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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.

Figure 1. Lebanon



Source: Created by CRS. Boundaries from ESRI and U.S. State Department.

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. The ESO is also known as the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO) or Unit 910.

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. Hezbollah also seeks to maintain its domestic political influence and privileges—in particular its significant store of advanced weaponry that remains outside state control and its private telecommunications network.

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 conducted trials in absentia. In 2020, the STL found one Hezbollah member guilty and sentenced him to five terms of life imprisonment; he remains at large. Other anti-Syrian politicians, journalists, and security personnel were killed in Lebanon in the years following the Hariri assassination, including four members of parliament; analysts assess that Hezbollah or Syria are likely culprits.

Hezbollah vies for the loyalties of its constituents by operating a vast network of schools, clinics, youth programs, private businesses, and local security networks. Hezbollah has participated in elections since 1992. The group entered the Cabinet for the first time in 2005, and has held one to three seats in each Lebanese government 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 out of 128), but parties allied with the March 8 coalition increased their share of seats.

Syria

Hezbollah has a longstanding relationship with the Assad 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 Assad government’s survival. The Assad government has relied on Hezbollah, as well as Iran, to fight opponents and secure territory.

Yemen

Hezbollah, along with Iran, also provides weapons and training to Houthi militants in Yemen, according to the State Department’s 2019 *Country Reports on Terrorism*, published in 2020. The Houthis have conducted persistent ballistic missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks against Saudi Arabia, Iran’s primary regional rival.

Attacks Against U.S. Interests

Starting in the early 1980s, Hezbollah has been linked to a series of terrorist attacks against U.S. personnel and facilities, including the truck bombing 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. 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 (2003 – 2010).

In 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; one has since been sentenced to 40 years in prison. The men allegedly surveilled potential targets for attack in the United States and Panama. In 2019, the Department of Justice announced the arrest of a third naturalized American citizen who also reportedly surveilled possible targets in the United States on behalf of Hezbollah.

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, the group launched more than 4,000 rockets into 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.

The 2019 *Country Reports on Terrorism* estimates that Hezbollah may now possess up to 150,000 rockets. Israeli assessments have highlighted Hezbollah efforts to produce precision-guided missiles within Lebanon. Israel also has destroyed multiple Hezbollah tunnels into Israel. The U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) patrols the Lebanon-Israel-Syria tri-border area, but U.S. officials assess that Hezbollah’s presence in the Lebanese government has prevented UNIFIL from fully investigating cross-border incidents.

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. In 2020, a Bulgarian court convicted two men, whom prosecutors linked to Hezbollah, of involvement in a 2012 bus bombing that killed six, including five Israeli tourists.

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’ 2020 *Military Balance* states that estimates of Hezbollah’s strength “suggest up to 20,000 active personnel with an additional [circa] 25,000 reserves.” In recent years, Iran provided an estimated \$700 million in annual funding to Hezbollah, but U.S. officials in 2020 stated that U.S. sanctions on Iran had constrained Iran’s ability to finance the group.

Hezbollah also operates a global criminal-financial network, with reported hubs in Europe, 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. Israel has stated that Iran may be supplying Hezbollah with advanced weapons systems and technologies, and assisting Hezbollah in creating an indigenous production capability for rockets, missiles, and drones that could threaten Israel from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, or Yemen.

Sanctions and Designations

Hezbollah, as an entity, is listed as a Specially Designated Terrorist (1995); a Foreign Terrorist Organization (1997); and a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT, 2001). Numerous affiliated individuals and entities have also been designated as SDGTs. Some countries and the European Union separate Hezbollah’s military and political wings—designating the former for sanctions while maintaining dialogue with the latter. U.S. officials have described this as a “false distinction,” and one not made by Hezbollah itself.

The United States uses secondary sanctions to target persons and entities that facilitate financial transactions for Hezbollah, including via the Hizballah Financial Sanctions Regulations, which implement the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015 (P.L. 114-102, known as HIFPA), as amended by the Hizballah International Prevention Amendments Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-272, sometimes referred to as HIFPA II).

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