

Assessing Hizballah's West Bank Foothold

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Jun 18, 2004

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

When the IDF withdrew from southern Lebanon in May 2000, Hizballah realized that it had to change direction somewhat, primarily because it had lost its avowed justification (and any hint of international legitimacy) for carrying out attacks from Lebanon. Accordingly, Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah, the group's secretary-general, instantly changed his rhetoric, focusing less on Lebanon and more on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. In one speech, for example, he told Palestinians that it took Hizballah eighteen years to force Israel out of Lebanon, and that they could accomplish the same feat in even less time through armed struggle and suicide bombings.

Most of the terrorist attacks carried out in the West Bank in recent months have been conducted and financed by Hizballah, which controls 70-80 percent of terrorist cells there. The group's activities in Israel consist mainly of Arab Israeli recruitment, coordinated by Qais Obeid, a key operative with ties to the Arab Israeli town of Taibeh. Obeid recruits Arab Israelis and Palestinians from the West Bank, Gaza, and Arab Israeli villages for Hizballah operations using his connections with lower-level criminals and drug smugglers. He was also involved in the kidnapping of IDF Col. (ret.) Elhanan Tenenbaum. In addition, Hizballah has demonstrated a willingness to create terrorist networks that cross ethnic and sectarian backgrounds. The phenomenon of strong cooperation between a Shi'i organization such as Hizballah and a secular Sunni organization such as Fatah (Tanzim) is particularly notable given the situation in Iraq.

Terrorist Operations

Imad Mughniyeh (Hizballah's operations chief) and Talal Hamiyah (one of his senior lieutenants) continue to play vital role in the organization from Beirut, under the direction of Nasrallah. They are the masterminds behind all Hizballah activities (including terrorist networks) in the Palestinian territories. Hizballah has facilitated Palestinian terrorism through the transfer of knowledge, particularly regarding advanced explosive charges. In addition to providing Palestinian terrorists with funding, weapons, weapons-making technology (e.g., related to the Qassam rocket), fighting techniques, and fake documents, Hizballah also grants them access to training specialists in its Baqa Valley camps in Lebanon. In this manner, Hizballah has been able to gain significant influence and operational reach in the Palestinian territories even without infiltrating its own operatives there.

Hizballah has long posed an immediate threat to Israel from the north. The group possesses nearly 10,000

katyushas, as well as Fajr rockets with a range of 45-75 kilometers; collectively, these weapons endanger more than half a million Israelis. Moreover, Hizballah's widespread presence in the West Bank and Gaza challenges the Palestinian Authority's ability to control Fatah activists and maintain stability. In contrast to the situation in Lebanon, Hizballah's terrorist activities in the Palestinian territories are not scrutinized by the international community. Iran and Syria's sponsorship of such activities is largely ignored as well. Iran continues to provide \$70 to 100 million per year for the group's efforts in Lebanon as well as a significant amount for its activities in the West Bank and Gaza.

Global Reach

Hizballah's terrorist capabilities make it a major security threat to targets around the globe. The group maintains the capability to strike Israeli, Jewish, and U.S. targets worldwide. Yet, due to various strategic factors, including limitations and deterrents imposed by Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Israel, and the United States, Hizballah's actions do not always reflect its desire and capability to carry out a larger number of attacks. In particular, neither Syria, Iran, nor Hizballah wants to be the next target in the U.S. war on terror. Nevertheless, Iran does not believe it is incurring undue risk by continuing to ship advanced weapons to Hizballah. After being sent to Damascus International Airport, these weapons cross the border from Syria into Lebanon through Masna Pass. Hence, should Syria choose to do so, it is fully capable of halting the transshipment of weapons to Hizballah and asserting control over the group's activities.

MATTHEW LEVITT

Financial Mechanisms

Hizballah's fingerprint is present on 80 percent of terrorist attacks emanating from the West Bank, and arrested Fatah operatives concede that Hizballah now funds nearly all of their group's attacks. Through Hizballah, Iran also provides a tremendous amount of funding and logistical support to Hamas, in addition to funding Fatah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Hizballah conditions this funding on successful Palestinian attacks, paying three to five thousand new Israeli shekels per attack and allowing operatives to keep any funds left over after successful strikes. Given the desperate economic situation in the West Bank and Gaza, this is a very effective means of encouraging terrorist activity. Over the past several years, Hizballah has provided between \$750,000 and \$1.5 million to Palestinian terrorist groups annually. Besides the large-scale funding obtained from Iran, Hizballah uses charities as humanitarian fronts for terrorist activities against Israel (e.g., the al-Ansar Charity Association in Gaza). Israel has taken several measures to frustrate these efforts, including arresting moneychangers and seizing their funds; confiscating undeclared funds over 2,000 Jordanian dinar at Israeli-Jordanian crossing points; and raiding accounts tied to terrorists and front organizations in Ramallah banks.

Adapting and Innovating

Like other terrorist groups, Hizballah constantly updates its tactics to evade counterterrorism efforts. Its innovations include transferring funds to the accounts of terrorists' family members and smuggling a computer chip with a detailed bombmaking guide from an operative in Jordan inside a Sony Playstation videogame console. Hizballah has also recruited Palestinians wounded in the intifada and sent them to Iran for medical treatment. Once recuperated, these Palestinians are trained by Hizballah and Iranian operatives, then sent back to the West Bank to recruit operatives, collect intelligence, conduct surveillance, and execute attacks. Hizballah originally planned to create its own cells on the ground in the West Bank, called the Return Brigades (Kataab al-Awda). After several arrests, however, the group has instead adapted the more effective tactic of co-opting existing Fatah cells.

Prospects for the Future

The tactics that Hizballah perfected in Lebanon and is now applying in the West Bank and Gaza will likely be replicated elsewhere. Although Hizballah maintains a presence in the United States, FBI officials have testified that

the fundraising and related activities the group is able to conduct here serve as a disincentive to executing attacks on U.S. soil. A more likely scenario is the establishment of Iranian proxies in Iraq. Hezbollah could easily facilitate the creation of a local Iraqi wing, much as it helped train, fund, and arm local affiliates in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait.

Indeed, Hezbollah has shown a remarkable resilience to counterterrorism efforts, constantly creating new techniques as circumstances change and old tactics are foiled. Nevertheless, the international community can take many steps to combat and contain the local, regional, and global threat posed by Hezbollah. International financial institutions can fix systemic weaknesses by establishing and enforcing regulations designed to prevent such institutions from serving as the preferred transfer mechanism for terrorist groups. Iran can affect Hezbollah's decisionmaking by cutting the group's funding. Egypt is increasingly interested in controlling Hezbollah's presence in Gaza as Israel moves toward withdrawal. Ankara can take measures to prevent Hezbollah operatives from using Turkey as a meeting place. In general, a broad counterterrorism strategy is needed, one that moves beyond military attacks on Hezbollah training camps to measures such as establishing financial monitoring and soliciting the cooperation of Middle Eastern countries.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Anna Solomon-Schwartz and Ben Thein.

Policy #463

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022

◆
Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](/policy-analysis/peace-process)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](/policy-analysis/lebanon)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/palestinians)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](/policy-analysis/syria)