

## Hezbollah in Profile

### Introduction

Claims by the Federal Government that Australia is potentially at risk of an attack by Hezbollah, a group blamed for a number of terrorist attacks worldwide, have led to the introduction of the Criminal Code Amendment (Hizballah<sup>1</sup>) Bill 2003, which would provide a mechanism to proscribe Hezbollah. If passed, Hezbollah will be the first organisation banned in Australia without prior reference to the UN.

### Background

Hezbollah is a radical Iranian-backed Lebanese Islamic Shiite group sometimes referred to by its English name, the 'Party of God'. It was founded in 1982 in response to the invasion of Lebanon by Israel that same year, having subsumed members of the 1980s coalition of groups known collectively as Islamic Jihad.

It has remained a powerful force ever since, with its established political wing holding seats in the Lebanese Parliament and its military wing gaining popular support as a de facto security force in southern Lebanon. The political wing operates welfare programmes which some say are better than those offered by the State.<sup>2</sup>

Amongst its stated objectives are the establishment of a Shiite theocracy in Lebanon, the destruction of Israel and the elimination of Western influences from the region. Its militant core is said to comprise some 300–500 fighters, although there are thousands of active supporters. Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah is the current leader.<sup>3</sup>

### Activities and Tactics

Hezbollah and its factions are probably best known internationally for its series of kidnappings, hijackings and bombings against mainly US interests during the 1980s, both in Lebanon and overseas. It has also attacked the interests of other nations, such as



Map of Lebanon  
(Source : CIA World Factbook 2002)

France,<sup>4</sup> and Hezbollah's conflict with Israel is ongoing.

Hezbollah has been credited with inventing the modern notion and use of 'suicide bombing', and is said to have provided training to terrorist groups HAMAS and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Its most infamous attack is probably the October 1983 suicide bombing of a US Marine barracks in Beirut which killed 241 US and 56 French soldiers.

The alleged current head of Hezbollah's 'international wing', Imad Mughniyah, is believed to have masterminded the attack on the US Marine barracks, amongst others. With the fleeing of Mughniyah to Iran after this attack, a movement grew out of the military wing to become something of a third branch. This is often referred to as Hezbollah's 'international wing', or the 'external security organisation'. Mughniyah remains on the US list of most wanted terrorists.

As an indication of Hezbollah's global reach, it has been held responsible for attacks against mainly Jewish and US interests in Africa, Sweden, Denmark, Thailand, Argentina and the UK. The 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and the 1994 bombing

of a Jewish cultural centre also in Buenos Aires, both for which Hezbollah was blamed, were perhaps the most significant.

Significantly, Hezbollah's tactics have largely been successful. Its 1983 attack on the US military barracks prompted the US to withdraw US troops from Lebanon and its unrelenting campaign against Israel was believed to have been the main reason for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon in May 2000 after some 20 years of occupation.

Hezbollah continues to operate primarily in southern Lebanon, where it fought and eventually ousted Israeli troops, but also maintains a strong political presence in Beirut, bases in the Bekaa Valley and offices in Iran.

Hezbollah is assessed by many as still posing a significant threat to Israeli and US interests and its international wing has amply demonstrated its capability to conduct major terrorist attacks overseas. As recently as December 2002, leader Nasrallah urged Hezbollah to conduct a global suicide bombing campaign.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, Hezbollah is said to be more involved overseas nowadays in fundraising than committing terrorist acts, leading some to suggest that Hezbollah now limits itself to conflict with Israel and would have little to gain in the modern climate from attacking the US.<sup>6</sup> It still enjoys popular support in a number of countries, including Australia,<sup>7</sup> for its success in liberating southern Lebanon.

### Funding and Support

Hezbollah is believed to receive substantial funding from Iran (some claim as much as US\$60 million annually), but is also said to raise its own funds through charities and various commercial enterprises.<sup>8</sup>

Hezbollah is also reported to receive logistical assistance from Syria which moves weapons and equipment from Iran through Syria.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Hezbollah is believed to be well-armed and trained, even possessing surface-to-air missiles, and is also said to possess a sophisticated intelligence capability.<sup>10</sup>

### Claimed Links to al-Qaeda

Amongst the first public claims of a link between Hezbollah and al-Qaeda was a *Washington Post* article<sup>11</sup> in June 2002 which claimed that Hezbollah and al-Qaeda are increasingly cooperating in explosives training, money laundering, weapons smuggling and document forging.

It stated that the relationship first came to light in 2000 when a former US soldier, who pleaded guilty to conspiring with Osama bin Laden to bomb the US embassies in Africa, alleged that Imad Mughniyah, Hezbollah and bin Laden met in Sudan to plan the bombings.

Notwithstanding their religious differences (Hezbollah being Shiite and al-Qaeda being Sunni) the two groups are said by some to be united by their shared anti-US and Israeli objectives. Iran is reported to have attempted to restrict contact between the two groups so as to avoid being targeted by the US in its war on terrorism.

Hezbollah has denied it has links to al-Qaeda, and denounced the claims as propaganda spread by US intelligence to influence world opinion against Hezbollah.

It has been reported that Mughniyah established strong links with al-Qaeda in the late 1990s, but that Hezbollah would never openly admit to a relationship with al-Qaeda, particularly now, because that would embarrass Syria and jeopardise Syria's support.<sup>12</sup>

*Pravda* reported that an October 2002 meeting in Bosnia involving several Islamic extremist groups, including Hezbollah and al-Qaeda, resolved to consolidate various Islamic movements in the fight against the US.<sup>13</sup> Such meetings have been interpreted as an attempt by al-Qaeda to encourage other groups into a global Islam-West war. US authorities have also claimed that a meeting took place in Lebanon in March 2002 between al-Qaeda, HAMAS and Hezbollah.<sup>14</sup>

It has also been suggested that Hezbollah and al-Qaeda use the same contacts in West Africa to trade in illegal diamonds.<sup>15</sup>

Although Hezbollah would make a powerful ally for al-Qaeda, some<sup>16</sup> do not agree they would join forces so easily. Both the US and Israel have strong motives for wanting revenge on Hezbollah and could be supporting each other to achieve this end, with the added bonus for the US of implicating 'rogue states' Iran and Syria. Claims of a relationship between the two groups are reportedly 'viewed with scepticism by non-US intelligence and diplomatic sources in the region'.<sup>17</sup>

### Current Status of Hezbollah

Hezbollah as a whole is listed as a banned terrorist organisation in the US and Canada, whereas the UK has specifically only proscribed Hezbollah's 'External Security Organisation', presumably affording some legitimacy to Hezbollah's political wing.

The European Union has to date not proscribed Hezbollah, despite lobbying by the UK and Germany to do so. France, Sweden, Greece, Spain and Belgium have apparently opposed the idea. The UN, too, has not included Hezbollah on its list of terrorist organisations, additions to which must have a demonstrated link with the Taliban and/or al-Qaeda in order to qualify.

Lebanon refused to freeze Hezbollah's assets in response to a request by the US to do so in November 2001, claiming that Hezbollah is a legitimate resistance group.

Although Hezbollah is not yet banned in Australia, since late 2001 it has been a criminal offence under the provisions of the *Charter of the United Nations Act 1945* and the *Charter of the United Nations (Terrorism and Dealings with Assets) Regulations 2002*, to fund or resource the group. Together, this legislation ratifies Australia's obligation under UN Security Council Resolution 1373 to suppress the financing of terrorism.

1. This is the abbreviated form of the group's official name in Arabic 'Hizb Allah-Al-thawra Al-Islamiya fi Lubnan', but the US spelling of 'Hezbollah' is typically used in Australia.
2. E. Blanche, 'US and Israel Step Up Pressure on Hizbullah', *Jane's*

1. *Terrorism Intelligence Centre (JTIC)*, 29 July 2002, <http://jtic.janes.com>, (4 April 2003).
2. Unless otherwise indicated, background sourced primarily from Rob Fanney, 'Hizbullah', *JTIC*, 25 March 2002 <http://jtic.janes.com> (4 April 2003).
3. For example—1983 bombing of the French Embassy in Kuwait; 1985 kidnapping of three French diplomats; 1986 murder of French military attache in Beirut.
4. *The Washington Times*, 4 December 2002, accessed at <http://www.washtimes.com/world/20021204-29720774.htm> (8 April 2002).
5. For example – Mats Warn, a researcher at Stockholm University, cited in Anders Strindberg, 'Assessing the Hizbullah Threat', *JTIC*, 25 February 2003, at <http://jtic.janes.com>, (4 April 2003).
6. news.com.au, 28 May 2003, at [http://www.news.com.au/common/story\\_page/0,4057,6506133%5E2,00.html](http://www.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,4057,6506133%5E2,00.html) (28 May 2003).
7. Rob Fanney, op. cit.
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. *Washington Post*, 30 June 2002, accessed at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A2324-2002Jun29> (4 April 2003).
11. *The Washington Times*, 4 December 2002, op. cit.
12. *Pravda*, 9 October 2002, at <http://english.pravda.ru/world/2002/10/09/37949.html> (4 April 2003).
13. *Washington Post*, 30 June 2002, op. cit. and *National Review Online*, 12 July 2002, <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-berman071202.asp> (4 April 2003).
14. *Washington Post*, 2 November 2001, accessed at <http://www.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/diamond/2001/1102qaeda.htm> (4 April 2003).
15. E. Blanche, op. cit. and Anders Strindberg, op. cit.
16. E. Blanche, op. cit.

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