

Hizballah Campaigns at Home, Exposed Abroad

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Brief Analysis

As the Hizballah-led March 8 coalition campaigns ahead of Lebanon's June 7 elections, the group has been forced to contend with the unexpected exposure of its covert terrorist activities both at home and abroad. At home, Hizballah now stands accused of playing a role in the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Abroad, law enforcement officials have taken action against Hizballah support networks operating across the globe, including in Egypt, Yemen, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Azerbaijan, Belgium, and Colombia. Together, these activities pose what Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah recently described as "the largest and most important and serious challenge" facing Hizballah today.

Implicated in Hariri Assassination

Last week, the German weekly Der Spiegel revealed that the UN special tribunal investigating Hariri's assassination has now implicated Hizballah. According to the report, which cites Lebanese security sources, investigators identified cell phones linked to the plot and found that "all of the numbers involved apparently belonged to the 'operational arm' of Hizballah." The report identified Abdulmajid Ghamlush as one of the main suspects and described him as "a Hizballah member who completed training courses in Iran." The investigation of Ghamlush, who reportedly purchased the mobile phones, led officials to Hajj Salim, the alleged mastermind of the assassination plot and commander of a "special operational unit" reporting directly to Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah.

Cells Exposed in Egypt, Yemen

In April, Egyptian authorities publicized the November 2008 arrest of dozens of Hizballah operatives accused of funneling arms to Hamas and targeting Israeli tourists and Suez Canal shipping. According to Egyptian prosecutors, the operatives were instructed to collect intelligence from villages along the Egypt-Gaza border, at tourist sites, and at the Suez Canal. Nasrallah himself confirmed to the Financial Times that one of the men arrested was Sami Shihab, a Hizballah member who was on "a logistical job to help Palestinians get [military] equipment." The cells reportedly established commercial businesses as fronts for their operational activities, purchased apartments in al-Arish and the Egyptian side of Rafah for use as safe houses, and contacted criminal elements in Egypt to procure forged Egyptian passports so they could leave Egypt as needed and purchase or rent apartments. Some of the cell members reportedly worked for the Egyptian bureau of al-Manar, Hizballah's satellite television station, as cover for their activities in Egypt.

Following the exposure of the Hizballah cells operating in Egypt, UN special envoy Terje Roed-Larsen commented that there has recently been "a growing concern that Hizballah has engaged in clandestine and illegal militant activities beyond Lebanese territory." The following month, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salih publicly accused Hizballah of training Shiite rebels in Yemen.

African Support Network Designated

Also in May, the U.S. Treasury Department added two Africa-based Hizballah supporters, Kassim Tajideen and Abdulmenhem Qubaisi, to its list of designated terrorists. According to information released by Treasury, Tajideen has contributed tens of millions of dollars to Hizballah and has funneled money to the group through his brother, a Hizballah commander in Lebanon. Tajideen, a dual Lebanese-Sierra Leonean citizen, and his brothers also run cover companies for Hizballah in Africa, according to Treasury. In 2003, following a four-month international investigation by Belgium's Economic Crimes Unit, Tajideen was arrested in Belgium in connection with fraud, money laundering, and diamond smuggling. Judicial police raided the Antwerp offices of Soafrimex, a company managed by Tajideen, arrested several of its officials, and froze its bank accounts on charges of "large-scale tax fraud, money laundering, and trade in diamonds of doubtful origin, to the value of tens of millions of Euros."

According to Treasury, Qubaisi is a Hizballah supporter and fundraiser who functions as Nasrallah's "personal representative" in the country and also "helped establish an official Hizballah foundation in Cote d'Ivoire, which has been used to recruit new members for Hizballah's military ranks in Lebanon."

These designations are particularly timely, coming just a month after Israeli officials issued warnings to Israeli businesspersons traveling to Europe in response to what was described as "pinpoint" intelligence of a specific threat. In August 2008, Israel issued similar warnings of a pending Hizballah attack targeting Israelis in Africa. A few weeks later, senior Israeli officials confirmed that two attempts by Hizballah operatives to kidnap Israeli citizens abroad had been thwarted.

Tied to Baku Bomb Plot

Last week, the Los Angeles Times ran the first public details of a Hizballah and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps plot to bomb the building housing the Israeli, Thai, and Japanese embassies as well as a radar tower in Baku, Azerbaijan. Israeli officials have said that the operatives also planned to kidnap the Israeli ambassador to Azerbaijan. The plot was foiled last year in the weeks following the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, Hizballah's chief of external operations. Azeri prosecutors are now trying two Lebanese Hizballah operatives, Ali Karaki, described as "a veteran of Hizballah's external operations unit," and Ali Najem Aladine, a "lower-ranking explosives expert." The two men reportedly traveled to Iran several times, using Iranian passports. When they were arrested, police found in their car explosives, binoculars, cameras, pistols with silencers, and surveillance photographs.

Colombian Indicted in 1994 AMIA Bombing

One week prior to the exposure of the Baku plot, Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman announced that an international arrest warrant had been issued for Samuel Salman al-Reda, a Colombian of Lebanese descent and suspected Hizballah operative who previously lived in Buenos Aires and is charged with playing a key role in the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish charities headquarters that killed 85 people and wounded approximately 300. According to the original AMIA indictment, a government witness identified al-Reda as a Hizballah member who fought in southern Lebanon. The indictment says al-Reda coordinated the activities of "dormant" cells in the triborder area where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet and provided "all the necessary support" to carry out the attack. According to information provided by the Argentine intelligence service, SIDE, and cited in the AMIA indictment, al-Reda is also suspected of being a senior operative involved in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. An FBI report on the AMIA bombing notes that "additional information has identified

Samuel Reda as an active member of Hizballah who was in Buenos Aires during the attack after having moved from the city of Iguacu Falls, Brazil. It is alleged [that] Reda was the contact for members of Hizballah, of Iran, and of Lebanon."

Conclusion

On May 29, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah gave his final major address before the elections. The speech was broadcast live on Hizballah's al-Manar satellite television station and projected on a giant screen at a Resistance and Liberation Day rally in the Beqa Valley celebrating the ninth anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. Nasrallah bemoaned what he described as an Israeli effort to "return to the strategy of introducing Hizballah as a terrorist organization that attacks countries and peoples and threatens world security." Even worse, Nasrallah said, is "the attempt to accuse Hizballah of assassinating martyr Rafiq Hariri in order to foment a sectarian sedition in Lebanon."

Far from being the Israeli conspiracy that Nasrallah alleges, information about Hizballah's continued terrorist activities abroad come from a wide array of highly credible international sources -- from Belgian, Argentine, Egyptian, and Azeri prosecutors to Yemeni, U.S., and UN officials, to the international team investigating the Hariri assassination from their headquarters in The Hague. Whether its coalition wins an outright majority or merely solidifies its "blocking third" veto over government policy, Hizballah is likely to do well in next week's elections. Recent revelations about Hizballah's continued terrorist activities and global reach highlight the difficulties the international community will face dealing with the new Lebanese government should Hizballah emerge victorious.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11). He is the author of [Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=265\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=265).

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