

## Hezbollah: A Rising Threat in the Middle East

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*The paper explores Hezbollah's thriving popularity in the Middle East, specifically Lebanon, and its increasing threat to the United State's foreign policy interests. It begins with the history and background of the Islamic group and provides information of its functions within Lebanon and the dynamics of its relationships with the United States, Iran and Syria. The paper concludes with three suggestions of how the United States should respond to Hezbollah's potential threat to the U.S. and world order.*

**H**ezbollah's July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2006 attack in northern Israel, in which two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped, elicited an Israeli military response that entangled the region in a multi-dimensional conflict. The month-long war touched upon an array of critical U.S. foreign policy issues in the Middle East, including the continued instability in the Arab-Israeli peace process, the war on terror, controlling the use of weapons of mass destruction, the promotion of democracy, and the preservation of Lebanon's sovereignty which remains hampered by the inability to disarm Hezbollah. The 34-day military confrontation between Hezbollah and the Israeli Defense Force greatly enhanced the prestige of Hezbollah at the expense of the Lebanese government. Hezbollah's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, and his organization have been widely hailed both for military aptitude and for the perceived ability to initiate disaster relief projects far more quickly and efficiently than the regular governmental organizations. With Hezbollah deeply ingrained in Lebanese Shiite society, the movement

has become a fixture in the political system. The street demonstrations that began on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2006 to overthrow the Lebanese government seriously affect U.S. goals of anti-terrorism and the promotion of democracy. Such conditions would likely foster increased terrorism, unrest on Israel's border, and other forms of regional instability.

The 2006 war in Lebanon is the latest manifestation of conflict along the Israeli-Lebanese-Syrian border. Historically, on the Lebanese side of the border, weak, usually Christian/Sunni led governments paid little attention to the southern, predominately Shiite, portion of the country (Ranstorp 1997). Throughout the years of Lebanon's existence, the Shiites, although comprising the largest sect in Lebanon, suffered from under representation in the governmental political institutions. Without much of an economy or government military presence in the south, the region was prone to penetration by outside groups opposed to Israel until the Shiites residing there formed their own militias (Sharp 2006). Before Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shiite militia, came on the scene, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) used Lebanon as a base to wage guerrilla war against Israel. Repeated PLO-Israeli clashes in Lebanon helped ignite the 15-year long Lebanese civil war (Ranstorp 1997). To eliminate the PLO threat from its border, Israel occupied a buffer zone in southern Lebanon for 18 years, a policy which many observers believe accelerated the politicization of Lebanese Shiites there and, with significant assistance from Iran, led to the creation of the Shiite militia, Hezbollah (Sharp 2006). In 1985, Hezbollah declared an armed struggle to end the Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory. When the Lebanese civil war ended, and other warring factions agreed to disarm, Hezbollah and the Israeli-sponsored South Lebanon Army (SLA) refused. Today with the PLO and the Syrian armed forces expelled

from Lebanon, Hezbollah has stepped in to fill the power vacuum in southern Lebanon and continue to threaten Israel with the full support of its foreign patrons- Syria and Iran (Sharp 2006).

From the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990 until the disengagement of Syria from Lebanon in April 2005, Hezbollah operated in Lebanon under Syrian protection. Syria remains a vital cohesive connecting Hezbollah to Iran and serves as a channel for the transfer of arms from Iran to Hezbollah. Syria's utility to Iran and Hezbollah is likely to remain strong despite increased international pressure on Damascus to seal its border with Lebanon and halt the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, a breach of UN Security Council Resolution 1701<sup>1</sup> (Executive Summary, Lebanon 2006).

Since the withdrawal of the Syrian military from Lebanon in 2005, Hezbollah has come under increasing domestic and international pressure to disarm its armed wing (Hizbullah 2006). While Hezbollah's Islamic Resistance (IR) military wing should be disarmed in accordance with UN resolutions, Hezbollah argues that the force is needed to defend Lebanon against future Israeli attacks. With the Lebanese military too weak to tackle the IR, disarmament can only be brought about with Hezbollah's approval, which currently seems unlikely (Executive Summary, Lebanon 2006). According to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice,

*I don't think there is an expectation that this UN force is going to physically disarm*

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<sup>1</sup> Called for a full cessation of hostilities in the month-long war between Israel and Hezbollah, mapping out a formula for the phased withdrawal of the Israel Defense Forces from southern Lebanon, while up to 15,000 United Nations peacekeepers help Lebanese troops take control of the area.

*Hezbollah....I think it's a little bit of a misreading about how you disarm a militia. You have to have a plan, first of all, for the disarmament of the militia, and then the hope is that some people lay down their arms voluntarily (Sharp 2006).*

Most analysts believe that the Lebanese army can do little to prevent the smuggling of arms to Hezbollah.

Estimates of the IR's strength have varied widely. The IR centers on a core of full-time guerrilla fighters numbering around 600-800. These fighters are typically aged in their late 20s to early 30s, many of them combat veterans of the IR resistance campaign against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the 1990s. There are perhaps 5,000 to 7,000 part-time fighters, acting essentially as a reserve force of village guards. The part-time cadre comprised the bulk of IR's fighting force in the summer 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. In an event of a national emergency, Hezbollah can theoretically draw upon its entire membership which could be as many as 25,000. Every Hezbollah member is required to undergo a basic military training course, conducted on an ad hoc basis in the eastern Bekaa with IR instructors, although specialist training is carried out in Iran (Hizbullah 2006).

Already considered the most capable non-state armed group in the Middle East, Hezbollah's IR wing was rearmed by Iran and Syria with a large number of unguided rockets after the withdrawal. These rockets, which threatened much of northern Israel, were intended as a deterrent against further Israeli operations in Lebanon, or U.S. action against Iran's suspicious nuclear program. That deterrent capability has been eroded following the Israel-Hezbollah war in the summer of 2006. Although Hezbollah retains a substantial supply of short-range

Katyusha rockets and some longer-range versions, the organization no longer controls Lebanon's southern border with Israel (Hizbullah 2006).

As far as monetary assistance, some estimates put Iranian donations to Hezbollah in the region of USD 50 million annually (exact figures are unknown). The group benefits from collections from individuals, charities, as well as legitimate commercial enterprises. There is evidence of Hezbollah receiving funds from narcotics, both cultivation and smuggling in Lebanon and elsewhere (Hizbullah 2006). Iran supplies most of Hezbollah's more sophisticated weaponry, including artillery rockets and anti-tank missiles. Syria has also been implicated in supplying weapons to Hezbollah, either directly, or by allowing Iranian arms shipments to transit its territory (Hizbullah 2006).

The most recent conflict began when Hezbollah fired Katyusha rockets and mortars at Israeli military positions and border villages to divert attention from another Hezbollah unit that crossed the border and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and killed three. The conflict killed over 1,500 people, most of whom were Lebanese civilians, severely damaged Lebanese infrastructure, displaced about 900,000 Lebanese and 300,000 Israelis (Executive Summary, Lebanon 2006). This war strengthened calls for Hezbollah's disarmament.

Hezbollah's violent acts are characterized by some countries as terrorist attacks, while others regard them as legitimate resistance, and some as *jihad*. Supporters justify Hezbollah's attacks against Israel for several reasons. First, Hezbollah believes the security zone held by Israel is an occupation of Lebanese land. Many of the attacks took place while Israel occupied the southern part of Lebanon and held it as a security zone in spite of the United

Nation's Security Resolution 425<sup>2</sup> (Deeb 2006). Although a complete Israeli withdrawal was verified by the United Nations in 2000, Lebanon still considers the Shebaa farms, captured by Israel from Syria in the 1967 war and considered by the UN to be disputed territory between Syria and Israel, to be Lebanese territory<sup>3</sup> (Deeb 2006). Furthermore, Israel continues to hold Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails for crimes committed against Israel (Executive Summary, Israel 2006). Finally, as is common for large portions of the Muslim world, Hezbollah considers Israel an illegitimate state. For these reasons, many in the Arab world consider acts performed by Hezbollah against Israel to be justified as acts of *jihad* (BBC News 2006). Even 74 percent of Lebanese Christians viewed Hezbollah at the height of the war as a resistance organization rather than a terrorist group (National Public Radio 2006).

For years, Hezbollah was synonymous with terror, suicide bombings and kidnappings. It was among the first Islamic resistance groups to use tactical suicide bombings against foreign soldiers in the Middle East and has reportedly been involved in multiple kidnappings, murders,

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<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Security Resolution 425 calls for strict respect for the territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon within its internationally recognized boundaries; and calls upon Israel immediately to cease its military action against Lebanese territorial integrity and withdraw forthwith its forces from all Lebanese territory.

<sup>3</sup> A small, 10-square-mile enclave of disputed ownership near the Lebanon-Syria-Israel tri-border area known as the Shebaa Farms continues to exacerbate tensions in southern Lebanon and complicate implementation of cease-fire terms. The area was captured by Israel from Syria during the Six Day War in 1967. Israel considers the Shebaa Farms to be part of the Golan Heights. Israel's annexation of the Shebaa Farms has been contested by Hezbollah and advanced as a reason for its continued attacks on Israel.

hijackings, and bombings (Dahr 2006). The group's manifesto includes three goals: the eradication of Western imperialism in Lebanon, the transformation of Lebanon's multi-confessional state into an Islamic state, and the complete destruction of Israel (Hizbullah 2006). Today, although Hezbollah believes in an Islamic Republic like Iran, it finds it an inaccessible goal in Lebanon. Starting only with a militia, it has grown to an organization with seats in the Lebanese government, a radio and a satellite television station, and programs for social development (Deeb 2006). Hezbollah has evolved into a more pragmatic socio-political movement. It has gained political legitimacy, with a credible holding of seats in Lebanon's parliament and a social service that far outperforms the state's cumbersome bureaucracy.

The secondary players, Iran and Syria, have added additional layers of complexity to the triangular dynamic of the conflict in which Israel was at war with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Both countries have played significant roles in arming, training, and financing Hezbollah, and have used the Lebanese Shiite organization as a proxy to further their own goals in the region. Iran may have aspirations to become the dominant power in the Middle East, and many in the international community are concerned about its potential weapons of mass destruction capability. In this light, the fighting in southern Lebanon was viewed by some as a contest between two of Middle East's rivals and most powerful actors, Israel and Iran (via Hezbollah), and could be a indication of future indirect confrontations between two possibly nuclear-armed nations (Sharp 2006).

The United States holds a legacy of constantly backing democracy. However, in the case of Lebanon, Hezbollah is increasingly being placed into office legitimately through elections, and is a great concern to the U.S. and Israel.

Fawaz A. Gerges, former professor at Harvard, Princeton, and Colombia, believes that,

*We should not be surprised that Muslim voters are empowering mainstream Islamists. Secular rulers have failed both to deliver jobs, social services, and education, and to defend the homeland against external threats. More and more Muslims view Islamists as the most effective alternative to the discredited ruling establishment (Gerges 2006).*

The Lebanese government itself is far from monolithic. On one hand, parliamentary elections gave a majority (72 out of 128 seats) to a large anti-Syrian bloc headed by the late Prime Minister's son; on the other hand, the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah leads a 33-seat minority bloc, and a third 21-seat bloc headed by an independent cooperating with the Hezbollah bloc on some issues (Sharp 2006).

While fighting has come to a halt in the most recent conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, Hezbollah is contending with the United States and its international partners over which side can help rebuild southern Lebanon the fastest and win the "hearts and minds" of many distraught Lebanese civilians who have lost homes and businesses due to the war. Hezbollah militants and party members allegedly have been handing out \$12,000 cash payments to anyone who lost their home during the war (Steinvorth 2006). According to the governor of Lebanon's Central Bank, Hezbollah was distributing banknotes that had not gone through the formal banking system implying that they may have been transported across the border by land (Executive Summary, Lebanon 2006). According to *Time*, Hezbollah has pledged to rebuild apartment buildings and entire villages within three

years and has sent civil-affairs team wears hats that read, “Jihad for Reconstruction” (Time 2006).

To counter Hezbollah’s efforts, President Bush announced on August 21, 2006 that the United States would provide \$230 million to Lebanon, an additional \$175 million on top of an earlier pledge of \$55 million (Shelby 2006).

On December 1, 2006, Hezbollah and its coalition, a major Christian party aligned with them, conducted a massive street demonstration in Beirut, demanding control of one third of the government, plus one, giving them veto power over the Cabinet. The protests were the “latest demonstration of the decisive rift splitting Lebanese society on the political future of the country” (Engel 2006). The current government has been a U.S. ally, expressing interest in having dialogue with Israel, but is accused of being an American puppet (Slackman 2006). The group has made it clear that the fight is against “American tutelage” and said the protest action will continue until the government falls (Engel 2006). Prime Minister Fouad Sinoria claimed, “I am going to stay in office and defend democracy and independence and we will not be scared by their threats or terrorized by their threats” (Slackman 2006). However, the protesters claim that they support democracy, and these street demonstrations display their people-power. They claim to want a free and open government, not controlled by the United States (Engel 2006).

Virginia Palmer a Foreign Service Officer in the Department of State in Regional and Trans-Regional Affairs suggests that we address Iran head on, but do so carefully considering their potential nuclear ambitions. She also mentioned that we need to pull Syria out of Iran’s orbit. This may be hard however, she admitted; because it

may take bringing back the Golan Heights to get back into good relations with Syria (Palmer 2006).

Regardless of how these recent events play out, the United States should take action against increasing Iranian and Syrian influence in the region. Without the accountability of the world community, Hezbollah is essentially free of consequences, such as sanctions, and many suggest they pose a significant threat against Israel and the United States. Risk that critical nuclear technology can be subverted to terrorist organizations is particularly high, especially if those groups have access to significant financial resources, and program participants are able to profit with little detection by either the proliferating state or by the opponents. With a weak central government, Lebanon is an increasingly unstable state. The threat that Hezbollah military hubs based in Lebanon pose to the United States and to its allies escalates dramatically if those hubs obtain access to nuclear weapons.

The United States must restrict Hezbollah's ability to operate in the global commons. The U.S. must combat money laundering and restrict financial operations by Hezbollah immediately. This can be difficult however because of the many alternative financial mechanisms to earn, move, and store their assets (Dempsey 2006). On August 29, 2006, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated the Islamic Resistance Support Organization (IRSO) of Lebanon as "serving as a key Hezbollah fund-raising organization" (U.S. Department of Treasury 2006)<sup>4</sup>. As a result of the designation, the IRSO is prohibited from

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<sup>4</sup> According to Treasury officials, the organization openly raised funds for Hezbollah via direct solicitation and advertisements on Hezbollah's Al Manar television network. The IRSO reportedly allowed its donors to specify whether or not they wished their funds to be used for military equipment or weapons purchases, in addition to a range of other services.

operating in the United States, and any of its assets under U.S. jurisdiction were frozen. The action against the IRSO has been followed by two actions against Lebanese and Iranian financial entities suspected of providing support to Hezbollah (Sharp 2006). This pressure must continue on these and other organizations aiding the transfer of money between Hezbollah and its supporters. Unfortunately, according to a Lebanese military official<sup>5</sup>, a majority of the financial support provided by Iran and Syria is physically carried over the border in large amounts. Border security must significantly increase. Currently, the Lebanese government has accepted the U.N. deployment, which is part of a cease-fire deal that ended hostilities on August 14, 2006 (CNN 2006). Under that agreement, 15,000 U.N. troops will be added to a small U.N. force already on the ground and is supposed to help the Lebanese army secure the country's borders, in part to prevent re-supply of Hezbollah (CNN 2006).

The United States should quickly step up efforts to help build Lebanon's local state capacity to combat terrorist action within its borders, and help stabilize Lebanon's security forces over the next decade (Dempsey 2006). Security assistance programs must be in place in addition to a cultivation of local and regional partners who can avoid the necessity for direct U.S. intervention. The U.S. Department of Justice must partner with Lebanese law enforcement agencies and internal security forces to identify, apprehend, and bring to justice terrorist suspects operating or taking refuge within Lebanon. In an interview with a military official from the region,<sup>6</sup> it was strongly suggested that the U.S. continue to aid the central government so that they can provide for the necessities of

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<sup>5</sup> The identity of the military official must remain anonymous due to non-attribution standards

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the Lebanese people and repair much of the damaged infrastructure. He stressed the importance of setting up troops, in addition to U.N. forces, to secure the borders where money and weapons are continuously transported. Lebanese officials are very confident in their ability to recover and function as a democracy, but fear a continued campaign to force Lebanon's U.S. backed government from office.

Diverse perspectives toward this crisis have brought the competing religious and political parties of some important figures across the Arab and Muslim world into contrast. A majority of the supporters are of the pro U.S.-Lebanese government, a more affluent Sunni population, while the pro Syria-Hezbollah supporters are generally poorer Shiite Muslims (Engel 2006). In a July Internet posting, an Al Qaeda representative rejected any Unitarian sentiment between violent Sunni groups and Hezbollah by characterizing Hezbollah as "the head of the Iranian spear in the Arab region," and arguing that "any support to Hezbollah in Lebanon is indirect support of the Iranian objectives" (OSC Document 2006). Nevertheless, conservative Sunni Islamic leaders, such as Qatar-based cleric and international Muslim Brotherhood figure Yusuf Al Qaradawi argued that "Muslims should support the activities of Hezbollah as legitimate 'resistance' activities, based on Quaranic injunctions to defend Muslim territory invaded by outsiders" (Al-Jazirah Television 2006). The United States must work together with other Middle Eastern nations to discourage any alignment of terrorist organizations, and stop any propaganda promoting participation in such groups. The United States should continue to build diplomatic relationships with neighboring nations and encourage them to also demote terrorist organizations and not allow them to advance within their borders.

Finally, in a much broader context, the United States should endorse strategies to address the root causes of terrorism and the conditions that foster it. Over the next 15 to 20 years, the U.S. should identify the underlying issues that provoke young Muslim men to seek out the *salafi jihad* throughout the Middle East and Africa. The Bush administration must “deal with the...fundamental problems- economic distress, ethnic and religious fissures, fragile governance, weak democracy, and rampant human right abuses- that create an environment in which terrorists thrive” (Dempsey 2006). President Bush himself identified the task of reducing conditions that can be exploited by terrorists as the goal of his 2003 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Dempsey 2006). In order to accomplish this, the U.S. must promote a strengthening of Lebanon’s central government in order to meet the needs of the Lebanese people. The combination of cutting of Hezbollah’s supplies, building up the Lebanese government, demoting terrorism throughout the region, and addressing poverty are all crucial elements to fighting the war on terror.

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