



Policy Analysis /
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Hezbollah's Message for Israel

by [Matthew Levitt](#)

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Brief Analysis

Given its recent track record of targeting Israelis, Hezbollah's decision to take public responsibility for a new border attack likely has more to do with burnishing its domestic "resistance" credentials than sending a deterrent signal to Israel.

On October 7, 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. In a statement to the media, Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem called the incident a message, noting, "Even though we are busy in Syria [defending the Assad regime] and on the eastern front in Lebanon [battling Sunni militants], our eyes remain open and our resistance is ready to confront the Israeli enemy." Indeed, the timing was no coincidence: the attack occurred on the fourteenth anniversary of Hezbollah's abduction of three Israeli soldiers from the same area in 2000.

Yet the bombing is only the latest "message" Hezbollah has sent in recent years, as seen in numerous unclaimed plots targeting Israelis at home and abroad. To be sure, the group is keen on communicating its displeasure with recent actions it blames on Israel, including the September 5 killing of a Hezbollah operative attempting to dismantle an Israeli listening device in Lebanon, the blocking of arms transfers from Syria to Lebanon, and the seemingly free movement of Sunni jihadists through areas adjacent to the Israeli border. Yet taking public responsibility for the attack likely has even more to do with burnishing Hezbollah's "resistance" credentials among its domestic Shiite constituency.

INTERNATIONAL PLOTS

Hzbollah operatives have targeted Israelis around the world over the past few years, sometimes in order to avenge the death of terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyah, and in other cases as agents of Tehran's shadow war with the West over Iran's nuclear program. Thankfully, the only successful Hezbollah attack abroad was the July 2012 bombing of a tour bus in Burgas, Bulgaria, which killed five Israelis and a local bus driver. Around the same time, a Swedish Hezbollah operative named Hossam Yaacoub was arrested in Cyprus for surveilling Jewish targets on the island; he later told local police that "this is what my organization is doing everywhere in the world."

Other Hezbollah plots either failed or were foiled as far afield as South Africa, Azerbaijan, India, and Turkey. The latest occurred in Thailand this April, when authorities arrested two Hezbollah operatives -- one a dual Lebanese-French citizen, the other a dual Lebanese-Filipino citizen -- who were planning to attack Israeli tourists in Bangkok.

MIDDLE EAST OPERATIONS

Hzbollah has also been targeting Israeli interests closer to home. In August, military prosecutors in Amman charged seven Jordanians and one Syrian with plotting to attack the Israeli embassy and U.S. soldiers. The charges include belonging "to an unlawful society [Hezbollah] with the intention of committing terrorist acts in the Kingdom of Jordan and against Jordanian interests abroad, in addition to the possession of automatic weapons with the intention of using them illegally to carry out terrorist acts."

Most of the group's other Middle East operations do not involve Israel at all, however, which may explain why Hezbollah felt the need to underscore its continued commitment to "resistance" on October 7. As reports emerge revealing the extent of its activities against Sunnis across the region, the group risks being seen as an increasingly sectarian fighting force acting at Iran's behest rather than a Lebanese actor focused on fighting Israel.

In Yemen, for example, two suspected Hezbollah members were freed from jail on September 25 after Shiite Houthi rebels seized the capital. Three Iranians believed to be members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were reportedly released the next day. The Hezbollah operatives had been held for around three years in the southern port city of Aden, where they were captured on suspicion of planning to provide military training to Houthis. According to an August 2013 U.S. Treasury release, Hezbollah and Iranian Qods Force 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.

Hezbollah is also active in Iraq -- as group leader Hassan Nasrallah pledged in June, "We are ready to sacrifice martyrs in Iraq five times more than what we sacrificed in Syria in order to protect [Shiite] shrines." Hezbollah special operations personnel first began training and supporting Iraqi Shiite militants in 2003, aided financially and materially by the IRGC. The group's operations abated after U.S. troops left Iraq but have resumed since the "Islamic State"/ISIS began its offensive in June (see [PolicyWatch 2277, "Hezbollah in Iraq: A Little Help Can Go a Long Way"](#)).

PENETRATING THE ISRAELI HEARTLAND

At the same time, Hezbollah continues to pursue tried and true means of targeting the Israeli heartland, as shown in recent reports regarding activity in the Golan Heights and the recruitment of Israeli Arabs. At least five Israeli Arabs have been charged with spying for Hezbollah in the past five years. In October 2010, suspect Ameer Makhoul pled guilty to contact with a foreign agent, conspiring to assist an enemy, and espionage for Hezbollah.

In August 2009, a young Israeli Arab named Rawi Sultani was arrested for spying on Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff at the time. While at a summer camp for nationalist Arab youths in Morocco the previous year, Sultani had told a Hezbollah agent that he went to the same gym as Ashkenazi; when he returned home, he began passing information about the general's movements to his Hezbollah handlers.

In June 2012, Israeli authorities arrested eleven men who were trying to smuggle twenty kilograms of C4 explosives

from Lebanon, aided by Israeli Arab suspect Abed Zoabi, a known Hezbollah-linked drug smuggler. The explosives were reportedly meant for attacks on Israeli officials.

In September of that year, Israeli Arab suspect Milad Hatib was captured just before he was to give Hezbollah targeting information on President Shimon Peres. He had also collected intelligence on other public figures, army bases, defense manufacturing plants, and weapons storage facilities.

Another Israeli Arab, Zaher Omar Yusefin, was indicted on numerous charges in June 2013, including contact with a foreign agent, handing potentially valuable information to the enemy, and aiding an unlawful association. While on a religious pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, he had allegedly met with Hezbollah operatives.

More recently, an Israeli Arab journalist was arrested for Hezbollah ties in April, and sixteen more Israeli Arabs were arrested in July for Hezbollah-linked drug dealing. The latter group was also trying to import weapons, "possibly for a Hezbollah-sponsored attack during Operation Protective Edge," according to the *Times* of Israel.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah activity has heated up Israel's borders with Lebanon and Syria. The October 7 incident came just two days after an Israeli patrol prevented a cross-border incursion from Lebanon, according to the Israeli military. And in March, two bombs targeting IDF patrols detonated in the space of four days just inside Israeli-controlled territory; the first exploded along the Lebanese border and resulted in no casualties, but the second, along the Syrian border, wounded four soldiers. The IDF responded with artillery fire against a Hezbollah post in Lebanon and a Syrian army post, respectively. Israeli security officials categorized both bombs as retribution for an IDF strike that had taken out an arms convoy destined for Hezbollah in late February.

HEZBOLLAH MESSAGING

Given all of the above, it is hard to see exactly what new message the October 7 attack might have been meant to convey to Israel that Hezbollah has not regularly conveyed for some time, notwithstanding the group's anger about recent developments. Israeli authorities are very clear about the ongoing threat Hezbollah poses at home, in the region, and beyond. As one official explained, Israel has been able to deter Hezbollah from doing anything big along the border, balancing its policy toward the group against the backdrop of the Syrian war. "We have each found ways to communicate through actions," he added, noting the limited nature of Hezbollah retaliation in the north thus far.

In other words, the message behind the latest attack was likely aimed at Hezbollah's domestic audience as much as Israel. The Lebanese public may be forgiven for thinking that the group's attention is focused solely on Syria at the moment. Nasrallah has issued numerous statements affirming Hezbollah's commitment to the war next door, and while he has been careful to note that the group is "defending Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria," it is difficult to sell the idea that fighting Sunnis in Syria constitutes defending Palestine.

What is new here is not that Hezbollah targeted Israelis, but that it publicly took responsibility for the attack. Previously, the group has maintained a veneer of plausible deniability to avoid massive Israeli retaliation. Yet it now seems increasingly concerned about convincing Lebanese Shiites that it has not lost sight of its founding purpose. Ironically, Hezbollah appears to have done a better job communicating with its enemies than with its friends.

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