

Looking Forward: Hizb Allah's Evolving Strategic Calculations

By Vera L. Zakem

IT IS NO COINCIDENCE that many U.S. and international counterterrorism experts view Lebanese Hizb Allah (also spelled Hizballah) as the "A-list of terrorist organizations."¹ It is Hizb Allah's successful employment of conventional and irregular warfare capabilities that lead many analysts to this conclusion. Hizb Allah's ability to accrue political power and provide essential services to the Lebanese Shi'a and pro-Syrian Christians in Lebanon, however, is what makes it so unique. This allows Hizb Allah to influence its targeted population through the message of resistance and maintain its popularity in Lebanon, the Middle East region, and the international community. Since its 2006 war with Israel, Hizb Allah has realized important political gains among the Lebanese population. It is noteworthy, however, that since the 2006 conflict Hizb Allah has not carried out any major attacks or retaliated against anyone for the assassination of Imad Mughniyyeh, Hizb Allah's former chief of military operations.

This article examines the strategic, political and military calculations of Hizb Allah in the aftermath of the 2006 Israel-Hizb Allah war and the assassination of Imad Mughniyyeh. Specifically, it will look at the way Hizb Allah has been able to increase its political power following the 2006 conflict and provide essential services to its constituents, while choosing not to retaliate for Mughniyyeh's death. The article will explore the likelihood that Hizb Allah will continue to play the terrorism card when deemed strategically important. Finally, some recommendations will be offered for effective alternatives that could limit Hizb Allah's influence on relevant populations.

Social Influences

In the immediate aftermath of the 2006 war, Hizb Allah stepped up its efforts to provide a variety of social services to the Lebanese Shi'a who were most affected by the conflict. With help from Iran, Syria, Islamic charities, and Shi'a groups,² Hizb Allah's reconstruction arm worked quickly to restore life in southern Beirut, Hizb Allah's stronghold. Aside from providing immediate health care to the wounded and getting people back on their feet, Hizb Allah handed out \$12,000 per family for temporary housing, while its construction company, Jihad al-Binaa, began rebuilding residential and commercial infrastructure. Considering the fact that the average per capita income in Lebanon is only \$6,200, receiving almost double that amount in cash within a matter of days was an impressive feat. With its rapid response, Hizb Allah was clearly able to show the world that it was capable of taking care of its people with greater speed and effect than the Lebanese government or the international community, who only made exaggerated promises of assistance. The results were obvious. Many Lebanese who were interviewed immediately after the war felt that Hizb Allah's ability to provide these types of services to the affected populations generated the notion that "Hizb Allah is the government" because it protects the people.³ This is precisely the influence message that Hizb Allah wanted to spread.

Immediately after the war, Prime Minister Fouad Seniora's government attempted to highlight its infrastructure revitalization efforts. Nayla Mouawad, Lebanon's minister of social affairs, said, "We are here. We are laying the groundwork for a housing project which would help people rebuild the damaged homes."⁴ Similarly, the international community organized a major donor conference to raise funds to rebuild Lebanon and bolster Seniora's legitimacy. While it has been able to distribute \$500.4 million⁵ for the entire

country, Seniora's government and the international community moved slowly in providing badly needed services, thereby enabling Hizb Allah to respond more swiftly and aggressively. According to one U.S. counterterrorism expert, in the end the international community made multibillion dollar plans, but they did not pan out. As a result, Hizb Allah won over the population in southern Beirut.⁶

Political Influences

In addition to winning the "guts and souls"⁷ of the Lebanese Shi'a, Hizb Allah has made impressive political inroads in Lebanon since the 2006 war. This has enabled Hizb Allah to increase its political voice and influence across various diverse populations, even though it does not serve all of Lebanon's constituents. This was evident when Hizb Allah reached an agreement with Seniora's government allowing the organization to retain its weapons and gain ministerial posts within the parliament. Hizb Allah's postings allowed the organization to effectively have veto power over any major decision with which the organization does not agree. As such, Hizb Allah has been able to secure political legitimacy in the eyes of various sects in Lebanon. Since 2006, Hizb Allah has been careful to avoid any major conflict as it seeks to gain additional political representation in the June parliamentary elections. Through political influence, Hizb Allah has attempted to demonstrate that it can serve the people and provide them services, engage in terrorist activities regionally and globally, and represent Iranian and Syrian interests, all at the same time. With its political, socio-economic, and military influence capabilities, Hizb Allah has been able to effectively seal its status as an "armed state within a state."⁸

⁶ Personal interview, U.S. counterterrorism expert, January 6, 2009.

⁷ Dr. Shmuel Bar describes that Hizb Allah goes after "guts and souls" versus "hearts and minds" of relevant populations. Hizb Allah tries to arouse emotions and religious sentiment.

⁸ "State within a state" is a common term used to describe Hizb Allah's role in Lebanon. Hizb Allah is a violent non-state actor that carries out terrorist and influence operations against targeted populations, while at the same time has political representation and provides social services to the people.

² Thanassis Cambanis, "With Speed, Hezbollah Picks up the Shovel," *Boston Globe*, August 19, 2006.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ This is the current figure to date for the entire country based on figures from www.rebuildlebanon.gov.lb, January 19, 2009.

¹ This is a view expressed by many U.S. counterterrorism experts who the author interviewed during the course of her research on the topic.

Hizb Allah's Strategic Calculation Post Mughniyyeh

The February 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyyeh was a major blow to Hizb Allah. It remains to be seen, however, whether Hizb Allah will retaliate for the assassination or whether it will skip retaliation and begin taking steps to become solely a political and social organization. While some experts believe that Hizb Allah may choose the political road, others are not as optimistic. A number of U.S. counterterrorism experts who were interviewed for this article expressed the view that, despite Mughniyyeh's assassination, Hizb Allah draws its core strength from its military operations and will continue to engage in terrorist activities as long as it is strategically important and useful for the organization. Furthermore, while the assassination of Imad Mughniyyeh might be a blow to Hizb Allah's international military organization, those who were interviewed expressed that Hizb Allah's central military arm will not be significantly impacted by his demise; as one U.S. counterterrorism expert said, Mughniyyeh was "one of several top guys."⁹

If Hizb Allah decides to retaliate in response to the assassination, it is unclear what form of retaliation it might choose and when it might act.¹⁰ As Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah stated after the assassination, "We shall defend ourselves the way we choose, at the time and place of our choosing."¹¹ Despite the rhetoric, Hizb Allah has to pick its battles carefully, especially since it is trying to further its political ambitions. This is perhaps the reason why Hizb Allah chose not to get involved in the most recent Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza. Another reason might be that Hizb Allah is patiently waiting to strike on the international scene when the world is least expecting it. Even though Hizb Allah has not carried out a major international terrorist attack since Mughniyyeh's death, it

nevertheless is a robust transnational terrorist organization that is able to pull the trigger when it is strategically important and necessary.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

Despite Hizb Allah's recent political success, the United States cannot assume that it will cease all of its terrorist activities. Furthermore, the United States should not treat Hizb Allah as a solely "Lebanese" problem. Hizb Allah is a transnational organization that has the capability to influence globally, despite the fact that one of its international masterminds is dead. Hence, Hizb Allah should be treated with as much priority as other major transnational terrorist organizations. While defeating and disrupting the military arm of Hizb Allah is critical, it is equally important to marginalize Hizb Allah's political and social influence in Lebanon and beyond, and provide unique political and socio-economic alternatives to the group's active and passive supporters.

Providing the right mix of political and socio-economic alternatives is not an easy task, especially in a country such as Lebanon that is made up of various religions and ethnicities, where outside state actors compete for influence and legitimacy. Nevertheless, the United States and the international community should aim to better empower Seniora's government and partners, including non-governmental organizations and local institutions that enjoy the support of the local population. The best messages of empowerment and influence come through fast and effective actions, not merely words. Therefore, it is important to help Seniora and his partners provide alternative essential services to the Lebanese in southern Beirut and other parts of Lebanon the moment they are needed. For instance, to counter Hizb Allah's influence, the United States and international partners should help Lebanon raise money not just to pay off debt from previous conflicts, but also to create a surplus of social services and a reconstruction fund for future conflicts. If Hizb Allah's active and passive supporters see that other entities are helping them build and rebuild their communities, Hizb Allah's political and social influence will likely lose some of its cachet.

Finally, the United States and its partners should explore ways to isolate the divergent interests of Hizb Allah from its two main state sponsors: Syria and Iran. For Hizb Allah, Syria is a partner of convenience as it primarily provides logistical and training support. Yet, Syria relies on Hizb Allah's support for its own regime survival and legitimacy in the region. Iran, however, is an important strategic partner that provides spiritual and moral guidance, as well as military and financial support. To weaken these partnerships, the United States and its allies have to pursue different strategies. In regards to Iran, the United States and the international community should consider finding a better way to address broader regional security issues such as managing the nuclear proliferation issue in an effort to minimize Iran's influence in the region. With Syria, the United States should explore negotiation strategies to mitigate the Arab-Israeli conflict that could eventually lead to a peace agreement between Israel and Syria. Such an agreement could set a precedent for the rest of the region, consequently weakening both Hizb Allah's and Iran's legitimacies and influence given that much of their power derives from their anti-Israel stance.

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9 The author interviewed several U.S. counterterrorism experts in 2009 for the purpose of this article.

10 It is not clear who was responsible for assassinating Imad Mughniyyeh, but Hizb Allah blames Israel for the car bombing that took his life in Damascus.

11 David Shenker, "Beyond Rhetoric: Hizballah Threats after the Mughniyyeh Assassination," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 28, 2008.