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## Should Hezbollah Be Next?

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# Should Hezbollah Be Next?

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## THE A TEAM

ON SEPTEMBER 20, 2001, in a historic speech to a joint session of Congress, President George W. Bush famously declared, “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.” Few terrorist organizations meet this standard, but Hezbollah is definitely one of them. The Lebanon-based group has cells on every continent, and its highly skilled operatives have committed horrifying attacks as far away as Argentina. Before September 11, 2001, it was responsible for more American deaths than any other terrorist organization. Hassan Nasrallah, the group’s secretary-general, recently proclaimed, “Death to America was, is, and will stay our slogan.” Since the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in September 2000, Hezbollah has armed and trained Palestinian terrorists, further fraying the already tattered peace process. Hezbollah operatives have reportedly traveled to postwar Iraq to rekindle historic ties with Iraqi Shi’ites.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many in the United States have argued that Hezbollah should be the next target in the war on terror. Shortly after September 11, a group of leading scholars, pundits, and former government officials, including William Kristol and Richard Perle, declared in an open letter to President Bush that “any war on terrorism must target Hezbollah” and urged that military action be considered against the movement’s state sponsors, Syria and Iran.

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Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has warned of Hezbollah's lethality, noting that "Hezbollah may be the A team of terrorists," while "al Qaeda is actually the B team."

Given the organization's record of bloodshed and hostility, the question is not whether Hezbollah should be stopped; it is how. A campaign against it similar to the U.S. effort against al Qaeda—killing the group's leaders and ending its haven in Lebanon—would probably fail and might even backfire. Syria and Iran openly support it, and much of the Arab world regards it as heroic, for its successful resistance against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon (the only time that Arab arms have forced Israel to surrender territory), and legitimate, because of its participation in Lebanese parliamentary politics. Even officials in France, Canada, and other Western nations have acknowledged the value of its social and political projects.

To have any chance of success, a U.S. military operation would have to involve a sustained counterinsurgency campaign—something that Israel tried for 20 years, only to find that its efforts strengthened Hezbollah's resolve and increased its local and regional appeal. In response to a U.S. attack, Hezbollah might activate its cells in Asia,

Europe, and Latin America—and possibly in the United States itself. The United States, furthermore, is today in a far worse position militarily and diplomatically than it was before the war in Iraq. Occupying Iraq is tough enough; a fight in the Bekaa Valley, a Hezbollah stronghold in Lebanon, would only make things worse.

The upshot is that although Washington should indeed confront Hezbollah, it should do so indirectly. However morally justified an all-out attack would be, reducing Hezbollah's terrorist activity requires avoiding the temptation to overreach. Instead, Washington must apply pressure through Syria and Iran. Only Damascus has the necessary intelligence assets and force on the ground in Lebanon to shut down Hezbollah's militant activities. The right combination of carrots and sticks would lead Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to crack down on his erstwhile proxy. Pressure on Iran, meanwhile, would help cut off Hezbollah's global network and might persuade it to focus on Lebanese politics rather than anti-American violence. Although convincing a hissing Damascus and a fractured Tehran to cooperate will be difficult, such a strategy is more prudent than launching a doomed direct confrontation that would further inflame anti-Americanism. With skill, Washington can transform Hezbollah into just one more Lebanese political faction—one that continues to be hostile but no longer poses a major threat to the United States and its interests.

#### THE HEZBOLLAH MODEL

IN THE U.S. DEMONOLOGY of terrorism, Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda are relative newcomers. For most of the past two decades, Hezbollah has claimed pride of place as the top concern of U.S. counterterrorism officials. It was Hezbollah that pioneered the use of suicide bombing, and its record of attacks on the United States and its allies would make even bin Laden proud: the bombing of the U.S. marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 and the U.S. embassy there in 1983 and 1984; the hijacking of TWA flight 847 and murder of U.S. Navy diver Robert Stethem in 1985; a series of lethal attacks on Israeli targets in Lebanon; the bombing of the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992 and of a Buenos Aires Jewish community center in 1994. More recently, Hezbollah operatives have plotted to blow up the Israeli embassy in Thailand,

and a Lebanese member of Hezbollah was indicted for helping to design the truck bomb that flattened the Khobar Towers U.S. military base in Saudi Arabia in 1996. As CIA director George Tenet testified earlier this year, “Hezbollah, as an organization with capability and worldwide presence, is [al Qaeda’s] equal, if not a far more capable organization. I actually think they’re a notch above in many respects.”

In the course of its 20-year history, Hezbollah has amply demonstrated its hostility, its lethality, and its skill. However, to focus exclusively on this record is to miss how much it has evolved over the past two decades—an evolution that has altered both the nature of the threat and the best means of confronting it.

Hezbollah today is dramatically different from the ragtag collection of Shi’ite fighters that first emerged in the early 1980s. In 1982, in the midst of the Lebanese civil war, Israel invaded Lebanon in an effort to expel Palestinian guerrillas there. The Shi’ites, traditionally underrepresented in Lebanese politics, welcomed the Israelis, whom they saw as protection against the Palestinian militias that dominated much of southern Lebanon. Israel overstayed its welcome, however, and the Shi’ite community soon turned against it. As the situation unraveled, the United States deployed peacekeepers to Beirut and worked to form a new government. Although the Amal movement, until that time the leading voice of the Shi’ite community, embraced the U.S.- and Israeli-backed regime, much of its constituency rejected this cooperation and denounced the government as a puppet of Israel. Syria and Iran encouraged such dissent; Iran hoped to export its Islamic revolution to Lebanon, and both Syria and Iran sought to use the Shi’ites as a proxy force against Israel. With support from Damascus, Tehran helped organize, arm, train, inspire, and unite various Shi’ite groups into the movement that became known as Hezbollah—“party of God.”

The organization literally exploded into the world’s consciousness with devastating suicide attacks on the U.S. embassy and marine barracks in Beirut, causing over 250 American casualties. As a result, Washington concluded that there was little peace to keep in Lebanon and withdrew its forces in 1984. Israel suffered similar blows, fighting

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a long, bitter struggle against relatively autonomous fighters who became more and more effective over time. Faced with ferocious Hezbollah resistance, Israel withdrew to a “security zone” in southern Lebanon in 1985 and, 15 years later, left Lebanon altogether.

In Hezbollah’s struggle to expel Israel from Lebanon in the 1990s, much of its activity vis-à-vis Israel was best characterized as guerrilla warfare rather than terrorism. The vast majority of Hezbollah’s actions were focused on Israeli military personnel on Lebanese soil and intended to drive Israel out of the country. At times, however, Hezbollah did target civilians, through operations such as Katyusha rocket attacks on Israeli settlements near the border and the attacks in Argentina. Hezbollah’s supporters argue that such strikes occurred only after Israel violated “red lines” or escalated tensions by assassinating Hezbollah leaders.

Both Hezbollah’s terrorist actions and its guerrilla warfare are facilitated by the group’s extensive international network. Hezbollah operatives have been found in France, Spain, Cyprus, Singapore, the “triborder” region of South America, and the Philippines, as well as in more familiar operational theaters in Europe and the Middle East. The movement draws on these cells to raise money, prepare the logistic infrastructure for attacks, disseminate propaganda, and otherwise ensure that the organization remains robust and ready to strike. In 2001, U.S. federal investigators discovered a Hezbollah fundraising cell in North Carolina.

Hezbollah’s founding document calls for Islamic rule in Lebanon, an end to Western imperialism, and the destruction of the state of Israel. But the group has now abandoned these founding principles, at least in practice. Hezbollah leaders participate in Lebanon’s political system, and some have rejected the forceful imposition of Islam. Hezbollah still denounces the United States, but it has become much more cautious in its opposition. It has not been involved in an attack on a U.S. target since the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, when it assisted others rather than using its own capability.

Direct attacks on Israel have also become rare since the withdrawal from southern Lebanon. This decrease, however, is not a sign that the movement has accepted Israel’s existence. Rather, Hezbollah has shifted to helping Palestinian terrorist groups become more lethal—exporting what journalist James Kitfield has labeled “the Hezbollah



model” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hezbollah has proved the single most effective adversary Israel has ever faced. Its fighters and leaders have demonstrated exceptional dedication and an ability to learn from mistakes and innovate quickly. Palestinians regularly cite Hezbollah’s combination of skilled operations, willing sacrifice, and emphasis on long-term struggle as a guide to their own efforts. And even militias affiliated with Yasir Arafat’s secular Palestinian faction Fatah have followed Hezbollah’s example, resorting to the sort of suicide terror that had heretofore been the province of Palestinian Islamists. Since the outbreak of the al Aqsa intifada in October 2000, Hezbollah has provided guerrilla training, bomb-building expertise, propaganda, and tactical tips to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other anti-Israeli groups. There are also reports that Hezbollah is trying to establish its own Palestinian proxy, the Return Brigades. Such support for Palestinian terrorists has helped disrupt the peace process at little cost to Hezbollah itself.

Exporting its model of conflict while limiting actual attacks allows the movement to continue its fight without alienating its Lebanese constituents (many of whom fear an Israeli backlash) or its backers in

Tehran and Damascus (who fear U.S. retaliation). Ominously, Iraq may become the site of Hezbollah's newest proxy war. In May, Nasrallah called for supporting "the oppressed" when they are "occupied," an attempt to equate the U.S. presence in Iraq with Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon. He has thus far avoided openly urging foreign volunteers to enter Iraq, but the postwar chaos has clearly provided fertile ground for Hezbollah's expansion. Many of the movement's founders studied in seminaries in Iraq, and Lebanese Shi'ites maintain ties with their Iraqi brethren. The relative disorganization of Iraqi Shi'ites provides an opportunity for Hezbollah to gain a foothold there, and much of the Arab world would support Hezbollah action against "the American invader." For the United States, active Hezbollah support of Iraqi insurgents would have disastrous consequences.

#### LEGITIMACY AND POWER

ADDRESSING HEZBOLLAH'S involvement with terror is complicated by the support it enjoys in the region and the legitimacy it enjoys in Lebanon. At home, Hezbollah is as much a social and political organization as it is a terrorist or guerrilla movement; abroad, its violence serves the interests of Tehran and Damascus, both of which helped create it and still actively back it. It is embedded in Lebanese politics and society and, unlike al Qaeda, is a stakeholder in the existing regional order, not a force bent on destroying it. This position has made Hezbollah stronger but has also forced it to become more cautious, cunning, and subtle.

Like many other radical Islamist groups, Hezbollah builds both bombs and schools. It is popular among Lebanon's Shi'ite plurality and respected by many non-Shi'ite Lebanese, and its political wing holds 12 seats in parliament. In marked contrast to the Lebanese government, it offers relatively efficient public services and runs effective schools and hospitals. Although such social and political involvement does not indicate a fundamental reversal in the movement, as some apologists suggest, it does reflect a broadening of Hezbollah's functions beyond political violence. In southern Lebanon's Bekaa Valley and in several poor Shi'ite suburbs of Beirut—an area analyst Gal Luft has dubbed "Hezbollahland"—it exercises almost exclusive control and maintains a dense social network that provides food, medicine, education, and basic services.



For Syria and Iran, using Hezbollah as a proxy enables them to strike at Israel and other targets without the risks of direct confrontation. Damascus provides Hezbollah with weapons and logistic support while squashing rival movements and allowing it a haven in Lebanon. This relationship is intensely practical: the Syrian government has avoided direct involvement in international terrorism since 1986 but still puts pressure on Israel and other opponents through Hezbollah. Syria's ties to Hezbollah are essentially meant to remind Israel that it cannot end terrorism without accommodating Damascus. President Assad recently confessed this open secret, noting that the terrorist group is a necessary "buffer" against Israel. Although Hezbollah exercises considerable independence, it has consistently demonstrated that it will bend to Syria's will. Damascus can prompt violence by militants, as it did by making the disputed Shebaa Farms territory a Hezbollah concern, and can get those same militants to lie low when it wants to avoid a confrontation.

Tehran provided the initial inspiration for Hezbollah and continues to offer organizational aid and ideological guidance. Indeed, Iran's sponsorship of the movement consistently puts the country at the top of the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. Hezbollah adheres to Iran's ideology of the *velayat-e faqih* (rule by the Islamic jurist), and Tehran provides approximately \$100 million to the group every year. Hezbollah's senior terrorist, Imad Mugniyah, is reportedly an Iranian citizen and regularly travels there. Other top operatives maintain close ties to Iranian intelligence and to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is directly connected to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Hezbollah's leaders proclaim their loyalty to Khamenei, and he reportedly acts as an arbiter in their decisions. Tehran exercises particular influence over Hezbollah's overseas activities. For example, Hezbollah cells in Europe ended attacks after Iran decided to halt violent activity there. In exchange for its support of the group, Iran gets a valuable weapon against Israel and influence far beyond its borders. In some cases, Tehran has also used Hezbollah to kill dissidents and strike at U.S. targets.

Although foreign support is a source of Hezbollah's strength, it is just as often a brake on its activities. Iran and Syria use Hezbollah operations to further their foreign policy objectives, but their close

ties to the group make them responsible for its trespasses. When Tehran and Damascus feel threatened by the possibility of retaliation, they do not hesitate to rein Hezbollah in. When then Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad met with President Bill Clinton in 1994, for example, Hezbollah halted attacks; it did the same in the face of increased U.S. pressure on its patron before and after the war in Iraq.

#### THE PITFALLS OF DIRECT ATTACK

ANY CAMPAIGN against Hezbollah must take into account the group's standing in Lebanese politics and society and the nature of its international support. Four possible courses of action are open to Washington: confronting Hezbollah directly through military action; coercing the Lebanese government to take action against the group; working through Iran; or cracking down on Syria. Each carries considerable risks—and the possibility of outright failure.

The object of a U.S. military strike would be to eliminate Hezbollah's leadership, disarm its militias, and disrupt its infrastructure in Lebanon. As it did against al Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001, the United States could invade, deploy thousands of troops, and work with Hezbollah's local adversaries in an effort to eradicate the movement completely. Or it could launch smaller-scale missile strikes against key leaders and infrastructure, similar to the attacks on al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan in 1998.

Any kind of direct attack, however, would face unfavorable odds. Hezbollah's members are tough and highly skilled and, unlike al Qaeda radicals in Afghanistan, do not stand out from the rest of the supportive Lebanese population. In response to years of Israeli air attacks, Hezbollah has dispersed its membership and its weaponry among Lebanese civilians, making it almost impossible to strike at the group without killing many innocents.

A U.S. invasion would be unpopular in Lebanon even outside Hezbollah strongholds, moreover. U.S. forces would have a difficult time finding local allies, apart from a small group of Maronite Christians, and would have to remain in Lebanon for years—a daunting task in ordinary times, an impossible one given other U.S. commitments today.

Limited strikes would be similarly unlikely to succeed. After all, Hezbollah fought a successful guerrilla war against Israel for 15 years. Israeli forces killed or kidnapped large numbers of commanders and combatants, but Hezbollah was able to regenerate its leadership and find new recruits. And any strike against Hezbollah would likely increase its popularity. The pre-September 11 campaigns against al Qaeda are instructive: the 1998 U.S. bombings in Afghanistan and Sudan not only failed to kill al Qaeda leaders, but also lionized the movement in the eyes of the local population and the Arab world.

Nonetheless, Hezbollah too has good reason to want to avoid such a conflict. Although the movement gained popularity for its successful resistance—and remains fundamentally a militant movement—any further confrontation with the United States or Israel that subjected southern Lebanon once again to the ravages of war would be highly unpopular even among Hezbollah's supporters. However, in the event of a direct U.S. attack, the group's gloves would come off. Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, often referred to as Hezbollah's spiritual leader, has told his followers to confront "American interests everywhere" if the United States cracks down.

Ultimately, the biggest difference between the struggle against al Qaeda in Afghanistan and a potential war on Hezbollah is that the United States' current position in the world—militarily and diplomatically—is far less favorable than it was at the start of the war on terror. The U.S. military was overstretched even before September 11; now, there are almost 150,000 U.S. troops stationed in Iraq and smaller forces deployed in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Yemen, Djibouti, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Hopes for a quick withdrawal from Iraq are no longer feasible, and U.S. special operations forces—critical in counterterrorism operations—are particularly strained.

The United States would have a difficult time finding allies for a strike on Hezbollah. Al Qaeda declared war on everyone: secular Western regimes, Arab autocracies, and a range of governments in between. Such indiscriminating zealotry made international cooperation against al Qaeda relatively easy to obtain. In contrast, Hezbollah is widely viewed as a legitimate, and even admirable, resistance movement

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fighting an oppressive regional hegemon. Many regimes in the region see the group as a cause deserving support, not a threat to their rule. Even some government officials in Europe and Asia see Hezbollah as more of a social movement than a terrorist organization. In October 2002, Hezbollah operatives participated in a Francophone summit in Beirut with implicit French endorsement.

The war in Iraq has exposed the United States to charges of arrogance from its friends and imperialism from its enemies. The failure to uncover a robust weapons of mass destruction program has hurt U.S. credibility, making it difficult to justify another war. A new military struggle would confirm perceptions of the United States as a trigger-happy cowboy.

#### CONFRONTATION BY PROXY

THE BEST STRATEGY against Hezbollah is to confront it indirectly: by putting pressure on Iran and, more important, on Syria. Secretary of State Colin Powell has tried a similar tactic with the Lebanese government, but Beirut is essentially Damascus' puppet and will take no independent action. In the past, Israel has tried military action to force Lebanon to act, but the result has been destruction and a refugee crisis with no change in the government's stance. Moreover, it is unlikely that Beirut could confront Hezbollah even if it wanted to. Although approximately 7,000 Lebanese government troops are stationed along the Israeli-Lebanese border, Hezbollah forces could easily defeat them.

Constant diplomatic and economic pressure on Tehran and Damascus, on the other hand, coupled with the implicit threat of military action, can successfully rein in Hezbollah. Demanding that its backers abandon it outright would fail, but a more limited approach focused on putting a stop to violent activity would have a good chance of success. The United States should repeatedly emphasize that Syria and Iran will be held responsible for Hezbollah's actions.

Although Iran exercises tremendous influence over Hezbollah, it lacks the means to force a significant change in the movement and its goals. It has no real presence on the ground in Lebanon, and a call to disarm or cease resistance would likely cause Hezbollah's leadership, or at least its most militant elements, simply to sever ties with Tehran's

leadership. Indeed, Iran may find that it has been too successful in imparting its ideology: Hezbollah is more loyal to the legacy of the Islamic revolution than are most Iranians. The United States could, however, convince Tehran to end its support of Hezbollah's violence without walking away from the movement altogether. Iranian President Muhammad Khatami recently told a crowd in Beirut that Hezbollah should act cautiously, and experts have argued that the U.S. victory in Iraq and domestic strife in Iran will compel Iranian leaders to seek better relations with Washington. For the right price—or from fear of a very harsh response—Tehran might begin to emphasize Hezbollah's humanitarian and political projects over its guerrilla and terrorist operations.

Ultimately, cracking down on Syria is Washington's most promising option. Such a policy should include threats of military force, economic measures, aid to the domestic opposition, and pressure on Syria's relationships with moderate Arab and European states. Damascus is particularly vulnerable to such efforts; the large U.S. troop presence in the region has already begun to intimidate Assad's regime. Although Syrian leaders do not have Tehran's close ideological and personal ties to Hezbollah, Damascus' leverage is actually much greater. Syria serves as a conduit for Iranian military supplies and often determines the timing, location, and scope of Hezbollah attacks. Moreover, Syrian intelligence on Lebanon is superb; unlike the United States and Israel, Damascus knows the identity and location of Hezbollah's core leadership. Syria also has as many as 30,000 troops deployed in Lebanon, and it has demonstrated its skill and ruthlessness by disarming every militia there except Hezbollah. Damascus essentially exercises a veto over Hezbollah's operations, as it has demonstrated by shutting down strikes against Israel when it has suited the regime's purposes.

To encourage progress, the United States should couple its sticks with carrots, offering Syria and Iran some positive incentives to cooperate. Their status as state sponsors of terrorism rightly precludes direct economic assistance, but policymakers can encourage change through sustained pressure followed by relaxation in the event of real verifiable progress. In essence, Washington should formulate a "road map" that details the steps that each side will take as sponsorship declines.

As with so many other issues, Iraq will be a critical test case in the fight against Hezbollah. The organization's potential for wreaking havoc there is immense: its resources, prestige, and ties to Iraq's Shi'ite leadership put it in a position to lead a massive and devastating anti-U.S. insurgency. Hezbollah's recent caution suggests that it will not act directly; instead, it may attempt to export "the Hezbollah model" to the Iraqis, just as it did to the Palestinians. U.S. policy-makers must address this possibility before it is too late, in part by emphasizing to Syria and Iran that they will be held responsible for any actions linked to Hezbollah and that any meddling will be grounds for escalation.

If the United States can successfully defuse Hezbollah's militant activity, the organization might well move more squarely into the political arena. Such a shift would set off a virtuous cycle, as Hezbollah's continuing political success would depend on its ability to bring stability and prosperity to its Lebanese constituents instead of on its violent efforts against Israel and the United States. Hezbollah would remain a force in Lebanon, but it would no longer be a "terrorist group of global reach." Given the moral rhetoric of the war on terror and Hezbollah's bloody history, this outcome may not be entirely satisfying—but it is the only realistic option available. 🌐