

Hizballah's West Bank Foothold

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Brief Analysis

Last week, Hizballah drastically escalated its activity along Israel's northern border, ending seven months of relative calm there. Yet, the assault on Israeli positions in the Shebaa Farms area and the cross-border shelling of northern Israeli towns pale in comparison to the potential danger posed by the terrorist cells and political opposition Hizballah is now operating—with Iranian funding and oversight—in the northern West Bank.

Information about Hizballah's foothold 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), which have already been the subject of regional media coverage. Such information is by its very nature unobtainable by means other than intelligence and law enforcement operations. ISA's findings appear credible; they are based on multiple confessions and intelligence sources, and Western sources have confirmed their general veracity.

Hizballah's Palestinian Recruits

Sometime in 2000, with the armed Palestinian intifada gaining dangerous momentum, Iran began to recruit Palestinians in earnest in order to build a network of Hizballah operatives in the territories. In February 2001, Israeli authorities informed foreign diplomats that Iran was transferring money to terrorists in the West Bank and Gaza for the purchase of weapons, and that Fatah Tanzim operatives were traveling to Iran for "instructions and training." Israeli officials told the media that Iran had played on the "frustration and anger of Israeli Arabs" to find ways of ferrying weapons and funds to terrorist cells in Israel and the territories.

By early 2002, Israeli intelligence sources had documented Iran's use of the social-welfare hook to recruit Palestinians into Hizballah. According to ISA and press reports, Israeli authorities arrested several Palestinians upon their return from Iran in January. Two of those arrested, Shadi Jaber and Jihad Ibrahim Albasha, related that the Iranian Committee for Aiding Wounded Victims of the Intifada had been working with Palestinians to find potential terrorist recruits among those injured in the uprising. The committee apparently offered free travel, medical treatment, and terrorist training for those who returned to the Palestinian territories to establish terrorist cells. Among those involved in the recruitment drive, according to Albasha, were Nosratollah Tajik, the Iranian ambassador to Jordan; Hisham Abdel al-Razek, the Palestinian Authority (PA) minister of detainees and freed detainees affairs; and Abu Mahadi Najafi, a senior Hizballah operative. Abu Mahadi tasked Jaber with serving as Hizballah's "eyes for its activities" in the West Bank, as well as recruiting and facilitating the transfer of additional

wounded Palestinians to Iran, all the while remaining in contact with his Hizballah handler in Iran via cellular phone. In addition, Abu Mahadi provided Albasha with \$30,000 to set up Hizballah's first Palestinian "armed squad," then raised the possibility of Albasha opening a construction company as a cover for his activities and additional funds to be transferred to him.

In the summer of 2002, Hizballah recruited four Tanzim operatives and attempted to transport three of them into Lebanon through Jordan and Syria for military training at Hizballah 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 Hizballah commanders to conduct surveillance on potential Israeli targets, collect preoperational intelligence, and execute terrorist attacks.

Hizballah's "Return Brigades"

Lebanon-based operatives from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hizballah have built on this effort, recruiting a network of rogue Fatah Tanzim cells to serve as Hizballah's West Bank cadres. Calling themselves the "Return Brigades" (Kata'ab al-Awda in Arabic, Gedudei HaShiva in Hebrew), the Hizballah recruits consist of renegade PA officials and Fatah activists

The operational and political objectives of the Hizballah-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 Ikbaryia, a PA activist from Shweike near Tulkarm. Under the direct oversight of a senior IRGC official, the brigades were to recruit Palestinians who were opposed to PA negotiations with Israel and who would embrace Tehran's stance of attacking Israel and opposing peace.

According to an October 2002 ISA report on Ikbaryia's detention and confession, he claimed that "over the past few months" IRGC commanders began to establish "a new organization comprised of two wings, a military wing and a political wing." Intended to be compartmentalized from each other, the military wing was tasked with conducting terror attacks (e.g., the suicide attack Ikbaryia 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." (In fact, overlap between the terrorist and political wings led to the arrest of several political activists like Ikbaryia for their roles in terrorist plots.) Most alarming, Ikbaryia 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.

ISA asserts that before Operation Defensive Shield (Israel's April 2002 West Bank counterterrorism offensive), Iran funded these cells through renegade Fatah colonel Mounir al-Maqdeh in Lebanon—a fact that Maqdeh confirmed in the Beirut-based Daily Star. That became more difficult after the Israeli military operation. Moreover, after discovering that Maqdeh was pocketing more of the Iranian funding than had been anticipated, Tehran decided that it was better off using other channels obtained via its successful recruitment of wounded Palestinians. Therefore, the Return Brigades cells are now primarily funded by Iranian money transfers from Hizballah and IRGC commanders in Lebanon. (Maqdeh still funnels Iranian funds to the West Bank, but on a far diminished scale.)

The West Bank cells answer to Hizballah and IRGC commanders via two channels. The primary point of communication is Qais Ubaid, an Israeli-Arab Hizballah operative in Lebanon who played a central role in the October 2000 kidnapping of Israeli businessman Elchanan Tannenbaum. The cells also communicate and receive instructions via senior Fatah leaders in Jordan, including the previously mentioned Yassin and Bilbeisi. According to

the statements of captured Return Brigades members, Yassin and Bilbeisi are both "operated by the IRGC."

Keeping Up the Terror Tempo

The Return Brigades have significantly expanded Hizballah's targeting capabilities as well as its political goals. Return Brigade leaders are required to inform Hizballah 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.

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. According to Israeli security sources, the brigades are also specifically tasked with planning and executing suicide attacks in Israel.

The Return Brigades maintain close operational cooperation between their various Tanzim cells, 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. They also work with other Palestinian terrorist groups. In June 2002, Israeli authorities conducting a search in Hebron arrested Fawzi Ayub, a Lebanese Hizballah operative and Canadian national who traveled to Europe on his own Canadian passport but then entered the territories by sea using a forged American passport. 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 Hizballah in Lebanon. Indeed, Hizballah bombmakers trained Hamas to maximize the lethality of their homemade explosives. For its most deadly suicide attack—the March 27, 2002, bombing that killed 29 and wounded 172 Passover celebrants at the Park Hotel in Netanya—Hamas reportedly called in a "Hizballah expert for advice in building an extra-potent bomb."

Hizballah 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 Hizballah. 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. Around the same time, a Jordanian friend employed in China helped Qawqa make arrangements to travel there via Jordan in order to assassinate Yitzchak Shelef, Israel's ambassador to China. Qawqa had also approached a Hizballah operative to assist with the mission, but was arrested before he could make the trip.

Conclusion

As disturbing as the recent flare-up on Israel's northern border is, it pales in comparison to the far greater threat that Hizballah poses in the West Bank. Indeed, Israeli security officials assert that Hizballah no longer needs to recruit, train, and infiltrate terrorists into Israel through Europe (as it has done at least four times since 1996) because it now controls an extremely capable terrorist network within the West Bank.

Hizballah's Return Brigades pose the most challenging and immediate threat to both the ceasefire and the Roadmap. Iran continues to sponsor Palestinian terrorism at a frenetic pace, and the lethal capabilities of Fatah and other terrorist elements in the West Bank are significantly enhanced by the presence of Hizballah units there.

Iran and Hizballah pose nearly as dangerous a threat to the international community as al-Qaeda, in addition to being the most proactive spoilers of Middle East peace. Dealing with both of them is crucial to the war on terror as well as to Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Hizballah is the only terrorist group besides al-Qaeda to maintain so extensive an international network of financial, logistical, and operational cells. As Secretary of State Colin Powell stated on Egyptian television in the wake of recent Hamas and al-Aqsa suicide bombings, "It is time to end the use of terror as a way of achieving a political objective. It's part of the solution for the Middle East. It's also part of the global

campaign against terrorism."

Matthew Levitt, senior fellow in terrorism studies at The Washington Institute, is writing a book on Hizballah's international terror network.

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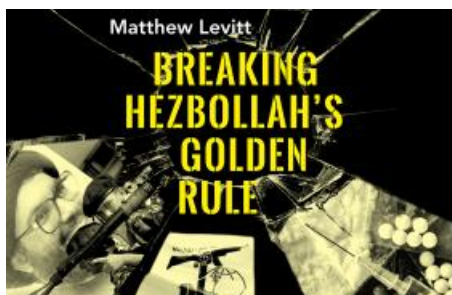
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