

Why Hezbollah Had a Really Bad Week

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

Whether or not the newly indicted Hizballah members are convicted in The Hague, the verdict on the group in the Middle East court of public opinion will be guilty.

Back in 2006, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah was riding high. Having fought the Israeli army to a standstill, the organization's leader Hassan Nasrallah declared "divine victory." The war was a public relations coup for the militia, which emerged from the campaign as the most favorable personification of Shiism in the largely Sunni Muslim world. So impressive was the alleged victory that the campaign sparked a widely reported trend of conversion to Shiite Islam in the region. But if 2006 was a divine victory, this week's Special Tribunal on Lebanon (STL) indictments of four Hezbollah officials and affiliates in connection to the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri may prove a divine defeat.

While the first reports of a Hezbollah role in the assassination of Hariri surfaced some two years ago, the formal announcement of the indictments will likely serve as an exclamation point to a longer process of depreciation in the group's reputation that started in 2008, when the organization invaded and occupied Beirut, turning the weapons of "the resistance" on the Lebanese people. That depreciation continued through 2009, when the organization's chief financier was arrested in a Bernie Madoff-like Ponzi scheme. More recently, in an ironic twist, Hezbollah -- which at one time was known as the "Party of the Oppressed" -- has emerged as the strongest regional backer of Syria's murderous Assad regime. Straining credulity, Nasrallah himself has now given two speeches vouching for Assad's pro-reform bona fides.

Now, for an organization that has long described itself as "the Resistance" to Israel, the revelation that it also specializes in killing Sunni Muslims will, at a minimum, be problematic. Although Nasrallah has spent the better part of the past two years trying to discredit the tribunal, few in the largely Sunni Muslim Middle East will question the court's accusation that the militia played a central role in the murder of Hariri, the leader of Lebanon's Sunni community. Indeed, the Arab Spring has contributed to a spike in Sunni-Shiite tensions. Pro-democracy demonstrations in Bahrain, for example, were largely seen by Gulf Arabs as an attempt by the Shiite theocracy in Iran to subvert the Sunni monarchy. In Syria, meanwhile, the rallying cry of the largely Sunni Muslim opposition to the Alawite Assad regime has been "No to Iran, No to Hezbollah!" Given these sentiments -- and despite the residual respect for the accomplishments of the organization -- the indictment will likely be seen through a largely sectarian prism.

Moreover, the accusations are bound to foment discontent within Nasrallah's organization, and potentially result in some diminished support for the militia in Lebanon. While they will not come as a shock to anyone, of course, they will reopen old wounds, enraging Lebanon's Sunni Muslims and, perhaps, disillussioning a few of Hezbollah's Christian allies. At the same time, some Shiites -- Hezbollahis and the organization's constituents -- will likely view the indictments as a liability and may seek to provoke another conflict with Israel, a la 2006, to distract attention from the tribunal. But regardless of Nasrallah's bravado, Shiites in south Lebanon do not crave another costly war with Israel or a return to civil war at home.

To be sure, notwithstanding the indictment of four of its lieutenants, Hezbollah will remain firmly in control of Lebanon, both politically and militarily. But the organization's stature in the wider Muslim world will be irrevocably diminished, and the change in status of this once seemingly holy Shiite organization will likewise further undermine the position of Iran and Syria in the region. It could also undermine Hezbollah in the eyes of Europe, where the militia has long benefitted from the Continent's inexplicably tolerant view of the group's "political" wing. Indeed, given the European Union's expressed disgust with the ongoing atrocities perpetrated by the Assad regime and its growing frustration with the clerical regime in Tehran, the EU might be inclined to shift its views and finally lump Hezbollah in with these irredeemable regimes.

Until then, despite United Nations Resolutions calling for Lebanon to render the indicted individuals, it is all but certain Hezbollah won't cooperate with the Special Tribunal. But while the trigger men themselves may slip the noose and be tried by the STL in absentia, the Shiite militia and its sponsors that ordered the Hariri hit will pay a steep price. Indeed, there may or may not ultimately be a conviction in The Hague, but in the Middle East court of public opinion, the verdict on Hezbollah will be guilty.

David Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the [Program on Arab Politics \(/template102.php?](/template102.php?SID=1&newActiveSubNav=Program%20on%20Arab%20Politics&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D1&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)

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