

Inside Hezbollah's American Sleeper Cells: Waiting for Iran's Signal to Strike U.S. and Israeli Targets

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Articles & Testimony

If hostilities break out with the United States, Tehran may try to minimize risk to its most important assets in the Middle East by drawing on black ops units further abroad instead.

After Iran shot down an American drone in the Gulf last month, U.S. forces were reportedly **[ten minutes away](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/21/world/middleeast/trump-iran.html)** from firing missiles at Iranian targets when the President suddenly called off the attack. The missile strikes would have killed too many Iranians, he later said, adding he was in no hurry to attack Iran but that “our military is rebuilt, new, and ready to go.” U.S. officials insist that a “**[full range of options](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2019/06/17/Pompeo-Of-course-military-option-on-table-to-deal-with-Iran/7751560744056/)**” remain on the table to deal with Iran’s malign activities, including military options.

But those military options could have significant implications for the security of Washington’s allies in the region, including Israel, especially as they relate to the activities of Iran’s increasingly capable proxies. As tensions spike between Iran and the West—especially over oil sanctions and freedom of navigation in the Gulf—Iran has been able to draw upon its network of militant proxies to carry out attacks on Iran’s behalf. In the words of former IRGC commander Gen Mohammad Ali Jafari, “The upside of the recent (conflicts) has been the mobilization of a force of nearly **[200,000 armed youths](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/testimony/UskowiTestimony20180417.pdf)**” in different countries in the region.”

Overseen by the IRGC’s Qods Force, this informal “**[Shia Liberation Army](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/testimony/UskowiTestimony20180417.pdf)**”

includes Iraqi Shia militias, Yemeni Houthi rebels, and of course Lebanese Hezbollah. Houthi rebels have targeted Saudi airports, border towns, oil facilities, and even targeted a Saudi warship using an Iranian-designed [remote-controlled boat \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rouhanis-threat-to-shut-the-strait-of-hormuz-more-than-bluster\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rouhanis-threat-to-shut-the-strait-of-hormuz-more-than-bluster) filled with explosives. Meanwhile, Iraqi militias have fought in Syria, reshaped the Iraqi political and security landscape in Iran's favor, [fired rockets \(http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/trump-warns-iran-shia-militia-iraq/569989/\)](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/trump-warns-iran-shia-militia-iraq/569989/) at U.S. diplomatic and military facilities in Iraq, and carried out a [drone attack \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-oil-usa/us-says-saudi-pipeline-attacks-originated-in-iraq-wall-street-journal-idUSKCN1TT2LQ\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-oil-usa/us-says-saudi-pipeline-attacks-originated-in-iraq-wall-street-journal-idUSKCN1TT2LQ) targeting Saudi oil facilities. Iran [loaded rockets \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-spent-two-weeks-on-edge-over-irans-missile-boats-11559813523\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-spent-two-weeks-on-edge-over-irans-missile-boats-11559813523) into launchers on Iranian commercial boats in the Gulf in May, just weeks after U.S. intelligence [determined \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-spent-two-weeks-on-edge-over-irans-missile-boats-11559813523\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-spent-two-weeks-on-edge-over-irans-missile-boats-11559813523) Tehran told its proxies to prepare to take a more confrontational approach to the U.S.

Israel is very much within these proxies' crosshairs as well. "If the U.S. attacks us, [only half an hour \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-official-if-us-attacks-israel-will-be-destroyed-in-half-an-hour/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-official-if-us-attacks-israel-will-be-destroyed-in-half-an-hour/) will remain of Israel's lifespan," threatened Mojtaba Zolnour, chairman of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission.

Hyperbole aside, Iran has reportedly begun providing Iraqi Shia militia groups with [precision missiles \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-iran-missiles-hezbollah-in-iraq-threaten-israel-1.7606916\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-iran-missiles-hezbollah-in-iraq-threaten-israel-1.7606916) capable of hitting targets anywhere in Israel, perhaps to compensate for the attack platforms Iran lost in Syria as a result of Israeli airstrikes. Recently, press reports claim Israeli jets [targeted \(https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1839396/security-sources-israel-strike-iranian-sites-iraq\)](https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1839396/security-sources-israel-strike-iranian-sites-iraq) Iranian missile shipments in Iraq that were meant to be transferred on to Hezbollah.

Indeed, Hezbollah is clear that if it comes to an American war with Iran, it wants in on the fight. Interviewed on the group's own al-Manar TV, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah asked and [answered \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-13/iran-won-t-be-alone-if-it-fights-u-s-lebanon-s-hezbollah-says\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-07-13/iran-won-t-be-alone-if-it-fights-u-s-lebanon-s-hezbollah-says) his own rhetorical question about what the group would do in the event of a war between Iran and the United States: "Are we going to sit back and watch? Iran won't be alone in the war, that is clear."

In the unlikely event of a truly full-scale war with Iran, Hezbollah would surely target Israel with salvos of artillery, missile and rocket bombardments. Nasrallah [recently bragged \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Przcf2SGwV0&feature=youtu.be\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Przcf2SGwV0&feature=youtu.be) that this arsenal has "doubled or tripled" since the 2006 war and that it includes weapons capable of hitting anything from the northern border to Eilat.

Nasrallah [claims \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Przcf2SGwV0&feature=youtu.be\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Przcf2SGwV0&feature=youtu.be) Hezbollah could attack northern Israel for as long as any conflict persisted, but also stressed the vulnerability of Israeli population centers and critical infrastructure along the coast from Netanya to Ashdod. "This is the Stone Age," Nasrallah [concluded \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Przcf2SGwV0&feature=youtu.be\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Przcf2SGwV0&feature=youtu.be). "We shall see who will turn the other into the Stone Age." But for all his rhetoric, Nasrallah does not want war with Israel at the present time—especially now that Israel exposed and destroyed Hezbollah attack tunnels burrowing into Israel, and given Israel's continued offensive against Hezbollah's budding military and intelligence buildup on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights.

Moreover, in the context of any conflict short of all-out war, Tehran is unlikely to want to put at risk the most tangible achievement of its proxy strategy, namely the strong military, political and social position of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran may still want Hezbollah to act under such circumstances, and Nasrallah was clear that Hezbollah would not sit

back and watch.

Which is where Hezbollah's external operations apparatus, the Islamic Jihad Organization or Unit 910, comes into play. Over the past several years, Hezbollah IJO activities have been on the rise. The uptick began in 2008 as a means of **avenging** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-strategic-shift-a-global-terrorist-threat>) the assassination of Hezbollah arch terrorist Imad Mughniyeh, and later continued as a factor of Iran's **shadow war** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hizballah-and-the-gods-force-in-irans-shadow-war-with-the-west>) with the West over Tehran's nuclear program.

Hezbollah's last successful attack targeted Israeli tourists **in Burgas** (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-knows-who-is-behind-bulgaria-attack-1.5267912>), Bulgaria, in 2012. But a **long list** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Levitt-20180831-AJC.pdf>) of other plots have since been foiled around the world in places as far afield as Bolivia, Cyprus, Peru, Thailand and the United Kingdom. Hezbollah preoperational surveillance occurred in Canada, Panama, the U.S., and elsewhere.

The **most alarming case** (<https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/new-york-resident-convicted-of-spying-for-hezbollah-1.7251390>) took place in the United States and Canada. According to U.S. prosecutors, **two U.S.-based Hezbollah** (<https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/972421/download>) IJO operatives—Ali Kourani and Samer el Debek—were tasked with carrying out pre-operational surveillance for potential Hezbollah attacks in the United States and Panama.

Authorities **allege** (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/972446/download>) Debek was sent to Thailand to shut down a Hezbollah explosives lab, and that Ali Kourani was directed to **identify Israelis** (<https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/972421/download>) in New York who could be targeted by Hezbollah and to find people from whom he could procure arms that Hezbollah could stockpile in the area. Kourani also conducted surveillance of New York and Toronto airports as well as of FBI, Secret Service and U.S. military facilities in New York City.

The case also offers unique insight into how and when Iran might ask Hezbollah IJO cells to carry out attacks. During one of Kourani's meetings with the FBI, an interviewing agent recalled, Kourani "sat back in his chair, squared his shoulders and stated, 'I am a member of 910, also known as Islamic Jihad or the Black Ops of Hezbollah. The unit is Iranian-controlled.'" Within Hezbollah, the unit reports directly to Nasrallah, according to Kourani, but Iran oversees the unit's operations.

Kourani went on to describe himself to the FBI as being part of a "**sleeper cell** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-isnt-just-in-beirut-its-in-new-york-too>)," and explained, "There would be certain scenarios that would require action or conduct by those who belonged to the cell." Kourani said that in the event that the United States and Iran went to war, the U.S. sleeper cell would expect to be called upon to act. And if the United States were to take certain unnamed actions targeting Hezbollah, Nasrallah himself, or Iranian interests, Kourani added, "in those scenarios the sleeper cell would also be triggered into action."

In the event of war with Iran, Qods Force allies around the region could fire rockets or carry out other attacks targeting Israel. Iran appears to have brokered **an agreement with Hamas** (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-defense-officials-iran-hamas-to-open-gaza-front-if-war-breaks-out-in-israeli-north-1.7610033>) whereby the group would carry out attacks targeting Israel from Gaza in the event that hostilities break out along Israel's northern borders. Iraqi militants could fire rockets at Israel from Western Iraq, or help Iran transport missiles to Lebanon for Hezbollah's use there. Hezbollah operatives could target Israel from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, or across the Lebanese border.

But any of these scenarios invite fierce Israeli retaliation, while terrorist attacks by covert cells often present no easy targets for retaliation. Israeli preemptive measures targeting Iranian proxies' weapons shipments, attack tunnels, and logistics and financing streams are proving effective at undermining their capabilities and denying them various attack options. But if hostilities do break out between Washington and Tehran, both America and Israeli interests are likely to be targeted by Iranian proxy groups, including the "Black Ops of Hezbollah."

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