

Hezbollah: Pulled between Resistance to Israel and Defense of Syria

By Matthew Levitt

ON JANUARY 18, 2015, an Israeli airstrike on Syria's Golan Heights targeted a Hezbollah convoy, killing several senior operatives.¹ Among the dead were Jihad Mughniyeh, the son of late Hezbollah terrorist leader Imad Mughniyeh, and Iranian Revolutionary Guard General Mohammed Allahdadi, aide to Qods Corps commander Qassem Suleimani.² Within days, Hezbollah retaliated by firing two rockets at an Israel Defense Force (IDF) convoy in the disputed Sheba'a Farms area along the Israeli-Lebanese border, killing two Israeli soldiers.³ The rare flare-up sparked one of the most violent exchanges of fire between the two sides since the 2006 war. And yet, the flare-up was contained and short-lived. One reason for this is that Hezbollah's overt reaction to the Israeli strike was almost certainly only part of its planned response. Authorities fear that the remainder of the retaliation will be executed abroad using covert operatives acting under reasonably deniable circumstances.

This article examines the strategic calculations behind Hezbollah's retaliation. First, it explains why retaliation was an absolute necessity, not a choice, from Hezbollah's perspective, despite the group's interest in avoiding a full-fledged war with Israel. It then probes the nature of Hezbollah's retaliation in light of the organization's involvement in Syria, popular sentiment among its Lebanese Shi'a constituents, and its current operational capacity. It finds that Hezbollah's retaliation is likely to be two-pronged: an overt attack targeting the Israeli heartland and international attacks targeting Israeli and Jewish interests abroad.

1 Anne Barnard and Isabel Kershner, "Hezbollah Says Israeli Helicopter Strike Killed Five Fighters in Syria," *New York Times*, January 18, 2015.

2 Amos Harel, "Death of Iranian General Brings Tehran back into the Heart of Israel's Conflict with Hezbollah," *Haaretz*, January 19, 2015.

3 Jeffrey Heller and Sylvia Westall, "Two Israeli Soldiers, U.N. Peacekeeper Killed in Israel-Hezbollah Violence," *Reuters*, January 28, 2015.

Necessary Retaliation

Speaking just three days before the Israeli airstrike, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah condemned earlier Israeli airstrikes in Syria and warned of retaliation for any future strikes: "The repeated bombings that struck several targets in Syria are a major violation, and we consider that any strike against Syria is a strike against the whole of the resistance axis, not just against Syria."⁴ Nasrallah went on to stress that responding to such "violations" is the right of the "resistance" and could occur at any time.⁵

In case it was not already clear, Nasrallah sought to remind his Shi'a constituents and neighbors to the south: Hezbollah stands fully prepared to fight Israel despite the group's deep involvement in an entirely different battle in Syria. In fact, during the same interview with the pan-Arab television station Al-Mayadeen, the Hezbollah leader proclaimed that the organization was prepared to invade the Galilee and possessed the advanced weaponry necessary to defeat the IDF should another war break out.⁶ Despite the organization's involvement in Syria, the Hezbollah leader wanted Israel to know that Hezbollah possessed both the missiles and the manpower to deal a crippling blow to Israel.

There is no doubt that Nasrallah's remarks were meant as a threat to Israel: continue your airstrikes in Syria and Hezbollah will strike back decisively. But then Israel called Nasrallah's bluff, putting Hezbollah in a position where it had to follow up on its leader's word or appear weak.

But Nasrallah's inflammatory rhetoric was not the only factor that necessitated retaliation. While not a ranking member within Hezbollah, the symbolic significance of the "martyrdom" of Jihad Mughniyeh for Hezbollah members and supporters alike was undeniable. Remember that Hezbollah had still not avenged the death of

4 Mohamed Salami, "Sayyed Nasrallah: Hezbollah Ready to Invade Galilee, Beyond Galilee," *al-Manar*, January 17, 2015.

5 Ibid.

6 Nizar Hassan, "Hezbollah chief admits Mossad spy found among party ranks," *Daily Star* [Beirut], January 15, 2015.

Jihad's father, Imad Mughniyeh, only further underscoring Hezbollah's need to counter the perception that it was incapable of responding or too weak to do so. The only question was how and where the group would respond.

Part One: Overt Retaliation

But this retaliation required strategic finesse. Having warned Israel of Hezbollah's military capacity only days earlier, the response had to be on a larger scale than the organization's recent, small-scale and infrequent roadside bombs along the Lebanese border and attacks by local proxies on the Golan Heights.⁷ However, in the immediate aftermath of the Israeli airstrike, Hezbollah remained silent on its plans for retaliation, no doubt calculating how to balance revenge with the continuation of the relative peace that has existed on the Lebanese border with Israel since the adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701.⁸ The outcome of this calculation: a two-pronged retaliation, first overtly targeting the Israeli heartland, and second more deniably targeting Israeli and Jewish interests abroad.

The first stage began on January 27, when a number of Hezbollah antitank missiles struck an IDF convoy while it drove through the disputed Sheba'a Farms area, killing two Israeli soldiers.⁹ This act of overt retaliation was intended as a message to Israel that Hezbollah would not tolerate additional attacks against its members and that the organization was not spread too thin in Syria to deal out sharp retaliation.¹⁰ A show of Hezbollah's military capacity, the attack fulfilled Nasrallah's promise of military action in the event of another Israeli airstrike. In this single, swift, and relatively restrained act, the overt part of Hezbollah's retaliation was completed.

7 Isabel Kershner and Anne Barnard, "Hezbollah Attack Along Border with Lebanon Wounds Two Israeli Soldiers," *New York Times*, October 7, 2014.

8 Hussein Dakroub, "Hezbollah silent on retaliation plans," *Daily Star* [Beirut], January 20, 2015.

9 Jodi Rudoren and Anne Barnard, "Hezbollah Kills 2 Israeli Soldiers Near Lebanon," *New York Times*, January 28, 2015.

10 Bassem Mroue, "Hezbollah Warns Israel it won't Tolerate More Attacks," *Associated Press*, January 30, 2015.

Yet Israel was not the only audience the Hezbollah response sought to address. The attack was also meant as a message to the organization's largely Lebanese Shi'a constituents that Hezbollah remains committed to its *raison d'être* despite its deep and continued involvement in Syria. Since Nasrallah's May 25, 2013, announcement that the war in Syria is Hezbollah's to fight, public opinion among Hezbollah's constituency has become increasingly critical of the group.¹¹ Nasrallah's assertion that Hezbollah, "will continue along the road [in Syria], [and] bear the responsibilities and the sacrifices," of its involvement has been perceived as an abandonment of the resistance in favor of the war in Syria.¹² For many of the organization's Shi'a constituents, this shift in focus eroded the organization's legitimacy.¹³ As these doubts have continued to grow, Hezbollah has grown increasingly concerned about convincing Lebanese Shi'a that it has not lost sight of its founding purpose.

The doubts concerning Hezbollah's commitment to the resistance are not unfounded: today most of the group's Middle East operations do not target Israel at all. Indeed, on February 16, Nasrallah publicly acknowledged the not-so-well-kept secret that Hezbollah commanders were operating on the ground in Iraq.¹⁴ And aside from small-scale attacks, many of which have been carried out by local proxies rather than Hezbollah members, in recent years Hezbollah has turned its attention to international targets and the war in Syria. The time was ripe to scratch the resistance itch, and the Israeli assassination of Jihad Mughniyeh proved a perfect impetus for carrying out an overt attack against the Israeli homeland. There is no doubt that the organization hoped that an attack

overtly targeting the IDF would, at least momentarily, quiet doubts as to the organization's commitment to resistance against Israel. As of now, the success of Hezbollah's attack on the IDF convoy remains to be measured.

The nature of this part of Hezbollah's retaliation highlights the irony that has come to characterize the group's expansion of the resistance front into Syria and the Golan Heights. On the one hand, Nasrallah has continuously referred to Hezbollah's activities in Syria as a, "great victory," denying claims that the organization is suffering as a result of their involvement.¹⁵ Similar to his remarks on January 15, Nasrallah asserted in a speech on November 4, 2014, that Israel, "[knows] that going to war with the resistance will be very costly because we are more determined, stronger, more experienced...and we are capable of achieving such accomplishments," as a result of the group's involvement in Syria.¹⁶ According to Nasrallah, expanding the resistance front to include Syria has been beneficial, dramatically increasing Hezbollah's capacity as a resistance force. It is statements like these that necessitated a response to the Israeli airstrike.

However, on the other hand, Hezbollah desperately wants to avoid opening a second front with Israel, as the reality for the group on the ground in Syria is quite different than Nasrallah has continually suggested. In fact, Hezbollah's commitment to defending the Assad regime has taken a heavy toll on the organization's operational capacity. Thus, while Hezbollah wants to maintain its credentials as an anti-Israel fighting force, it can't afford a full-scale battle with the Jewish state in Southern Lebanon while committed to fighting Sunnis in Syria and increasingly forced to do the same at home in Lebanon.¹⁷ Nor does it want to take the chance of inviting the Israeli air force to respond in Syria, where Israeli airstrikes could further damage

Hezbollah and other forces loyal to the Assad regime - the impact of which was aptly demonstrated on January 18. Further, Hezbollah has already lost as many as a thousand experienced fighters to the Syrian conflict, a significant loss for a group believed to have only about 5,000 full-time, highly-trained fighters and as many as 20,000-50,000 part-time reservists.¹⁸

It is for this reason that the overt half of Hezbollah's retaliation was limited to a number of days. Reports that de-escalation was initiated by Hezbollah - via a message sent to Israel through the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) - suggest that, despite claims to the contrary and the desire to boost the organization's standing in the minds of its constituents, Hezbollah leadership is well aware of the organization's military limitations.¹⁹ Thus, the desire to avoid a full-blown military conflict with Israel appears to have tipped the balance in favor of strictly limited overt retaliation.

Part Two: Striking Israeli Targets Abroad

But Hezbollah's retaliation is likely far from over. Precisely because of its desire to avoid opening a second front with Israel at the present time, the Hezbollah threat to Israel today is in some ways more acute oceans away - in plots that can be carried out with reasonable deniability - than along its northern borders. In this vein, Matthew Olsen, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), warned in September 2014, "Beyond its role in Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah remains committed to conducting terrorist activities worldwide."²⁰ The NCTC director continued: "We remain concerned the group's activities could either endanger or target U.S. and other Western interests."²¹ NCTC officials note that Hezbollah, "has engaged in an aggressive terrorist campaign in recent years and continues attack

11 Ali Hashem, "Nasrallah on Syria: 'This Battle Is Ours,'" *al-Monitor*, May 26, 2013.

12 Ibid.

13 Jonathan Spyer, "Behind the Lines: New Opponents, New Challenges in the Middle East," *Jerusalem Post*, October 18, 2014; ShiaWatch, "Hezbollah's Efforts to Safeguard its Image: The Proof by the Poll and by the Rocket," February 9, 2015; ShiaWatch, "Achieving an Open, Quantitative and Community-Based Understanding of Lebanon's Shia Community: Polling Dahiyah," August 20, 2014.

14 Stuart Winer, "Hezbollah Admits Fighting Islamic State in Iraq," *Times of Israel*, February 17, 2015.

15 Dana Khraiche, "Nasrallah: Hezbollah Achieving 'Great Victory' in Syria," *Daily Star* [Beirut], November 4, 2014.

16 Ibid.

17 Jonathan Spyer, "Behind the Lines: New Opponents, New Challenges in the Middle East," *Jerusalem Post*, October 18, 2014.

18 Avi Issacharoff, "After Losing 1,000 men in Syria, Hezbollah builds 'Security Zone,'" *The Times of Israel*, October 31, 2014.

19 Dan Williams and Laila Bassam, "Israel, Hezbollah Signal their Flare-up is Over," *Reuters*, January 29, 2015.

20 Matthew G. Olsen, "Worldwide Threats to the Homeland," Hearing before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, September 17, 2014.

21 Ibid.

planning abroad.”²² Over the past few years Hezbollah plots either failed or were foiled as far afield as South Africa,²³ Azerbaijan,²⁴ India,²⁵ Nigeria,²⁶ Cyprus,²⁷ and Turkey.²⁸ In Bulgaria, Hezbollah operatives blew up a bus of Israeli tourists at the Burgas airport.²⁹ Just this year two Hezbollah plots were thwarted, one in Thailand³⁰ and another in Peru.³¹

In April, two Hezbollah operatives were arrested in Thailand, one of whom admitted that the two were there to carry out a bomb attack targeting Israeli tourists in Bangkok, according to Thai security officials.³² The plots underscored the threat posed by Hezbollah to civilian centers, the officials added. Most recently, Peruvian counterterrorism police arrested a Hezbollah operative in Lima, the result of a surveillance operation that began in July.³³ The operative, Mohammed Amadar, is a Lebanese citizen who arrived in Peru in November 2013 and married a woman of dual Peruvian-American citizenship two weeks later. Shortly thereafter, they moved to Brazil, living in Sao Paulo until they returned to Lima in July 2014. Peruvian authorities were alerted by Israel’s Mossad that Amadar was planning to

return to Lima with the intention of carrying out terrorist attacks. As a result, members of Peru’s anti-terror unit questioned him upon his arrival at the airport and put Amadar under surveillance. When he was arrested in October, police raided his home and found traces of TNT, detonators, and other flammable substances. A search of the garbage outside his home found chemicals used to manufacture explosives. By the time of his arrest, intelligence indicated Amadar’s targets included places associated with Israelis and Jews in Peru, including areas popular with Israeli backpackers, the Israeli embassy in Lima, and Jewish community institutions. The disruption of these plots indicate that, as Matthew Olsen warned, Hezbollah operatives around the world remain busy planning attacks on Israeli interests abroad.

Hezbollah has long been active in South America, from the Triborder Area where the borders of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil meet to Chile and Uruguay, and parts of Asia and Africa. This trend continues, as the State Department noted in its latest annual terrorism report, where it highlighted the financial support networks Hezbollah maintains in places like Latin America and Africa.³⁴ The report concluded that Hezbollah remains, “capable of operating around the globe.”³⁵ This conclusion was underscored in November 2014 when Brazilian police reports revealed that Hezbollah helped a Brazilian prison gang, the First Capital Command (PCC), obtain weapons in exchange for the protection of prisoners of Lebanese origin detained in Brazil.³⁶ The same reports indicated that Lebanese traffickers tied to Hezbollah reportedly helped sell C4 explosives that the PCC allegedly stole in Paraguay.³⁷

The recent revelation that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) provided key intelligence to Israel’s Mossad that led to the 2008 assassination

of terrorist mastermind and ranking Hezbollah member Imad Mughniyeh has renewed the organization’s impetus for international attacks.³⁸ Writing in 1994, the FBI assessed that Hezbollah would be unlikely to carry out an attack in the United States — and put at risk its lucrative fundraising, procurement, and other activities within the U.S. — but the group could still decide to carry out reasonably deniable attacks targeting American or other Western interests around the world in reaction to direct threats to the group or its interests.³⁹ An American hand in the killing of Imad Mughniyeh would certainly seem to check that box. And the group remains active here in the United States as well, as underscored in January when the FBI’s Miami field office released a “request for information” bulletin about a dual Venezuelan-Lebanese Hezbollah operative known both for raising money for the group and meeting with Hezbollah officials in Lebanon to discuss “operational issues.”⁴⁰

The same can be said in respect to attacks targeting Israel. Given the desire to avoid opening a second front on the border with Israel, Hezbollah will undoubtedly opt for attacking Israeli and Jewish targets abroad. Israel’s recent assassination of Jihad Mughniyeh, together with heightened hostility in the wake of recent revelations concerning Imad Mughniyeh’s death, has surely renewed the threat to Israeli interests abroad.

Conclusion

It is clear that part one of Hezbollah’s retaliation was limited to the two days that constituted the most serious escalation with Israel since the 2006 war. That being said, roadside border bombings will surely continue from time to time, and Hezbollah may even claim responsibility for some of these, as they did on October 7, 2014.⁴¹ It is

22 Ibid.

23 Itamar Eichner, “PM reveals: South Africa attack against Israelis thwarted,” *Ynet News*, July 20, 2012.

24 Yossi Melman, “Hezbollah, Iran plotted bombing of Israel embassy in Azerbaijan,” *Haaretz*, May 31, 2009.

25 Dan Williams, “Israel blames Iran after attacks on embassy staff,” *Reuters*, February 13, 2012.

26 “Nigeria foils latest Hezbollah plot to attack Israelis,” *Jerusalem Post*, May 30, 2013.

27 Barak Ravid, “Man detained in Cyprus was planning attack on Israeli targets for Hezbollah,” *Haaretz*, July 14, 2012.

28 Oren Kessler, “Istanbul bombing was Hezbollah strike on Israeli envoy,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 18, 2011.

29 “Israelis killed in Bulgaria bus terror attack, minister says,” *CNN*, July 18, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/07/18/world/europe/bulgaria-israel-blast/>.

30 Barak Ravid, “Hezbollah members arrested in Thailand admit to planning attack on Israeli tourists,” *Haaretz*, April 18, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/1.586220>.

31 Stuart Winer, “Hezbollah operative targeted Jews, Israelis in Peru,” *The Times of Israel*, October 30, 2014.

32 “Report: Hezbollah Attack on Israeli Tourists in Bangkok Thwarted,” *Ynet News*, April 18, 2014.

33 Barak Ravid, “Hezbollah Members Arrested in Thailand Admit to Planning Attack on Israeli Tourists,” *Haaretz*, April 18, 2014.

34 United States Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2013,” United States Department of State Publication, April 2014.

35 Ibid.

36 “Hezbollah has ties to Brazil’s Largest Criminal Gang; Group also Found Active in Peru,” *Fox News Latino*, November 11, 2014.

37 Ibid.

38 Adam Goldman and Ellen Nakashima, “CIA and Mossad Killed Senior Hezbollah Figure in Car Bombing,” *Washington Post*, January 30, 2015.

39 US Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Terrorist Research and Analytical Center, “International Radical Fundamentalism: An Analytical Overview of Groups and Trends,” November 1994.

40 FBI Bulletin Seeking information on Ghazi Nasr al-Dina, January 2015.

41 Isabel Kershner and Anne Barnard, “Hezbollah At-

less clear, however, when and where Hezbollah will carry out the second part of its strategic retaliation. What we do know is that despite being bogged down in Syria, Hezbollah has the capacity to target Israeli interests abroad and, as demonstrated by plots foiled by law enforcement in Thailand and Peru in recent months, has no qualms about doing so.

There is one shift in the geopolitical environment that could rapidly reshape and refocus Hezbollah's strategy: if Israeli warplanes do at some point strike Iranian nuclear facilities, all bets are off. Hezbollah will surely aim their rockets at Israeli critical infrastructure, even as it continues to pick up the pace of Peru-style operations abroad. How committed and effective Hezbollah can be as a fighting force simultaneously battling at Iran's behest both Syrian rebels and the Israeli military remains an open question, but one that both Hezbollah and Iran are likely trying to answer fairly quickly.

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tack Along Border With Lebanon Wounds Two Israeli Soldiers," *New York Times*, October 7, 2014.