

PolicyWatch #1389

Hizballah's Military Wing Under Pressure Despite Political Gains

By [Matthew Levitt](#)

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Hizballah has much to celebrate. With the formation of a national unity government in Lebanon last week, it is now well positioned to block any effort to dismantle its military wing. Today, the organization is celebrating the release of five Lebanese prisoners and the remains of several Hizballah and Palestinian militants. But even as Hizballah enjoys the political dividends of its successes, its military wing finds itself under pressure at home and abroad.

Protecting the Arms of the "Resistance"

The "blocking third" Hizballah formally secured in the new Lebanese cabinet is part of the Doha agreement reached in May. The one-third plus one representation of Hizballah and its allies within the thirty-member cabinet effectively undercuts any legislative means to disarm the group's military wing as required under UN Security Council Resolution 1701. At the time, then-UN secretary general Kofi Annan stated, "Dismantling Hizballah is not the direct mandate of the UN." Commenting on the continued flow of weapons from Iran to Hizballah through Syria, Annan made clear the UN force would not stop the transactions. "The understanding," he added, "was that it would be the Lebanese who would disarm [Hizballah]." Clearly, although it is much needed, that will not now happen.

Israeli intelligence officials told the Israeli cabinet that Hizballah has tripled the number of rockets it had during the summer 2006 war. More disturbing, according to a French diplomat, not only has the quantity increased, but also the quality as well. Hizballah now has "serious weapons," the diplomat reported, "not just Katyushas." According to an Israeli security official, Hizballah can now fire rockets on Tel Aviv from north of the Litani River, and hit as far south as Dimona from southern Lebanon. Moreover, because of Hizballah's blocking third, the new Lebanese cabinet may not be able to approve renewal of UNIFIL's mandate, which expires in August.

Reclaiming the July War as a Victory

The summer 2006 war caused massive damage to Lebanon's infrastructure and led to significant domestic criticism of Hizballah and its military wing for its decision to kidnap Israeli soldiers and fire thousands of missiles into northern Israel. Local criticism of Hizballah arose once more this May, after the organization briefly seized control of part of west Beirut, turning the weapons it claims are maintained to "resist" Israel against fellow Lebanese. Speaking in late May, U.S. principal deputy director of national intelligence Donald Kerr noted, "Hizballah's early May actions inflamed the Sunni 'street' in Lebanon and contributed to a dramatic increase in sectarian tensions."

But Hizballah now expects, with good reason, that the prisoner exchange will catapult the group and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, back into the limelight as the spearhead of "resistance" against Israel. Among the slogans being plastered along coastal roads from the Israeli border to Sidon is Nasrallah's refrain: "Thanks to the weapons of the resistance, we will free our prisoners." Hizballah posters refer to the exchange as "Radwan Operation" -- a reference to Hizballah's recently assassinated chief of international operations, Imad

Mughniyeh (a.k.a. Hajj Radwan).

Hizballah under International Scrutiny

Even as Hizballah celebrates these successes, it is under increasing pressure and scrutiny abroad. Yesterday, Britain's parliament approved a Home Office order issued earlier this month, banning Hizballah's military wing, *al-Muqawam al-Islamiyya* or Islamic Resistance. Hizballah's terrorist wing, often called the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO) or, as in Britain, the External Services Organization (ESO), was banned in 2001. Condemning "Hizballah's violence and support for terrorism," the ban outlaws raising funds, encouraging support for, or belonging to, Hizballah's military wing.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown informed members of parliament that the decision to act now was based "on the sole grounds of new evidence of [Hizballah] involvement in terrorism in Iraq and the occupied Palestinian territories." According to reports in the British press, these include "planning to kidnap British security workers in Iraq," echoing the charges of two Iraqi parliamentarians claiming that Hizballah planned and oversaw the kidnapping of five Britons -- still missing -- from the Iraqi Finance Ministry in May 2007.

The U.S. government has also taken action against Hizballah since its forced takeover of Beirut. The U.S. Department of Treasury designated two Hizballah operatives in Venezuela, highlighting the scope of the organization's global footprint. One, Ghazi Nasr al-Din, is a Venezuelan diplomat who has been posted to its embassies in both Damascus and Lebanon. According to the Treasury, Nasr al-Din "counseled Hizballah donors on fundraising efforts and has provided donors with specific information on bank accounts where the donors' deposits would go directly to Hizballah." Undercutting the notion that there are distinct wings within Hizballah, he also met with senior Hizballah officials in Lebanon "to discuss operational issues" and "arranged the travel of Hizballah members to attend a training course in Iran."

Treasury describes the second designated individual, Fawzi Kanan, as "a significant provider of financial support to Hizballah" who "facilitated travel for Hizballah members," and also went to Iran for training with other members. He too crosses the lines between support, military, and terrorist activity, having "met with senior Hizballah officials in Lebanon to discuss operational issues, including possible kidnappings and terrorist attacks."

While denying responsibility for the killing of Mughniyeh, the Israeli government has taken a variety of steps to try and prevent a Hizballah retaliatory attack. Israelis officials fear three scenarios for Hizballah revenge: an attack on current or former senior Israeli officials traveling abroad; an attack on an Israeli embassy or other diplomatic mission abroad; or an attack targeting a location affiliated with a Jewish community abroad, as was the case in the 1994 Jewish community center bombing in Argentina. According to Israeli officials, Azerbaijani security services thwarted an attack on the Israeli embassy in Baku just weeks following the Mughniyeh assassination.

The pressure against Hizballah, however, is not just coming from governments. In the United States and Canada, two civil lawsuits were filed this month against Lebanese banks for providing Hizballah with financial services needed to carry out military and terrorist operations. In New York, plaintiffs sued a series of banks for providing Hizballah with "regular, systematic, and unfettered access to U.S. currency" with which it purchased rockets and other weapons. In Canada, plaintiffs sued banks for allowing U.S.-designated Hizballah entities, such as Yousser Company and Martyrs Foundation, "to open and maintain accounts and to freely transfer many millions of dollars of Hizballah funds and to carry out millions of dollars in financial transactions" (see [PolicyWatch #1267](#)). Cases such as these can be costly not only financially, but also in terms of the unwanted exposure they are likely to bring to both the banks and Hizballah.

Conclusion

Two years after surviving a brutal war with Israel, Hizballah has leveraged its military success into significant

political gain. It has restocked its military arsenal, achieved new levels of political influence within the Lebanese government, and has now secured the release of prisoners from Israeli jails. Far from weakened or cowed by the summer 2006 war, Hizballah has emerged far stronger inside Lebanon.

Yet over the same time period, the group's military and terrorist activities abroad have been increasingly uncovered. Further exposing Hizballah's global footprint, and the violent and illicit activities in which its operatives are engaged, could help roll back the group's successes at home. According to Nasrallah, a European designation of Hizballah would "destroy" the organization since "the sources of our funding will dry up and the sources of moral, political, and material support will be destroyed." This week, Hizballah celebrates. But its party may be short-lived, especially if European leaders followed Britain's lead and held the group accountable for its militant and terrorist activities.

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