



HEZBOLLAH

Quick Facts

Geographical Areas of Operation: Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, North America, and Sub-Saharan Africa

Numerical Strength (Members): Thousands of supporters, several thousand members, and a few hundred terrorist operatives

Leadership: Hassan Nasrallah

Religious Identification: Shia Islam

Quick Facts Courtesy of the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism (Last Updated 2016)

OVERVIEW

Hezbollah (the Party of God) is not just a major political party and provider of social services in Lebanon; it is also a militant organization that fields both a well-armed and well-trained militia in Lebanon and a terrorist wing integrated with elements of Iranian intelligence services operating abroad. Even as the movement has undergone a process of “Lebanonization,” through which it has successfully integrated itself into the Lebanese parliamentary political system, it remains committed not only to its Lebanese identity but to its revolutionary pan-Shia and pro-Iran identities as well.

HISTORY & IDEOLOGY

Founded in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Hezbollah was the product of a Shia awakening in Lebanon that followed the disappearance of Sayyid Musa al-Sadr in 1978 and the Islamic Revolution in Shiite Iran the following year. Long neglected by the Lebanese government and underrepresented in the country’s social and political institutions, Lebanese Shia leaders organized to empower their disenfranchised community. Already eager to follow in the footsteps of the Iranian revolution, young Lebanese Shia were driven to break with established parties like the Shia Amal and gravitated to Hezbollah as a result of the Israeli invasion and subsequent occupation of southern Lebanon. Iran was more than willing to help, eager as it was to export its Islamic revolution to other Shia communities throughout the Middle East. Iranian assistance included financial backing and training at the hands of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and was facilitated by a Syrian regime pleased with the prospect of developing a proxy in Lebanon capable of preventing Israel and its allies in Lebanon from controlling the country. It was the IRGC, however, that shaped Hezbollah’s ideological foundations and informed its operational policies.

Hezbollah is simultaneously a Lebanese party, a pan-Shia movement and an Iranian proxy group. These multiple identities form the foundation and context for the group’s radical Shia ideology. Though it has since been downplayed, the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon was a central component

of Hezbollah's original political platform, released in 1985.¹ The fight against "Western Imperialism" and the continued conflict with Israel also feature prominently in that document. Hezbollah is ideologically committed to the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine of *Velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist), creating tension between its commitment to the decrees of Iranian clerics, its commitment to the Lebanese state, and its commitment to the sectarian Shia community in Lebanon and its fellow Shiites abroad. As a result, its objectives include the sometimes competing goals of establishing an Islamic republic in Lebanon; promoting the standing of Shia communities worldwide; undermining Arab states with Shia minorities in an effort to export the Iranian revolution; eliminating the State of Israel; challenging "Western imperialism;" and serving as the long arm of Iran in coordination with the Qods Force paramilitary wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The consequences of these competing ideological drivers was clear after Hezbollah dragged both Israel and Lebanon into a war neither wanted by crossing the UN-demarcated Israel-Lebanon border and killing three Israeli soldiers while kidnapping two more in July 2006.

Hezbollah receives significant financial support from the contributions of Hezbollah supporters living abroad, particularly from Lebanese nationals living in Africa, South America and other places with large Lebanese Shia expatriate communities. Over time, these communities developed into a global support network available not only to raise funds but to provide logistical and operational support for Hezbollah operations. Such support networks, sometimes comprising a few individuals and in other cases developed cells, have developed in Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa and in Middle Eastern countries with minority Shia populations, such as Saudi Arabia.

GLOBAL REACH

Hezbollah is well known for several international terrorist attacks, most notably the 1992 and 1994 bombings of the Israeli embassy and Jewish community center (AMIA), respectively, in Argentina, the 1995 Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia, and most recently the 2012 bombing of an Israeli tourist bus in Burgas, Bulgaria.² Hezbollah's global footprint, however, is broader still, with support networks in regions as far afield as Africa, Southeast Asia, North and South America and Europe.

For example, Hezbollah has leveraged its support networks in Europe to help operatives use the Continent as a launching pad for entering Israel in order to conduct attacks or collect intelligence there. Hussein Makdad, a Lebanese national, entered Israel from Switzerland under a forged British passport in 1996. He was critically injured when a bomb he was assembling exploded in his Jerusalem hotel room.³ In 1997, a German convert to Islam, Stefan Smirnak, flew to Israel from Amsterdam using his own passport.⁴ Fawzi Ayoub, a Canadian of Lebanese decent, infiltrated Israel on a boat traveling from Europe in 2000. Discarding his Canadian passport in Europe, he used a forged American passport to enter Israel in order to plot attacks there. He was later arrested in Hebron.⁵ In 2001, Jihad Shuman, a British citizen of Lebanese decent, flew to Israel from the UK. He flew from Lebanon to Europe on his Lebanese passport, and then on to Israel using his British passport.⁶ Hezbollah's most successful European operation to date came on July 18, 2012. In Burgas, Bulgaria, Hezbollah bombed a tour bus carrying Israelis, killing the Bulgarian bus driver and five Israelis, and wounding some thirty more.⁷

Throughout the 1990s, Hezbollah maintained an active support network in Southeast Asia as well. Hezbollah infiltrated at least one Malaysian operative, Zinal Bin-Talib, into Israel to collect intelligence.⁸ Hezbollah has conducted significant fundraising in Southeast Asia, nearly succeeded in bombing the Israeli embassy in Bangkok in 1994,⁹ and collected intelligence on synagogues in Manila and Singapore.¹⁰ Hezbollah members are known to have procured and cached weapons in Thailand and the Philippines.¹¹ They collected intelligence on the Bangkok office of Israel's national airline, El Al, and on U.S. Navy and Israeli commercial ships in the Singapore Straits.¹² The network additionally recruited local Sunni Muslims and sent several to Lebanon for training.¹³ In January 2012, Thai police

arrested Hussein Atris, a Lebanese national carrying a Swedish passport, at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport.¹⁴ After questioning, Atris led authorities to a three-story building on the outskirts of Bangkok containing a stockpile of 8,800 pounds of already distilled chemicals used to make explosives.¹⁵ Some of the explosives, disguised as cat litter, were intended to be shipped abroad. Bangkok had already been described as “a center for a [Hezbollah] cocaine and money-laundering network,” but it was now clear that the city also served as a hub for explosives in addition to logistics and transportation.¹⁶

In Africa, Hezbollah operatives have long helped finance the group's activities by dealing in conflict diamonds in places like Sierra Leone and Liberia. According to David Crane, the prosecutor for the Special Court in Sierra Leone, “Diamonds fuel the war on terrorism. Charles Taylor is harboring terrorists from the Middle East, including al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, and has been for years.”¹⁷ Hezbollah also raises funds in Africa from the local Shia expatriate community. In some cases, Shia donors are unwittingly conned into funding Hezbollah, while in others they are knowing and willing participants in Hezbollah's financing efforts.¹⁸ In 2002, Ugandan officials disrupted a cell of Shia students who were recruited by Iranian intelligence agents and sent on scholarships to study at the Rizavi University in Mashhad, Iran. Upon their return, one student recruit, Shafri Ibrahim, was caught, while another, Sharif Wadulu, is believed to have escaped to one of the Gulf States. The two were trained by the MOIS, together with new Lebanese Hezbollah recruits, and sent home with fictitious covers to establish an operational infrastructure in Uganda.¹⁹

Hezbollah activity in South America has been well documented, including its frenetic activity in the Tri-Border region. The group's activities received special attention in the wake of the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina and the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center there. What is less well known, however, is that Hezbollah is also active in Chile, Venezuela, Cuba, Panama and Ecuador. Of particular concern to law enforcement officials throughout South America is Hezbollah's increased activity in free trade zones, especially under the cover of import-export companies.²⁰

Finally, Hezbollah maintains a sizeable presence of supporters and operatives in North America. The U.S. Treasury Department has designated Hezbollah charities in the Detroit area, while individuals and cells have been prosecuted across the U.S. and Canada for raising funds and procuring weapons and dual use technologies like night vision goggles. The most prominent case to date occurred in Charlotte, North Carolina, where Hezbollah operatives engaged in a cigarette smuggling enterprise raised significant sums for Hezbollah while maintaining direct contact with Sheikh Abbas Haraki, a senior Hezbollah military commander in South Beirut.²¹ Members of the Charlotte cell received receipts back from Hezbollah for their donations, including receipts from the office of then-Hezbollah spiritual leader Sheikh Mohammad Fadlallah. The Charlotte cell was closely tied to a sister network in Canada that was primarily engaged in procuring dual-use technologies such as night vision goggles and laser range finders for Hezbollah operational squads. The Canadian network was under the direct command of Hajj Hassan Hilu Lakis, Hezbollah's chief military procurement officer, who is also known to procure material for Iran.²² Despite the crackdown on this network, support for Hezbollah in North America still lingers. In August 2016, a Michigan man admitted he had lied to authorities when he was arrested onboard a Lebanon-bound flight in 2014. Upon his arrest, he had insisted that he was traveling to see his dentist in Lebanon. In fact, he had intended to join Hezbollah and fight against the Syrian regime.²³

Ali Kourani of New York and Samer el Debek of Michigan were arrested on charges related to alleged activities on behalf of Hezbollah in June 2017.²⁴ According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Kourani and El Debek had received “military-style” training from the group, including in the use propelled grenade launchers and machine guns. El Debek allegedly conducted missions in Panama to locate the U.S. and Israeli embassies there. As part of that mission, he assessed the vulnerabilities of the Panama Canal and ships in the Canal. Kourani allegedly also surveilled potential targets in America, including military and law enforcement facilities in New York City.²⁵

Most prominent of Hezbollah's international operations, however, has been Hezbollah's involvement in Syria in support of the Assad regime. The organization has been ascertained to have assumed a key role in providing "training, advice and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria."²⁶ Furthermore, a UN report confirmed that Hezbollah members are in Syria fighting on behalf of the Assad government.²⁷ Since the publication of the report in 2012, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has only grown. According to various reports and sources, Hezbollah has seven thousands fighters in Syria at any time. They redeploy throughout Syria when Hezbollah is involved in major offensives. Its elite Force - the Radwan Brigade - has been redeployed in Syria a number of times, and was involved in challenging battles, like Aleppo and Daraa. Hezbollah also is involved in manufacturing weapons and running weapons factories for Iran in Syria.

Hezbollah in Lebanon

May 2008 represented a turning point of sorts for Hezbollah in Lebanon. With the position of the country's President vacant since the previous November, an ongoing presidential crisis presented the backdrop for what would prove to be the most violent intrastate fighting in Lebanon since the fifteen-year civil war ended in 1991. In early May of that year, the Lebanese government reported discovering a Hezbollah surveillance camera situated at the Beirut airport. The ensuing criticism by Hezbollah's political opponents, and pro-Hezbollah protests throughout Beirut, left nearly 100 dead and 250 wounded.²⁸ While the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) ultimately deployed and stopped the fighting, Hezbollah successfully leveraged its military strength for political advantage over the already-weakened Lebanese government. The result, after five days of Qatari mediation, was the Doha Agreement under which Hezbollah secured a "blocking third's" worth of representation in a new national unity government, that could obstruct any government initiative.

The Doha Agreement left the issue of Hezbollah's weapons—maintained in blatant violation of UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701—unresolved, allowing the militia to remain the only one in Lebanon to maintain a private arsenal of weapons. Preventing serious discussion of this issue at the talks in Doha was a public relations coup for Hezbollah, which was left politically exposed after turning its guns on fellow Lebanese. Despite the insertion of a more robust United Nations presence in southern Lebanon in the wake of the July 2006 war, Hezbollah had successfully restocked its arsenal of missiles. Indeed, Hezbollah was then believed to have more rockets, with longer ranges and larger payloads, than it did prior to the 2006 war.²⁹

These political gains, however, were followed by a significant reversal. In May 2009, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* revealed that the UN special tribunal investigating former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination had implicated Hezbollah.³⁰

In early January 2011, it became evident that the Tribunal's chief prosecutor, Daniel Bellamere, would submit a draft indictment to the pre-trial judge for review. While the actual contents of the indictment would continue to be under seal for several months, Hezbollah pre-empted the indictment's release and withdrew its support for Saad Hariri's government, forcing its collapse.³¹ Subsequently, aided by sympathetic leaders of Lebanon's Christian and Druze communities, Hezbollah was able to raise billionaire Najib Mitaki to the premiership, cementing its control over the Lebanese state.³²

Since then, Hezbollah's power over the Lebanese state institutions has grown. Combined with the disintegration of the pro-Western "March 14" coalition, Hezbollah and its Lebanese allies won the May 2018 parliamentary elections, thereby securing their control of Lebanon.³³ However, Hezbollah now finds its position in Lebanon challenged, in large part thanks to the role the organization and its chief sponsor, Iran, have played in propping up the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria since the outbreak of the civil war there in March 2011.

RECENT ACTIVITY

Hezbollah in the Middle East

The impact of the Syrian war on Hezbollah has been dramatic, shifting the group's focus from battling Israel and contesting the dynamics of its support base in Lebanon to engaging in regional conflicts beyond the borders of Lebanon. Hezbollah deployed a unit to Iraq to train Shiite militants during the Iraq War, where it worked in close cooperation with Iran, but its deep commitment on the ground in the war in Syria underscores the group's new, regional, pan-Shia focus.

As Hezbollah became more involved in the war in Syria, its main priority was to defend Damascus, while protecting the surrounding suburbs and the territory that links the Alawite coast to the Syrian border with Lebanon. This initiative resulted in major ethnic cleansing of Sunnis from strategically important areas. Hezbollah's leadership also prioritized controlling the Syria-Iraq border, and thereby securing the land bridge that would connect Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria. Because of its increased military responsibilities, Hezbollah's weapons arsenal grew from 33,000 rockets and missiles before the 2006 war to an estimated 150,000 afterward. Similarly, it expanded from a few thousand members in 2006 to an estimated 20,000-plus.³⁴

However, Hezbollah has lost many of its high-ranking commanders and well-trained fighters. Although the group did manage to recruit more fighters, many of these newcomers have not undergone the same training usually required by Hezbollah. Quality had to be compromised for quantity. Furthermore, Hezbollah's extensive military operations in the region have forced the group to make budget shifts. As most resources are now allocated to military operations in the region, Hezbollah's shrank its available pool of social services.³⁵ This belt-tightening resulted in serious discontent within the Shia community, particularly in poor neighborhoods.³⁶

Besides the group's significant interest in Syria, Hezbollah's regional reorientation is most obvious in its increased operational tempo in the Gulf.

In Yemen, a small number of Hezbollah operatives have been training Houthi rebels for some time, but in early 2016 the Gulf-backed Yemeni government claimed to have physical evidence of "Hezbollah training the Houthi rebels and fighting alongside them in attacks on Saudi Arabia's border."³⁷ Three years earlier, the U.S. government revealed that Khalil Harb, a former special operations commander and a close adviser to Nasrallah, was overseeing Hezbollah's activities in Yemen. He has also traveled to Tehran to coordinate Hezbollah's operations in Yemen with Iran.³⁸ Harb is not the only senior Hezbollah operative to be deployed to Yemen. Former Hezbollah special operations commander in southern Lebanon Abu Ali Tabtabai, who also spent time fighting in Syria, is likewise reported to have been sent to Yemen.³⁹ Hezbollah has never been open about these deployments, but Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem did warn in April 2015 that Saudi Arabia would "incur very serious losses" and "pay a heavy price" as a result of its Yemen campaign.⁴⁰

Beyond Yemen, Hezbollah's support for terrorist groups in the Gulf region also continues unabated. In August 2015, Kuwaiti authorities raided a terrorist cell of 26 Shia Kuwaitis. The cell was accused of amassing "a large amount of weapons, ammunition, and explosives."⁴¹ After media outlets reported alleged links between the cell, Iran, and Hezbollah, the public prosecutor issued a media gag order on the investigation.⁴² In January 2016, authorities in Bahrain arrested six members of a terrorist cell for a July 2015 explosion outside of a girls' school in Sitra. The cell had connections to Hezbollah.⁴³ Also in January 2016, a Kuwaiti court sentenced a Kuwaiti and an Iranian national to death for spying on behalf of Iran and Hezbollah.⁴⁴ In June, a court in Abu Dhabi found the wife of a "prominent Emirati" guilty of spying for Hezbollah.⁴⁵ The following month, a Kuwait court sentenced a Shi'a member of parliament in absentia for issuing statements deemed insulting to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and for calling on people to join Hezbollah.⁴⁶

In 2013, a Hezbollah sleeper cell was busted in the United Arab Emirates. According to court

proceedings in April 2016, “the terrorist cell used sex and alcohol” to recruit a group of agents that provided “information about government, security, military and economic institutions as well as UAE’s arms deals with various countries to the Hezbollah agents.” The prosecution claimed that “two Emiratis, four Lebanese, and a Canadian-Egyptian woman” were blackmailed into participating in the spying scheme. The court case came shortly after the UAE convicted three Lebanese men with setting up a Hezbollah cell.⁴⁷

Set against this aggressive activity in the Gulf, it was little surprise that in March 2016 the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) took the step of formally labeling Hezbollah a terrorist group. The Arab League and the OIC followed suit within weeks.⁴⁸ Since then, the Gulf States have cracked down on Hezbollah supporters and financiers within their borders.⁴⁹ This seemingly rapid series of condemnations was three years in the making. In May 2014, Saudi authorities withdrew the business license of a Lebanese national linked to Hezbollah,⁵⁰ and a GCC offer to engage Iran in dialogue if Tehran changed its policy on Syria fell on deaf ears.⁵¹ In January 2016, the Saudi government released a report on Iranian-sponsored terrorism that focused heavily on Hezbollah, spanning the group’s militant activities from the 1980s to the present.⁵²

In May 2018, following U.S. President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, the GCC states agreed to increase sanctions against Hezbollah’s senior leadership as part of its cooperation with the U.S.⁵³ Additional U.S. sanctions have targeted Hezbollah’s top officials, including its leader Hassan Nasrallah and his deputy, Naim Qassem. Washington has also blacklisted members of Hezbollah’s Shura Council, its primary decision-making body.

Hezbollah’s intensified involvement in the Gulf is a function of the sustained geopolitical and sectarian tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These tensions spiked in January when Saudi Arabia executed Shiite Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr on charges of sedition and taking up arms against Saudi security forces. The sheikh’s death sparked outrage across the Shi’a world, and, in Iran, two Saudi diplomatic compounds were stormed in protest. Saudi Arabia sought condemnation of the attacks from the Arab League and the OIC, and both organizations responded accordingly. Lebanon, however, offered only “solidarity.” This perceived slight spurred Saudi Arabia to cut off monetary support to Lebanon and pull funds from Lebanese banks.⁵⁴ Bahrain and the UAE fell in line with the Saudis, issuing travel warnings and travel bans, respectively, for Lebanon.⁵⁵ A month after the execution and protests, Saudi Arabia blacklisted four companies and three Lebanese businessmen, citing their relationships to Hezbollah.⁵⁶ The United States had designated these companies and individuals a year earlier, but the Saudi actions indicated a heightened focus on Hezbollah on the part of the kingdom.⁵⁷

Nasrallah has tried to deflect these actions as Israeli machinations, but Hezbollah and Iran have, in fact, been increasingly active in the Gulf in recent years. Iranian, Hezbollah, and Saudi posturing all come against the backdrop of a Gulf that is concerned with a region post-Iran deal (aka Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA). Gulf leadership was wary of an Iranian financial windfall resulting from the deal and the flexibility the regained cash gives Iran and of Hezbollah to destabilize the region. Sunni Gulf states were thus particularly sensitive to Iranian and Hezbollah activity in the Gulf in the year since the announcement of the JCPOA.

Nasrallah has tried to justify Hezbollah’s overreach into proxy wars around the region by presenting the issue as a Lebanese national security threat. In July 2016, Sheikh Nabil Qaouq, the deputy head of Hezbollah’s Executive Council, derided Saudi Arabia for supporting terrorism in Lebanon and throughout the region. The terrorists “who staged bombings in Beirut, Hermel and the Bekaa, and who abducted and slaughtered the (Lebanese) servicemen are al-Qaida’s branch in Lebanon and Syria (Abdullah Azzam Brigades) and al-Nusra Front, and al-Nusra Front is today fighting with Saudi weapons,” Qaouq charged. Qaouq accused the Saudis of continuing to arm Jabhat al-Nusra “although it has murdered us, executed our servicemen and continued to occupy our land in the Bekaa,” noting that Saudi sponsorship of terrorism

“poses a real threat to Lebanese national security.”⁵⁸

Despite the devastation of the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, the man accused of orchestrating and executing the attack evaded capture for almost 20 years. Finally, in August 2015, Ahmed al-Mughassil, the military chief of Saudi Hezbollah, was apprehended in Beirut and deported to Saudi Arabia. Mughassil had allegedly lived in Lebanon for years under the protection of Hezbollah.⁵⁹ The Farsi-speaking Mughassil may provide insight into the clandestine operations of Iran and its proxies around the region. In the current sectarian environment in the region, the circumstances of the arrest itself are a source of intrigue. Just as Hezbollah-Saudi tensions are mounting, a Hezbollah operative who evaded capture for years was suddenly caught and deported to Saudi Arabia.

Even more significant is what happened next door in Syria eight months later. Hezbollah was dealt a heavy blow in May 2016 with the loss of its most prominent military figure, Mustafa Badreddine. Badreddine was killed in an explosion in Damascus while acting as head of Hezbollah’s External Security Organization and its forces in Syria, making him the most senior Hezbollah official killed since the death of former “chief of staff” Imad Mughniyah in 2008. In the 1980s, Badreddine was involved in terrorist attacks in Lebanon and Kuwait, with targets including U.S. embassies and Marine barracks. Badreddine escaped from prison in Kuwait in the early 1990s during the Iraqi invasion there. He fled back to Lebanon and rose to power in Hezbollah, aided by his expertise and family ties to Mughniyah. The two men, Badreddine and Mughniyah, led Hezbollah’s military activities for years and founded some of the organization’s most infamous units. Describing Badreddine, one Hezbollah operative said he was “more dangerous” than Mughniyah, his longtime “teacher in terrorism.”⁶⁰

The assassination of Badreddine shocked Hezbollah; it lost an especially qualified commander with a unique pedigree as the brother-in-law of Mughniyah and an intimate of Nasrallah. Yet most confounding to Hezbollah was that Israel, Hezbollah’s arch enemy, was not the assassin. Though Hezbollah outlets quickly pinned blame for the attack on Israel, Nasrallah soon took to the airwaves to personally announce that there was “no sign or proof leading us to the Israelis.” Nasrallah quickly added that Hezbollah is “not afraid to blame Israel when necessary,” but in this case, “our investigations led us to the [Sunni] terrorist groups.” Nasrallah could not have been clearer: “Within 24 hours we knew who killed Syed Mustafa, don’t just try to point at Israel.”⁶¹

For some within Hezbollah, the Saudis will come up as likely players behind the scenes, possibly supporting the Sunni rebels Nasrallah says were behind the attack. Indeed, there would be historical precedent for this. The Saudis reportedly supported the Lebanese militants who targeted Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah in a failed assassination attempt in 1985.⁶² In fact, the United States has been fairly open about that fact that it has partnered with GCC countries and others to counter Hezbollah’s activities.⁶³

Analytically, Hezbollah’s pivot toward the Gulf should not be seen as a pivot away from Israel. To the contrary, Hezbollah sees a pernicious, budding alliance among the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel that is directly benefiting the Sunni “takfiri” militants it is fighting in Syria and, to a lesser extent, elsewhere in the region. And while Hezbollah is taking active measures to prepare for the next, eventual war with Israel, it is eager to avoid such a conflict at the present time given its significant investment of personnel and resources in the Syrian war next door and its desire not to give Israel a pretext to either enter that war on the side of the Sunni rebels or take advantage of Hezbollah’s deployment there to target the group’s military presence and rocket arsenal in south Lebanon. Moreover, Hezbollah has been trying to extend its reach into the Palestinian Territories. In August 2016, Israeli authorities busted several Hezbollah cells in the West Bank. The members, some of whom had been ordered to commit an imminent attack against IDF forces in the area, had been recruited online by Hezbollah operatives in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip.⁶⁴

Hezbollah Beyond the Middle East

Hezbollah’s international operations are not limited to its home region, however, and the group continues to boast a robust global presence. In June 2015, the latest Hezbollah plot in Europe was thwarted

in Cyprus, where Hussein Bassam Abdallah, a dual Lebanese-Canadian citizen, stockpiled 8.2 tons of ammonium nitrate, a popular chemical explosive. Abdallah was convicted by a Cyprus court for his participation in a terrorist group (Hezbollah), possessing explosives, and conspiracy to commit a crime. It was the second time in three years that a Cypriot court has sentenced a Hezbollah operative to prison for plotting an attack in Cyprus.

After months of often acrimonious deliberations, senior European officials gathered in Brussels in July 2013 to announce that all 28 EU member states agreed to add Hezbollah's military wing -- not the organization itself -- to the EU's list of banned terrorist groups. At the time, European officials pointed to the blacklisting as a shot across the bow. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle claimed that: "This is a signal to terrorist organizations.... If you attack one of our European countries, you get an answer from all of them."⁶⁵ Regardless, evidence reveals that Hezbollah's military wing is still plotting attacks across Europe, and that the EU's words have not dissuaded the organization whatsoever.

According to Israeli investigators, Hezbollah was using Cyprus as a "point of export" from which to funnel explosives elsewhere for a series of attacks in Europe.⁶⁶ Indeed, the plot was already in motion: investigators believe the explosives used in the 2012 Burgas bus bombing may have come from the batch of chemicals stored in Cyprus.

Not only did Hezbollah actively maintain an explosives stockpile in Cyprus, the group retained the operatives, infrastructure and reach to engage in operations across Europe. Over the course of time Abdallah maintained this explosives stockpile, Hezbollah remained active across Europe, from a 2012 bombing thwarted in Greece to the arrest and deportation of a Hezbollah operative in Denmark in 2013 who arrived on a commercial ship for purposes still unknown. Four months after the EU ban, in late 2013, two Lebanese passengers at a Brussels airport were caught with nearly 770,000 euros in their possession. At least some of this cash was suspected to be intended for Hezbollah's coffers, Europol reported. A few months later, Germany raided the offices of the Orphan Children Project Lebanon in Essen, accusing the group of serving as a Hezbollah fundraising front organization. Germany's domestic intelligence agency recently reported that Hezbollah maintains some 950 active operatives in the country.

Hezbollah weapons and technology procurement operations continued in Europe as well. In July 2014, the U.S. Treasury Department blacklisted a Lebanese consumer electronics business, Stars Group Holding, along with its owners, subsidiaries, and "certain managers and individuals who support their illicit activities." Together, they functioned as a "key Hezbollah procurement network" that purchased technology around the world—including in Europe—to develop the drones Hezbollah deploys over Israel and Syria.⁶⁷

The Treasury Department is moving more frequently to designate terrorists and targeting key individuals and companies facilitating Hezbollah's international misdeeds, with a focus on those with ties to the Islamic Jihad Organization, Hezbollah's terrorist arm.⁶⁸ President Barack Obama signed legislation in December 2015 that aims to "thwart" the group's "network at every turn" by imposing sanctions on financial institutions that deal with Hezbollah or its al Manar television station.⁶⁹

The Treasury designations—which freeze assets and impose sanctions—kicked into high gear in June 2016 when the U.S. targeted a high-level operative, Adham Tabaja and his company, al-Inmaa Group. Already, Treasury had targeted Hezbollah's military procurement front organizations and some of the businesses that run them, such as Stars Group Holdings in Lebanon and foreign subsidiaries that supplied components for the unmanned aerial vehicles Hezbollah deploys over Syria and Israel. Treasury also targeted associates of Mr. Tabaja -- one, Husayn Ali Faour, is a member of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad whose company supplied vehicles -- and other Hezbollah procurement agents and financiers.

October 2016 brought arrests of a lawyer in Paris and a businesswoman in Atlanta who, according to the criminal complaint, conspired to launder narcotics proceeds and engage in international arms trafficking. The businesswoman told an undercover agent that she had associates in Hezbollah who were

seeking to purchase cocaine, weapons, and ammunition, the U.S. government has charged;⁷⁰ the lawyer suggested that he could use his connections with Hezbollah to provide security to narcotics shipments.

Other nations have also responded negatively to Iran and Hezbollah's involvement in their affairs. In May 2018, Morocco severed relations with Iran, accusing it of providing funds, training and weapons to Polisario Front independence fighters in the disputed Western Sahara. The Moroccan government claimed that they had obtained and verified proof that Hezbollah has provided training and financial support to Polisario fighters since 2016.⁷¹ The collaboration between Polisario and Hezbollah appears to have intensified after Moroccan authorities arrested Lebanese businessman Kassim Tajeddine in March 2017. He was later deported to the United States based on his financial ties to Hezbollah and related designations by the U.S. Treasury Department.⁷²

Hezbollah's dependence on money laundering and drug trafficking has continued unabated as the group's monetary situation has deteriorated, strained by tightened U.S. sanctions and the costly Syrian war effort. In February 2016, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) implicated Hezbollah in a multi-million-dollar drug trafficking and money laundering network that spanned four continents.⁷³ According to the DEA report, Hezbollah had relationships with South American drug cartels in a cocaine-smuggling network to Europe and the U.S. The proceeds funded a money laundering scheme known as the Black Market Peso Exchange and provided Hezbollah with "a revenue and weapons stream."⁷⁴

Nasrallah dismissed the investigation's implication of Hezbollah, stating: "The criminal regimes are falsely accusing Hezbollah of corruption and money laundering in order to destabilize the party."⁷⁵

Regardless of Nasrallah's protests of such accusations, Hezbollah's activities in South America have continued apace. Since at least the early 1980s, Iran has operated an intelligence network in Latin America – Hezbollah soon followed suit.

Tensions over the AMIA bombing and the indictment of senior Iranian officials for their roles in the attack resulted in poor diplomatic relations between Argentina and Iran for many years. Then, in 2007, Argentine representatives suddenly ceased their years-long policy of walking out of UN meetings whenever an Iranian official spoke. Despite the standing Argentinean indictments of Iranian officials, Argentina and Iran agreed in 2011 to form a "truth commission" to jointly investigate the 1994 bombing. The merits of this "partnership" were questionable from the outset, but were cast into severe doubt with Nisman's mysterious death in 2015. Nisman filed charges that the Argentinean administration, specifically President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Foreign Minister Héctor Timerman, planned a cover-up of Iran and Hezbollah's role in the AMIA bombing in exchange for a political deal between the government of Iran and Argentina.⁷⁶ The day before Nisman was due to present his case to the Argentine parliament, he was found dead in his apartment. Despite his tragic and untimely death, the work Nisman and his team had already conducted exposed not only the circumstances behind the AMIA attack, but Iran's ongoing intelligence operations in South America – and at a time when Hezbollah's activities in the region are on the rise.

In May 2015, the man described by Argentinean authorities as the driving force behind the AMIA bombing, Mohsen Rabbani, told Argentinean TV that Nisman's investigation was based on nothing more than "the inventions of newspapers without any proof against Iran."⁷⁷ In fact, the most powerful proof against Iran was evidence of Rabbani's own role in the plot, from running a network of intelligence agents in Buenos Aires to purchasing the van used as the car bomb in the attack. And he remains active: according to Nisman's more recent investigations, Iranian agents in Argentina acting at Rabbani's behest and reporting directly back to him were conspiring to concoct fake "new evidence" to supplant the real evidence collected in the case.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, Hezbollah activities in the region have picked up pace significantly. In its 2014 annual terrorism report, the State Department highlighted the financial support networks Hezbollah maintains in places like Latin America and Africa. The report concluded that Hezbollah is, "capable of operating around the globe." This conclusion was sustained in the Department's 2015 annual report. The claim was underscored in November 2014 when Brazilian police reports revealed that Hezbollah helped a Brazilian

prison gang, the First Capital Command (PCC), obtain weapons in exchange for the protection of prisoners of Lebanese origin detained in Brazil. The same reports indicated that Lebanese traffickers tied to Hezbollah reportedly helped sell C4 explosives that the PCC allegedly stole in Paraguay.

One of the group's most recently foiled plots was in Peru and involved a Hezbollah operative married to a U.S. citizen. Peruvian counterterrorism police arrested the Hezbollah operative in Lima in November 2014, the result of a surveillance operation that began several months earlier. In that case, Mohammed Amadar, a Lebanese citizen, arrived in Peru in November 2013 and married a dual Peruvian-American citizen two weeks later. When he was arrested in October, police raided his home and found traces of TNT, detonators, and other inflammable substances. A search of the garbage outside his home found chemicals used to manufacture explosives.⁷⁹

As of this writing, Hezbollah remains active in South America. In the lead-up to the 2016 Rio Olympics, Brazilian authorities arrested former Hezbollah member Fadi Hassan Nabha. According to police, Nabha served in Hezbollah's special services and had weapons and explosives training.⁸⁰ The justice ministry has been seeking to expel him from the country. September 2016 saw two more arrests of key Hezbollah operatives in South America: Khalil Mohamed El Sayed and Mohammed Jalil. El Sayed, a Lebanese naturalized Paraguayan, was arrested while trying to enter Argentina using counterfeit documents. The U.S. has investigated El Sayed for six years for his involvement in Hezbollah, and Brazil has accused El Sayed for involvement in drug and arm trafficking for over eight years. Jalil, also a Lebanese-Paraguayan attempting to enter Argentina on false papers, was arrested on similar charges, including affiliation with Hezbollah, drug and arms trafficking, along with credit card fraud. Jalil is wanted in the U.S., Brazil, and Paraguay.

In light of its international operations, Hezbollah's confidence is not entirely unfounded. In August 2016, Nasrallah expressed Hezbollah's international ambitions in no uncertain terms. "If Hezbollah emerged from the 2006 war a regional force," Nasrallah declared, "it will emerge from Syria crisis an international force."⁸¹

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