

## 'Fight on All Fronts':

# Hizballah, the War on Terror, and the War in Iraq

Dec 1, 2003



### In-Depth Reports

**A**n odd blending of religion and politics, Hizballah was born as a movement amid the terrorism of the 1980s. By 2000, it had matured into a strategic, vital player in the Middle East, capable of influencing the region's course for peace or war. Organizationally, Hizballah has evolved from a loose, mysterious umbrella group guided by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran to a well-knit and disciplined organization guided by its own charismatic leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

Over the past decade, various developments -- in particular, the 1992 Lebanese parliamentary elections, the significant internal developments in Iran and Syria, and the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 -- led analysts to predict that Hizballah would transform itself from an international terrorist organization into a Lebanese political party. Despite these developments, however, Hizballah continued to use international terrorism as a strategic tool for advancing its goals. The organization regards terrorism not only as a legitimate military strategy, but as a religious duty, part of a "global jihad." It sees itself as the vanguard of the world Islamist movement, with an obligation to lead by example and encourage weaker groups in the political and cultural fight against the West.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the concrete expression of this ideology took the form of intensive terrorist activity within numerous countries worldwide, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries. In the Middle East, Hizballah operatives and affiliate cells targeted several Arab countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain), often in the service of Iranian interests. Some of these attacks were aimed at local regimes, while others targeted Western interests (e.g., the bombings of U.S. embassy facilities in Beirut in 1983 and 1984; the twin 1983 suicide attacks on U.S. and French military headquarters in Beirut; the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers U.S. military complex in Saudi Arabia). In addition, Hizballah perpetrated a long string of kidnappings and murders involving Westerners in Lebanon, including U.S. officials such as CIA bureau chief William Buckley and citizens of numerous European countries.

Hizballah's reach and anti-Western activities extended to many other regions as well. In Europe, for example, the organization was involved in a 1985 restaurant bombing near a U.S. military base in Spain as well as several 1986 bombings targeting Parisian shopping centers and rail stations. In South America, it was behind the two deadliest terrorist attacks in the continent's history: the Israeli embassy and Jewish community center bombings in Buenos Aires, which took place in the early 1990s. Hizballah also established a significant presence in the "Tri-Border Area" (where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay converge) using local businesses, drug trafficking, and contraband networks to launder funds for terrorist operations worldwide. In Asia, Hizballah unsuccessfully attempted to attack U.S. and Israeli interests in countries such as Thailand and Singapore. And in North America, authorities uncovered Hizballah fundraising and equipment-procurement cells in both the United States and Canada.

The various key developments that have occurred in the Middle East since the turn of the millennium have only strengthened Hizballah and enhanced its reputation among sympathizers as a leading actor in the fight against Israel, the United States, and other enemies of Islam. In the wake of Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon,

Hizballah leaders became convinced that they could achieve their Islamist goals by actively supporting a Palestinian terrorist campaign against Israel and by conducting their own attrition attacks from the north, a strategy supported by Syria and Iran. Subsequent developments -- namely, the Palestinian intifada, the post-September 11 U.S.-led "war on terror," and the war in Iraq -- have led Hizballah to escalate this strategy, reinforcing the organization's status as a threat to international peace.

Indeed, Hizballah's role in the Palestinian uprising against Israel is of broad regional and international significance, part of a wider struggle against the perceived imperialist threat represented by the United States. When the Palestinian intifada erupted in fall 2000, the organization was quick to increase its level of cooperation with Palestinian rejectionists through direct training combined with logistical and operational support. Hizballah also put forth a significant effort toward establishing an independent terrorist and intelligence infrastructure inside both the Palestinian Authority and Israel. On the military front, the organization continued its cross-border attacks against Israeli forces in the Shebaa Farms area and expanded its arsenal of weaponry, acquiring rockets and missiles capable of reaching a greater number of Israeli targets.

Hizballah's activities on the Israeli-Palestinian front since 2000 have threatened to drag the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Asad (and Lebanon along with it) into a regional conflict with Israel. Indeed, the balance of power between Damascus and Hizballah has shifted noticeably during the young Bashar's reign, with Hassan Nasrallah assuming greater independence and demonstrating a certain charismatic ascendancy. In Tehran, Hizballah's activities during this period have helped to strengthen the hardliners and compromise the efforts of reformers who question Iranian support for terrorism and the disruption of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians. For its part, Iran's massive support for Hizballah has helped the organization to maintain pressure on Israel's northern border and facilitate assistance provided to the intifada and to Palestinian Islamist organizations.

Nevertheless, Syria -- not Iran -- has been the most important source of support for Hizballah's terrorist and guerrilla activity against Israel from the north. Without Syria's help -- in the form of providing an overall strategic umbrella; specific military and political coordination; and pressure on Beirut to give the organization free rein in southern Lebanon -- Hizballah could not have achieved its current status. Presently, it is a guerrilla movement with control over a "liberated" territory, it maintains a continuous supply of military equipment via Damascus, and has virtual immunity from all-out Israeli punitive measures. Indeed, Syrian aid has effectively transformed Hizballah into a strategic partner and operational arm of the Syrian army in confrontation with Israel, a transformation highlighted by Hizballah's retaliation for Israeli attacks against Syrian interests.

The events of September 11, 2001, had a major impact on the organization's strategy and behavior. The al-Qaeda attacks on the United States, the subsequent U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan, and the ensuing war on terror all threatened to rob Hizballah of the strategic gains it had made since 2000. Moreover, the Bush administration's post-September 11 policies raised the possibility that both Hizballah and its state sponsors might eventually be targeted in a continuing U.S.-led campaign against the "axis of evil." In response, the organization decided to escalate both its attacks on Israel and its support for the Palestinian intifada as a means of fomenting instability, obstructing U.S. action in the region, and concentrating international attention on the Palestinian arena. These efforts included the (Israeli-thwarted) January 2002 Karine-A smuggling operation in which Iran and Hizballah attempted to transport fifty tons of illegal weaponry to the Palestinian Authority. In addition, Hizballah's leaders began to consider cooperation with Sunni radical groups, echoing past organizational and training links to groups affiliated with the Sunni al-Qaeda movement.

Hizballah's self-assurance regarding its aggressive approach began to diminish somewhat once its leaders realized that the United States and Britain were preparing in earnest for a military campaign against Iraq. Even as they accepted the inevitability of U.S. intervention in that country, however, Hizballah and its state sponsors planned for

the emergence of a post-Saddam era in which the United States would sink in the region's figurative sands. They would exploit their historical and religious ties to Iraqi Shiites while at the same time calling for Sunni unity in the face of Western aggression. They seemed to believe that, given the difficulties U.S. forces would inevitably encounter in postwar Iraq, the Bush administration would be neither willing nor able to take forceful responsive action against them in the short term.

## Policy Recommendations

Despite its far-reaching goals and vehement incitement against coalition efforts in Iraq, Hizballah is also a pragmatic movement. Even when its ultimate objectives are postponed due to strategic or political constraints, the organization does not feel compelled to renounce those objectives or the violent means it has used in the attempt to achieve them. Given this modus operandi, Hizballah's current short-term strategy may be twofold: to maintain hostilities in the Israeli-Palestinian arena and to build on the American entanglement in Iraq. If Hizballah perceives the United States as having difficulty controlling the situation in Iraq, the organization could further escalate its attrition war against Israel at the northern border, inside the Palestinian Authority, and even within Israel proper. Indeed, Hizballah views the continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as crucial to achieving its overall goals.

Parallel to its escalation on the Israeli-Palestinian front, Hizballah could also choose to foster a radical Shia "resistance" movement in Iraq by attacking U.S. and other Western interests in the southern Gulf, which is home to a large Shia minority. In fact, evidence of Hizballah's ties to the Iraqi opposition began to emerge early in the war, and the organization has reportedly established a significant presence of its own inside Iraq since then. Although Hizballah operatives have not yet been involved in attacks on coalition forces, they could eventually assume an active role if Iran and Syria feel that their interests in Iraq or their own territorial sovereignty are threatened by the U.S. military presence.

Hizballah is also prepared for the worst-case scenario. That is, if the Iranian and Syrian regimes feel pressured by the U.S. military presence on their borders, they could decide to sacrifice Hizballah for the sake of their own political survival. In this scenario, the Hizballah leadership has warned that any attempt to eliminate or disarm the organization -- whether conducted by Israel, the United States, Syria, Iran, or Lebanon -- would be met with an unprecedented "explosion."

In light of Hizballah's potentially destructive influence in the region, it is imperative that the United States and the international community take the necessary measures to curtail the organization's international terrorist activity. These measures include isolating Hizballah at the international level; maintaining relentless diplomatic and economic pressure on Syria and Iran; making the Hizballah issue the first priority in U.S. communication with Damascus; and applying diplomatic and, in particular, economic pressure to convince Lebanon to deploy its armed forces in the south and curb Hizballah's military presence there.

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