



# HEZBOLLAH

## Quick Facts

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

Numerical Strength (Members): tens of thousands of supporters and members worldwide.

Leadership: Hassan Nasrallah

Religious Identification: Shi'a Islam

*Quick Facts Courtesy of the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism (2019)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Hezbollah (the Party of God) is not simply 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 combined 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 also to revolutionary pan-Shi'a and pro-Iran ideas and sentiments.*

## HISTORY & 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 Iranian Revolution of 1979. Long neglected by the Lebanese government and underrepresented in the country's social and political institutions, Lebanese Shi'ite leaders empowered their disenfranchised community. Eager to follow in the footsteps of the Iranian revolution, young Lebanese Shi'a were driven to break with established parties like *Amal* and gravitated to Hezbollah because of the Israeli invasion and subsequent occupation of southern Lebanon. Iran, motivated to export its Islamic revolution to other Shi'a communities throughout the Middle East, was more than willing to help. Iranian assistance included financial backing and training from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), backed by a Syrian regime seeking a proxy in Lebanon. 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. The group's multiple identities form the foundation and context for its radical ideology. The establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon was a central component of Hezbollah's original political platform, which was released publicly in 1985.<sup>1</sup> The document also prominently features the fight against "Western

Imperialism” and the continued conflict with Israel. Hezbollah is ideologically committed to the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s revolutionary doctrine of *Velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist), creating tension between its commitments to the decrees of Iranian clerics, the Lebanese state, the sectarian Shiite community in Lebanon and its fellow Shi’a abroad. As a result, its objectives simultaneously include establishing an Islamic republic in Lebanon; promoting Shi’a communities worldwide; undermining Arab states with Shi’a 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 paramilitary wing of the IRGC, known as the Qods Force. The consequences of these competing ideological drivers became clear after Hezbollah dragged both Israel and Lebanon into a war neither wanted by crossing the UN-demarcated Israel-Lebanon border, killing three Israeli soldiers and kidnapping two more in July 2006.

Hezbollah receives significant financial support from supporters (particularly Lebanese nationals) living abroad. Over time, these communities developed into a global network available not only to raise funds but to provide logistical and operational support for Hezbollah operations as well. Such support networks 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 the 2012 bombing of a bus full of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria.<sup>2</sup> These activities were facilitated by support networks that the organization maintains in Africa, Southeast Asia, the Americas, and Europe.

In Europe, Hezbollah has for decades leveraged local support networks to help operatives use the continent as a launching pad to conduct attacks or collect intelligence in Israel. The organization’s most successful European operation to date took place on July 18, 2012, when it bombed a tour bus carrying Israelis in Bulgaria. Five tourists and the bus driver were killed and roughly 30 others were injured as a result.<sup>3</sup> (Notably, at least some countries in Europe are now attempting to make the continent a less permissive environment for Hezbollah. Thus, in February 2019, the UK moved to ban all wings of Hezbollah, classifying the movement as a whole as a terrorist organization.<sup>4</sup> In other parts of the EU, however, Hezbollah continues to possess extensive freedom of action.)

Hezbollah has maintained an active support network in Southeast Asia since the 1990s. Hezbollah has also conducted significant fundraising in Southeast Asia, nearly succeeded in bombing the Israeli embassy in Bangkok, Thailand in 1994, and collected intelligence on synagogues in Manila and Singapore throughout that decade.<sup>5</sup> Hezbollah members similarly are known to have procured and cached weapons in Thailand and the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> The network recruited South Asian Sunni Muslims and sent several to Lebanon for training.<sup>8</sup> Such contacts continue; in January 2012, Thai police arrested Hussein Atris, a Lebanese national carrying a Swedish passport, at Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi Airport.<sup>9</sup> Atris led authorities to a three-story building containing a stockpile of 8,800 pounds of distilled chemicals used to make explosives.<sup>10</sup> 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”; it was now clear that the city also served as a hub for explosives.<sup>11</sup>

In Africa, Hezbollah operatives have long helped finance the group’s activities through their participation in local conflicts.<sup>12</sup> Hezbollah also raises funds in Africa from the continent’s local Shi’a

expatriate communities. In some cases, Shi'a donors are unwittingly conned into funding Hezbollah, while others are willing participants in the process.<sup>13</sup> The group likewise engages in operational activities and recruitment on the continent; in 2002, for instance, Ugandan officials disrupted a cell of Shi'a students who were recruited by Iranian intelligence agents and sent 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 alongside new Lebanese Hezbollah recruits and sent home with fictitious covers to establish an operational infrastructure in Uganda.<sup>14</sup>

Hezbollah activity in South America has been well documented, including its frenetic activity in the tri-border region where Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil intersect. 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 as well.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, Hezbollah maintains a sizeable presence 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 smuggled cigarettes to raise funds for the group while maintaining direct contact with Sheikh Abbas Haraki, a senior Hezbollah military commander.<sup>17</sup> Charlotte cell members 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. 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.<sup>18</sup>

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 fact, he had intended to join Hezbollah.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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 transiting the waterway. Kourani allegedly also surveilled potential targets in the U.S., including military and law enforcement facilities in New York City.<sup>21</sup>

Hezbollah's most prominent international operations, however, have been those in support of the Assad regime in Syria. The organization assumed a key role in providing "training, advice and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria" shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011.<sup>22</sup> According to various reports, Hezbollah has had seven thousand fighters in Syria at any given time over the course of the conflict. These forces have redeployed throughout Syria when the group has carried out major offensives. Hezbollah's elite force — the Radwan Brigade — has been redeployed in Syria a number of times to participate in battles in places like Aleppo and Daraa. Hezbollah has also been involved in weapon production for Iran in Syria.<sup>23</sup>

With the winding down of the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah's strategy on Syrian soil has shifted. While its military operations have decreased in scope and operational tempo, the organization has become more deeply involved in "support" activities, which it has coordinated closely with its patron, Iran. This has

included helping Iran to purchase land, invest money, and implement religious and cultural initiatives within Syria.<sup>24</sup> These activities suggest strongly that, like its patron, Hezbollah hopes to put down roots in Syria and establish a long-term presence in the country.

### *Hezbollah in Lebanon*

May 2008 represented a turning point for Hezbollah in its home base of Lebanon. Starting in November 2007, an ongoing crisis surrounding a vacant national presidency set the backdrop for the most violent intrastate fighting in Lebanon since the end of the country's civil war in 1991. In early May of that year, the Lebanese government discovered a Hezbollah surveillance camera at the Beirut airport. Subsequent pro-Hezbollah protests throughout Beirut left nearly 100 dead and 250 wounded.<sup>25</sup> While the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) ultimately deployed and stopped the fighting, Hezbollah successfully leveraged its military strength for political advantage over the 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, leaving Hezbollah the only group in Lebanon with a private arsenal. A public relations coup within Hezbollah during the talks in Doha prevented serious discussion of the issue. Despite a more robust United Nations presence in southern Lebanon in the wake of the July 2006 war, Hezbollah successfully restocked its arsenal of missiles. Indeed, Hezbollah was by then believed to have amassed more rockets, with longer ranges and larger payloads, than it had prior to the 2006 war.<sup>26</sup> These political gains, however, were reversed in May 2009, when the German weekly *Der Spiegel* revealed that the UN special tribunal investigating former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri's assassination had implicated Hezbollah in the killing.<sup>27</sup>

In early January 2011, it became evident that the chief prosecutor of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) would submit a draft indictment to the pre-trial judge for review. While the actual contents of the indictment would be under seal for several months, Hezbollah preempted the indictment's release and withdrew its support for Saad Hariri's government, forcing its collapse.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, aided by sympathetic leaders of Lebanon's Christian and Druze communities, Hezbollah raised Najib Mitaki to the premiership and cemented its control over Lebanon.<sup>29</sup>

In September 2018, the STL prosecution finally submitted its closing arguments with ample evidence to corroborate the link between Hezbollah's leadership and the perpetrators of the killing, including details on their movements and communications ahead of the attack.<sup>30</sup>

Subsequently, on September 16, 2019, The STL issued five new charges against Hezbollah cadre Salim Ayyash relating to the killings of three men, including former secretary-general of the Lebanese Communist Party George Hawi. Pre-trial judge Daniel Fransen, also issued warrants for the arrest of court fugitive Ayyash to the Lebanese government and international police organizations.

Nevertheless, Hezbollah's power over Lebanese state institutions has only grown. Capitalizing on the collapse of the pro-Western "March 14" coalition, Hezbollah and its Lebanese allies won the May 2018 parliamentary elections, and pressured Lebanon's political class to form a pro-Hezbollah majority cabinet.<sup>31</sup> However, Hezbollah now finds its position in Lebanon challenged, in large part due to its role in the Syrian civil war; despite heavy involvement in the conflict, Hezbollah could not deliver a decisive victory that would benefit the Shi'a community. Controversial as well have been the group's links to the devastating August 2020 blast at the port of Beirut, which has further tarnished its national reputation and image.

## 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 to engaging in conflicts beyond Lebanon. Hezbollah deployed a unit to Iraq to train Shiite militants during the Iraq War, where it worked in close cooperation with Iran. Its deep commitment to the war in Syria, visible to this day, underscores the group's new, regional, pan-Shi'a focus.

As Hezbollah became more involved in the war in Syria, its main priority was defending Damascus while protecting the surrounding suburbs and territory that links the Alawite coast to the Syria-Lebanon border. This initiative resulted in the 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. Consequently, Hezbollah's weapons arsenal grew from 33,000 rockets and missiles before the 2006 war to an estimated 150,000 a decade later.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, it expanded from a few thousand members in 2006 to an estimated 20,000-plus as of 2017.<sup>33</sup>

However, Hezbollah has since lost many of its high-ranking commanders and well-trained fighters as a result of the conflict, with official fatalities number ranging between 1,200 and 1,400 as of 2019.<sup>34</sup> Many of its recruited replacements have not undergone the same training usually required by Hezbollah. Furthermore, Hezbollah's extensive military operations in the region have forced the group to cut certain budgets. As most resources are now allocated to military operations, Hezbollah was forced to shrink its available pool of social services.<sup>35</sup> This belt-tightening resulted in serious discontent within the Shi'a community, particularly in poor neighborhoods of Lebanon.<sup>36</sup>

Additional budget restrictions were introduced after the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Iran. During his September 2019 visit to Beirut, Marshall Billingslea, assistant secretary for terrorist financing at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, said that the U.S. sanctions had drastically deprived Hezbollah of funds, especially those coming from Iran. He said Hezbollah used to receive around \$700 million a year from Iran but, thanks to tough U.S. sanctions on Tehran, this cash flow had diminished considerably.<sup>37</sup>

Besides the group's significant interest in Syria, Hezbollah's regional reorientation is most obvious in its increased operational tempo in the Gulf region. In Yemen, a small number of Hezbollah operatives have been training Houthi rebels for some time; 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."<sup>38</sup> Three years earlier, the U.S. government revealed that Khalil Harb, a former special operations commander and a close adviser to Nasrallah, oversaw Hezbollah's activities in Yemen. Harb has also coordinated Hezbollah's operations in Yemen with Iran.<sup>39</sup> Former Hezbollah special operations commander in southern Lebanon Abu Ali Tabtaba has reportedly also been sent to Yemen.<sup>40</sup> Hezbollah has never been open about these deployments, but in April 2015 Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem warned that Saudi Arabia would "incur very serious losses" and "pay a heavy price" as a result of its Yemen campaign.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond Yemen, Hezbollah's support for Gulf region terror groups continues unabated. In August 2015, Kuwaiti authorities raided a terrorist cell of 26 Shi'a Kuwaitis accused of amassing "a large amount of weapons, ammunition, and explosives."<sup>42</sup> After media outlets reported alleged links between the cell, Iran, and Hezbollah, the public prosecutor issued a media gag order on the investigation.<sup>43</sup> Subsequently, in January 2016, authorities in Bahrain arrested six members of a terrorist cell with connections to Hezbollah for a July 2015 explosion outside of a girls' school in Sitra.<sup>44</sup>

In the first half of 2016, three people were found guilty of spying on behalf of Iran and Hezbollah on



two unrelated occasions by Kuwait and Emirati courts.<sup>45</sup> In July 2016, 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.<sup>46</sup>

Because of this aggressive activity in the Gulf, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) formally labeled Hezbollah a terrorist group in March 2016. The Arab League and the OIC followed suit within weeks.<sup>47</sup> Since then, the Gulf States have cracked down on Hezbollah supporters and financiers within their borders.<sup>48</sup>

This seemingly rapid series of condemnations was actually years in the making. In May 2014, Saudi authorities withdrew the business license of a Lebanese national linked to Hezbollah, and a GCC offer to engage Iran in dialogue if Tehran changed its policy on Syria fell on deaf ears.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup>

In May 2018, the GCC states agreed to increase sanctions against Hezbollah's senior leadership as part of its cooperation with the U.S following the latter's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known colloquially as the "Iran Nuclear Deal."<sup>51</sup> 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 primary decision-making body, the Shura Council.

Hezbollah's involvement in the Gulf is a function of sustained geopolitical and sectarian tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pressure increased in January 2016 when Saudi Arabia executed Shiite Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr on charges of sedition and taking up arms against Saudi security forces; in Iran, two Saudi diplomatic compounds were stormed in protest. The Arab League and the OIC both condemned the attacks at Saudi Arabia's request. Lebanon, however, offered only "solidarity." This perceived slight prompted Saudi Arabia to cut off monetary support to Lebanon and pull funds from Lebanese banks.<sup>52</sup> Bahrain and the UAE fell in line with the Saudis, issuing travel warnings and travel bans, respectively, for Lebanon.<sup>53</sup> A month after the execution and protests, Saudi Arabia blacklisted four companies and three Lebanese businessmen, citing their relationships to Hezbollah.<sup>54</sup> The United States had designated these companies and individuals a year earlier, but Saudi actions indicated the kingdom's heightened focus on Hezbollah.<sup>55</sup>

Nasrallah has tried to deflect these actions as Israeli machinations, but Hezbollah and Iran have been recently increasingly active in the Gulf. Iranian, Hezbollah, and Saudi posturing all come against the backdrop of a Gulf concerned with life in the aftermath of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal known as the JCPOA. Gulf leadership was wary of an Iranian financial windfall resulting from the deal; Sunni Gulf states were thus particularly sensitive to Iranian and Hezbollah activity in the Gulf since the announcement of the JCPOA in 2015.

Nasrallah has tried to justify Hezbollah's presence in regional proxy wars by framing 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-Qaeda's] branch in Lebanon and Syria (Abdullah Azzam Brigades) and al-Nusra Front, and al-Nusra Front [are]... 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."<sup>56</sup>

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. He escaped from prison in Kuwait in the early 1990s during the Iraqi invasion there and fled back to Lebanon where he 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."<sup>57</sup>

The assassination of Badreddine shocked Hezbollah; it lost an especially qualified commander with a unique pedigree as the brother-in-law of Mughniyah and a confidant of Nasrallah. Yet most confounding to Hezbollah was that Israel, Hezbollah's arch enemy, was not the assassin. Though Hezbollah outlets quickly pinned the attack on Israel, Nasrallah soon personally announced 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 be clearer: "Within 24 hours we knew who killed Syed Mustafa, don't just try to point at Israel."<sup>58</sup>

Some within Hezbollah believe that the Saudis were likely acting behind the scenes, possibly supporting the Sunni rebels Nasrallah claims were behind the attack. Indeed, there would be historical precedent for this. The Saudis reportedly supported the Lebanese militants targeting Sheikh Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah in a failed assassination attempt in 1985.<sup>59</sup> In fact, the United States has been fairly open about its partnership with GCC countries and others to counter Hezbollah.<sup>60</sup>

Hezbollah's shift toward the Gulf should not be seen as a pivot away from Israel, however. To the contrary, Hezbollah sees a pernicious, budding alliance among the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel that directly benefits the Sunni "takfiri" militants it is fighting in the region. While Hezbollah is taking active measures to prepare for the next, eventual war with Israel, it is eager to avoid conflict at present. Despite the recent tensions between Hezbollah and Israel following a 2019 Israeli attack on a Hezbollah stronghold in Beirut, Hezbollah's response has been very calculated and demonstrated hesitancy and aversion to conflict.<sup>61</sup>

Hezbollah has invested heavily in the Syrian war with both personnel and resources; it desires 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 by targeting Hezbollah's military presence and rocket arsenal in south Lebanon.

Hezbollah is now working to strengthen its deterrence by transforming some rockets into precision missiles. When Israel targeted much of these missile facilities in Syria, Hezbollah moved them to Lebanon, thereby increasing the risk of a war with Israel.<sup>62</sup>

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 Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in the area, had been recruited online by Hezbollah operatives.<sup>63</sup>

### *Hezbollah beyond the Middle East*

Hezbollah's international operations are not limited to its home region. Although the organization's military wing was formally added to the EU's list of banned terrorist groups in July 2013,<sup>64</sup> it has continued plotting attacks across Europe, including in Bulgaria in 2012 and in Cyprus in 2015. The organization also maintains a significant continental presence; Germany's domestic intelligence agency recently reported that Hezbollah maintains some 950 active operatives in the country.<sup>65</sup>

Hezbollah also continued procuring weapons and technology in Europe. 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.<sup>66</sup>

The Treasury Department has, over the years, targeted 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.<sup>67</sup> President Barack Obama signed legislation in December 2015 designed to "thwart" the group's "network at every turn" by imposing sanctions on financial institutions that deal with Hezbollah or its television station, al Manar.<sup>68</sup>

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 in the disputed Western Sahara.<sup>69</sup> The collaboration between the Polisario and Hezbollah appears to have intensified after Moroccan authorities arrested Lebanese businessman Kassim Tajeddine in March 2017.<sup>70</sup>

The group also continues to boast a durable presence in the Americas. 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.<sup>71</sup> According to the DEA report, Hezbollah had relationships with South American drug cartels in an international cocaine-smuggling network. The proceeds funded a money laundering scheme known as the Black Market Peso Exchange and provided Hezbollah with "a revenue and weapons stream."<sup>72</sup>

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."<sup>73</sup> Regardless of Nasrallah's protests, Hezbollah's activities in South America have continued. Since at least the early 1980s, Iran has operated an intelligence network in Latin America – and Hezbollah soon followed suit.

These activities have increased significantly in recent years. In November 2014, 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.<sup>74</sup>

Peruvian counterterrorism police arrested the Hezbollah operative in Lima in November 2014 after a months-long surveillance operation. Mohammed Amadar, a Lebanese citizen, arrived in Peru in November 2013 and married a dual Peruvian-American citizen two weeks later. When police raided Amadar's home after the arrest, they found traces of TNT, detonators, and other inflammable substances. They also found chemicals used to manufacture explosives in the garbage.<sup>75</sup>

In 2016, 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.<sup>76</sup> 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 of drug and arm trafficking. Jalil, also a Lebanese-Paraguayan attempting to enter Argentina on false papers, was arrested on similar charges. 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."<sup>77</sup>

This confidence, however, was dented by severe financial pressure caused by Trump-era sanctions against Iran. Hezbollah's services were no longer able to cater to the whole community, the organization had trouble paying salaries on time, and was forced to laid off contractors and employees. As a result, people began to criticize and question the organization, as well as its patron, Iran.<sup>78</sup> However, Hezbollah leadership was not worried on the long term, confident that it would be able regain its financial capabilities



and restore its relations with its constituency. This calculation appears to have proven correct, as the first half-year of the Biden administration's term in office saw the White House signal its willingness to provide some \$100 million in humanitarian assistance to Lebanon<sup>79</sup> – aid that, once disbursed, will have the corollary effect of alleviating financial pressure on the country's most important Islamist actor.

## ENDNOTES

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