

Hezbollah (Lebanon, Islamists)

What is Hezbollah?

Hezbollah is a Lebanese umbrella organization of radical Islamic Shiite groups and organizations. It opposes the West, seeks to create a Muslim fundamentalist state modeled on Iran, and is a bitter foe of Israel. Hezbollah, whose name means “party of God,” is a terrorist group believed responsible for nearly 200 attacks since 1982 that have killed more than 800 people. Experts say Hezbollah is also a significant force in Lebanon’s politics and a major provider of social services, operating schools, hospitals, and agricultural services, for thousands of Lebanese Shiites. It also operates the al-Manar satellite television channel and broadcast station.

What are Hezbollah’s origins?

Hezbollah was founded in 1982 in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and subsumed members of the 1980s coalition of groups known as Islamic Jihad. It has close links to Iran and Syria.

Who are Hezbollah’s leaders?

Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah is considered the group’s spiritual leader. Imad Fayeز Mugniyah is considered the key planner of Hezbollah’s worldwide terrorist operations. During the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s, experts say Mugniyah trained with al-Fatah. When the Palestine Liberation Organization and al-Fatah were expelled from Lebanon by Israeli forces in 1982, Mugniyah joined the newly formed Hezbollah and quickly rose to a senior position in the organization. Hassan Nasrallah is Hezbollah’s senior political leader. Nasrallah was originally a military commander, but his military and religious credentials—he studied in centers of Shiite theology in Iran and Iraq—quickly elevated him to leadership within the group. Experts say he took advantage of rivalries within Hezbollah and the favor of the head of Iran’s theocratic government, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, to become the group’s secretary general in 1992, a position he still holds.



Hezbollah leader
Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah,
Tehran, Iran, April 2001.
(AP Photo/HasanSarbakhshian)

Where does Hezbollah operate?

Its base is in Lebanon’s Shiite-dominated areas, including parts of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley. In addition, U.S. intelligence reports say that Hezbollah cells operate in Europe, Africa, South America, and North America. Despite Israel’s 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah continues to periodically shell Israeli forces in the disputed Shebaa Farms border zone.

Hezbollah has also carried out attacks outside the Middle East. In his September 20, 2001, speech to Congress, President Bush pledged that the U.S.-led war on terror “will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.” Hezbollah’s cells outside the Middle East, its reported involvement in the January 2002 attempt to smuggle a boatload of arms to the Palestinian Authority, and its role in the 1992 and 1994 attacks in Argentina imply that it might meet the president’s definition, terrorism experts say. In June 2002, Singapore accused Hezbollah of recruiting Singaporeans in a failed 1990s plot to attack U.S. and Israeli ships in the Singapore Straits. Hezbollah was also among the few terrorist groups that President Bush mentioned by name in his January 2002 State of the Union address.

How big is Hezbollah?

Its core consists of several thousand militants and activists, the U.S. government estimates.

What major attacks is Hezbollah responsible for?

Hezbollah and its affiliates have planned or been linked to a lengthy series of terrorist attacks against the United States, Israel, and other Western targets. These attacks include:

- a series of kidnappings of Westerners in Lebanon, including several Americans, in the 1980s;
- the suicide truck bombings that killed more than 200 U.S. Marines at their barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983;
- the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847, which featured the famous footage of the plane’s pilot leaning out of the cockpit with a gun to his head;
- and two major 1990s attacks on Jewish targets in Argentina—the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy (killing 29) and the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center (killing 95).

Is Hezbollah sponsored by any states?

Yes, Iran and Syria. The group receives “substantial amounts of financial, training, weapons, explosives, political, diplomatic, and organizational aid from Iran and Syria,” the State Department reports. Hezbollah was founded as a vehicle for Iran’s Islamist agenda, Middle East experts say. While Iran gave Hezbollah more funding and support in the 1980s than in recent years, experts say it still gives Hezbollah its orders and its ideological inspiration. And because Lebanon has been under Syrian control since 1990, Hezbollah could not operate in Lebanon without Syria’s approval, Middle East experts say. Following the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in Beirut, large crowds of Lebanese citizens demonstrated against Syria’s continuing influence in the country. Hezbollah organized a massive counterdemonstration in support of the Syrian government.

What is U.S. policy toward Hezbollah?

In November 2001, the State Department placed Hezbollah on a formal list of foreign terrorist organizations whose financial assets can be seized. After September 11, the Bush administration demanded that Lebanon freeze Hezbollah's assets, but Lebanon has refused. Also, the head of Hezbollah's security apparatus, Imad Mugniyah, now has a \$25 million U.S. bounty on his head. In December 2004, the U.S. government cut al-Manar's satellite television feed to the United States and announced that anyone with links to the station would be expelled from or refused a visa to enter the country.

Because Hezbollah plays a role in mainstream Lebanese politics and provides a vast array of social services in southern Lebanon, some European governments have resisted labeling the group a terrorist organization, to the frustration of the Bush administration. Putting Hezbollah on official terrorist group lists would help prevent the group from raising money through charities in those countries. The Netherlands, Italy, and Poland are the only European states that officially consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization.

Does Hezbollah have ties to other terrorist groups?

Yes, the group reportedly shares members with Palestinian Islamic Jihad and is an ally of Hamas. Hezbollah is believed to have had contacts with the al Qaeda terrorist network, although the Shiite clerics who rule Iran have a different radical religious agenda than that of the Sunni Muslims of both al Qaeda and the Taliban, which targeted Shiites in Afghanistan. Mugniyah reportedly met at least once during the 1990s with Osama bin Laden. In addition, Hezbollah and al Qaeda have reportedly been cooperating on logistics and training for some operations, according to intelligence officials and some terrorism experts. Yet Hezbollah's spiritual leader, Sheikh Fadlallah, condemned the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington as incompatible with Islamic law and perversions of the true meaning of jihad.

Is Hezbollah active in Lebanese politics?

Yes. Hezbollah has 12 seats in Lebanon's 128-member parliament, which is elected according to rules that experts say tends to magnify the influence of Christian and Sunni groups worried about Shiite influence over the country. The group entered electoral politics after Lebanon's civil war ended in 1990 and the country fell under Syrian influence.

Why is Hezbollah popular in the Arab world?

Experts attribute much of Hezbollah's widespread popularity to its claim that it forced Israel to retreat from territory it held, something no Arab government or group had ever accomplished. Hezbollah waged a violent, 18-year campaign against Israel's control of a self-declared "security zone" in southern Lebanon, which Israel had established after the 1982 invasion of Lebanon by forces under then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon. In 2000, after suffering mounting casualties, then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak ordered Israeli troops to

unilaterally leave the security zone. For millions of Arabs, Hezbollah achieved heroic status, and many Palestinian militants at war with Israel cite Hezbollah as an inspiration.

What is Shiite Islam?

Shiism is a minority strain within Islam. Its members believe only descendants of the Prophet Mohammed should lead the Muslim world. Shiites are the largest community in Lebanon, but they do not form a majority. Shiite populations live in a number of countries, but they are a majority only in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan.

Source: Council of Foreign Relations