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Lebanese Hezbollah

Hezbollah (“Party of God” also spelled Hizballah) is an Iran-backed Lebanese Shi’a militia and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Formed in the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, the group has conducted numerous attacks against Israeli and Western targets. Hezbollah serves as an Iranian partner force, enabling Tehran to project power across the region and threaten U.S. interests and allies across the Middle East.

Figure 1. Lebanon



Source: Created by CRS. UNIFIL = United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon; UNDOF = United Nations Disengagement Observer Force.

Leadership, Structure, and Size

Hassan Nasrallah has served as Secretary-General of Hezbollah since the assassination of his predecessor by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in 1992. According to the U.S. government, the External Security Organization (ESO), the military arm of Hezbollah responsible for the planning, coordination, and execution of terrorist attacks, is headed by Talal Hamiyah. The ESO is also known as the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO) or Unit 910. Some countries and the European Union separate Hezbollah’s military and political wings—designating the former for sanctions while maintaining dialogue with the latter. U.S. officials describe this division as a “false distinction,” and one not made by Hezbollah itself. Definitive numbers on Hezbollah’s total size are not publicly available; the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ 2022 *Military Balance* estimates that the group may have “up to 20,000 active personnel.”

Objectives

For nearly two decades, Hezbollah’s stated objective was to drive IDF forces from southern Lebanon, through a range of attacks on Israeli military and civilian targets. Since the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, Hezbollah has used Israel’s remaining presence in the Sheb’a Farms and other disputed areas in the Lebanon-Syria-Israel tri-border region (see **Figure 1**) to justify its ongoing conflict with Israel—and its persistence as an armed militia alongside the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Hezbollah also bolsters Iranian objectives; the State Department’s 2021 *Country Reports on Terrorism* states that Iran provides Hezbollah with “most of its funding, training, weapons, and explosives, as well as political, diplomatic, monetary, and organizational aid.”

Hezbollah operates a global criminal-financial network, with reported hubs in Europe, Africa, and Latin America. A 2022 Europol report stated, “The network of collaborators built by Hezbollah in the EU is suspected of managing the transportation and distribution of illegal drugs into the EU, dealing with firearms trafficking and running professional money laundering operations.” Other 2022 reports highlight Hezbollah’s role in the trafficking of amphetamine-type stimulants, marketed as “captagon,” along the Syria-Lebanon border.

In addition to military and criminal objectives, Hezbollah also seeks influence in Lebanon’s political system, likely in part to prevent the government from targeting the group’s weapons stockpiles or private telecommunications network.

Hezbollah in Lebanese Politics

Hezbollah has participated in elections since 1992, and draws popular support from its vast network of schools, clinics, youth programs, and other social services. The group entered the cabinet for the first time in 2005, and has held one to three seats in each Lebanese government formed since then. Hezbollah has at times sought to block cabinet decisions, twice prompting the collapse of the government by withdrawing from the cabinet alongside its political allies. The group is part of the March 8 political coalition, which also includes the Free Patriotic Movement (Christian) and the Amal Movement (Shi’a). Hezbollah holds two seats in Lebanon’s caretaker government.

Hezbollah did not gain additional parliamentary seats in the 2018 or 2022 legislative elections (it continues to hold 13 out of 128). However, following the expiration of President Michel Aoun’s term in October 2022, Hezbollah and its March 8 allies have obstructed efforts by parliament to elect a president by preventing the formation of a quorum and by casting blank ballots in parliamentary electoral sessions. In November 2022, the head of Hezbollah’s parliamentary

bloc stated, “we know who we want to elect, and we are acting to ensure that this person accedes to the presidency.”

Areas of Military Operation

Hezbollah is based in Lebanon and primarily operates in the Middle East, though it has conducted attacks elsewhere.

Lebanon. According to U.S. government assessments, Hezbollah controls access to parts of Lebanon and operates inside the country with relative impunity. The group was implicated in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in a car bombing in downtown Beirut that also killed 21 others. In 2011, the United Nations-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) indicted four Hezbollah members in connection with the Hariri assassination and conducted trials in absentia.

Syria. Hezbollah has a long-standing relationship with the Asad government in Syria, which facilitates the transit of weapons through its territory from Iran to Hezbollah. In 2013, Nasrallah acknowledged Hezbollah operations inside Syria and pledged that the group would “do everything in [its] power” to ensure the Asad government’s survival.

Yemen. Hezbollah also provides weapons and training to Houthi militants in Yemen. The Houthis have conducted persistent ballistic missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks against Iranian rivals Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Attacks and Threats to U.S. Interests

Hezbollah has been linked to a series of terrorist attacks against U.S. personnel and facilities abroad, including the truck bombing of the U.S. Embassy and Multinational Force barracks in Beirut in 1983, and the Embassy annex in 1984. Hezbollah also hijacked TWA Flight 847 and took roughly 100 foreign hostages between 1982 and 1992, including the CIA chief of station in Beirut, who later died in their custody. U.S. officials have alleged that Hezbollah leaders were active in arming and training Shi’a militias that carried out attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003 – 2010).

The 2022 Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community stated that, “Hizballah seeks to reduce U.S. influence in Lebanon and the broader Middle East, and maintains the capability to target U.S. persons and interests in the region, worldwide, and—to a lesser extent—in the United States.” In 2022 congressional testimony, FBI Director Christopher Wray stated, “The arrests of individuals in the United States allegedly linked to Lebanese Hizballah’s main overseas terrorist arm, and their intelligence collection and procurement efforts, demonstrate Lebanese Hizballah’s interest in long-term contingency planning activities here in the Homeland.” In a 2022 statement for the record, Defense Intelligence Agency Director Scott Berrier stated, “Hizballah probably will direct an IJO attack in the homeland or against U.S. interests abroad only if Hizballah or Iran perceives a threat to the group’s existence.”

A 2022 joint study by George Washington University, West Point, and the NCITE research center reported that 128 individuals linked to Hezbollah had been involved in U.S. federal criminal cases between 1997 and 2020. Most

individuals (87%) were charged with providing financial or material support to Hezbollah, while 13% were charged with operational support—including human smuggling, weapons procurement, and surveillance. The report stated that Hezbollah’s activities in the United States are primarily financial, in collaboration with existing criminal networks.

Attacks on Israeli and Jewish Targets

Over the past two decades, Hezbollah has periodically fired rockets into northern Israel. Hezbollah rocket attacks reached a peak during the 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War, when, over the course of a 34-day period, the group launched more than 4,000 rockets into northern Israel, killing 55 Israelis. Hezbollah also conducted cross-border raids on Israeli villages and military installations. All told, the 2006 conflict killed an estimated 163 Israelis and more than 1,000 Lebanese. The 2020 *Country Reports on Terrorism* estimates that Hezbollah may possess up to 150,000 rockets, according to some Israeli estimates. Israeli assessments also have highlighted Hezbollah efforts to produce precision-guided missiles within Lebanon. Israel has destroyed multiple Hezbollah tunnels leading from Lebanon into Israel. Hezbollah has also been implicated in attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets outside Israel.

Legislation and Issues for Congress

Congress has passed several measures authorizing secondary sanctions against persons and entities that facilitate financial transactions for Hezbollah, including the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015 (P.L. 114-102, known as HIFPA), as amended by the Hizballah International Prevention Amendments Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-272, sometimes referred to as HIFPA II).

Members in the 117th Congress introduced several Hezbollah-related legislative measures, including the Hizballah Money Laundering Prevention Act of 2021 (S. 1637); the Countering Hizballah in Lebanon’s Military Act (H.R. 4073); the Hizballah in Latin America Accountability Act (H.R. 5039 and S. 1651); and the Strategic Lebanon Security Reporting Act (H.R. 4230).

Some Members have questioned successive presidential administrations regarding potential links between Hezbollah and the LAF, and regarding any possible diversions of U.S. security assistance. State Department officials have described the LAF as “an institutional counterweight to Hezbollah,” and reported that the LAF “continues to comply fully with all EUM reporting and security requirements.” The explanatory statement accompanying the FY2023 omnibus bill states that, “As a current recipient of United States foreign assistance, the Lebanese Armed Forces are not controlled by a Foreign Terrorist Organization.”

Members may consider various measures to counter Hezbollah influence in Lebanon. These measures could include efforts to reduce Lebanese domestic reliance on Hezbollah—for example via increased direct assistance to local municipalities—or expanded secondary sanctions.

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