

American Foreign Policy Council



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

Hezbollah (the Party of God) is not only 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-Shi'a and pro-Iran identities as well.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Founded in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Hezbollah was the product of a Shi'a awakening in Lebanon that followed the disappearance of Sayyid Musa al-Sadr in 1978 and the Islamic Revolution in Shi'ite Iran the following year. Long neglected by the Lebanese government and underrepresented in the country's social and political institutions, Lebanese Shi'a leaders organized to

empower their disenfranchised community. Already eager to follow in the footsteps of the Iranian revolution, young Lebanese Shi'a were driven to break with established parties like Shi'a 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 Shi'a 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-Shi'a movement and an Iranian proxy group. These multiple identities form the foundation and context for the group's ideology of Shi'a radicalism. 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 Shi'a community in Lebanon and its fellow Shi'ites abroad. As a result, its objectives include the sometimes competing goals of establishing an Islamic republic in Lebanon; promoting the standing of Shi'a communities worldwide; undermining Arab states with Shi'a minorities in an effort to export the Iranian Shi'a revolution; eliminating the State of Israel; challenging "Western imperialism;" and serving as the long arm of Iran in coordination with the Qods Force 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 Shi'a 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 Shi'a 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, and the 1995 Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia. 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 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.² In 1997, a German convert to Islam, Stefan Smirnak, flew to Israel from Amsterdam using his own passport.³ Fawzi Ayoub, a Canadian of Lebanese descent, 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.⁴ In 2001, Jihad Shuman, a British citizen of Lebanese descent, 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.⁵

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.⁶ Hezbollah has conducted significant fundraising in Southeast Asia, nearly succeeded in bombing the Israeli embassy in Bangkok in 1994⁷, and collected intelligence on synagogues in Manila and Singapore.⁸ Hezbollah members are known to have procured and cached weapons in Thailand and the Philippines.⁹ They collected intelligence on El-Al's Bangkok office and on U.S. Navy and Israeli commercial ships in the Singapore Straits.¹⁰ The network additionally recruited local Sunni Muslims and sent several to Lebanon for training.¹¹

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."¹² Hezbollah also raises funds in Africa from the local Shi'a expatriate community. In some cases, Shi'a donors are unwittingly conned into funding Hezbollah, while in others they are knowing and willing participants in Hezbollah's financing efforts.¹³ In 2002, Ugandan officials disrupted a cell of Shi'a 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

RECENT ACTIVITY

The period of 2008-2010 has been one of major gains and significant setbacks for Hezbollah. Even as the Shi'a militia has consolidated its power and improved its political position at home, it has confronted unprecedented international scrutiny of its global activities.

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. In response, the camera was removed and the army commander in charge of airport security, Brig. Gen. Wafiq Choucair, a suspected Hezbollah sympathizer, was rotated to a new position.¹⁸ At a cabinet meeting that week, the government announced it would no longer tolerate Hezbollah's "illegal" fiber optic communications network and described such activities on the part of Hezbollah as an "attack on the sovereignty of the state."¹⁹ In response, Hezbollah revealed its strategic priorities, putting the maintenance of its independent weapons, communications and intelligence infrastructure ahead of the greater interests of Lebanon. In the words of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, "Those who try to arrest us, we will arrest them. Those who shoot at us, we will shoot at them. The hand raised against us, we will cut it off."²⁰

Over the next few days, Hezbollah took to the streets, shutting down the Beirut airport road and temporarily taking control of much of the city by force.²¹ In the course of the fighting, nearly one hundred Lebanese were killed and 250 wounded.²² 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" in a new national unity government, among other concessions. Controlling just over a third of the cabinet, Hezbollah could henceforth block any government initiative. At the negotiating table in Doha, then-Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence Donald Kerr explained a few days later, participants "were faced with the implicit threat of further violence if opposition demands were not met. March 14 Coalition leaders cited their awareness of public fears about continued violence as a motivation for making the compromises necessary to reach an agreement at Doha."²³

Hezbollah also successfully tabled addressing the fact that it remained the only militia in Lebanon to maintain a private arsenal of weapons. The Doha Agreement left the issue of Hezbollah's weap-

ons—maintained in blatant violation of UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701—unresolved. UNSCR 1559, for example, calls for the dismantling of “all Lebanese and non-Lebanese armed groups.”²⁴ This was particularly significant for Hezbollah, which had promised that its “weapons of resistance” maintained to fight Israel and defend Lebanon would not be used against fellow Lebanese. 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. As Kerr commented just days later, “Events in Lebanon since May 7 demonstrate that Hizballah—with the full support of Syria and Iran—will in fact turn its weapons against the Lebanese people for political purposes.”²⁵

Despite the insertion of a more robust United Nations presence in southern Lebanon in the wake of the July 2006 war, Hezbollah has successfully restocked its arsenal of missiles. Indeed, Hezbollah is now believed to have more rockets, with longer ranges and larger payloads, than it did prior to the 2006 war. According to Israeli estimates, in the years since the war Hezbollah has stockpiled tens of thousands of rockets both in south Lebanon and in the area north of the Litani River, just beyond the jurisdictional reach of UNIFIL forces. These reportedly include dozens of C-802 land-to-sea missiles, several hundred Faajr 5 missiles with a range of 75 kilometers, at least 20,000 40-kilometer rockets, and Zilzal rockets with a range of 250 kilometers and capable of penetrating deep into Israel even from above the Litani River.²⁶ Most disturbingly, on April 13, 2010 Israeli President Shimon Peres accused Hezbollah of acquiring Scud missiles with the capability to strike any location within Israel, including the nuclear reactor at Dimona.²⁷

Twice, in July and October of 2009, explosions at Hezbollah arms depots in southern Lebanon exposed Hezbollah’s hidden arms caches. In the first incident, a two story building in the village of Khirbet Slem, 12 miles from the Israeli border, exploded. When UN troops attempted to go to the site of the explosion they were stopped by Hezbollah forces.²⁸ Surveillance footage showed Hezbollah fighters removing unexploded rockets and munitions from the site. According to Alain Le Roy, the head of UN peacekeeping operations in Lebanon, “a number of indications suggest that the

[arms] depot belonged to Hezbollah and, in contrast to previous discoveries by UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces of weapons and ammunition, that it was not abandoned but, rather, actively maintained.”²⁹ Three months later, another Hezbollah arms cache exploded at the home of a Hezbollah member in Tayr Filsay, near Tyre. An Israeli aircraft reportedly filmed several men carrying what appear to be rockets from the home and delivering them to a different home in another village a few kilometers away.³⁰

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. The revelation was momentous; for most of the Tribunal’s existence, Syria had been the main suspect in Hariri’s murder. Accusing the Shi’ite Hezbollah of killing the leader of Lebanon’s Sunni community, by contrast, threatened the stability of the country. According to the report, which cites Lebanese security sources, investigators identified cell phones linked to the plot and found that “all of the numbers involved apparently belonged to the ‘operational arm’ of Hezbollah.” The report identified Abdulmajid Ghamlush as one of the main suspects and described him as “a Hezbollah member who completed training courses in Iran.” The investigation of Ghamlush, who reportedly purchased the mobile phones, led officials to Hajj Salim, the alleged mastermind of the assassination plot and commander of a “special operational unit” reporting directly to Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah.³¹ Later reports would also identify Mustapha Badreddine, the brother-in-law of slain external operations chief Imad Mughniyah and allegedly one of Hezbollah’s top military commanders, as a key player in the plot.³²

With its domestic standing under threat by the Tribunal’s accusations, Hezbollah moved to deflect criticism through an aggressive media campaign portraying the Tribunal as a Zionist-American plot. In a speech following the *Der Spiegel* report, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah accused Israel of being behind “the attempt to accuse Hezbollah of assassinating martyr Rafiq Hariri in order to foment a sectarian sedition in Lebanon.”³³ The discovery of an alleged Israeli spy network in the Lebanese main telecommunications provider and the release of aerial footage from Israeli spy planes which appeared to follow Hariri’s known travel routes

through Beirut and other parts of the country, were used as evidence of Israeli involvement.³⁴ Hezbollah leaders concurrently accused the Tribunal of relying on the testimony of “false witnesses,” claiming that recanted testimonies from early witnesses proved the politicization of the investigation.³⁵

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.³⁶ Subsequently, aided by sympathetic leaders of Lebanon’s Christian and Druze communities, Hezbollah was able to raise billionaire Najib Mitaki to the premiership, cementing Hezbollah’s control over the Lebanese state.³⁷

Hezbollah abroad

In the spring of 2009, as the Hezbollah-led “March 8” coalition campaigned ahead of Lebanon’s June 7th elections, the group was suddenly forced to contend with the unexpected exposure of its covert terrorist activities both at home and abroad. At home, Hezbollah now stands accused of playing a role in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Abroad, law enforcement officials have taken action against Hezbollah support networks operating across the globe, including in Egypt, Yemen, Sierra Leone, Cote d’Ivoire, Azerbaijan, Belgium, and Colombia. Together, these activities pose what Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah described as “the largest and most important and serious challenge” facing Hezbollah today.³⁸

Hezbollah’s fortunes began to take a turn for the worse in April 2009, when Egyptian authorities publicized the November 2008 arrest of dozens of Hezbollah operatives accused of funneling arms to Hamas and targeting Israeli tourists and Suez Canal shipping. According to Egyptian prosecutors, the operatives were instructed to collect intelligence from villages along the Egypt-Gaza border, at tourist sites, and at the Suez Canal. Nasrallah himself confirmed to the *Financial Times* that one of the men arrested was Sami Shihab, a Hezbollah member who was on “a logistical job to

help Palestinians get [military] equipment.”³⁹ The cells reportedly established commercial businesses as fronts for their operational activities, purchased apartments in al-Arish and the Egyptian side of Rafah for use as safe houses, and contacted criminal elements in Egypt to procure forged Egyptian passports so they could leave Egypt as needed and purchase or rent apartments. Some of the cell members reportedly worked for the Egyptian bureau of al-Manar, Hezbollah’s satellite television station, as cover for their activities in Egypt. While Shihab and his co-conspirators were eventually convicted in April 2010, the cell escaped from Egyptian prison during the pro-democracy uprising in early 2011.⁴⁰

Following the exposure of the Hezbollah cells operating in Egypt, UN special envoy Terje Roed-Larsen commented that there has recently been “a growing concern that Hezbollah has engaged in clandestine and illegal militant activities beyond Lebanese territory.”⁴¹ Indeed, in March of 2009, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salih publicly accused Hezbollah of training Shi’ite rebels in Yemen.⁴²

Hezbollah operatives were under stress in the far corners of Africa as well. There, two local Hezbollah supporters, Kassim Tajideen and Abdulmenhem Qubaisi, were exposed when the U.S. Treasury Department added them to its list of designated terrorists.⁴³ According to information released by Treasury, Tajideen has contributed tens of millions of dollars to Hezbollah and has funneled money to the group through his brother, a Hezbollah commander in Lebanon. Tajideen, a dual Lebanese-Sierra Leonean citizen, and his brothers also run cover companies for Hezbollah in Africa, according to Treasury. In 2003, following a four-month international investigation by Belgium’s Economic Crimes Unit, Tajideen was arrested in Belgium in connection with fraud, money laundering, and diamond smuggling. Judicial police raided the Antwerp offices of Soafrimex, a company managed by Tajideen, arrested several of its officials, and froze its bank accounts on charges of “large-scale tax fraud, money laundering, and trade in diamonds of doubtful origin, to the value of tens of millions of Euros.”⁴⁴ According to Treasury, Qubaisi is a Hezbollah supporter and fundraiser who functions as Nasrallah’s “personal representative” in the country and also “helped establish an official Hezbollah foundation in Cote

d'Ivoire, which has been used to recruit new members for Hezbollah's military ranks in Lebanon."⁴⁵

In December 2010, Treasury built upon their earlier action by designating Kassim Tajideen's two brothers, Ali and Husayn, along with their businesses in Gambia, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, and the British Virgin Islands.⁴⁶ These designations were particularly timely, coming just a month after Israeli officials issued warnings to Israeli businesspersons traveling to Europe in response to what was described as "pinpoint" intelligence of a specific threat. In August 2008, Israel issued similar warnings of a pending Hezbollah attack targeting Israelis in Africa. A few weeks later, senior Israeli officials confirmed that two attempts by Hezbollah operatives to kidnap Israeli citizens abroad had been thwarted.

On the other side of the globe, reports began to leak out of a Hezbollah and IRGC plot to bomb the building housing the Israeli, Thai, and Japanese embassies, as well as a radar tower in Baku, Azerbaijan. According to Israeli officials, the operatives also planned to kidnap the Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan.⁴⁷ The plot was foiled in the weeks following the February 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's chief of external operations. Azeri prosecutors subsequently tried two Lebanese Hezbollah operatives, Ali Karaki, described as "a veteran of Hezbollah's external operations unit," and Ali Najem Aladine, a "lower-ranking explosives expert." The two men reportedly traveled to Iran several times, using Iranian passports. When they were arrested, police had found explosives, binoculars, cameras, pistols with silencers and surveillance photographs in their vehicles. Though the two men subsequently were convicted in October 2009 and sentenced to 15 years in prison, Iran managed to secure their release in August 2010 in a prisoner swap with the Azerbaijani government.⁴⁸

Just a week prior to the exposure of the Baku plot, Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman announced that an international arrest warrant had been issued for Samuel Salman al-Reda, a Colombian of Lebanese descent and suspected Hezbollah operative who previously lived in Buenos Aires and is charged with playing a key role in the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish charities headquarters that killed 85 people and wounded approximately 300.⁴⁹ According to

the original AMIA indictment, a government witness identified al-Reda as a Hezbollah member who fought in southern Lebanon. The indictment says al-Reda coordinated the activities of “dormant” cells in the Tri-border area where Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay meet and provided “all the necessary support” to carry out the attack.⁵⁰ According to information provided by the Argentine intelligence service, SIDE, and cited in the AMIA indictment, al-Reda is also suspected of being a senior operative involved in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. An FBI report on the AMIA bombing notes that “additional information has identified Samuel Reda as an active member of Hezbollah who was in Buenos Aires during the attack after having moved from the city of Iguacu Falls, Brazil. It is alleged [that] Reda was the contact for members of Hezbollah, of Iran, and of Lebanon.”⁵¹

Feeling the heat from these international setbacks, and worried about the possible impact they would have on Hezbollah’s political standing at home, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah gave his final major address before the June elections on May 29, 2009. The speech was broadcast live on Hezbollah’s al-Manar satellite television station and projected on a giant screen at a Resistance and Liberation Day rally in the Beka’a Valley celebrating the ninth anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. In it, Nasrallah bemoaned what he described as an Israeli effort to “return to the strategy of introducing Hezbollah as a terrorist organization that attacks countries and peoples and threatens world security.”⁵²

Despite the increased attention directed towards the group’s international presence, Hezbollah is still willing to carry out attacks abroad. According to leaked diplomatic cables cited by Israel’s Ha’aretz newspaper, Hezbollah was also responsible for the January 2010 bombing an Israeli diplomatic convoy in Jordan. During a meeting just after the attack, Israeli Defense Forces Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi revealed to the United Nations envoy to Lebanon that Israel had obtained information linking Hezbollah to the bombing. The attack was reportedly conducted as a response to the 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus.⁵³ This is in addition to six other attempted attacks, all thwarted by Israel.⁵⁴ While the Israeli diplomats were unhurt, Hezbollah continued to threaten revenge, with Hezbollah second in command Naim Qas-

sem stating in February 2010 that the “commitment exists,” but “the (attack) period and specifications, however, will be come in due time.”⁵⁵

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