

Assessing the Hizbullah threat

Senior Washington policy-makers have indicated that Hizbullah is high on the list of US targets in the war against terror. However, Anders Strindberg argues that the Lebanese group is not significantly linked to Al-Qaeda and scrupulously avoids confrontation that will bring it into conflict with the USA.

It was evident from the earliest days of the US-led war against terrorism that it would not be confined to the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the defeat of the Al-Qaeda network. "We are planning a broad and sustained campaign to secure our country and eradicate the evil of terrorism," President George W Bush said four days after the 11 September attacks. "I will not settle for a token act. Our response must be sweeping, sustained and effective." And Secretary of State Colin Powell added: "What we have to do is not just go after these perpetrators, and those who gave them haven, but the whole curse of terrorism that is upon the face of the earth."

These and other similar statements set the campaign against terrorism in motion and in April 2002, Secretary of State for Defense Donald Rumsfeld narrowed the focus. "Terrorists have declared war on civilisation," he stated, "and states like Iran, Iraq and Syria are inspiring and financing a culture of political murder and suicide bombing. The president has declared war on terrorism."

One supposed nexus between these three states is their relations with and support for Palestinian militant organisations, in particular those conducting suicide operations against Israel. They are, according to the USA, equipped, bankrolled and encouraged by the governments in Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus.

Hizbullah is also seen by Washington policy-makers as a pivot in the Middle Eastern 'cabal of terrorism' involving states and substate actors. "The [Palestinian terrorist] issue will certainly be a focus for the American effort at some point," a European diplomat in Damascus said to *JIR*, "but first, after Iraq, the United States is most likely to take on Hizbullah."

Building a case

Since mid-2002, powerbrokers in Washington have exerted great effort to generate a political climate conducive to a showdown with Hizbullah. While never a concerted campaign, those leading the charge have included Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Senator Bob Graham, former chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Richard Perle, chairman of the Defence Policy Board, and a number of high-profile policy advisers drawn from academia and think-tanks.

"It would be insane to conduct a war against terrorism and not do something about [Hizbullah]," suggested a US military analyst, because "they are the most committed and dangerous terrorist group in the world, with a global operational reach that extends to the [US] homeland."

There are three distinct arguments made in support of a US confrontation with Hizbullah. First, there are allegations of organisational and operational links between Hizbullah and Al-Qaeda. Such ties would make confrontation with Hizbullah central to 'phase one' in the war against terrorism, similar to action taken against the Abu Sayyaf Group and Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, where the USA deployed troops in support of the government.

Second, there are allegations that Hizbullah is a major supplier of funds and arms to various Palestinian militant factions, and that it organises military training for Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). There are also claims that Hizbullah maintains an operational infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Such a linkage would be tantamount to Hizbullah engaging in offensive activities against Israel outside southern Lebanon, which could prompt Israeli retaliatory measures against Hizbullah and Syria with the blessing of the USA.

A third strain in the case being built against Hizbullah is the belief that regardless of any ties to either Al-Qaeda or the Palestinians, Hizbullah's agenda and activities in and of themselves constitute an urgent and massive threat to the USA, its citizens and interests, in the Middle East as well as inside its own borders.

European intelligence analysts appear more sceptical about available evidence than their US colleagues. "This [case against Hizbullah] is fuelled by the political momentum of the war against terrorism," suggested one European intelligence analyst, "but it has little to do with Hizbullah's current activities and nothing to do with any threat from [Hizbullah] against America."

"We have to be very careful," countered a US military analyst, "to take these dangers seriously because they are real and imminent." Whatever the perspective, there appears to be little disagreement that Hizbullah will be the focus of the war against terrorism once the Iraqi crisis has been settled. "Sooner than that," a member of Hizbullah suggested to *JIR*, "because Israel may decide to attack us, the Palestinian people and Syria [under the cover of] an American invasion [of Iraq]. The attitude of the Americans is crucial for the Israelis."

Links with Al-Qaeda

US and Israeli intelligence sources have claimed that Hizbullah has developed organisational and even operational links to Al-Qaeda. Other than speculation for the purposes of contingency threat management, this claim is based on two main premises. First, the presence and activities of both organisations in the 'tri-border area' between Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina, a lawless zone where arms trading, drug trafficking and other illicit activities are unchecked. Second, the much-debated function of Imad Mughniyeh, one of the FBI's 22 most wanted terrorists who is thought to act as Hizbullah's liaison with Al-Qaeda, as well as with Iran, Syria and Iraq.

That Hizbullah has a presence in the tri-border area is clear. The area has a sizeable Arab population, a large part of which comes from Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. Western intelligence agencies claim that local kingpin Ahmed Barakat is connected to Hizbullah, although it is not clear how, and his 'lieutenant' Sobhi Mahmoud Fayyad was arrested late last year by Paraguayan authorities on suspicion of raising funds for the movement. Also Al-Qaeda is known to have representatives in the area, and is thought to be hard at work trying to set up an organisational and operational infrastructure there. It is hypothesised that Al-Qaeda has sought Hizbullah's assistance in setting up its base in the area.

Fayyad's arrest came after the USA had put pressure on Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina to step up their counterterrorism efforts in the area. Given Hizbullah's history of fundraising and sizeable support among Lebanese expatriate communities, it is not unexpected that Hizbullah should be present in the tri-border area. The same applies to Al-Qaeda. Yet, beyond their mutual presence in the area there is little to suggest any connection between the two organisations and those who have seen the available intelligence tend to be sceptical. "Their simultaneous fundraising and arms purchasing does not make them partners," a European intelligence officer tasked with monitoring Hizbullah told *JIR*. Chinese and Russian organised crime syndicates, African conflict diamond traders, and European white-collar

criminals are also in the area, “but we don’t assume that Hizbullah is involved with, say, the Triads... this is all about inference”.

The pivotal role of Imad Mughniyeh, a former Hizbullah military commander in southern Lebanon suspected of being a liaison officer between Hizbullah’s military intelligence service and Iran, Syria and Iraq, may be another red herring. “We have seen no evidence whatever that [Mughniyeh] takes orders from or even co-operates with Hizbullah’s leadership,” said the same intelligence officer. Mughniyeh’s status within Hizbullah has been compared with that of Sabri al-Banna Abu Nidal within Yasser Arafat’s Fatah in the early 1970s. For several years, Abu Nidal was a member of Fatah while nonetheless building his own support base, striking his own alliances and working towards goals that were his own, not those of Fatah. Several intelligence practitioners and analysts have suggested that Mughniyeh, like Abu Nidal, is ‘long since out of control’. “Mughniyeh is a very nasty piece of work,” said the intelligence analyst, but rejected the notion that he is still connected to Hizbullah.

It all seems to boil down to motive. “Hizbullah has nothing to gain from working with Al-Qaeda,” suggests Mats Wärn, a researcher at Stockholm University with regular access to Hizbullah leaders and cadres. “It would only serve to tarnish their image as a responsible and popular movement with good working relations with the Lebanese government. It would also make their relationship with the Syrians more difficult.” In addition, he notes: “The Taliban and Al-Qaeda have perpetrated massacres against Shia Muslims, which aggravated both Hizbullah as well as the Iranians, and together with Syria, the movement has had serious problems with rising Sunni militancy in Lebanon.” Some of this militancy has been linked to Al-Qaeda, including an armed uprising in late 2001 outside the coastal town of Tripoli — Syrian troops assisted Lebanese forces in quelling the uprising, while Hizbullah provided intelligence support.

Assisting the Palestinians

According to US intelligence sources, Hizbullah assists a range of Palestinian militant factions in a variety of ways. The movement is thought to offer financial aid, weapons and military training courses to, most prominently, Hamas, the PIJ and the PFLP-GC. Israeli intelligence has also charged that Hizbullah maintains operatives in the West Bank and Gaza and “is actively involved in the murder of Israeli civilians”. It has also been suggested that Hizbullah has facilitated a connection between Al-Qaeda, on the one hand, and Hamas and the PIJ, on the other.

The notion that Hizbullah has facilitated a Palestinian connection to Al-Qaeda would appear false in light of Hizbullah’s own hostility towards Al-Qaeda and because no link between the Palestinian Islamist organisations and Al-Qaeda has ever been proven. “It is the greatest prize they [the Israelis] could imagine,” mused Imad al-Alami, a member of Hamas’s politburo, “to [establish] a connection between Al-Qaeda and us, Hizbullah, Syria, Iran... Let them try and they will fail. There is no such connection.”

Even so, Hizbullah clearly supports and co-operates with the Palestinian organisations in a number of ways. The secular organisations, PFLP-GC and Fatah al-Intifada, have long talked of their ‘strategic relationship’ with Hizbullah. Until 1996-97 this involved sporadic joint operations against the Israel Defence Force (IDF) in southern Lebanon. Since then, the relationship has primarily centred on political co-ordination, intelligence sharing and joint training in guerrilla warfare. This applies also to the Palestinian Islamists. As for suicide operations, the different types of explosives, detonators and tactics used by Hamas and PIJ, on the one hand, and Hizbullah, on the other, suggest that this has not been an area of co-operation.

None of the groups involved deny a close and fruitful relationship. Imad al-Alami has told *JIR* that: “We have excellent relations with the Islamic resistance in Lebanon,” and that “ Hamas benefits from the relationship, and we hope that [Hizbullah] benefits.” PFLP-GC deputy secretary general, Talal Naji, has spoken with gratitude of Hizbullah’s assistance to the Palestinian struggle during “the difficult years in Lebanon... Therefore we believe that we must co-operate with them and we give them armaments, weapons... training, everything... There is no secret.” While Hizbullah has assisted the Palestinians financially, through intelligence sharing and with tactical training, shipments of arms appear to have gone the other way. This has primarily involved redundant light weapons from the PFLP-GC’s arms caches in Lebanon.

Hizbullah for its part repeatedly reaffirms its solidarity, support and close co-ordination and co-operation with the Palestinians. The movement is careful to not give Israel any political ammunition, however, while studiously using Israel’s security concerns in all occupied territories as a launch pad for psychological warfare. Thus, for instance, it denies accusations that it has active cells in the occupied Palestinian territories, yet is careful to imply its capability to start and operate such cells.

While not connected to concerns about a Hizbullah presence in the Palestinian areas, the arrests last year of IDF Lieutenant-Colonel Omar Hayeb, an Israeli Bedouin accused of having passed military secrets to Hizbullah, underscored Hizbullah’s potential to the Israeli leadership and public. The indictment in mid-February 2003 of six suspected members of another Hizbullah spy ring based in the village of Ghajar reinforced that awareness. Ghajar, divided by the Lebanese-Israeli border, has been a long-standing security concern for the IDF, once described by a senior officer as “Israel’s soft underbelly.” “The Israelis are terrified of Hizbullah,” one US intelligence analyst told *JIR*. “They are convinced that they can contain the Palestinians, but that [Hizbullah] is a threat to the very existence of the Jewish state.”

Hizbullah, in turn, is playing on these fears. “They are always concerned about the possibility of [our] presence in Palestine,” a Hizbullah cadre recently remarked, “so let them worry. If they could prove it they would.”

“I cannot confirm or deny any information that could benefit the Israelis,” Hizbullah member of parliament Hussein Hajj Hassan told an Egyptian newspaper when asked whether Hayeb was really a Hizbullah agent. “We are happy that they are worried and angry.”

The most urgent threat

The third strain of the case being built against Hizbullah argues that the movement is an urgent threat to US interests and citizens, in the Middle East as well as on its own soil. These fears exist also in connection with Hamas and the PIJ, but are most strongly felt when it comes to Hizbullah. US Senator Bob Graham has called Hizbullah “the most vicious and effective terrorist organisation in the world”, arguing that the movement has killed US citizens in the Middle East for 20 years and operates cells in the USA ready to strike. In this context, he has advocated air strikes against both Lebanon and Syria if the latter, widely thought of in the USA as Hizbullah’s ‘puppet master’, does not voluntarily dismantle the movement. Graham has referred to Hizbullah and four Palestinian groups — Hamas, the PIJ, the Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO) and the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) — as “the most competent terrorist groups... which represent the greatest threat against the United States... a more urgent threat [than Saddam Hussein]”.

It should be noted that none of these Palestinian groups have indicated any interest in attacking the USA. Hamas and the PIJ have in fact repeatedly told European diplomats in Damascus and Beirut that their “only theatre of conflict is Palestine”, which accords with

their official statements and internal memos. ANO has told *JIR* that: “It is not in our interest to confront America,” and appears mostly concerned with extortion, racketeering and other money-generating activities in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The Damascus-based PLF that Graham referred to (as opposed to the Ramallah-based and Palestinian Authority-affiliated PLF faction headed by Abu al-Abbas) has a total membership of less than 30 individuals and was forced to disband its armed wing in the early 1990s due to lack of funds. It has neither an interest in nor the ability to attack the USA.

Certainly, Hizbullah has a significant network in place across the USA, particularly in areas with large Lebanese and Arab communities. Yet this network is geared towards fundraising for the movement’s various sections, including its military wing. In addition to receiving charitable contributions, money is generated through a variety of criminal schemes, including tax fraud and various types of smuggling operations. Because Hizbullah is classified as a terrorist group by the USA, all fundraising, even the charitable donations, are illegal. However, the existence of this support network does not serve as proof of an operational network, such as that assumed by Graham. “They know not to bite the hand that feeds them,” remarked a US diplomat stationed in the Middle East, implying that Hizbullah’s ability to raise funds in the USA acts as a disincentive to attack. While several arrests related to Hizbullah fundraising have been made — most notably the tobacco smuggling ring in North Carolina, successfully prosecuted last year — no individual has ever been successfully charged with preparing to mount an attack against the USA on Hizbullah’s behalf.

Diplomatic offensive

US efforts at isolating and confronting Hizbullah have intensified in parallel with the organisation’s growing prestige and political role in Lebanon, regionally and even internationally. Following the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000, the movement’s popularity skyrocketed in the Middle East, and its Secretary General Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, according to polls, became one of most popular leaders in the Arab World.

The presence of Nasrallah at a summit of Francophone nations in October 2002 was a major public relations victory. According to the Lebanese daily *Al-Nahar*, it indicated “a rejection of the American definition of Hizbullah”. *Al-Safir* suggested that Hizbullah was demonstrating “its readiness to establish relations with the Europeans in facing the mutual dangers represented in the American inclination towards world hegemony”, showing “the Zionist entity and the United States that Hizbullah is not isolated”.

On 9 February 2003, Hizbullah unveiled a peace and reconciliation plan for Iraq, what Nasrallah called an “Iraqi Taif”, referring to the regionally sponsored Taif conference that brought the Lebanese civil war to an end. Nasrallah urged the Arab League and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference to sponsor the proposal. The proposed conference would comprise representatives of the Iraqi regime and the opposition, brought together to “set down the principles and the basis for a comprehensive national reconciliation... These measures will produce a regime that enjoys popular domestic legitimacy and credibility regionally and internationally, which would remove the justifications for [US] aggression”.

Hizbullah’s diplomatic efforts and ‘public relations struggle’ have acquired critical importance since the onset of the war against terrorism, when the movement’s leadership came to believe that the activities of Al-Qaeda would affect the status of all Islamist organisations, whether connected to the 11 September attacks or not.

Should Hizbullah be able to establish itself as a bona fide political actor on the international stage — and it may be approaching that status — Israel’s options in dealing with and countering the movement would be seriously curtailed. Mats Wärn argues that: “Hizbullah’s

primary struggle is presently a discursive one, trying to change the way we think about the struggle against Israel, and the way we think about Islamists as political actors.” According to Wörn: “The Khomeini school of political Islam,” to which Hizbullah adheres, “is more universal than its Sunni counterpart,” and “Hizbullah is genuinely bothered and concerned by the sectarian nature of the Bin Laden-type of Sunni militancy.” Therefore, he argues, one has to consider the movement’s local and specific agenda and context. “Attacking the United States would confirm Western stereotypes of Islamists, validate claims that [Hizbullah] is a terrorist group, increase support for Israel and discredit all its political and diplomatic activity. For what?”

The case against the movement rests entirely on its capabilities, but fails to provide a plausible motive. It also appears based on a failure to distinguish between contingency planning and political reality, a deficiency that may well be built in to the current US administration’s National Security Strategy through the doctrine of pre-emptive self-defence. If that is the case, confrontation with Hizbullah may be drawing near.

Dr Anders Strindberg is JIR’s UN correspondent and a Visiting Fellow in the Center of International Studies, Princeton University

Pull out quotes

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