

Could Hezbollah Retaliate for Syria Strikes?

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If U.S. strikes are seen as seriously undermining the Assad regime's viability, Hezbollah's global networks could be called on to retaliate against Israeli or Western interests.

Though delayed to obtain Congressional support, US airstrikes targeting Syria are likely to occur in the near future. The more limited the strikes, the less likely Syria, Iran or Hezbollah retaliate in any significant fashion. But in the event they do decide to strike back, Hezbollah is the most likely vehicle. And while the group could rain missiles down on northern Israel, it is more likely to strike with reasonably deniable terrorist attacks in an effort to make it more difficult for the West to strike back.

In fact, for some time now Hezbollah operatives have been trolling the globe targeting Israeli tourists abroad. Last July marked the first successful international attack by the group in Burgas, Bulgaria, when six people, including five Israelis, were killed on a bus leaving the airport. Just two weeks earlier, Hezbollah agent Hussam Yaacoub was arrested in Cyprus where he was preparing for a nearly identical attack. Yaacoub, who has since been convicted, admitted to police: "It was just collecting information about the Jews, and this is what my organization is doing everywhere in the world."

Earlier, in January 2012, Thai police arrested Hussein Atris, a Lebanese national who also carried a Swedish passport, trying to flee the country. Intelligence officials surmised that Hezbollah had been using Thailand as an explosives hub -- Atris rented the space a year earlier -- and decided to use its on-hand operatives and material to target Israeli tourists.

This past May, three Lebanese suspects were arrested in Nigeria, one of whom had a considerable weapons cache hidden at his home. They were believed to be planning attacks against both Western and Israeli targets.

According to the US Treasury Department, Hezbollah has an "expansive global network" that "is sending money and operatives to carry out terrorist attacks around the world."

Now with a more direct threat to its interests, Hezbollah is unlikely to ease up on its ongoing global campaign.

But even these latest activities -- some related to Hezbollah's efforts to avenge the 2008 death of Imad Mughniyeh and others tied to Iran's shadow war with the West -- while increased in pace and scope, are hardly new. Following the assassination of the notorious Mughniyeh, Hezbollah, in consultation with its patron Iran, merely revitalized operations, with Hezbollah focused on "soft targets" (Israeli citizens), and Iran focused on "hard targets" (Israeli and Western diplomats).

Hezbollah was well placed to take on these roles, with decades of experience operating all over the world, from South America to Southeast Asia.

Hezbollah first made a name for itself in the 1980s with large-scale suicide attacks in Lebanon, including attacks on the US embassy and French and US military bases. This month marks the 30th anniversary of the Marine barracks bombing in Beirut.

Hezbollah then expanded its operations further into the Middle East -- Kuwait in particular -- then Europe. In 1992 and 1994 Hezbollah truck bombs struck in Argentina, first hitting the Israeli embassy and then hitting the AMIA Jewish community center. In 1996, another large-scale attack was successful -- this time targeting the Khobar Towers military housing at a base in Saudi Arabia.

Ironically, it would be another organization's large-scale suicide attack that, for a time, would change Hezbollah's calculus; following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, Hezbollah's operational attacks declined noticeably, but the networks were not abandoned, just refocused on fundraising and logistics. Networks in South America embedded themselves into global narcotics trafficking networks, shipping drugs to other Hezbollah agents across the Atlantic to West Africa along the tenth parallel, known to smugglers as "Highway 10." From there drugs would travel to Europe and the Middle East, with the profits sent to Lebanon. In one case, Hezbollah agent Ayman Joumma was laundering as much as \$200 million in drug money a month.

In North America, a case that began in criminal enterprises led to a treasure trove of information on Hezbollah's global procurement network and financial fraud network, including evidence of Hezbollah's attempts to obtain MANPADs in addition to various other types of military equipment from Europe and North America. The case also led to an undercover agent being presented with high-quality forged passports from several European countries and Canada, in addition to several samples of very high-quality counterfeit currencies, including US dollars and Euros.

Today, Hezbollah is bogged down in Syria, where it has taken significant losses, but it has also gone all-in on the side of the Assad regime, to the extent that it sees its own survival wrapped up in the survival of the Assad regime. If Western strikes are seen as limited and intended only to punish, not remove, the Syrian regime, then Hezbollah & Co. may not retaliate at all. But in the event strikes are seen as seriously undermining the regime's continued viability, Hezbollah's global networks could be called upon to retaliate against Israeli or Western interests.

Matthew Levitt directs The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and is 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). ❖

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