

Tough Times for Hezbollah

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Aug 29, 2013

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Articles & Testimony

In this excerpt from his new book on Hezbollah, Matthew Levitt discusses how destabilizing activities in Syria and ongoing money problems have hurt the group.

In July 2012, U.S. National Counterterrorism Center director Matthew Olsen warned that while Iran and Hezbollah had not yet hit targets in the United States, that could soon change. "We're seeing a general uptick in the level of activity around the world," he noted, adding that "both Hezbollah and Iran's Qods Force have demonstrated an ability to operate essentially globally."

In fact, the Hezbollah-Qods Force threat has sometimes eclipsed that of al-Qaeda. "There are times when we are briefing the White House [on terror threats and] at the top of the list are Hezbollah or Iran," according to Olsen.

At home in Lebanon, too, Hezbollah remains a destabilizing force, refusing to relinquish its private stockpile of arms to the Lebanese Army, despite periodic explosions of poorly stored weapons in which Lebanese citizens are killed. "We consider our arms like blood flowing in our veins," Hezbollah Shura Council member Mohammad Yazbek explained in October, 2012, pledging not to turn over the party's weapons "no matter what the costs are."

The indictment of four Hezbollah members accused of assassinating Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the internecine Sunni-Shia violence in West Beirut in 2008 also have affected the group's popularity on the home front. In 2012, when the government of New Zealand blacklisted Hezbollah's military wing, it did so in part based on the group's "pre-planned and well-coordinated operation" to take over West Beirut, and the group's use of machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades during street battles.

But it is the group's destabilizing activities in Syria since that country's uprising began in 2011 that have, as a journalist in Lebanon put it, "torn away the [Hezbollah] party's mask of virtue."

Within weeks of the uprising, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah himself called on all Syrians to stand by Syria's Assad regime. As reports emerged in May 2011 that Iran's Qods Force was helping the Syrian regime crack down on

anti-government demonstrators, Hezbollah denied playing "any military role in Arab countries." But by the following month, Syrian protesters were heard chanting not only for Assad's downfall but also against Iran and Hezbollah. Video footage showed protesters burning posters of Nasrallah.

According to a senior Syrian defense official who defected from the regime, Syrian security services were unable to handle the uprising on their own. "They didn't have decent snipers or equipment," he explained. "They needed qualified snipers from Hezbollah and Iran."

Over time, Hezbollah increasingly struggled to conceal its on-the-ground support of the Assad regime. In August 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department blacklisted Hezbollah, already on the department's terrorism list, this time for providing support to the Assad regime. Since the beginning of the rebellion, Treasury explained, Hezbollah had been providing "training, advice and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria's increasingly ruthless efforts" against the opposition.

Most funerals for those killed in the fighting were quiet affairs, as Hezbollah tried to keep a lid on the extent of its activities in Syria, but news began to leak. In August 2012, Hezbollah parliamentarians reportedly attended the funeral of military commander Musa Ali Shehimi, who "died while performing his jihadi duty." A few weeks later, another Hezbollah military commander, Ali Hussein Nassif, was killed in Syria, along with two bodyguards, also "while performing his jihadi duties," according to a Hezbollah newspaper.

Two months later, a UN report confirmed Hezbollah members were in Syria fighting on behalf of the Assad government. Amid increasing concern that the struggle in Syria would engulf the region in conflict, Hezbollah set up training camps near Syrian chemical weapons depots in November 2012. According to one senior U.S. official, "The fear these weapons could fall into the wrong hands is our greatest concern."

Hezbollah has always portrayed itself as a vanguard force standing up for the dispossessed in the face of injustice. Thus, supporting a brutal Syrian Alawite regime against the predominantly Sunni Syrian opposition risked shattering a long-cultivated image. In the end, Hezbollah's strategic necessity of preventing the collapse of the Assad regime -- which, if replaced by a regime representing the country's Sunni majority, would, at the least, be far less friendly to Hezbollah and possibly oppose it outright -- took precedence over the need to maintain the party's image.

Money problems also have exacerbated Hezbollah's situation.

Flush with revenues from skyrocketing oil prices, Iran reportedly had ramped up its funding to defray Hezbollah's soaring costs as it attempted to rebuild following its 2006 war with Israel. The funds went toward fulfilling Hezbollah's unprecedented needs in areas such as restocking weapons supplies, investing in reconstruction, and buying favor within both the various sectarian communities and Lebanese towns and villages that suffered damage during the war. The 2009 Lebanese elections also were expensive, with Hezbollah increasingly desperate for support in order to compete with its Sunni political rivals, who were funded by Saudi Arabia. According to one report, as the election neared, Iran allegedly pledged as much as \$600-million to Hezbollah for its political campaign. In recent years, Israeli sources estimated, Iran had provided Hezbollah some \$1 billion in direct military aid.

With this influx of Iranian money, Hezbollah hired more people and invested in more programs, assuming the inflated support would persist. Yet just as Hezbollah accustomed itself to a larger budget, Iran became a much less reliable donor. By mid-January 2009, oil prices had fallen to about \$36 per barrel and remained under \$60 until May, drastically reducing Iran's oil profits. International sanctions against Iran's nuclear program, meanwhile, became harsher. Such factors, combined with crippling subsidies for basic commodities and soaring inflation have severely hampered Iran's economic growth.

The economic pressures on Iran, according to Israeli intelligence, forced the regime to temporarily slash its annual budget for Hezbollah by up to 40% in early 2009. As a result, Hezbollah was compelled to enact austerity measures,

reducing salaries and placing several building projects on hold. Hezbollah operatives feared for their jobs, and Hezbollah beneficiaries feared for their handouts. The ensuing cutbacks caused tension within the organization as certain programs and activities were prioritized over others.

Suddenly constrained after years of abundant Iranian funding, Hezbollah turned to its preexisting criminal enterprises to boost its assets. The income earned through these illicit enterprises is viewed by the organization as critical for providing social services to an expanding swath of the Lebanese electorate, paying the families of its fighters, and investing in its growing arsenal of rockets and other advanced weapons.

Excerpted from *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*

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