actually south of the "23 line", and is in fact a new line, called the "29 line". The 29 line adds 1,430 km² to the disputed area. Internecine fighting in Lebanese politics has prevented Lebanon from officially claiming the line in the UN as its maritime border.²

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¹ Dario Sabaghi, "[Explained: Renewed Israel-Lebanon maritime border dispute](#)", *Middle East Eye*, 11 June 2022.

² "[The Maritime Delimitation Between Lebanon and Israel](#)", *Lebanon Gas News*, 24 January 2021.

Since 2020, both Lebanon and Israel have participated in several negotiation meetings mediated by the US and the UN in Naqoura, Lebanon. These meetings were unfruitful due to impasses in negotiations. Instead, indirect negotiations began through an American mediator, Amos Hochstein. Israeli drilling in the “Karish” field is a major factor in the maritime dispute due to its location in Lebanese-claimed waters, as the new Lebanese “29 line” bisects part of the field.³

While the drilling ship made its way to the “Karish” field, Hizballah began to overtly oppose Israeli drilling. However, Hizballah’s focus on the maritime dispute originated prior to the arrival of the drilling ship, while media apparatus and social media presence had laid the groundwork for its official opposition to the drilling. Several weeks after focusing on the drilling ship and Israeli construction in the field, Hizballah took kinetic action and attacked the drilling ship with 3 drones that were intercepted by the Israeli military.⁴

Hizballah’s secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, stated in a speech on 13th July that his organization has adopted a new calculus for action – the target is “after, after Karish”, implying Israel, which is derived from Hizballah’s slogan in the 2006 war “after, after Haifa”. Nasrallah threatened Israeli drilling and surveying operations all active contractors in the area. Seeking to galvanize popular support in Lebanon to fight Israel, Nasrallah proclaimed that is preferable to die in battle as a “Shahid” than to die in a street brawl while waiting in line at a gas station.⁵

In an interview given on 25th July with Ghassan Bin-Jaddo, the chairman of Al-Mayadeen’s board of directors, Nasrallah boasted that Hizballah’s precision missiles may reach any target in Israeli territory either on sea or land. He then threatened Israel, stating that any Israeli drilling would be a “problem” for Hizballah.⁶

³ Dario Sabaghi *op. cit.*.

⁴ “[Hezbollah launches unarmed drones towards Israeli gas rig in disputed waters](#)”, *France24*, 2 July 2022.

⁵ “[Secretary-General of Hizballah, Hassan Nasrallah about the latest political updates 13-7-2022](#)”, *Al-Ahed News*, 14 July 2022.

⁶ “[Nasrallah in ‘The 40’s Interview’: Our precise missiles can get to all the targets in Israel land or sea](#)”, *Al-Mayadeen*, 25 July 2022.

Hizballah's propaganda and media institutions played a significant role in spreading their official narrative. The Media Relations Unit, subordinated to the Executive Council of Hizballah, oversees Hizballah's array of media outlets. The head of the unit, Mohammad Afeef, is Nasrallah's chief media advisor. Of the media outlets owned by Hizballah, the most prominent is Al-Manar. Al-Manar disseminates propaganda and militarized disinformation, mostly targeting the Hizballah's enemies, Israel foremost among them.⁷

For example, the channel published an article exposing ostensible Israeli ownership of the Greek company "Energean", threatening it with a phrase from Nasrallah's speech: "The one who decided to bring the ship to 'Karish' will bear the consequences for damage or injuries to the ship".⁸ The Hizballah owned news website "Al-Ahed" also played a role in Hizballah's psychological warfare offensive by publishing an article praising Hizballah's aerial warfare capabilities after its prior drone attack, promising more in the future.⁹

Hizballah has also weaponized social media to propagate its narrative. Hizballah operates an "Electronic Army", assigned to track social media users and analyze data from hacked computers and cellphones. SIMIA, a central and highly secretive unit in the Electronic Army, has more than 100 operatives under the management of Abdallah Kassir, a former Al-Manar channel manager. SIMIA is responsible for online offensives against Hizballah's rivals, spreading the organization's narratives through social media influence and disinformation campaigns. SIMIA has thousands of bot accounts at its disposal which it uses to flood the internet with pro-Hizballah content and "brigading", or mass-reporting Hizballah's rivals on social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter to temporarily take down their entities.¹⁰

Hizballah's social media campaigns also cover domestic Lebanese political issues alongside regional or international incidents, although most campaigns are focused on demonizing Hizballah's rivals. The political activist Lokman Salim, who was murdered in February

⁷ "[Hezbollah's media empire](#)", *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, 3 September 2019.

⁸ "[The Exploration company in 'Karish' is Greek but with Israeli ownership](#)", *Al-Manar*, 10 June 2022.

⁹ Hussien Khazem, "[Hizballah drones from 'Mirsad' to 'Hassan': Drones above Palestine and Mediterranean sea](#)", *Al-Ahed News*, 3 July 2022.

¹⁰ Tal Beeri, "[Hezbollah – The Executive Council – the Electronic Unit \(Hezbollah's 'Electronic Army'\)](#)", *Alma Research and Education Center*, 13 June 2022.

2021, had his reputation posthumously besmirched online by thousands of Hizballah supporters. Dr. Basel Saleh, a philosophy professor, also suffered from the same kind of campaign, eventually leading to his murder by unknown assailants. Jad Shahrour, an activist in the SKEYES Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, said in an interview to “Al-Hurra” website that the Hizballah Electronic Army and social media trolls regularly carry out character assassinations of Hizballah’s opponents. These campaigns spread rumors about and dox their victims, thus inciting public opinion against them while also providing the necessary information to physically harm the targets.¹¹

SIMIA operates a Telegram channel and Twitter account named “The Muqawama (resistance) Media Forum – SIMIA”. This channel publishes narratives and visual aids for Hizballah supporters to post online. SIMIA’s method also includes setting up and boosting a hashtag for every campaign the exact hour when its starts. Even prior to the beginning of Israeli drilling, Hizballah has continuously run campaigns against Israel, the Energian compnay, and Amos Hochstein, the American mediator.

¹¹ Hussein Tlais, “[“Assassinations through Twitter’: Information about Hizballah’s Electronic Army Tactics”](#), *Al-Hurra*, 25 February 2022.



SIMIA photo from its campaign portraying anti-ship missiles and the phrase: “We will protect every drop of Lebanese water as we protected our nation’s land”.¹²

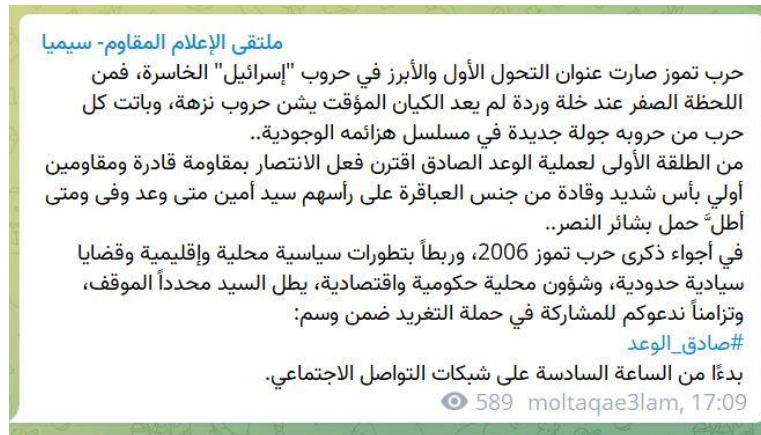
Hizballah launched a disinformation campaign when the drilling ship arrived in the Karish field, claiming that Israel is trying to violate Lebanese sovereignty at sea and steal its resources.¹³ This campaign lasted few days in a row with the hashtag “Our resistance is the guarantee to our resources”. The main narrative claimed that Hizballah is able to prevent Israel from drilling in Karish.¹⁴ Prior to Nasrallah’s speech on 13 July, SIMIA launched a new campaign with the hashtag “He [Nasrallah] who keeps his promise” being boosted before the speech. During the speech, SIMIA posted short videos from the speech about the maritime dispute with visual materials for their followers to use.¹⁵

¹² @moltaqae3lam, Telegram, 6 June 2022

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ @moltaqae3lam, Telegram, 10 June 2022.

¹⁵ @moltaqae3lam, Telegram, 13 July 2022.



SIMIA post about the campaign announcing the hashtag and the narrative calling its followers to start tweeting at 18:00, before the speech.¹⁶

An examination of the campaign flow on Twitter shows that SIMIA announced it first and then started thousands of tweets using the abovementioned hashtag, which started with Twitter users featuring Hizballah visual identifiers. One example is the well-known journalist who is close to Hizballah, Hossein Mortada, who used the hashtag only 20 minutes after the first tweet, in a way that indicates a cooperation with SIMIA.¹⁷



Twitter user named after Hizballah's slogan in the parliamentary elections of 2022. One of the first users to use the hashtag in the campaign.¹⁸

Hizballah's efforts reached their peak on 31 July, when the Military Media Center of Hizballah posted a video explicitly threatening the drilling ship in the Karish field. The video was promptly shared by SIMIA. The video includes pictures of the ship taken from an anti-ship missile system alongside their coordinates. SIMIA promoted this video online with the slogan and hashtag "Karish – time is running out".¹⁹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ @HoseinMortada, Twitter, 13 July 2022.

¹⁸ @Hzbollahm Twitter, 13 June 2022.

¹⁹ @moltaqae3lam, Telegram, 31 July 2022



Twitter user which participated in the campaign threatening the drilling ship with the slogan “Karish – time is running out”. The user's profile picture is a photo of Nasrallah and most of its uploaded content is SIMIA related.²⁰

SIMIA’s methods are an integral part of Hizballah's campaigns against Israel and Israel’s drilling in the Karish field. Hizballah’s campaigns illustrate how it utilizes all its institutions and tools to propagate its narratives. Hizballah’s myriad institutions and units all co-operate and focus on their specific role in the promotion of disinformation to specific target audiences – TV viewers, netizens, and social media activists. Hizballah uses its many tools and methods to spread its narratives to achieve various goals: impacting Lebanese public opinion and promoting its supporters, threatening and deterring enemies, and, as of late, laying the groundwork for legitimacy for any military attack against Israel in the Karish field.

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²⁰ [@lybrkat16](#), Twitter, 1 August 2022.

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