



Hezbollah's International Presence and Operations

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In recent years Hezbollah has come under increased international scrutiny. In 2013 the European Union blacklisted its military wing and the Gulf Cooperation Council designated the entire organization a terrorist group. And yet the group continues to operate around the world. Even after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or Iran deal), when one might have thought that Hezbollah's patrons in Tehran would be less likely to promote international terrorism, Hezbollah operatives continue to engage in a wide range of activities around the world.

Less than a week after the Iran deal was completed, Israeli officials arrested a Swedish-Lebanese man, Hassan Khalil Hizran, at Ben Gurion Airport for attempting to gather intelligence on Israeli targets for Hezbollah.^[1] And just days before the signing, a Lebanese-Canadian man confessed his ties to Hezbollah and said the group had directed him to attack Israeli targets.^[2] He was jailed in Cyprus after authorities seized nine tons of a chemical compound used in bomb making from his home there. Indeed, Hezbollah has remained on the same bloody path before, during, and after the Iran deal.

Nor were such activities limited to targeting Israel. Hezbollah continues to flex its muscles at home in Lebanon as well, including bombing BLOM Bank in Beirut in 2016^[3] and tightening its hold on the

Lebanese government after the May 2018 elections. In February 2017, the Treasury Department designated Beirut-based IRGC Qods Force officer Hasan Dehghani Ebrahimi, who served as an Iranian moneyman for Hezbollah working out of Lebanon. Several Hezbollah-affiliated companies in Lebanon were also designated at that time, underscoring the extent to which Hezbollah uses and abuses Lebanese businesses and financial institutions to facilitate its financial activities.[4]

Treasury's May 24, 2018, designation of nine individuals and entities associated with Iran's Mahan Air only further highlights Hezbollah's reach in the region.[5] According to Treasury, the designated facilitators "have been procuring parts and providing services for the fleets of Iranian airlines... [I]n doing so, they extend a lifeline to the IRGC-QF and enable the Iranian regime to transport weapons, fighters, and money to its proxies, including Hizballah..."

Beyond Lebanon, Hezbollah has in recent years become still more active across the region and around the world, building and maintaining networks in regions as far afield as Africa, Southeast Asia, North and South America, and Europe.

Hezbollah and the Syrian Civil War

Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war has made the group a regional actor and has brought it closer to Iran. By siding with the Assad regime, its Alawite supporters, and Iran, and taking up arms against Sunni rebels, Hezbollah has placed itself at the epicenter of a sectarian conflict that has nothing to do with the group's purported *raison d'être*: "resistance" to Israeli occupation.

Speaking in late May 2013, Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah declared that the battle in Syria was Hezbollah's fight: "We will continue along the road, bear the responsibilities and the sacrifices. This battle is ours, and I promise you victory." [6] To that end, Hezbollah went "all-in" fighting alongside Assad regime loyalists and Iranian Revolutionary Guardsmen against Syrian rebels. The impact of Hezbollah's involvement cannot be overstated, as was seen most clearly in the 2013 battle for Qusayr, where Hezbollah gunmen reportedly fought house to house, took significant losses, and played the decisive role in turning the tide against the rebels.[7] That battle also laid bare the myth that Hezbollah was not fighting in Syria. Although Hezbollah had already admitted it was fighting there, it insisted that it was only operating along the border to protect ethnic Lebanese living on the Syrian side of the border, or protecting Shi'a shrines, specifically the Sayyeda Zeinab shrine in Damascus. These narratives, used by Hezbollah and its allies in Iran and Iraq, have pervaded its propaganda since the beginning of its involvement in the regional conflicts.[8]

Hezbollah's destabilizing activities in Syria date almost to the beginning of the country's uprising in 2011. Within weeks, Nasrallah himself called on all Syrians to stand by the regime.[9] As reports emerged in May 2011 that Iran's Qods Force was helping the Syrian regime crack down on anti-government demonstrators, Hezbollah denied playing "any military role in Arab countries." [10] But by the following month, Syrian protesters were heard chanting not only for Assad's downfall, but also against Iran and Hezbollah. Video footage showed protesters burning posters of Nasrallah.[11] According to a senior Syrian defense official who defected from the regime, Syrian security services

were unable to handle the uprising on their own. “They didn’t have decent snipers or equipment,” he explained. “They needed qualified snipers from Hezbollah and Iran.”^[12] Over time, Hezbollah increasingly struggled to conceal its on-the-ground support of the Assad regime. In August 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department blacklisted Hezbollah, already on its terrorism list, this time for providing support to the Assad regime. Since the beginning of the rebellion, Treasury explained, Hezbollah had been providing “training, advice, and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria’s increasingly ruthless efforts” against the opposition.^[13] Hezbollah’s “resistance” rhetoric notwithstanding, U.S. officials informed the UN Security Council in October 2012 that “the truth is plain to see: Nasrallah’s fighters are now part of Assad’s killing machine.”^[14] Two months later, a UN report confirmed Hezbollah members were in Syria fighting on behalf of the Assad government.^[15]

In the spring of 2013, Hezbollah became more public in the fight against the Syrian rebels by placing martyrdom notices for fallen Hezbollah fighters on the group’s official and unofficial websites, forums, and Facebook pages.^[16] Given Hezbollah’s organization structure and disciplined messaging, it is likely these notices were sanctioned by the leadership even though they did not publicly admit to being involved in Syria until late May 2013. Experts generally agree that 6,000 to 9,000 Hezbollah fighters are currently in Syria,^[17] with 3,000 more available as needed.^[18] Some reports estimate the number currently deployed is as high as 20,000 fighters.^[19] Hezbollah has proven to be an invaluable fighting force for Iran and the Assad regime. Yet the losses have been heavy – Hezbollah has lost at least 1,000 fighters in Syria, along with senior Hezbollah leader Mustafa Badreddine, reportedly killed in an explosion in Damascus in May 2016.^[20] Given Badreddine’s role as head of the group’s External Security Organization and its forces in Syria, his death represents Hezbollah’s biggest loss since the 2008 assassination of former “chief of staff” Imad Mughniyah. The strongest indicators of Hezbollah’s transformation since the beginning of its involvement in Syria are structural. Since 2013, the group has added two new military commands—one on the Lebanese–Syrian border, another within Syria itself—to its longstanding military commands in southern and eastern Lebanon.^[21]

With so many operatives deployed in Syria, and the group’s financial and logistical resources also going primarily to support that fight, Hezbollah’s militia, is—for the time being—somewhat distracted from its traditional objective of battling Israel. At the same time, Hezbollah’s terrorist wing—the Islamic Jihad Organization or External Security Organization—is also preoccupied and less capable of carrying out operations abroad. Key ESO leadership has been redirected to the fight in Syria, including the late ESO chief, Mustapha Baddredine.

And yet, Hezbollah remains a regional and international security threat—beyond its destabilizing role in the war in Syria.

Hezbollah’s Pivot to the Gulf

Next to Syria, Hezbollah’s regional reorientation is most obvious in its increased operational tempo in the Gulf.^[22]

In Yemen, a small number of Hezbollah operatives have been training Houthi rebels for some time, but in early 2016 the Gulf-backed Yemeni government claimed to have physical evidence of “Hezbollah training the Houthi rebels and fighting alongside them in attacks on Saudi Arabia’s border.”[23] Three years earlier, the U.S. government revealed that Khalil Harb, a former special operations commander and a close adviser to Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, was overseeing Hezbollah’s activities in Yemen. He has also traveled to Tehran to coordinate Hezbollah’s operations in Yemen with Iran.[24] Harb, however, is not the most senior operative dispatched to Yemen by Hezbollah. In the spring of 2015, Hezbollah sent Abu Ali Tabtabai, a senior Hezbollah commander formerly stationed in Syria, to upgrade the group’s training program for Yemen’s Houthi rebels, which reportedly involves schooling them in guerilla tactics.[25] In early 2018, the Saudi-led coalition fighting Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen reported that weapons smuggled to the Houthis were being sent by Hezbollah directly from a Hezbollah stronghold in Beirut.[26] And in June 2018, the coalition reported that eight Hezbollah fighters were killed fighting alongside Houthi rebels in Yemen.[27] Nasrallah denied the killings,[28] and Yemen’s foreign minister issued a formal letter of protest to his Lebanese counterpart in July 2018, objecting to Hezbollah’s active backing of Houthi rebels.[29]

Beyond Yemen, Hezbollah’s support for terrorist groups in the Gulf region also continues unabated. In January 2017, authorities in Bahrain arrested six members of a terrorist cell tied to Hezbollah and blamed for a July 2015 explosion outside of a girls’ school in Sitra. [30] In August 2015, Kuwaiti authorities raided a terrorist cell of 26 Shi’a Kuwaitis. The cell was accused of amassing “a large amount of weapons, ammunition, and explosives.” [31] After media outlets reported alleged links of the cell to Iran and Hezbollah, the public prosecutor issued a media gag order on the investigation. [32] In January 2016, a Kuwaiti court sentenced a Kuwaiti and an Iranian national to death for spying on behalf of Iran and Hezbollah.[33] In June 2016, a court in Abu Dhabi found the wife of a “prominent Emirati” guilty of spying for Hezbollah.[34] The following month, a Kuwait court sentenced a Shi’a member of parliament in absentia for issuing statements deemed insulting to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and for calling on people to join Hezbollah.[35]

According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury, Hezbollah has also invested in commercial front organizations to support its operations in Iraq.[36] Treasury reported that Hezbollah member Adham Tabaja, the majority owner of the Lebanon-based real estate and construction firm Al-Inmaa Group for Tourism Works, has exploited the firm’s Iraqi subsidiaries to fund Hezbollah, with the assistance of Kassem Hejeij, a Lebanese businessman tied to Hezbollah, and Husayn Ali Faour, a member of Hezbollah’s overseas terrorism unit. The U.S. Treasury has also designated money launderer Mohamad Nouredine and his partner Hamdi Zaher El Dine, noting that Nouredine is “a Lebanese money launderer who has worked directly with Hezbollah’s financial apparatus to transfer Hezbollah funds” through his companies while maintaining “direct ties to Hezbollah commercial and terrorist elements in both Lebanon and Iraq.”[37]

This past May, the U.S. Department of Treasury imposed sanctions on Valiollah Seif, governor of the Iraq-based Central Bank of Iran, its chairman Aras Habib, and key Hezbollah affiliate Muhammad

Qasir.[38] All of these entities and individuals helped facilitate the movement of millions of dollars on behalf of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) to Hezbollah, demonstrating Hezbollah's continued presence in the Gulf.

In March 2016, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) labeled Hezbollah a terrorist group.[39] Since then, the Gulf States have cracked down on Hezbollah supporters and financiers within their borders.[40] The GCC designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization over the "hostile actions of the militia who recruit the young people [of the Gulf] for terrorist acts." [41] The Arab League and the OIC followed suit within weeks.[42]

In May 2018, the U.S. Department of Treasury, in partnership with seven GCC members of the Terrorist Finance and Targeting Center (TFTC), designated members of Hezbollah's Shura Council. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin noted Hezbollah's destabilizing presence in the region in the Treasury's press release: "Under the dictates of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), Secretary General and head of the Shura Council Hasan Nasrallah is prolonging the human suffering in Syria, fueling the violence in Iraq and Yemen, putting the Lebanese state and the Lebanese people at risk, and destabilizing the entire region." [43]

Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere

Hezbollah's global footprint, however, is broader still, with support networks in Africa, Southeast Asia, North and South America, and Europe.[44] Hezbollah receives significant financial backing from the contributions of supporters living abroad, particularly from Lebanese nationals living in Africa, South America, and other places with large Lebanese Shi'a expatriate communities. Over time, these communities developed into a global support network available not only to raise funds, but also to provide logistical and operational support for Hezbollah operations. Such support networks, sometimes comprising a few individuals and in other cases larger, more organized cells, have developed in Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa, and in Middle Eastern countries with minority Shi'a populations such as Saudi Arabia.

North America

Hezbollah maintains a sizeable network of supporters and operatives in North America. In October 2015, authorities in the United States and France coordinated law enforcement actions leading to the arrests of Joseph Asmar in Paris and Iman Kobeissi in Atlanta. Kobeissi informed a DEA undercover agent posing as a narcotics trafficker that her Hezbollah associates sought to purchase cocaine, weapons, and ammunition. Asmar, an attorney, discussed potential narcotics deals with a DEA undercover agent and suggested he could use his connections with Hezbollah to provide security for narcotics shipments. In the DEA recording of the conversation, the two discussed their money-laundering network and the services they provided to drug traffickers, terrorist organizations, and other criminal groups in Lebanon, Iran, France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Benin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, Cyprus, and cities across the U.S.. [45]

In October 2017, a joint FBI-NYPD investigation led to the arrest of two individuals who were allegedly acting on behalf of Hezbollah's terrorist wing, the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO).[46] At the direction of their Hezbollah handlers, one person allegedly "conducted missions in Panama to locate the U.S. and Israeli Embassies and to assess the vulnerabilities of the Panama Canal and ships in the Canal," according to a Justice Department press release. The other allegedly "conducted surveillance of potential targets in America, including military and law enforcement facilities in New York City." In the wake of these arrests, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center warned: "It's our assessment that Hezbollah is determined to give itself a potential homeland option as a critical component of its terrorism playbook, and that is something that those of us in the counterterrorism community take very, very seriously." [47] These cases, one official added, are "likely the tip of the iceberg." [48]

Hezbollah, the U.S. intelligence community determined as recently as February 2018, is clearly committed to stoking the flames of regional conflicts: "Lebanese Hezbollah has demonstrated its intent to foment regional instability by deploying thousands of fighters to Syria and by providing weapons, tactics, and direction to militant and terrorist groups." But that is not all: "Hezbollah probably also emphasizes its capability to attack U.S., Israeli, and Saudi Arabian interests." [49]

South America

Today, Hezbollah is more invested in South American operations than ever before. Not only are counterterrorism officials tracking the group's operational plotlines there on a regular basis, but one of the most prominent perpetrators behind the 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires has risen in the organization's ranks and is personally overseeing its operations in the region. [50] Salman al-Reda, whose true name is reportedly Salman Raouf Salman, was the on-the-ground coordinator of the AMIA bombing. A dual Lebanese-Colombian citizen who at various times lived in Colombia, Buenos Aires, and the Tri-Border area, he fled the region after the bombing before being indicted by Argentine authorities for his role in the attack. But in the years that followed, he served as an active member of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO)/External Security Organization (ESO). He was especially active in Southeast Asia and South America in the 1990s, including a flurry of missions in 1997 with three visits to Panama, two to Colombia, and one to Brazil. After Mohammad Hamdar was arrested in Peru, he identified Reda as the Hezbollah operative who served as his handler and with whom he met on three different occasions in Turkey to plan the Peru operation. [51]

What is less well known about Hezbollah's presence in South America, however, is that Hezbollah is also active in Chile, Venezuela, Cuba, Panama, and Ecuador. Of particular concern to law enforcement officials throughout South America is Hezbollah's increased activity in free-trade zones, often under the cover of import-export companies. [52]

Consider the arrests by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Europol that targeted what U.S. law enforcement now refer to as the Business Affairs Component (BAC) of Hezbollah's terrorist wing, the IJO/ESO. BAC, which engages in drug trafficking and drug smuggling, was

founded, according to U.S. officials, by deceased Hezbollah Senior Leader Imad Mughniyah and currently operates under the control of senior Hezbollah official Abdallah Safieddine and recently Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) Adham Tabaja.[53]

The BAC established working relationships with South American drug cartels that supplied cocaine to drug markets in both the U.S. and Europe. It would then launder the drug proceeds through the well-known Black Market Peso Exchange. In late January 2016, the DEA and Customs and Border Protection coordinated with multiple foreign counterparts to arrest top leaders of Hezbollah's BAC, including U.S.-designated SDGT Mohamad Nouredine, who has worked directly with Hezbollah's financial apparatus to transfer Hezbollah funds via his Lebanon-based company Trade Point International S.A.R.L. and maintained direct ties to Hezbollah commercial and terrorist elements in both Lebanon and Iraq.[54] The U.S. Department of Treasury similarly targeted Nouredine, his accomplice Hamdi Zaher El Dine, and their company Trade Point International S.A.R.L.[55]

The extent of Hezbollah's drug connection was underscored once more in the wake of the U.S. Treasury designation of Panama-based narcotics kingpin Waked Money Laundering Organization in May 2016.[56] The press release tied to this action mentions neither Hezbollah nor Iran, but the action reportedly proved particularly damaging for both Hezbollah and Iranian illicit financial conduct in the region. When this money-laundering organization was targeted, it tied up illicit finances linked to various Iran Threat Network entities, including Hezbollah, and forced them to find other money-laundering channels in the region. Much of that activity reportedly shifted to the Tri-Border Area, and to Paraguay in particular.

One of the group's recently foiled plots was in Peru and involved a Hezbollah operative married to a U.S. citizen. Peruvian counterterrorism police arrested the Hezbollah operative in Lima in November 2014, the result of a surveillance operation that began several months earlier. In that case, Mohammed Hamdar, a Lebanese citizen, arrived in Peru in November 2013 and married a dual Peruvian-American citizen two weeks later. When he was arrested in October, police raided his home and found traces of TNT, detonators, and other inflammable substances. A search of the garbage outside his home found chemicals used to manufacture explosives.[57]

In the run-up to the 2016 Rio Olympics, Brazilian authorities arrested former Hezbollah member Fadi Hassan Nabha. According to police, Nabha served in Hezbollah's special services and had weapons and explosives training.[58] September 2016 saw two more arrests of key Hezbollah operatives in the region: Khalil Mohamed El Sayed and Mohammed Jalil. El Sayed, a Lebanese naturalized Paraguayan, was arrested while trying to enter Argentina using counterfeit documents. The U.S. has investigated El Sayed for six years for his involvement in Hezbollah, and Brazil has accused him of involvement in drug and arms trafficking for over eight years.[59] Jalil, also a Lebanese-Paraguayan attempting to enter Argentina on false papers, was arrested on similar charges, including affiliation with Hezbollah, drug and arms trafficking, and credit card fraud. Jalil is wanted in the U.S., Brazil, and Paraguay.[60]

Most recently, on May 17, Lebanese citizen Mohamed Nader Farhat and his partner, Yu Pei Wu, from Taiwan, were captured in a series of raids carried out in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay.[61] Nader Farhat is the brother-in-law of Walid Sweid, a prominent businessman who has been accused of money laundering for Hezbollah.[62] During this raid, undercover Paraguayan agents seized cash in a variety of currencies that amounted to more than \$1 million (U.S.) from two exchange houses. According to the investigation, money was apparently laundered from both exchange houses to finance Hezbollah. Public prosecutor Marcelo Pecci said that money from the exchange houses was sent abroad in several cases, and that the owners of the houses have been issued arrest warrants. [63]

Across the border, Argentina's Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) froze the assets of 14 members of the so-called Barakat network, led by U.S.-designated Hezbollah operative Assad Ahmad Barakat.[64] Assad Barakat has long been known to "use every crime in the book...to generate funds for Hezbollah." [65] According to the FIU, these individuals were reportedly laundering the proceeds of criminal enterprises through a casino in Iguazu, Argentina, to finance Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's ties to certain governments in Latin America have also raised concern. Of note, the current vice president of Venezuela, Tareck al-Aissami, was designated by the Treasury Department in February 2017 under a counter-narcotics authority [66] and is also reportedly close to Hezbollah. [67]

Hezbollah in Africa

Alongside its clandestine foreign operatives, Hezbollah also maintains a more public international presence through its Foreign Relations Department, which has representatives around the world. FRD activities in Africa have been particularly disconcerting.

According to U.S. intelligence, "Hezbollah maintains several front companies in sub-Saharan Africa." [68] In May 2009, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Kassim Tajideen as "an important financial contributor to Hezbollah who operates a network of businesses in Lebanon and Africa," and in March 2017, he was arrested in Morocco and charged with evading U.S. sanctions. [69] According to the U.S. Treasury's fact sheet, Tajideen contributed tens of millions of dollars to Hezbollah and funneled money to the group through his brother, a Hezbollah commander in Lebanon. Tajideen, a dual citizen of Lebanon and Sierra Leone, was joined by his brothers in running "cover companies" for Hezbollah in Africa, the Treasury revealed. [70]

In fact, Tajideen had already been under investigation six years earlier. In May 2003, after a four-month international investigation by Belgium's Economic Crimes Unit, Belgian Judicial Police raided the Antwerp offices of Soafrimex, a Lebanese export company owned by Kassim Tajideen, arrested several of its officials, and froze its bank accounts on charges of "large-scale tax fraud, money laundering, and trade in diamonds of doubtful origin, to the value of tens of millions of euros." Tajideen and his wife were also arrested. A few months later, Belgian authorities informed officials from the Congolese Embassy that an investigation conducted on the ground in the Democratic

Republic of the Congo (DRC) demonstrated that “the company systematically undervalued its imports, shipping and insurance costs and that it filed false customs declarations.”[71]

In December 2010, the Treasury Department targeted two more Tajideen brothers—Ali and Husayn—as Hezbollah financiers, designating them and several of their companies, including Arosfram.[72] Described as “two of Hezbollah’s top financiers in Africa,” the two brothers ran a multinational network that generated millions of dollars for Hezbollah, according to the U.S. Treasury. The businesses targeted by the Treasury Department were located as far afield as The Gambia, Sierra Leone, the DRC, Angola, the British Virgin Islands, and Lebanon. The Treasury added that Ali alone provided huge cash payments to Hezbollah, in amounts as large as \$1 million r. And while he was apparently a major donor to Hezbollah, Ali Tajideen was no mere fundraiser, the Treasury stressed; he was also “a former Hezbollah commander” in Lebanon.[73]

In May 2018, Morocco severed diplomatic ties with Iran over evidence that Iran used Hezbollah to support the Algerian-backed Polisario Front, a Western Sahara independence movement. Morocco’s foreign minister stated that Iran and Hezbollah were helping train Polisario fighters and shipping weapons through the Iranian embassy in Algiers.[74] Senior Hezbollah military officials have reportedly been making visits to Polisario refugee camps since March 2017[75] and the relationship has been ongoing for two years.[76]

In late May 2018, Treasury designated Hezbollah financier Mohammad Ibrahim Bazzi and five companies he owns or controls, some of which have ties to West African countries.[77] For example, Bazzi’s Global Trading Group NV, a global energy products and services company, has locations in Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Ivory Coast, and Benin. Euro African Group LTD, for which Bazzi is the Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director as well as majority shareholder, is located in The Gambia. In fact, Global Trading Group and Euro African Group claim to have been “the exclusive importer of all fuel products into [T]he Gambia since 2003.” Through these and other companies, Bazzi has provided millions of dollars to Hezbollah.[78]

Hezbollah and Israel’s Northern Borders

Even as Hezbollah has poured considerable weaponry and manpower[79] into the conflicts in Syria and Iraq,[80] it has also directed third-party actors to carry out terrorist attacks. In January 2016, Israeli authorities arrested five Palestinians for planning an attack “organized and funded by Hezbollah.”[81] According to Israeli officials, the leader of this West Bank cell was recruited by Hassan Nasrallah’s son Jawad. Hezbollah trained and directed the group to surveil Israeli targets, giving the men \$5,000 to carry out suicide bombings and other attacks. Based on these and other cases, a senior Israeli official warned in February 2016 that Iran was “building an international terror network” of cells with access to weapons, intelligence, and operatives to carry out attacks in the West.[82]

Hezbollah Weapons Buildup

Since at least January 2017, Iran has been establishing rocket factories in Lebanon that are fully controlled by Hezbollah.[83] According to one of the deputy heads of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the factories are underground and are protected by layers of defense to shield against Israeli bombing.[84] Each factory only produces certain rocket parts, all of which are ultimately collected and assembled into complete rockets.[85] The decision to produce rockets inside Lebanon came after Israel bombed weapons facilities in Sudan and supply routes for Iranian rockets through Syria.

According to Israeli assessments, Iran wants to increase its production efforts as well as improve the accuracy of Hezbollah's missiles and rockets.[86] After discovering the facilities, Israel threatened to attack them.

Last September it appeared that Iran had stopped construction of the facilities. However, this past January, IDF spokesman Brig. Gen. Ronen Manelis, in a rare article published in Arabic publications, wrote that Israel believes that Iran has resumed building weapons facilities in Lebanon. General Manelis reported:

Through the actions and inaction of the Lebanese authorities, Lebanon is turning into one big missile factory while much of the international community looks the other way. It's no longer about transfers of arms, money or advice. De facto, Iran has opened a new branch, the Lebanon branch -- Iran is here... Iran and Hezbollah are currently trying to build a precision missile factory.[87]

Manelis also warned that Hezbollah is storing weapons in villages and towns in southern Lebanon, noting that "One of every three or four homes in southern Lebanon is a command post, position, weapons warehouse or hiding place for Hezbollah." [88]

Furthermore, the Israeli Navy has warned that "the next war with Hezbollah could see a focus on the sea." [89] The former deputy chief of Israel's naval operations, Shaul Chorev, has warned that Israel "must assume they will use asymmetric warfare to challenge Israeli technology like land to sea missile or suicide ships like you see in Yemen." [90] While Hezbollah does not necessarily want to start a war with Israel, should war break out Hezbollah's strategy would be to target Israeli strategic assets, such as its maritime power.[91] This could be particularly dangerous for Israel as the country is highly dependent on sea imports, with over 90 percent of Israel's imports arriving by ship, and Israeli leaders may be less attentive to the maritime domain relative to other threats.[92]

Shia Militias and Hezbollah leaders on Israel's Border

Beyond the weapons buildup on Israel's northern border, Hezbollah and Shia militia leaders have made several visits to Israel's borders. This past December, the leader and founder of Shia militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Qais al-Khazali, along with several others in military uniform, visited the Israeli-Lebanese border. One of those guiding al-Khazali showed him the areas overlooking Israeli towns and villages. The video of the visit, which was aired by Asaib al-Haq al-Ahd TV station, showed al-Khazali standing on the border near the Fatima Gate in the Lebanese village of Kfar Kila. In the video

al-Khazali can be heard saying: “We declare our full readiness to stand united with the Lebanese people and the Palestinian cause in the face of the Israeli occupation.”[93]

In a rare article published on Arab websites, IDF spokesman Brig. Gen. Ronen Manelis wrote:

If I had to choose my picture of the year on the Lebanese front, I would go back to the joint tour by the commander of the southern Lebanon front of Hezbollah and his friend, the commander of one of the Shi’ite militias loyal to Iran, Qais al-Khazali.... The picture expresses, better than anything else, Iranian involvement in Lebanon and lifts the curtain over the increasing reality of closer Iranian control in Lebanon. It’s clear that “terrorist tourism” is the tangible expression of the danger to the future of Lebanon and of the entire region— danger of a takeover by those doing Tehran’s bidding. [94]

In addition to the visits that Shia militia leaders have paid to Israel’s northern borders, Hezbollah members dressed in civilian clothing continue to patrol the border with Israel. According to Manelis, Hezbollah has even invited journalists for special tours of the border, showing “its ‘scorn’ for Lebanon sovereignty and UN Security Council resolutions.”[95]

In October 2017, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) Military Intelligence identified Munir Ali Naim Shaiti, also known as Haj Hasham, as Hezbollah’s new commander on the Syrian-held side of the Golan Heights.[96] Shaiti, from southern Lebanon, spends most of his time in Syria, where he oversees security and operations for Hezbollah. He is also responsible for preparing Hezbollah’s military infrastructure for a possible future war with Israel. According to Israeli Intelligence sources, Shaiti receives his orders from Major General Qasem Suleimani.[97]

Prior to assuming this role, it is believed that Shaiti was the deputy chief of Hezbollah Bader Brigades, which is responsible for Hezbollah’s terrorist operations north of the Litani River in Lebanon.[98] He assumed his current role in June 2016, replacing Samir Kuntar who was killed in December 2015.[99]

Most recently, opposition forces in southern Syria arrested eight suspected Hezbollah members, one of whom said he was waiting for orders to fire rockets into Israel, including four grad rockets with a range of 40 kilometers.[100]

Conclusion

Speaking in 2016, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah was crystal clear on his plans for Hezbollah’s future: “If Hezbollah emerged from the 2006 war a regional force,” Nasrallah declared, “it will emerge from [the] Syria crisis an international force.”[101] Less than two years later, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence testified before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that Hezbollah was indeed following that path: “Iran and its strategic partner Lebanese Hezbollah also pose a persistent threat to the U.S. and its partners worldwide.”[102]

And yet, despite this strategic partnership, Hezbollah is also part of the fabric of Lebanese politics, as Secretary of State Tillerson noted the very next day. Tillerson recognized Iran’s “unhelpful influence” over Hezbollah and Lebanon, but added, “We also have to acknowledge the reality that they [Hezbollah] also are part of the political process in Lebanon.”^[103]

Therein lies the key to understanding Hezbollah: As an organization, Hezbollah has a well-defined, hierarchical structure, but it also has multiple parts, and multiple interests and objectives. At times, different interests and objectives are prioritized over others, as in Hezbollah’s military deployment to Syria despite the domestic political cost to the group at home in Lebanon. What drives this calculus, however, especially in recent years, has been Hezbollah’s close ties with, and commitment to, Iran.

The good news is that the international community is coming together to address the threat from Hezbollah and Iran sometimes referred to as the Iran Threat Network. For example, the Law Enforcement Coordination Group (LECG) has met six times in various locations around the world to address Hezbollah’s terrorist and criminal activities. The latest meeting, held in Quito, Ecuador, was convened by the U.S. and Europol and held under the auspices of Ameripol.^[104] The LECG will next meet in Europe, where more than 30 governments—along with officials from Europol and Interpol—will convene to compare notes on Hezbollah activities in their far-flung jurisdictions and strategize on how to best cooperate to counter Hezbollah terrorist and criminal operations.

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