



What Is Hizbullah? Domestic Aspects and International Influence

By Matthew Levitt

Tony Blair Faith Foundation

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A primer on how the group has achieved its dominant position in Lebanese politics, engaged in terrorist activity worldwide, and played a major role in the Syrian war.

From 1975-1990 Lebanon was engulfed in a civil war that created an enormous sectarian divide among its people. In 1982 Israel invaded and occupied southern Lebanon, creating tension through which Iranian agents were able to unify a motley crew of Shiite militia into a new organisation: Hizbullah (The Party of God). The group has three core aims: resistance to the West, resistance to Israel, and the establishment of a Shia Islamic Republic. These three facets of Hizbullah's presence in Lebanon are allied with the group's dependence on Iran to create a powerful political force, buttressed by its provision of social services to cement its domestic position.

ORIGINS

Thirty years ago, three spectacular attacks in Beirut over an 18-month period announced the debut of a potent new force in Lebanon. The U.S. embassy was bombed on April 18, 1983, killing 63, including 17 Americans. The embassy bombing was followed by the two simultaneous attacks on the Multinational Force base in Beirut in October of 1983, which took the lives of 241 Americans and 58 French. The latter two attacks were coordinated by Imad Mughniyeh, a Hizbullah operational leader killed in 2008, and his brother-in-law Mustapha Badreddine, a current Hizbullah leader. Among other suspects were Subhi al-Tufayli, the organisation's first secretary general, and Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah.

In 1986, the CIA reported that Fadlallah "has long been recognised as the spiritual leader of and political spokesman for Lebanon's Shia Hizbullah." Inspired by the Iranian revolution of 1979 to seek an Islamic state in Lebanon, Fadlallah valued his ties to the country, in large part because of the significant military, financial, and political assistance Tehran provided. But he never fully embraced the Iranian revolutionary concept of velayat-e faqih (rule of the jurist), which holds that a Shia Islamic cleric should serve as the supreme head of government. This meant that the group was left simultaneously subject to various tensions: the decrees of Iranian clerics, the Lebanese state, its sectarian Shia community and fellow Shia abroad. Despite Fadlallah's desire to establish an Islamic State in Lebanon, he also recognised the need to maintain the country's religious diversity within an Islamic context.

As Fadlallah's relationship with Iran changed, so did his relationship with Hizbullah. Iran did not appreciate Fadlallah's interference in operational planning, such as his obstruction of Iranian orders for Hizbullah to attack Syrian security forces after their 1987 takeover of West Beirut. In response to such defiance, Tehran decided to circumvent Fadlallah and deal with other Hizbullah officials through their Iranian embassies in

Beirut and Damascus. Iran even established the Council of Lebanon, a nine-member body including the Iranian ambassadors to Beirut and Damascus and the local Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander as well as several Lebanese clerics, but not Fadlallah. He responded by holding informal meetings with Shia clerics and security officials without Tehran's knowledge. However, even as Fadlallah's ties frayed with Iran and Hizbullah, he was revered by Lebanese Shia. His charities remained sources of financial revenue for Hizbullah, but in March 1985 he was killed by a car bomb while leaving his mosque.

Other, more radical voices within Hizbullah would rise in his place, such as the up-and-coming security official Hassan Nasrallah, who sought an Islamic republic in Lebanon that would presage a movement spanning the entire Muslim world. In 1988, CIA analysts reported that "Nasrallah does not represent the mainstream of the movement." But four years later Nasrallah seized leadership of Hizbullah, moving the group's mainstream sharply to a more hardline position.

IDEOLOGY

Nasrallah, born in 1960, first joined the new Shia "Amal" (hope) militia as a teenager in 1975. Three years later he left for Najaf in Iraq, a major center of Shia religious studies, where he studied under future Hizbullah leader Abbas Musawi. After eighteen months they were forced to return to Lebanon when the Iraqi regime cracked down on the seminaries. By the early 1980s, Nasrallah was teaching his own religion classes to recruits for the nascent Hizbullah organisation. He spent a few more months studying in the Iranian religious center of Qom in 1989, only to return again to address domestic political troubles.

Nasrallah's charisma and organisational skills won over many followers. According to a CIA report at the time, "Nasrallah was directly involved in many Hizbullah terrorist operations, including hostage taking, airline hijackings, and attacks against Lebanese rivals." In 1992, Hizbullah's consultative council unanimously elected him to lead the group as secretary-general. Nasrallah's election also reinforced the relationship with Iran, as he was committed to the principle of velayat e-faqih. As recently as 2009, he asserted that "the subject of the velayat e-faqih and the Imamate is at the heart of our religious doctrine, and any offence to it is an offence to our religion."

Indeed, Hizbullah's ideology closely mirrors Iran's in other respects too, including its ingrained anti-Semitism. As a running theme, anti-Semitism can be found at all levels of the Hizbullah enterprise: leaders and members, formal organisations and individual followers, alike. Hizbullah defines itself as "a pure Islamic resistance fighting Israel." This aim at the core of Hizbullah's ideology strikes a strong resemblance to Hamas' commitment to the destruction of Israel and provides the foundation of a relationship between Hizbullah and Hamas. It is known that on more than one occasion the two groups have jointly coordinated attacks against Israeli interests throughout the region. Take, for instance, the "Passover Massacre" suicide bombing that occurred on March 27, 2002, at the Park Hotel in Netanya, Israel. Not only did Hamas rely on the guidance of a Hizbullah expert to build an extra-potent bomb, but according to a former Clinton administration official, "Mughniyeh himself received orders from Tehran to work with Hamas."

DOMESTIC SUPPORT

Aside from Hizbullah's military aspect, the group plays a fundamental role in Lebanese politics and society. For example, Jihad al-Bina, also known as "Construction for the Sake of the Holy Struggle," helped raise grassroots support for Hizbullah by conducting an accelerated reconstruction campaign following the 2006 war with Israel. Flush with money from Iran and operating under the guidance of senior Hizballah leadership,

Jihad al-Bina was used to raise funds for future terror operations and to bolster the group's standing. When the group's intended solicitation targets were thought to oppose Jihad al-Bina's association with Hizbullah and Iran, the organisation employed deceptive practices, applying in the name of proxies not publicly linked to Hizbullah.

But whatever the means and aims of Hizbullah's provision of social services were to the Lebanese people, their objective of creating a strong grassroots support base was successful. In June 2011, Lebanon's new Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, announced the formation of a government dominated by members and allies of Hizbullah. This came just six years after the "Cedar Revolution," which placed the group on the defensive and forced its Syrian patrons to leave the country. For a limited period, Hizbullah's provision of social services and the group's electoral success limited its willingness to openly engage in terror activities abroad. But according to senior State Department officials, while "Hizbullah attempts to portray itself as a natural part of Lebanon's political system and a defender of Lebanese interests...its actions demonstrate otherwise. While Hizbullah leads the governing coalition government in Lebanon and is well known for providing much-needed social welfare support to its constituent communities, it has long complemented these public and legitimate activities with a laundry list of clandestine and criminal pursuits, including acts of terrorism abroad and raising funds through criminal enterprises worldwide."

In fact, it would be a grave mistake to try and argue that there is a distinction between Hizbullah's political wing and its military branch. Indeed, in the words of Hizbullah's Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem, speaking in October 2012: "We don't have a military wing and a political one; we don't have Hizbullah on one hand and the resistance party on the other.... Every element of Hizbullah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, are in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority." It is this remaining commitment to its pan-Islamic, Shia ideology which in the maelstrom consuming the region sets it on a collision course with rival movements across the Middle East.

HIZBULLAH IN SYRIA

Lebanon's Hizbullah portrays itself as an "Islamic resistance movement" fighting Israel, but its deep involvement in the Syrian war is transforming the group into a sectarian militia and Iranian proxy doing the bidding of Syria's Bashar al-Assad and Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at the expense of fellow Muslims. The impact of Hizbullah's involvement in Syria has been significant, as was seen most clearly in the battle for Qusayr in May-June 2013, where Hizbullah gunmen played a decisive role in turning the tide against anti-Assad rebels who ultimately lost the town. That battle also laid bare the myth that Hizbullah was not fighting in Syria, the latest chapter in a story of international terrorism spanning the three decades since the group's founding in the early 1980s.

In 2006 Hizbullah dragged both Israel and Lebanon into a war neither wanted. Two years later, Hizbullah took over downtown Beirut by force, leading to several deaths. Now we have Hizbullah dragging the civil war in Syria into Lebanon. Despite their best attempts to veil their involvement, Hizbullah's destabilising activities in Syria date almost to the beginning of the country's uprising in 2011. Shortly after the conflict began, Nasrallah called on Syrians to support Assad's regime. By June 2011 Hizbullah's involvement was even clearer, as people in the streets began burning posters of Nasrallah and chanting "down with the Assad regime," as well as anti-Hizbullah slogans. The group's desire to keep its involvement quiet took another hit in August 2012 when the US Treasury Department blacklisted Hizbullah for providing support to the al-Assad regime. US officials informed the UN Security Council in October 2012 that "the truth is plain to see: Nasrallah's fighters are now part of Assad's killing machine." Two months later, a UN report confirmed Hizbullah's members were

fighting on behalf of the Assad government—and, indeed, Hizbullah gunmen played a decisive role in the battle for Qusayr in May and June 2013.

Hizbullah's intervention in the Syrian conflict is indicative of its interest in the region. Syria has been Hizbullah's reliable patron for years, a relationship that only grew deeper under the rule of Bashar al-Assad. And yet, Hizbullah's support of the Assad regime is not due to a romantic sense of obligation. Hizbullah is keen to make sure that air and land corridors remain open for the delivery of weapons, cash and other materials from Tehran. Since the conflict arose, obstacles have prevented Iranian planes from delivering cargo to Damascus International Airport, to be transported across the border to Lebanon.

Hizbullah is not only serving its own interests in Syria, but continues to act as a proxy of the Iranian government as well. The Iranian-Hizbullah relationship resembles a "quid pro quo" agreement, meaning that, "Iranian cargo planes deliver sophisticated weaponry, from rockets to small arms, to Hizbullah in regular flights to Damascus from Tehran. These weapons are offloaded in Syria and trucked to Hizbullah camps in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley." In exchange for the weapons delivery, Hizbullah carries out Iran's dirty work. Therefore, it is fair to say that Hizbullah's involvement in Syria is not entirely on its own accord.

Even so, speaking in late May 2013, Hizbullah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah declared that the battle in Syria was Hizbullah's fight: "We will continue along the road, bear the responsibilities and the sacrifices. This battle is ours, and I promise you victory." To that end, Hizbullah went "all-in" fighting alongside Bashar al-Assad regime loyalists and Iran's Revolutionary Guards against Syrian rebels. The group's efforts in Syria indicate that its terror operations worldwide will not be slowing down anytime soon.

FURTHER ABROAD

Syria is not the only country the organisation operates in across the region. Since American and multinational forces withdrew from Iraq, Hizbullah's Unit 3800—created to support Iraqi Shia militias targeting international forces in the country—has been put to work elsewhere, primarily in Yemen. Reports from the Treasury Department and the New York Times indicate that Hizbullah and Iranian personnel coordinated their operations in Yemen, with the former in charge of transferring funds and training Shiite insurgents, and the latter in charge of transferring advanced weapons such as anti-aircraft missiles. Hizbullah operating in the Gulf is not a new phenomenon. Consider, for example, the 1996 bombing by Hizbullah's Saudi branch of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, an attack that left nineteen U.S. Air Force personnel dead, and another 372 Americans wounded.

The group's increased activity in Europe is also significant. Hizbullah networks in the region have long used Europe as a base to recruit members, raise funds, procure weapons, conduct preoperational surveillance, and when feasible conduct operations. The motivations for Hizbullah's international operations vary. Often, it is at the behest of Iran and with Iranian assistance. While the bombing of Khobar Towers was planned and sponsored by Iran, Saudi Shia angry with the repressive Sunni monarchy were more than happy to carry it out. Sectarian solidarity is another common trigger for Hizbullah to act beyond Lebanon's borders. Some cases are purely Hizbullah affairs, such as revenge attacks for the killing of its operatives. A string of aeroplane hijackings in the 1980s were part of an unsuccessful attempt to secure the release of jailed comrades in Kuwait (they eventually escaped in the chaos of the 1990 Iraqi invasion). Typically, however, Hizbullah's international terrorism features an Iranian influence in one form or another.

USE OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

On March 21, 2013, a Cypriot criminal court convicted dual Lebanese-Swedish citizen Hossam Taleb Yaacoub of helping to plan attacks against Israeli tourists on the island the previous July. Before sending him on his mission to Cyprus, Hizbullah first used him as a courier, dispatching him to deliver packages to Hizbullah operatives in places such as Turkey, the Netherlands, and France. Yaacoub described his actions on behalf of Hizbullah as nothing more than "just collecting information about the Jews, and this is what my organisation is doing everywhere in the world." Then, on July 18, 2012, a bomb exploded in one of the seven buses escorting a group of Israelis just arriving in Burgas, Bulgaria, leaving six dead and 30 others wounded. The bomber's two handlers were Canadian and Australian citizens of Lebanese origin and members of Hizbullah. Both are now allegedly hiding in southern Lebanon.

The practice of Hizbullah recruiting operatives with Western complexions, nationalities and passports, and then using these recruits to carry out operations abroad fits a pattern that the group has long employed. Foreign fighters become attracted to Hizbullah's cause for many reasons. For Yaacoub, the Cyprus bomber, it was an honour to be recruited to carry out an attack for the organisation: "I accepted because I considered that [my handler] needed me for something great and I was for them the chosen one." Another foreign national, Israeli Arab Rawi Sultani, was ideologically motivated by Hizbullah's call for "resistance." Sultani initiated contact with a Hizbullah representative who had spoken at a summer camp for nationalist Arab youth to say that he had access to the Israeli chief of staff. The fact that Sultani never collected any significant amount of money during the year he was in contact with his Hizbullah handler indicated that his actions were ideologically driven.

Still other foreign fighters become embroiled in the operations of Hizbullah because of familial ties to the organisation. In January 2012, Thai police arrested such an agent, Hussein Atris, a dual Swedish-Lebanese citizen, trying to flee the country. Intelligence officials surmised Hizbullah had been using Thailand as an explosives hub and decided to use its on-hand operatives and material to target Israeli tourists. During the investigation it was discovered "that one of Atris' relatives, German resident Muhammad Atris, was involved in the past in the Iranian assassination of four Kurdish opposition figures in 1992." Usually having a family member involved facilitated other relatives' recruitment into the ranks of the organisation; familial involvement became a quasi-tradition.

The recruitment of foreign fighters is also based on the needs of Hizbullah. Seeking much-needed intelligence and operational support networks south of the Lebanese-Israeli border, Hizbullah found Israeli Arabs "an especially attractive target for recruitment and handling." Israeli Arabs are full citizens of Israel with complete freedom of movement throughout the country, enabling them to collect information on strategic locations and critical infrastructure. Beyond "honey trap" schemes luring Jewish and Arab Israeli citizens into compromising situations to blackmail them for intelligence gathering, Hizbullah endeavoured to spot and recruit Israeli Arabs staying abroad.

The case of Khalid Kashkoush is an example of Hizbullah employing monetary compensation to recruit operatives. Khalid was an Israeli Arab medical student from the Qalansua who was studying in Gottingen, Germany. While there he was introduced to Dr. Hisham Hassan, who headed the Orphaned Children Project in Lebanon. Dr. Hassan put Khalid in touch with a Hizbullah handler. His handler instructed him to try to get a job at an Israeli hospital, where he could collect information on hospitalised members of the Israeli security forces. In return for his efforts, Khalid was given basic security training and paid 13,000 euros for his

activities on behalf of Hizbullah. Eventually Khalid was arrested by Israeli authorities when he landed at Ben Gurion Airport in July of 2008.

These different motivations for foreign fighters to become Hizbullah operatives have contributed to the group's increasing ability to carry out international terror attacks across the globe. Intelligence reports resulting from the Atris case indicate that Hizbullah operatives were active in the southeastern region of Asia throughout the 1990s, including in Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and even Burma. The group certainly has the capacity to carry out attacks in Thailand and elsewhere in the region. It is also active in South America, where it carried out two deadly attacks in the early 1990s and maintains a presence as a hub for the group's illicit financial activity.

Since emerging in the early 1980s, Hizbullah has sought to present itself as a national Lebanese resistance organisation. Stepping into the vacuum left by the collapse of the Lebanese government during the civil war, it has provided services not only to the Shia community, but to those of other faiths as well. Yet at the same time it has been active in terrorist operations ranging from bombings to hijackings, and its claim to act only in the interests of the Lebanese is wearing increasingly thin with its activity in the past decade. Between provoking an Israeli invasion in 2006, turning its guns on fellow Lebanese in a political dispute in 2008, and now fighting openly in a sectarian war in Syria (alongside Persian Iran, no less), much of Hizbullah's formerly pan-Arab support is dropping away. Hizbullah has always been committed to velayat e-faqih; it may at last be coming back to haunt them.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. His latest book is [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God](#) (2013).