

Hizballah's Message of Hate and Powell's Levant Visit

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

As Secretary of State Colin Powell prepares to visit Syria and Lebanon on May 3, his agenda will most likely address the war on terrorism. The most active support for terrorism from both Damascus and Beirut is for Hizballah. To understand what the group's aims and ambitions are, few sources are better than al-Manar, Hizballah's Lebanese television station. The channel broadcasts messages calling for death to America and suicide bombings against American forces in Iraq.

Background: Al-Manar Television's Anti-American Message

Al-Manar (Arabic for "beacon") was established as a modest Hizballah communication outlet in 1991. It increased its daily broadcast from four hours to twenty-four hours in the months after the intifada erupted in September 2000. The station is accessible throughout the Arab world, the United States, and Europe via satellite.

Until recently, al-Manar's staple message was directed against Israel: the only way to achieve total liberation is through armed opposition, rather than negotiated peace. For example, in a video entitled "Death to Israel," Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah pledges "full-fledged support to the intifadah, with guns and bullets and martyrs' blood. Death to Israel." He continues, "No one has the right to give up one grain of Palestine's sand, or one letter of Palestine's name . . . Israel is evil and illegitimate."

Following the same paradigm, Hizballah has begun a campaign to incite opposition against American forces in Iraq that has an unsettling similarity to its media war against Israel. According to Hizballah, the United States is a demonic power threatening not just the Middle East but the entire planet. Nasrallah made an al-Manar statement in March 2002: "The main source of evil in this world, the main source of terrorism in this world, the central threat to international peace and to the economic development of this world, the main threat to the environment of this world, the main source of evil and war, and terrorism, and killing and turmoil, and civil wars and regional wars in this world is the United States of America." American involvement in the region is often portrayed in stark imperialist terms. The United States intends to "enslave the governments and people of the region and steal their resources," said Nasrallah in another al-Manar broadcast.

In addition to material objectives, the United States is said to be waging a war against "Islam as a belief." According to Nasrallah, the West is intent on proving Islam as a "religion of terror, hate, destruction, evil, barbarism, a religion against peace, civilization, and modernity," while portraying the Qur'an as the "source of hate and terrorism," with

President George W. Bush's reference to the war on terror as a "crusade" cited as definitive "proof" of U.S. intentions. Hizballah contends that first America "stole our land in Palestine, now they are coming to destroy the essence of our religion." The group therefore "see[s] America as being the enemy of this umma [community of believers]."

One of al-Manar's most powerful anti-American videos shows an altered image of the Statue of Liberty -- her head is portrayed as a skull with hollow eyes, her gown is dripping in blood, and instead of a torch she holds a sharp knife. As ominous background music plays, a list of U.S. conflicts over the past fifty years scrolls onto the screen (e.g., Somalia, Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan, Lebanon), coupled with images of nuclear war, bloody massacres, and carpet-bombing. The video ends with the slogan, "[The United States] has interfered in the affairs of most of the world's countries . . . The U.S. owes blood to all of humanity."

Hizballah Incitement During the Iraq Campaign

Al-Manar's hateful propaganda has expanded to include vicious attacks on the U.S. role in Iraq. As the American-led war in Iraq became imminent, Hizballah gave the issue more air time with increasingly violent language. "The people of this region will receive you with their rifles, with blood, with martyrdom, and martyrdom operations," declared Nasrallah a week before the onset of the war. "Today, as the region fills up with hundreds of thousands of American troops, our slogan was and will remain 'death to America.'"

With the commencement of war, Hizballah began explicitly calling for acts of "resistance" against U.S. forces in Iraq through a series of powerful videos (that made up approximately 25 to 30 percent of al-Manar's programming) produced and geared toward an already agitated audience.

A recent video lambastes U.S. troops in Iraq with the lyrics: "With our steadfastness we threaten [America]. Throughout all time we chant: America is the mother of terrorism. Let the mother of terrorism fall. America is the army of evil. An invading, aggressive, occupying army. There is nothing left but the rifles. There is nothing left but the martyrs." The video ends with footage of a suicide bomber detonating their explosive belt.

Another propaganda video, mirroring the station's frequent use of Nazi imagery in portrayals of Israeli leaders, features President Bush and Adolf Hitler side by side in a split-screen comparison. Both appear to wave and salute in the same fashion, make the same speeches, and order the same massacres. The video ends with the slogan "history repeats itself."

Policy Implications

At one point, Hizballah claimed it was only interested in attacking Israel: "Outside this fight we have done nothing," said Nasrallah in December 2002. That misled some leaders, especially in Europe, to dismiss Hizballah as a Western threat.

Today, Hizballah's calls for resistance against Americans in Iraq show that it is expanding its ambitions. Indeed, Hizballah's stance is strikingly similar to al-Qaeda's declared goal of driving U.S. forces out of the Middle East. Moreover, as a result of the Bush administration's effective campaign in disabling al-Qaeda, Hizballah may be better positioned to achieve this objective. As the most well-known and organized movement in the Arab Shi'a world, Hizballah may reach out to Iraqi Shi'a radicals. In the next phase of America's war on terror, Beirut and Damascus should both be aware that Hizballah may rank higher on the list of possible targets, especially if it continues to call for armed terror attacks on Americans.

According to Hizballah officials, their effort to incite Palestinian terrorism against Israelis were accompanied by the provision of arms, training, and logistical assistance to suicide bombers in the West Bank and Gaza. They believe this had a decisive impact on the scale of violence in the intifada, which has claimed over 750 Israeli lives and 2,000 Palestinian lives. It is possible that the group's campaign of anti-American incitement will also be accompanied by

the provision of operational material assistance to those who are willing to fight U.S. forces in Iraq. In recent weeks, Hizballah operatives have reportedly crossed the Syrian border into Iraq. Powell should make clear to Syrian and Lebanese officials that there will be a heavy price to pay for such a policy.

It should also be unacceptable for Hizballah to spread its vicious message inside Iraq. Several television stations, evidently Iranian-run, have begun broadcasting powerful signals into Iraq. Iran, which is closely linked to Hizballah, is reported to pay much of al-Manar's expenses, and may want to spread the station's call for suicide attacks against Americans in Iraq. While Western commentators and U.S. government officials frequently fulminate about the Qatari satellite station al-Jazeera and its pernicious impact on Arab public opinion, al-Manar is an altogether different phenomenon: it is TV terror, and it should change its message or be shut down. In light of Syria's ongoing occupation of Lebanon, demanding that Damascus end al-Manar's broadcast calls for suicide attacks on U.S. forces should be a central test for whether it is cooperating in the war on terrorism.

Avi Jorisch is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute. His Institute monograph *Beacon of Hatred: Inside Hizballah's al-Manar Television* will be published in 2004.

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