

Hezbollah's Syria Problem

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Articles & Testimony

The question remains open as to how effective the Iranian proxy can be fighting simultaneously against the Syrian rebels and the Israeli military.

Hezbollah wants the world to know it still wants death to Israel, it's just really busy right now. As Iranian and P5+1 negotiators met in Vienna against a looming deadline and prospects for a deal over Tehran's nuclear program seemed increasingly dim, Iran's primary militant proxy -- Lebanese Hezbollah -- chimed in with news of its own. In an interview with Iran's Tansim news agency, Hezbollah deputy chief Naim Qassem announced that with Iran's help the group had acquired advanced Iranian missiles with "pinpoint accuracy" that it could use in any future war with Israel. In other words, should negotiations fail Israel should think twice before carrying out a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

This is not exactly an empty threat -- though in point of fact Hezbollah has been making noise about its continued focus on fighting Israel for some time now, despite (or perhaps because of) its strong desire to avoid a full-fledged war with Israel at the present time.

In case it wasn't already clear, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah wants anyone who's listening to know this: Hezbollah stands fully prepared to fight Israel despite the group's deep involvement in an entirely different battle in Syria. At least that was the message of Nasrallah's annual speech marking the Shiite holy day of Ashura in November. What he didn't say, and is loath to publicly admit, is that Hezbollah desperately wants to avoid a full-blown military conflict with Israel right now and is therefore limiting its attacks on Israel to small and infrequent roadside bombs along the Lebanese border and attacks by local proxies on the Golan Heights.

In the hornet's nest that is the Middle East, filled with splinter terror groups of all persuasions, Hezbollah -- long financed and supplied by Iran and based in Lebanon -- has proved one of the most resilient, adaptable, and deadliest. Now, in its newest evolution, instead of its traditional strategy of attacking Israel and, occasionally, Western interests, Hezbollah has found itself consumed by the three-year-old war against Bashar al Assad's regime in Syria where, together with Iranian operatives, it's squaring off against Sunnis of all stripes, from Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL

to moderate Sunni rebels, in defense of the Syrian regime.

Today Hezbollah is far more active targeting Israeli and Jewish interests -- especially Israeli diplomats or tourists -- in plots that can be carried out far away from Lebanon and executed with reasonable deniability.

Hezbollah's new strategy, borne out of necessity rather than strength, is a mixed blessing. It marks a significant -- and underreported -- development in one of the longest-running proxy fights in the Middle East, ushering in an era that has increased the security of Israeli citizens at home while simultaneously boosting the risk faced by Israeli tourists and diplomats abroad -- and potentially boosting the terrorism risk to U.S. citizens around the world.

In the plus column for Israel, Hezbollah's army-like militia, the Islamic Resistance, is heavily occupied fighting Sunnis both in Syria and increasingly at home in Lebanon as well, reducing in the near term the likelihood of another full-blown war with Israel. However, Hezbollah's use of local proxies and terrorist operatives dispatched around the world is likely to increase in frequency and, as U.S. counterterrorism officials have warned, these plots may not be limited to targeting Israeli interests alone.

Hezbollah "is fully ready in southern Lebanon," Nasrallah stressed in his recent address, despite being bogged down in the Syrian war, where it has already lost as many as a thousand experienced fighters (this is 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). It is in Southern Lebanon, along the UN-demarcated "Blue Line" delineating the Israeli-Lebanese border, that Hezbollah faces off in the most immediate way with Israel. Hezbollah last instigated a full-blown war there in 2006.

Today, Nasrallah seeks to deter Israel from taking advantage of the fact that Hezbollah is enmeshed in the Syrian war and initiating a confrontation of its own to undermine Hezbollah capabilities in Southern Lebanon. Indeed, this is a message Hezbollah has been proactively peddling for some time now. For example, in October -- for the first time since the July 2006 war -- Hezbollah publicly claimed responsibility for an attack against Israel after two soldiers were wounded by a bomb planted along the Lebanese border. Then, too, Nasrallah pointed to the attack as evidence that despite Hezbollah's massive investment in Syria "our eyes remain open and our resistance is ready to confront the Israeli enemy."

Bravado aside, though, the attack was hardly Hezbollah's best work. It was small in scope and only mildly successful: No one was killed by the relatively small homemade explosive, and unlike previous operations no Hezbollah commandos were on call to grab wounded Israeli soldiers and drag them into Lebanon to be used as bargaining chips -- dead or alive -- in a future prisoner swap. Why? Because 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. Nor does it want to take the chance of inviting the Israeli air force to respond in Syria, where Israeli airstrikes could severely damage Hezbollah and other forces loyal to the Assad regime.

It should therefore not surprise that Hezbollah has chosen to recruit and dispatch local proxies to place roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) near the border fence between Israel and Syria in the Golan Heights. Israeli military officials point to 15 such attacks since March. "It's a proxy organization [that places these bombs], so everyone can say it's not us," an Israeli general told the *New York Times*. "Hezbollah gives them the IEDs and the Iranians give them the inspiration."

In his latest remarks, Nasrallah warned that in any future war Israel "would have to shut down Ben Gurion airport and Haifa port," but that's not exactly news. Hezbollah fired rockets from Lebanon at the Haifa port in 2006 and Hamas shot its own from the Gaza Strip toward Ben Gurion airport this past summer. And yet, Nasrallah was not just talking tough when he asserted that "the resistance is a real threat to Israel." Hezbollah's most significant plots

targeting Israel today are to be found much farther away than the border fences along Israel's northern frontiers with Lebanon and Syria.

"Beyond its role in Syria," Matt Olsen, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) warned in September, "Lebanese Hezbollah remains committed to conducting terrorist activities worldwide." Nor are these plots only Israel's concern. The NCTC director continued: "We remain concerned the group's activities could either endanger or target U.S. and other Western interests."

NCTC officials note that Hezbollah "has engaged in an aggressive terrorist campaign in recent years and continues attack planning abroad." Over the past few years Hezbollah plots either failed or were foiled as far afield as South Africa, Azerbaijan, India, Nigeria, Cyprus, and Turkey. In Bulgaria, Hezbollah operatives blew up a bus of Israeli tourists at the Burgas airport. Just this year two Hezbollah plots were thwarted, one in Thailand and another in Peru.

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 U.S. counterterrorism officials. The plots underscored the threat posed by Hezbollah to civilian centers, the officials added. Authorities were also concerned that the operatives were Lebanese dual citizens, one a French national and the other Filipino.

More recently, Peruvian counterterrorism police arrested a Hezbollah operative in Lima last month, the result of a surveillance operation that began in July. Mohammed Amadar, a Lebanese citizen, arrived in Peru in November 2013 and married a dual Peruvian-American woman two weeks later. They soon moved to Brazil, living in Sao Paulo until they returned to Lima in July 2014. Authorities were clearly aware of Amadar at the time, because they questioned him on arrival at the airport and began watching him then. When he was arrested in October, police raided his home and found traces of TNT, detonators, and other inflammable 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.

Hezbollah has long been active in South America, from the Triborder Area where the borders of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil meet to Chile, Uruguay, and more. 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. According to Brazilian police reports revealed publicly just last week, Hezbollah helped a Brazilian prison gang, the First Capital Command (PCC), obtain weapons in exchange for protecting prisoners of Lebanese origin detained in Brazil. Lebanese traffickers tied to Hezbollah reportedly helped sell C4 explosives that the PCC allegedly stole in Paraguay.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of Hezbollah plotting in Thailand and South America is nothing new: In 1994, Hezbollah nearly blew up the Israeli embassy in Bangkok just weeks before it successfully bombed the AMIA Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires. But this year's plots in Thailand and Peru may have a stronger connection than appears at first glance.

Two years ago, local authorities thwarted an earlier Hezbollah plot targeting Israeli and possibly American tourists in Bangkok in January 2012. Hussein Atris, a dual Lebanese-Swedish citizen and Hezbollah operative, led police to a warehouse where he had been stockpiling explosive precursor materials, presumably for future Hezbollah operations. But that's not all: some of the materials -- including five tons of fertilizer and 400 liters of ammonium nitrate -- were already distilled into crystal form, a step in building bombs. Information on international shipping forms found at the scene indicated that at least some of the explosives -- which were stored in bags marked as cat litter -- were intended to be shipped abroad. Israeli intelligence officials surmised that Hezbollah had been using Thailand as an explosives hub, noting that Atris had rented the space a year earlier. The conclusion should not have

been a surprise: U.S. officials had already determined that Hezbollah was known to use Bangkok as a logistics and transportation hub, describing the city as "a center for a [Hezbollah] cocaine and money-laundering network."

The documents seized at the Hezbollah warehouse reportedly included some suggesting that shipments of explosive precursor materials had already been shipped to South America, though that was never confirmed. Did Hezbollah already ship some of the crystalized explosive material out of Thailand before Thai police raided its explosives hub in 2012? Were the Hezbollah bomb plots thwarted in Bangkok and Peru this year supposed to have used some of the explosive materials from Hezbollah's Bangkok stockpile?

We may never know the answers to these questions, which is just how Nasrallah wants it. He can reasonably deny any knowledge of or role in reported plots targeting Israelis, Americans or other Westerners abroad, even if these are the primary means by which Hezbollah remains capable of targeting Israel today. Sure, Hezbollah has its local proxies on the Golan Heights too, but Nasrallah will not publicly acknowledge those either -- that's the point of employing deniable proxies. It's an odd situation when Hezbollah, which has always been a proxy for Iran, begins to employ its own proxies. But the group has shown in Iraq and now in Syria that it can and does train and deploy proxies of its own -- though these, too, are ultimately proxies of Iran.

This much is clear: Hezbollah remains an immediate threat to Israel, even while it is bogged down in Syria. That much Nasrallah wants us all to know. To be sure, roadside border bombings will continue from time to time, and Hezbollah may even claim responsibility for some of these. But 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 places as far afield as Thailand and Peru -- than it is along its northern borders.

There's one looming unknown in the modern geopolitical environment, though, 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 shoot at least some of those "pinpoint" rockets at Israeli critical infrastructure, even as it continues to pick up the pace of Peru-style operations abroad. As for how committed and effective can Hezbollah be as a fighting force battling at Iran's behest both Syrian rebels and the Israeli military at the same time? That is an open question, but it's one that both Hezbollah and Iran are likely trying to answer fairly quickly.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute, and author of [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god>). Follow him on Twitter: @Levitt_Matt. ❖

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