

Hezbollah's West Bank Terror Network

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Articles & Testimony

Now that it controls an extremely capable terrorist network in the West Bank, Hezbollah has established itself as a proactive spoiler of Middle East peace, capable of commissioning attacks even if Palestinian groups agree to cease fire.

Following the assassination of senior Hezbollah security operative Ali Hussein Saleh on August 2, leaders of the militant Lebanese Shiite group lost no time in pointing the finger at Israel. While such accusations against the Jewish state have long been routine whenever a car bomb explodes in Lebanon, this time Hezbollah officials had good reason to suspect the long arm of Israel. According to Israeli military sources, Saleh was a liaison between Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist cells operating in the West Bank.[1]

Over the last three years, Hezbollah has steadily intensified its involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, gravitating from the provision of material support and training for Palestinian terrorist groups to the direct recruitment of Palestinian operatives under its own command and control. Among the activities Hizballah's Palestinian squads have conducted are arms smuggling, recruitment, attempted suicide bombings, sniper and roadside shooting attacks, preoperational surveillance of Israeli communities and army bases, and planned kidnapping of Israelis.[2] Most recently, according to Israeli intelligence, Hezbollah's Palestinian operatives were responsible for the August 12 suicide bombing in Rosh Ha'ayin that left one person dead and six wounded.[3]

Information about Hezbollah's network in the West Bank comes largely from the statements of captured operatives and other information made public by the Israel Security Agency (ISA, or Shin Bet). ISA's findings appear credible; they are based on multiple confessions and intelligence sources, and Western sources have confirmed their general veracity.

Hezbollah and the Al-Aqsa Intifada

Hezbollah, a militant Shiite Muslim organization established in Lebanon by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), has been single-mindedly devoted to fighting Israel for over 20 years. Following the withdrawal of Israeli forces from south Lebanon in May 2000 (for which it rightly claimed credit), Hezbollah was obliged to scale back its guerrilla warfare against Israeli forces, though it still carried out sporadic cross-border attacks in the Shebaa Farms area of the Golan Heights.

Following the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000, Hezbollah shifted its resources to the Palestinian front. Its television station, Al-Manar, increased its daily broadcast hours from four to 24, spewing forth a relentless stream of incitement against Israel. It also dramatically increased its support for Palestinian terrorist groups, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

Hezbollah was involved in three major attempts to smuggle arms to the territories. In January 2001, Israel intercepted a ship carrying a large load of weapons, the *San Torini*, that had embarked from Lebanon. A year later, Israel intercepted the *Karine A*, which embarked from Iran with a Hezbollah-trained crew. In May 2003, Israel seized an Egyptian fishing boat, *Abu Hassan*, attempting to deliver explosives from Lebanon to Gaza. One member of its crew, Hamad Masalem Mussa Abu Amra, was a Hezbollah explosives expert. Other efforts were made to smuggle weapons into the West Bank via Jordan.

Ultimately, however, Hezbollah aspired to build its own network of operatives in the territories. Since the mid-1990s, it had recruited several terrorist operatives from Europe and attempted to infiltrate them into Israel. In 1996, for example, Israel arrested Hussein Makdad, a naturalized German citizen working for Hezbollah, after he was injured while constructing a bomb in an East Jerusalem Hotel. The following year, Hezbollah recruited Steven Smyrek, a German convert to Islam, trained him in Lebanon, and sent him to Israel to photograph prospective targets for terrorist attacks. In January 2001, Israeli security forces arrested Jihad Shuman, a Lebanese member of Hezbollah who entered the country with a British passport.

The movement had also succeeded in recruiting a network of Israeli Arabs. Hezbollah commissioned Lebanese drug dealers who had a long history of smuggling contraband across the border -- only now they supplied drugs in exchange for espionage and arms smuggling. However, most of these operatives were motivated not by ideological solidarity, but by the prospect of financial gain. Few were willing to actually carry out terrorist attacks and they tended to cooperate with the Israeli authorities once they were uncovered.

Recruiting Palestinian Terrorists

At the time of the second intifada's outbreak, Hezbollah had enjoyed only limited success in directly recruiting Palestinian operatives. One of the most notorious was Masoud Iyyad, an officer in Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat's Force 17 Presidential Guard, who traveled to Lebanon in the summer of 2000. After returning to Gaza, Iyyad directed a terrorist cell that carried out half a dozen relatively minor grenade and mortar attacks during the first months of the intifada. However, he was killed in an Israeli helicopter strike in February 2001.

By mid-2001, however, Hezbollah and the IRGC had begun a far-reaching campaign to directly recruit Palestinians to plan and carry out terror attacks on their behalf. Palestinians who had been wounded in the uprising were the primary source of early recruits -- not only had they already demonstrated their commitment to fighting Israel, but their injuries provided a perfect pretext for them to leave the country. An ostensibly humanitarian organization called the Iranian Committee for Aiding Wounded Victims of the Intifada flew hundreds of mild to moderately wounded Palestinians (it was conspicuously uninterested in the severely wounded) to Tehran and provided them with free medical care at military hospitals. During their recuperation, the prospective recruits were showered with attention (e.g. invited to speak at events commemorating the struggle against Israel) and persuaded to join

Hezbollah. Among those involved in the recruitment drive were Iran's ambassador to Jordan, Nosratollah Tajik, Palestinian Authority (PA) Minister of Detainees and Freed Detainees Affairs Hisham Abdel al-Razek, and Abu Mahadi Najafi, a senior Hezbollah operative.

A number of these operatives were later arrested by the Israeli authorities and provided detailed accounts of their recruitment. Shadi Jaber was recruited by Abu Mahadi after he arrived in Iran for medical treatment in January 2001. Upon his return to the West Bank, he recruited other operatives and planned a number of operations, such as the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier. He also facilitated the transfer of additional wounded Palestinians to Iran, all the while remaining in contact with his Hezbollah handler in Iran via cellular phone.

Jihad Albasha

Another captured Hezbollah operative, Jihad Albasha, recounted how he received red carpet treatment after arriving in Iran in April 2001 -- he even had his picture taken with Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. He was also recruited by Abu Mahadi, who provided him with \$30,000 to set up a terrorist cell and proposed that he open a construction company in the West Bank as a cover for the transfer of additional funds.[4]

In the summer of 2002, Hezbollah recruited four Tanzim operatives and attempted to transport three of them into Lebanon through Jordan and Syria for military training at Hezbollah training camps. They were recruited by Omar Hamdan Mohamad Seif, who had himself been trained in such camps. Although one of these men was denied entry into Jordan, the other two -- Dargem Salah and Iyad Kasem -- made it to the camps, where they learned to fire Uzis and M-16s, throw grenades, and prepare and detonate explosives. Upon completing their training, they were ordered by Hezbollah commanders to conduct surveillance on potential Israeli targets, collect pre-operational intelligence, and execute terrorist attacks.[5]

The Return Brigades

Palestinian terrorist cells established by Lebanon-based Hezbollah and IRGC operatives were organized into a network known as the Return Brigades (Kata'ib al-Awda). The operational and political objectives of the Hezbollah-run, Iranian-funded network were confirmed by confessions from various Return Brigades operatives arrested around September 2002. Chief among these was Ghaleb Abdel Hafiz Abdel Kader Ikbariya, a PA activist from Shweike near Tulkarm.

In his confession, Ikbariya said that IRGC commanders had begun to establish a new organization comprised of a military wing and a political wing. The military wing was tasked with conducting terror attacks (e.g., the suicide attack Ikbariya himself was caught planning together with Fatah leaders in Jordan and IRGC commanders in Lebanon) while the political wing would "infiltrate representatives into the PA and the Palestinian security mechanisms" to take over "when and if the current Fatah infrastructure collapses." [6] Although the two were supposed to be compartmentalized from each other, overlap between the terrorist and political wings led to the arrest of several political activists -- like Ikbariya -- for their roles in terrorist plots. Ikbariya claimed that his handlers, Bassem Soudki Ahmad Yassin and Fouad Bilbeisi (both senior Fatah leaders in Amman), reported not only to the IRGC but also to Fatah Central Committee member Mohammad Amouri and Palestine Liberation Organization Political Department chief Farouq Kadoumi.

According to the ISA, prior to Israel's April 2002 West Bank counterterrorism offensive, some of these cells were funded through renegade Fatah colonel Mounir al-Maqdah, who is based in the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp in Lebanon -- a fact that Maqdah recently confirmed in an interview.[7] However, after discovering that Maqdah was pocketing more of the Iranian funding than had been anticipated, Tehran decided that it was better off relying primarily on Hezbollah officials and IRGC commanders in Lebanon. Maqdah still funnels Iranian funds to the West Bank, but on a far diminished scale.[8]

Return Brigade leaders are required to inform Hezbollah and/or IRGC commanders immediately before and after their operatives conduct an attack, and financial disbursements are only made in specific amounts and at prearranged intervals after full accounting of previous expenditures. Their primary contact is Qais Ubaid, an Israeli-Arab Hezbollah operative in Lebanon who played a central role in the October 2000 kidnapping of Israeli businessman Elchanan Tannenbaum.[9] The cells also communicate and receive instructions via senior Fatah leaders in Jordan, most notably Yassin and Bilbeisi, who, according to statements of captured Return Brigades members, are both "operated by the IRGC." [10]

Different cells of the Return Brigades maintain close operational cooperation with each other, maximizing resources, personnel, and training. For example, brigade leaders smuggled one operative abroad for sniper training, then sent the new sniper around the West Bank to train other Tanzim cells.[11] They also work with other Palestinian terrorist groups. In June 2002, Israeli authorities conducting a search in Hebron arrested Fawzi Ayub, a Lebanese-born Hezbollah operative who entered the territories by sea using a forged American passport shortly after the outbreak of the intifada.[12] Not coincidentally, the arrest occurred around the same time as the discovery in Hebron of a type of mine that had previously been used only by Hezbollah in Lebanon.[13] Indeed, Hezbollah bombmakers trained Hamas to maximize the lethality of their homemade explosives. For its most deadly suicide attack -- the March 2002 bombing that killed 29 and wounded 172 Passover celebrants at the Park Hotel in Netanya -- Hamas reportedly called in a "Hezbollah expert for advice in building an extra-potent bomb." [14]

Hezbollah has also used the Return Brigades to expand its terror capabilities internationally. In mid-2003, Israeli forces arrested Ghulam Mahmud Qawqa, a member of both Fatah's al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades and the Return Brigades, for his role in several al-Aqsa bombings in Jerusalem. According to information discovered after his arrest, Qawqa had also been engineering attacks on Israeli interests in Europe and Asia on behalf of Hezbollah. In late 2002, Qawqa tasked a Lebanese woman he knew in Germany to photograph the Israeli embassy in Berlin from multiple angles for a possible attack.[15] Around the same time, a Jordanian friend employed in China helped Qawqa make arrangements to travel there via Jordan in order to assassinate Yitzhak Shelef, Israel's ambassador to China. Qawqa had also approached a Hezbollah operative to assist with the mission, but was arrested before he could make the trip.[16]

Now that it controls an extremely capable terrorist network in the West Bank, Hezbollah has established itself as a proactive spoiler of Middle East peace -- it can directly commission terrorist attacks even if major Palestinian terrorist groups abide by a cease-fire. Although Israel is working covertly to undermine Hezbollah's terrorist network, Hezbollah's massive rocket arsenal would make a direct military assault on its infrastructure in Lebanon quite costly. Indeed, the group's artillery in south Lebanon is deadly enough -- in retaliation for Ali Hussein Saleh's assassination, Hezbollah shelled northern Israel, killing a teenager. Meanwhile, the Bush administration's efforts to pressure the governments of Lebanon and Syria into disarming Hezbollah have born little fruit.

Notes [1] "Suicide Bombings Expose Fragility of Cease-fire," *Forward*, 15 August 2003. [2] "Iranian Activities towards Inflaming the Palestinian Intifada," Israel Security Agency, December 2002 (author's personal files) [3] Author interview with intelligence sources, September 2003. [4] "Iranian Activities towards Inflaming the Palestinian Intifada," Israel Security Agency, December 2002 (author's personal files). [5] Ibid. [6] "IRGC Intentions to Establish a Substitute Organization for the Palestinian Authority," Israel Security Agency, 12 October 2002. (author's personal files) [7] Nicholas Blanford, "Al-Aqsa cells being funded and guided from Ain al-Hilweh," *The Daily Star*, 4 July 2003. [8] Author interview with intelligence sources, July 2003. [9] Author interview with intelligence sources, July 2003. [10] "IRGC Intentions to Establish a Substitute Organization for the Palestinian Authority," Israel Security Agency, 17 October 2002 (author's personal files) [11] Author interview with intelligence sources, July 2003. [12] "Hezbollah (part 1): Profile of the Lebanese Shiite Terrorist Organization of Global Reach Sponsored by Iran and Supported by

Syria," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies, Israel, June 2003; and author interview with intelligence sources, July 2003. [13] James Bennet, "Israeli Killed As His Commandos Demolish West Bank House," *The New York Times*, 16 February 2002. [14] Molly Moore and John Ward Anderson, "Suicide Bombers Change Mideast's Military Balance," *The Washington Post*, 18 August 2002. [15] "Germany Surprised to Learn From Press of Plan to Kill Israeli Envoy," Spiegel Online (Hamburg), 3 January 2003, translated by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 4 January 2003; "Hezbollah (part 1): Profile of the Lebanese Shiite Terrorist Organization of Global Reach Sponsored by Iran and Supported by Syria," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies, Israel, June 2003; and author interview with intelligence sources, July 2003. [16] Ibid. ❖

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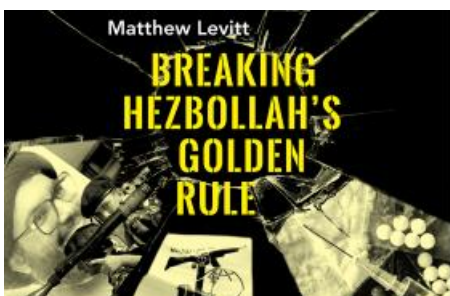
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