

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, 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, South-east 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.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

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.⁷ Hezbollah has conducted significant fundraising in Southeast Asia, nearly succeeded in bombing the Israeli embassy in Bangkok in 1994,⁸ and collected intelligence on synagogues in Manila and Singapore.⁹ Hezbollah members are known to have procured and cached weapons in Thailand and the Philippines.¹⁰ They collected intelligence on El-Al's Bangkok office and on U.S. Navy and Israeli commercial ships in the Singapore Straits.¹¹ The network additionally recruited local Sunni Muslims and sent several to Lebanon for training.¹² In January 2012 Thai police arrested Hussein Atris, a Lebanese national carrying a Swedish passport, at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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."¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹

RECENT ACTIVITY

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.²² 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."²³ 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.

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.²⁴ In the course of the fighting, nearly one hundred Lebanese were killed and 250 wounded.²⁵ 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.

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 weapons—maintained in blatant violation of UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701—unresolved. 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.²⁶

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. 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."²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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."²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.³¹

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.³² Subsequently, aided by sympathetic leaders of Lebanon's Christian and Druze communities, Hezbollah was able to raise billionaire Najib Mikati to the premiership, cementing Hezbollah's control over the Lebanese state.³³ Since then, Hezbollah has continued to maintain a controlling interest in the workings of the Lebanese state. This can be seen in the debate over a new electoral law that has roiled Lebanese politics in the first half of 2013. Disagreements concerning the law led to the resignation of Lebanon's Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, on March 22, 2013. Mikati grew frustrated after Hezbollah both hindered the passing of an electoral law proposal and refused to extend Major General Ashraf Rifi's tenure as Lebanon's police chief.³⁴

However, Hezbollah now finds its position in Lebanon under growing threat, 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. On September 13, 2012 the U.S. Treasury Department designated Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah for his role in supporting the Assad regime, citing that the organization's "ongoing activity undermines regional stability and poses a direct threat to Lebanon's security"³⁵ In response, Hezbollah officials believe, the United States now seeks to "undermine the party in Lebanon in order to form a new government" that is more pro-democratic.³⁶

Hezbollah abroad

Despite increased attention directed towards the group's international presence in recent years, Hezbollah has demonstrated that it is still both willing and able to carry out attacks abroad. According to leaked diplomatic cables cited by Israel's *Ha'aretz* newspaper, Hezbollah was responsible for the January 2010 bombing of 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.³⁷ This was in addition to six other attempted attacks, all thwarted by Israel.³⁸ While the Israeli diplomats were unhurt, Hezbollah continued to threaten revenge, with the organization's second in command, Naim Qassem, stating in February 2010 that the "commitment exists," but "the (attack) period and specifications, however, will be come in due time."³⁹

There are signs that the organization is adapting as well. In January 2010, the IRGC Qods Force "undertook a massive operational reevaluation... which led to big changes within the IJO [Hezbollah] over a period of a little over six months."⁴⁰ The campaign of violence focused on a three-tiered set of targets: Israeli tourists, government figures, and targets broadly representative of Israel or the Jewish community. Hezbollah was assigned with the task of targeting Israeli tourists.⁴¹

Subsequently, in May 2011, Hezbollah, working in concert with the IRGC Qods Force, attempted to carry out an unsuccessful operation in Turkey targeting an Israeli diplomat.⁴² Qods Force operatives cased the area and recorded the diplomat's routine and afterward Hezbollah members were called in to place the explosive along a route the diplomat often took.⁴³ Then, in January 2012, authorities thwarted Hezbollah attacks on Israeli tourists in Bulgaria, Greece,⁴⁴ and Bangkok.⁴⁵ That May, authorities thwarted another Hezbollah attack against Israeli tourists at the Johannesburg airport in South Africa.⁴⁶ Additionally, at least two attacks within a three-month span target-

ing Israeli officials on Israeli soil were thwarted during 2012.⁴⁷

In July 2012, Hezbollah planned two attacks in Europe, one in Cyprus and the other in Bulgaria. On July 7, Cypriot authorities raided the hotel room of a Lebanese-Swedish man. He had with him both photographs of Israeli targets in Cyprus as well as information on buses carrying Israeli tourists and Israeli flights to and from the island nation.⁴⁸ Then, tragically, on July 18 Hezbollah was successful in bombing a tour bus carrying Israelis in Burgas, Bulgaria. The attack killed the Bulgarian bus driver and five Israelis, and wounded some thirty more.⁴⁹

The organization has also demonstrated new capabilities. In October 2012, Hezbollah launched a drone over Israel. The drone was built in Iran, flown from Lebanon, and traveled 35 miles before being shot down north of the Negev desert.⁵⁰

In all, over the fifteen-month period between May 2011 and July 2012 more than twenty Hezbollah or Qods Force terror attacks were thwarted; by another count, nine plots were uncovered over the first nine months of 2012.⁵¹ In July 2012, Matthew Olson, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center, warned that “we’re seeing a general uptick in the level of activity around the world,” adding that “both Hezbollah and the Qods Force have demonstrated an ability to operate essentially globally.”⁵²

Most prominent, 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.”⁵³ Furthermore, a UN report confirmed that Hezbollah members are in Syria fighting on behalf of the Assad government.⁵⁴ By that time, reports had already emerged that Hezbollah had set up small training camps near Syrian chemical weapons depots in November 2012, thus intensifying the fear that the chemical weapons could fall into the wrong hands.⁵⁵ As of this writing, the Syrian conflict threatens to follow Hezbollah across the border into Lebanon, where Hezbollah remains a destabilizing force, refusing to relinquish its private stockpile of arms to the Lebanese Army.⁵⁶

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