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Boss or bard? Nasrallah son acquaintances dispute role



In this Nov. 3, 2014 photo, Jawad Nasrallah, the second eldest son of Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, films his father addressing his supporters, in the southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

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👤 Zeina Karam 👤 Bassem Mrouel [Associated Press](#)

BEIRUT: The son of Lebanon's Hezbollah leader designated by the U.S. State Department this week as a "global terrorist" is a poet and music lover who moves around without security and whose role within the group is shrouded in secrecy. Jawad Nasrallah, the 37-year-old father of four, is the second-eldest son of Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah, who has been at the helm of the Iran-backed group since 1992.

In its designation Tuesday, the State Department described him as "the rising star of Hezbollah," saying he has recruited people to carry out terrorist attacks against Israel in the occupied West Bank, and in January 2016 tried to activate a suicide bombing and shooting cell based there.

The sanctions freeze any assets that those designated may have under U.S. jurisdiction and prohibit Americans from doing business with them.

The action followed the Trump administration's decision this month to reimpose oil and banking sanctions on Iran over its financing of militant groups like Hezbollah, its military engagement in Syria and its nuclear program.

In May, the U.S. and some of its Arab allies, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, imposed sanctions on 10 top Hezbollah officials including its leader Nasrallah, deputy leader Sheikh Naim Qassem and top officials Hashem Safieddine, Ibrahim Amin al-Sayyed, Hussein Khalil and Mohammad Yazbek.

People who know Jawad Nasrallah, however, disputed the State Department's description of his role within Hezbollah, with one resident of Beirut's southern suburbs saying Jawad Nasrallah is not even a senior official within the group.

The man with close links to the group, who met the young Nasrallah on several occasions, described him as a modest man, adding it is almost impossible to believe that he is the son of the group's leader.

"He moves around without security and visits shops to buy stuff or to eat," the man

said. "People respect him because he is a humble person and the son of Sayyed Nasrallah," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was speaking about matters related to the group's security.

He said that Jawad is religiously moderate, unlike some other members of the group, and likes to listen to music. "He is not a big official with the party. I never heard that he has a security or military post," the man said.

Another person familiar with the group also cast doubt on the "rising star" narrative or that he was a high-ranking member of the group.

Hezbollah declined a request by the Associated Press to comment on the State Department action. The group generally dismisses sanctions imposed on Hezbollah members as ineffective and part of psychological propaganda against the group.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry also declined comment.

A Palestinian senior security official said Hezbollah stopped its activity in the occupied West Bank and Gaza after the second intifada, which ended in 2005.

Although his rank and role within the group have remained ambiguous, the round-faced Jawad is not the reclusive type, as senior Hezbollah commanders tend to be.

He has appeared publicly on numerous occasions, including at book signing events in 2007, when he published a collection of poems called "Resistance Letters."

The book focuses on the role of poetry in resistance, with poems that glorify those who died fighting Israel, including his elder brother, Hadi, who died while fighting Israel in south Lebanon in 1997.

In one poem called "Shukran," he writes: "From the heart, thank you to the most beautiful father, thank you for being my inspiration, my father and my commander."

In an interview with a local television station in that same year, Jawad refused to give details about his role within the group, only saying that he dedicated his life to the resistance. He said that he likes music and movies, including comedy films, history and documentary movies. Jawad was active on Twitter for a while, before his account was suspended.

The Trump administration has ramped up pressure on Iran and Hezbollah since withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal last year.

The Department of Treasury Tuesday also announced it was imposing sanctions on four Hezbollah operatives who were said to have provided financial, material and technological support to Hezbollah in Iraq.

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