

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Hizballah's Rise: The US Stake

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Summary

Hizballah--a pro-Iranian Shia fundamentalist movement--has become Lebanon's most dynamic political faction. From a throng of activist groups it has become a cohesive organization able to play a major--albeit negative--role in national politics. It has the capacity to negate any reconciliation of Lebanon's warring factions. During the next few years, Israeli, Syrian, and other domestic opposition probably will prevent Hizballah from creating an Islamic Republic in Lebanon, but the radical group probably will wrest control of sizable parts of South Lebanon from its moderate Shia rival, Amal. The fundamentalist group already controls Ba'labakk and part of the northern Bekaa valley with Syrian acquiescence.

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Hizballah's rise threatens to undermine US interests by:

--promoting terrorism, particularly against American targets in the Middle East,

--offering Iran a major foreign policy success--the first radical Shia victory in an Arab country,

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Levant Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 21 October 1986 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [redacted]

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[redacted]
--strengthening Shia fundamentalism throughout the region,

--facilitating military and terrorist operations against Israel,

--provoking Israeli-Syrian clashes,

[redacted] --wrecking the prospects that an independent Lebanon can emerge from the country's civil war. [redacted]

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Hizballah's Rise

Hizballah has come of age as a political organization, relentlessly building its militia, seizing control of important territory, and expanding its political role and contacts. Before 1982, Hizballah's political presence was generally limited to vocal but nonviolent demonstrations. The Israeli invasion galvanized Lebanon's Shias, and motivated otherwise fractious Shia groups to cooperate. Guidance and support from Tehran accelerated Hizballah's development, as did the lack of any authoritative or respected Lebanese voice to stop them. In late 1982, Hizballah seized the Shaykh Abdallah Barracks in Ba'labakk from the Lebanese Army beginning the radical Shia control of Lebanese territory. [redacted]

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Hizballah military strength puts it on a par with Lebanon's other major militias. In the summer of 1986, Hizballah massed some 5,000 fighters in Ba'labakk for a major display of its new military strength. The group's growing military power enabled it to seize control of politically crucial locations in Beirut near the main Green Line crossings and the Prime Minister's office. This September, Hizballah launched several simultaneous attacks on the Israeli-backed Army of South Lebanon, overrunning one outpost and inflicting dozens of casualties. [redacted]

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Waves of Shia migrants to Beirut's shanty towns have swollen Hizballah's ranks in the capital. Unemployment in the Bekaa valley, the cycle of raids and reprisals in southern Lebanon, and the effects of the civil war forced many Shias to abandon their homes. The majority converged on Beirut's southern suburbs, where the US Embassy estimates that the influx has increased the area's population to some 700,000, roughly one quarter of the country's population. [redacted]

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The breakdown of the social structure in West Beirut has made the southern suburbs a radicalizing environment. The bulk of the area's residents are Shia, and the majority supports Hizballah's goals; those actively committed to the fundamentalist group number in the thousands.

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Hizballah and its Iranian backers are determined to establish a Lebanese Islamic republic, but readily adapt to the convolutions of Lebanese politics. Over the last year, the group quietly developed its political and military strength, rather than seeking confrontations. Hizballah's fall offensive in southern Lebanon seems designed to give the group the undisputed lead in opposing the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon, further undercutting support for the moderate Amal militia among the country's Shias.

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Hizballah has forged tactical alliances with other actors in Lebanese politics. The radical Sunni Muslim Islamic Unification Movement, based in Syrian-occupied northern Lebanon, shares many of the Hizballah's political goals. Its leader, Shaykh Sa'id Shaban, frequently consults with the Hizballah leadership. Through Shaban and his followers, Hizballah has contacts with other Sunni fundamentalists in Beirut and southern Lebanon.

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The Arafat wing of the PLO--traditionally the protector of Lebanon's moderate Sunnis--has become an ally of Hizballah; we believe this relationship was born of convenience, not commitment. Several Embassy reports, for example, attest that the two groups cooperated in resisting Amal militia attacks on Palestinian camps in West Beirut and have a common interest in opposing the Syrian security plan for West Beirut, particularly in the southern suburbs--a Hizballah stronghold near the camps.

the PLO has provided military and financial support to the Hizballah.

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Iran's Role

Iranian support is one of the key assets in Hizballah's struggle for the loyalty of Lebanon's Shia community. Tehran's provision of weapons and training was crucial to the group's

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development as a powerful actor in Lebanese politics. Tehran hopes that attacks by the Hizballah against UN forces in southern Lebanon, the Army of South Lebanon, and Israeli forces will draw even more Shias into the radical camp and demonstrate that military force can prevail against the enemies of Islam. [redacted]

Iran's Revolutionary Guard has strong operational links with Hizballah. Guard headquarters in the Al-Khiwam hotel in Ba'labakk is near Hizballah military headquarters in the Shaykh Abdallah Barracks, the most important training facility used by the fundamentalists in Lebanon. Iran gives Hizballah policy guidance, training and military equipment. [redacted]

[redacted]

The foundation of Hizballah's appeal to the beleaguered Shia of southern Lebanon, however, is Iran's financial support for social welfare and humanitarian programs. Tehran has helped replace buildings damaged or destroyed during fighting with the Israelis, provided financial aid to wounded fighters as well as the survivors of those killed, financed hospital construction, and provided free medical treatment to thousands of Lebanese. The Iranian Martyrs Foundation has offices in Ba'labakk and southern Lebanon. Ayatollah Montazeri, Khomeini's designated successor, has promised to fund a center for Muslim theological studies and a medical school in Beirut. [redacted]

Hizballah's Prospects

We judge that Hizballah will be unable to accomplish its goal of establishing the Islamic Republic of Lebanon during the next few years, but that it probably will make substantial headway toward that end, especially in southern Lebanon. Based on our assessment of the political skill of Hizballah's leaders, its ability to develop a mass organization and to cultivate widespread popular support, we judge that the group could partially realize its goals by establishing mini-Islamic Republics in the areas where Shias now predominate: the Bekaa Valley, southern Lebanon, and the western and southern suburbs of Beirut. [redacted]

We believe, however, that despite the tactical flexibility Hizballah leaders have shown, they will not sacrifice their goal of becoming the government of all of Lebanon for pragmatic reasons; they will not be satisfied with half a loaf. [redacted]

Syria will oppose the growth of Hizballah political influence and military power. Damascus has periodically

[redacted] tightened restrictions on movements in the Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley, and confrontations between Syrian forces and Hizballah militiamen have hampered Hizballah military operations. Nevertheless, Iranian leverage with Damascus precludes a decisive Syrian crackdown, particularly at facilities where Iranian Guards are alongside Hizballah fighters. [redacted]

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We believe that during the next few years Syria will face a choice between accepting the consequences of crushing the Hizballah in the Bekaa Valley, or accomodating its policy to the continuing growth of the fundamentalists' influence. [redacted]

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Israel seeks to counter Hizballah's growing military capabilities in southern Lebanon, mainly by relying on the Army of South Lebanon militia, but short of a massive deployment of Israeli troops, Tel Aviv probably cannot root out the fundamentalists. [redacted]

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[redacted] Our assessment is that Hizballah's policy of confronting Israel and its surrogates is working. [redacted]

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Tel Aviv faces a cruel dilemma. Israeli efforts to attack the Shia inside Lebanon will gain Hizballah more supporters and further radicalize Shias in southern Lebanon. An Israeli withdrawal from the south, particularly if linked to Hizballah operations, would be seen as a victory for the radicals, and would also swell their ranks. [redacted]

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Implications for the United States

Hizballah's progress toward an Islamic Republic will have serious consequences for the United States. Hizballah seeks to destroy the remnants of western influence in Lebanon, particularly the official US presence. The determination of Hizballah to strike US personnel and installations has already hampered the conduct of normal US diplomatic, military and commercial business in Lebanon; the continued presence of our embassy in Beirut is a constant spur for the Hizballah to increase operations against Americans. [redacted]

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The fundamentalists want no less than the radical reorientation of Lebanese politics. As their political influence grows, Lebanon will become a springboard for Shia fanaticism throughout the Arab world. With Iranian support, Lebanon could play a critical role in Shia attempts to "liberate Jerusalem." [redacted]

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[Redacted]

Attacks by Hizballah elements against northern Israel will provoke Israeli retaliation and sustain the cycle of cross-border violence. A prolonged war between the Israelis and south Lebanese Shia almost certainly would precipitate an angry backlash throughout the Arab world and provide ammunition for opponents of negotiation with Israel. In our judgment, the reaction of both Syria and Israel to even the precursor of an Islamic Republic in Lebanon boosts the chances for unintended clashes between Tel Aviv and Damascus. [Redacted]

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The political ascendancy of the Shia fundamentalist movement in Lebanon will indirectly damage US relations with moderate Arab states. A Hizballah political victory could cause Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia to reassess the danger that domestic Islamic fundamentalism represents, and alter their domestic and foreign policies to counter domestic radicalism. [Redacted]

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