



Lebanese Hezbollah

Overview

Hezbollah (“Party of God”) is an Iran-backed Lebanese Shi’a militia and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Formed in 1982, in the wake of the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, the group has described itself as the leader of Islamic resistance to Israel and has conducted numerous attacks against Israeli and Western targets. Hezbollah currently operates regionally as a militia force, while also playing a powerful role as a Lebanese political party and provider of social services.

Leadership

Hassan Nasrallah has served as Secretary-General of Hezbollah since the assassination of his predecessor by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in 1992. The group’s leadership structure includes an advisory body known as the Shura Council, comprising the heads of the Executive, Political, and Judiciary Councils, as well as two permanent Iranian representatives. According to the U.S. government, the External Security Organization (ESO), the military arm of Hezbollah responsible for the planning, coordination, and execution of terrorist attacks, is headed by Talal Hamiyah. He reportedly took over in 2008, after his predecessor, Imad Mughniyah, was killed in a car bombing.

Objectives

For nearly two decades, Hezbollah’s stated objective was to drive IDF forces from southern Lebanon, through a range of attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets. Since the Israeli withdrawal in May 2000, Hezbollah has used the remaining Israeli presence in the Sheb’a Farms and other disputed areas in the Lebanon-Syria-Israel tri-border region to justify its ongoing conflict with Israel—and its persistence as an armed militia alongside the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Hezbollah promotes Iranian interests in the region, through efforts to ensure the survival of the Asad government in Syria and counter the influence of Iran’s regional rivals. In recent years, the group has portrayed itself as a protector of Lebanon’s domestic security, conducting operations against Sunni extremist groups that have crossed into the country from Syria.

Areas of Operation

Hezbollah is based in Lebanon and primarily operates in the Middle East, though it has conducted attacks elsewhere.

Lebanon

According to U.S. government assessments, Hezbollah controls access to parts of Lebanon and operates inside the country with relative impunity. The group was implicated in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in a car bombing in downtown Beirut that also killed 21 others. In 2011, the United Nations-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) indicted four Hezbollah members in connection with the Hariri assassination and is conducting trials in absentia (a fifth

Hezbollah member was indicted in 2013). Other anti-Syrian politicians, journalists, and security personnel were killed in the years following the Hariri assassination, including four members of parliament; analysts have claimed that Hezbollah and/or Syria are likely culprits.

Figure 1. Lebanon



Source: Created by CRS using ESRI, Google Maps, and Good Shepherd Engineering and Computing.

Hezbollah vies for the loyalties of its constituents by operating a vast network of schools, clinics, youth programs, private businesses, and local security. Hezbollah has participated in elections since 1992. The group entered the Cabinet for the first time in 2005, and has held one or two seats in each of the six Lebanese governments formed since then. Hezbollah has at times sought to block cabinet decisions, twice prompting the collapse of the government by withdrawing from the cabinet alongside its political allies. The group is part of the March 8 political coalition, which includes Lebanese President Michel Aoun of the Free Patriotic Movement. Hezbollah did not gain any additional seats in Lebanon’s May 2018 legislative elections (it continues to hold 13), but parties allied with the March 8 coalition increased their share of seats.

Syria

Hezbollah has a longstanding relationship with the Asad government in Syria, which facilitates the transit of weapons through its territory from Iran to Hezbollah. In 2013, Nasrallah acknowledged that Hezbollah fighters were operating inside Syria and pledged that the group would “do everything in [its] power” to ensure the Asad government’s survival. Formerly limited to advisory and support roles, Hezbollah fighters increasingly undertook combat missions, coordinating with Syrian military and paramilitary forces to recapture Syrian towns along the Lebanese border. Since 2013, Hezbollah has expanded its geographical scope of operations in Syria. While most

deployments aim to bolster regime forces, Hezbollah fighters have taken a lead role in some operations, including the regime's recapture of Aleppo in December 2016.

According to the 2016 *Country Reports on Terrorism* (published in July 2017), Hezbollah maintains about 7,000 fighters in Syria. Some observers have highlighted the potential for future Hezbollah deployments to assist the Assad regime in recapturing eastern Syria, which could facilitate the shipment of arms and other supplies across Iraq from Iran.

Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war has cost the group an estimated 2,500 fighters killed and 7,000 injured and has reportedly resulted in some erosion of its popular support, including within Lebanon's Shi'a community. At the same time, the group has gained combat experience and expanded its operational capabilities, leading some analysts to assess that the group has adopted some aspects of a conventional force.

Attacks Against U.S. Interests

Starting in the early 1980s, Hezbollah carried out a series of terrorist attacks against U.S. personnel and facilities, including the high-profile truck bombings of the U.S. Embassy and Multinational Force barracks in Beirut in 1983, and the Embassy annex in 1984. Hezbollah also hijacked TWA Flight 847 and took roughly 100 foreign hostages between 1982 and 1992, including the CIA chief of station in Beirut, who later died in their custody.

Since 1986, the U.S. government has not directly implicated Hezbollah in any attacks on American personnel or facilities. Nevertheless, U.S. officials have alleged that Hezbollah leaders were active in arming and training Shi'a militias that carried out attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. In June 2017, the Department of Justice announced that it had arrested two naturalized U.S. citizens on charges of providing material support to, and receiving military-type training from, Hezbollah. The men allegedly surveilled potential targets for attack in the United States and Panama.

Attacks on Israeli and Jewish Targets

Over the past two decades, Hezbollah has periodically fired rockets into northern Israel. Hezbollah rocket attacks reached a peak during the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War, when, over the course of a 34-day period in July and August, more than 4,000 rockets fell across northern Israel, killing 55 Israelis. Hezbollah also conducted cross-border raids on Israeli villages and military installations. All told, the 2006 conflict killed an estimated 163 Israelis and more than 1,000 Lebanese.

Since the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War, Hezbollah has reportedly continued to expand its rocket arsenal—from approximately 13,000 short- and medium-range rockets when the War began to, by some accounts, ten times that number today, including Russian- and Iranian-built systems with longer ranges and improved accuracy.

Over the years, Hezbollah has also been implicated in several attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets outside Israel, including two attacks in Argentina in the early 1990s and a 1994 car bombing at the Israeli Embassy in London.

Size and Financing

The U.S. government has not issued an unclassified assessment of the total number of Hezbollah fighters across all areas of operation. The International Institute for Strategic Studies' 2017 *Military Balance* estimates that Hezbollah's active forces number between 7,000–10,000 with an additional 20,000 reserves.

According to Nasrallah, Hezbollah receives all of its funding from Iran. In a 2016 speech, Nasrallah stated that "Hezbollah's budget, ... everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from the Islamic Republic of Iran." In June 2018, Treasury Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Sigal Mandelker estimated that Iran provides Hezbollah with more than \$700 million per year, significantly more than previously released U.S. government estimates.

However, Hezbollah also operates a global criminal-financial network, with reported hubs in Europe, West Africa, and Latin America. A 2016 Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) investigation implicated Hezbollah in a multimillion-dollar scheme involving the alleged transit of Latin American cocaine to the United States and Europe and the laundering of drug proceeds through exchanges in the Middle East and West Africa.

Relationship with Iran

Iranian support for Hezbollah, including providing thousands of rockets and short-range missiles, helps Iran acquire leverage against key regional adversaries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. It also facilitates Iran's intervention on behalf of the Assad regime in Syria. According to the 2016 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, Iran trains "thousands" of Hezbollah fighters.

Designations and Recent Legislation

Hezbollah, as an entity, is listed as a Specially Designated Terrorist (1995); a Foreign Terrorist Organization (1997); and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (2001). Several affiliated individuals and entities have also been designated as SDGTs, including Secretary-General Nasrallah.

In December 2015, the 114th Congress passed the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act (HIFPA, P.L. 114-102) imposing sanctions on foreign financial institutions that facilitate transactions or money laundering on behalf of Hezbollah or affiliated persons or entities. The Hizballah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act of 2017 (S. 1595 and H.R. 3329), introduced in July 2017, would amend HIFPA to impose additional sanctions on Hezbollah's financial facilitators. In October 2017, H.R. 3329 was passed by the House as amended and S. 1595 was passed by the Senate as amended. For additional information on Lebanese Hezbollah, see CRS Report R44759, *Lebanon*, by Carla E. Humud.

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