

The United States and Israel's Conflict with Iran: The Role of Hezbollah

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Hezbollah's Flag:



Summary

Some sources have described Hezbollah as a greater threat to the United States than al-Qaeda. This is largely due to Hezbollah's chief benefactor. Iran trained and equipped the first Hezbollah operatives. Today, the organization exists as a Lebanese political party, a paramilitary group, and an international terrorist organization that has demonstrated its ability execute attacks and fund operations around the world. Hezbollah is an extension of the Iranian Republican Guard Corps.

While Hezbollah developed into a formidable organization, Iran continued its nuclear weapons program and developed delivery means through a robust ballistic missile program. The debate of when Iran will develop an indigenous nuclear weapons program is almost irrelevant. This eventuality poses a direct threat to Israel's existence and to United States interests, as well as friendly regimes in the region. Israel may chose to take action as it did against the Osirak, Iraq nuclear reactor in 1981.

If Israel launches a military strike against Iran, Hezbollah has clearly stated its intention to strike United States targets around the world. The list of possible targets is immense and most likely would include attacks within the United States homeland. Known intelligence gaps have determined that the United States must identify Hezbollah supporters and networks at home and abroad and take action to disrupt those networks.

Scope and Background

In June 1982, Israel invaded southern Lebanon intending to eradicate Palestinian terrorists that used Lebanon as a base of operations. Iran exploited this situation by using a Bekaa Valley stronghold to facilitate the creation of Hezbollah's military and terrorist infrastructure. Hezbollah accepted Iranian training and financial assistance and pledged to fight Israel and support Iranian objectives around the world. The Iranian Republican Guard Corps created Hezbollah to extend the reach of the Iranian revolution.¹ Iran's international objectives, first conceived during the 1979 revolution, are reaching a new crescendo regarding Israel and the United States.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad recently stated that Israel will soon "fade away from the earth." In the past Ahmadinejad has repeatedly called for Israel to be "wiped off the map."² This inflammatory rhetoric, combined with Iran's nuclear program, poses an existential threat for Israel. Numerous United States policy-makers have agreed that the United States cannot accept a nuclear-armed Iran. However, United States policy could experience a dynamic shift with the new Barack Obama administration, as an unnamed source close to the president indicated that the United States would extend the "nuclear umbrella" to Israel. This may demonstrate that the new President would be willing accept a nuclear Iran as long as Iran understood the severity of a United States reaction to an Iranian attack on Israel.³

This post-Cold War application of United States deterrence policy could leave Israel with the sole responsibility of preventing Iran from acquiring or constructing nuclear weapons. Nuclear deterrence rests on the proposition that nuclear weapons exist primarily as political tools, and Iran most likely does not subscribe to this purely American philosophy. If Israel or any other regional power takes action against Iran's nuclear facilities, Hezbollah could launch attacks against Israeli and United States interests around the world.

The Growing Threat

While some may argue that Iran's nuclear ambitions are peaceful, analysts and policy-makers alike must always plan for the worst. Furthermore, analysts should define threats as the sum of a state or organization's capabilities and intentions. Most observers define Iran's intentions solely through Ahmadinejad's inflammatory rhetoric, but Iran's ballistic missile program also provides reliable evidence of how it intends to use nuclear technology. Iran has recently tested intermediate-range ballistic missiles and is known to be aggressively pursuing the development of an intercontinental ballistic missile known as the Shahab-6.⁴

The development of nuclear technology, while expressing the desire to target a clearly defined enemy and developing the most effective means of weapons delivery, represents a regional and international threat. Israel, and possibly its allies, probably will not allow this threat to grow indefinitely. There is also historical precedence as Israel has employed direct military action before to eliminate a burgeoning nuclear threat. In June

1981, Israel bombed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor because of the threat of nuclear weapons production at the site.⁵ In September 2008, Israeli war planes bombed a target in Syria that may have been a nuclear facility.⁶

In December 2007, a United States National Intelligence Estimate expressed "moderate confidence" that Iran was not currently developing nuclear weapons, although Iran was still enriching uranium. Israel cannot afford to be that nuanced in its assessments.⁷ It is a simple matter of capabilities and intentions. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert stated in June 2006 that the "repercussion of their continued pursuit of nuclear weapons will be devastating." Numerous news and weblog sources discuss the possibility that Israel will attack Iran with or without President Obama's support.

Hezbollah's Global Reach

From its creation as a Lebanese militia, Hezbollah has evolved into an international terrorist organization with immense resources. The organization raises money and operates around the world, all while doing the bidding of its patron in Tehran. In the early 1990s, Hezbollah bombed the Israeli Embassy and the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, Argentina. At the conclusion of a twelve-year investigation, prosecutor Dr. Alberto Nisman announced that the findings extrapolated from all available evidence indicated that Iran and Hezbollah were responsible. He further stated that both attacks were "ordered, planned, and financed" by Tehran and executed by Hezbollah operatives. According to the findings, the Iranian leadership had become enraged when President Carlos Menem of Argentina ceased all cooperation with the development of Iran's nuclear program. Interpol issued an arrest warrant for President Hashemi Rafsanjani, other high-ranking Iranian officials, and Imad Mughniyah of Hezbollah.⁸

Hezbollah maintains a powerful presence throughout Latin America. In October 2008, United States and Colombian authorities disrupted a cocaine trafficking and money laundering network that allegedly financed Hezbollah's operations and weapons purchases. The Colombian traffickers that included a Lebanese operative ran a global operation moving drugs and money. The case shows a link between Hezbollah, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and supporters in Venezuela.⁹

The Colombian operation serves as a global model of Hezbollah's operations throughout the world. The organization's reach includes numerous countries in Europe and Africa, as well as numerous other locations in the Western Hemisphere. This network includes supporters and operatives in the United States. In July 2006, the Federal Bureau of Investigation revealed that it was trying to locate individuals with links to Hezbollah currently living in the United States. While FBI sources did not identify specific subjects, they raised the concern that Hezbollah could easily target United States interests.¹⁰

Hezbollah has proven its loyalty to its creator and primary state sponsor. If the United States or Israel takes preemptive action against Iran's nuclear weapons program, Hezbollah will be ready to retaliate. Hezbollah spokesman, Mojtaba Bigdeli, announced:

“They have been trained and they can become fully armed. We are ready to dispatch them to every corner of the world to jeopardize Israel and America’s interests. We are only waiting for the Supreme Leader’s green light to take action. If America wants to ignite World War Three...we welcome it.”¹¹

Conclusion and Intelligence Gaps

Iran created and continues to fund Hezbollah to serve Iranian interests in the Middle East and world-wide. Iran’s international intentions have changed little since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, although its nuclear program has progressed to the point at which Israel may be compelled to take action. The United States, as an ally of Israel and an avowed enemy of Iran, may support Israel in a military strike. This support could come in the form of fly-over rights through Iraq or direct military or intelligence assistance. This situation makes the United States and its global interests a target of Hezbollah.

Several questions remain:

- What is Hezbollah’s strength in the United States?
- Which United States interests abroad and in the homeland will Hezbollah target?
- Historically, Hezbollah has depended on bombings as a primary tactic. Will that trend continue?
- What can the United State military and law enforcement entities do to prevent Hezbollah attacks?

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¹ Global Security. "Hizballah / Hisbollah / Hizbullah / Hezbollah." Retrieved 15 December 2008 from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hizballah.htm>.

² *Haaretz Newspaper*. 14 December 2008. "Ahmadinejad: Israel at end of line, will soon fade away." Retrieved 16 December 2008 from <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1046139.html>.

³ Benn, Aluf. *Haaretz Newspaper*. "Obama's atomic Umbrella: U.S. nuclear strike if Iran nukes Israel." Retrieved 16 December 2008 from <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1045687.html>.

⁴ Hildreth, Steven. "Iran's Ballistic Missile Programs: An Overview." Congressional Research Service. 21 July 2008. Retrieved on 17 December 2008 from <http://ftp.fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RS22758.pdf>.

⁵ *British Broadcasting Corporation*. "On This Day." Retrieved 16 December 2008 from http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/june/7/newsid_3014000/3014623.stm.

⁶ *The Jerusalem Post*. "Ex-CIA official: Israel will attack Iran on its own." 21 December 2007. Retrieved on 16 December 2008 from <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull&cid=1196847398265>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Horvitz, David. *The Jerusalem Post*. "Prosecutor: Argentina bombings ordered by Iran." Retrieved 17 December 2008 from <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1196847376211&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>.

⁹ Kraul, Chris and Sebastian Rotella. *The Los Angeles Times*. "Colombian cocaine ring linked to Hezbollah." Retrieved 16 December 2008 from <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-cocainering22-2008oct22,0,384200.story>.

¹⁰ *The Associated Press*. "FBI Eyes Hezbollah Cells in United States." Retrieved 16 December 2008 from <http://archive.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2006/7/18/215149.shtml>.

¹¹ *Reuters*. "Iran's Hizbollah Ready to Attack US, Israel." Retrieved 16 December 2008 from <http://www.nationalterroralert.com/updates/2006/07/18/irans-hizbollah-ready-to-attack-us-israel/>.