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IV. How is the U.S. targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani likely to affect Hezbollah's international activities and operations?



In recent years, Hezbollah grew into an expeditionary force deployed throughout the region — Syria, Iraq, Yemen — together with other Shi'a militias to further Iranian interests. An IRGC general referred to such forces as Iran's "Shi'a Liberation Army." In the wake of the Soleimani assassination, Hezbollah has already stepped in to help guide Iraq's various Shi'a militias, at least temporarily.

But even as its regional military responsibilities grew, and its domestic political position become more complicated, Hezbollah remained engaged in international terrorism with operational activities detected in recent years in Bolivia, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, Panama, Peru, Thailand, Uganda, the U.S., and more.

The New York trial of convicted Hezbollah Islamic Jihad operative Ali Kourani, a self-described Hezbollah sleeper agent, offers critical insight into the conditions under which Hezbollah might carry out a terrorist attack. According to the FBI, Kourani said "there would be certain scenarios that would require action," including from the sleeper cell, such as if the U.S. and Iran went to war, or if the U.S. were to take actions targeting Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, or Iranian interests.

The U.S. assassination of Soleimani clearly meets this threshold. As such, it is not surprising that since then Hezbollah has shifted its focus. "America is the number one threat," Nasrallah announced after the Soleimani hit, adding that "Israel is just a military tool or base."

Hezbollah still seeks to battle Israel, eventually. But the primary near-term objective of Iran and its proxies is to push U.S. military forces out of Iraq and the region. Nasrallah hinted at how Hezbollah could help realize this goal, boasting that "[t]he suicide attackers who forced the Americans to leave from our region in the past are still here and their numbers have increased."

Iran and its proxies will ultimately seek to avenge Soleimani's death by executing some type of reasonably deniable asymmetric attack. One likely scenario: recruiting operatives from Iranian proxy groups with non-Lebanese profiles. In August 2019, a Pakistani suspected of being a Hezbollah operative was reportedly questioned by authorities in Thailand. Or calling on Lebanese operatives who have lived abroad for several years, like the one arrested in Uganda in July 2019.

Kourani made this much clear: There are scenarios in which Hezbollah would use the preoperational surveillance it regularly collects to carry out an attack. Hezbollah will be patient, but will ultimately seek to avenge Soleimani's death.

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