

Lebanon: Hezbollah's Kidnapping Plan

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Stratfor has received information from multiple sources that Shiite militant organization Hezbollah is making preparations for kidnappings targeting Western citizens. Hezbollah and its patrons, Iran and Syria, would have little to gain from such a move at this point (though they are likely deriving benefits from spreading this threat). That said, the organization has the assets in place to pull off such an operation, and the threat of taking Westerners hostage in Lebanon should be taken seriously.

Analysis

Stratfor has received information from multiple sources that Shiite militant organization Hezbollah is making preparations for kidnappings targeting Western citizens. According to the sources, Hezbollah has compiled a thorough dossier on U.S. citizens in Lebanon and has mapped out all possible U.S. targets in the country.

Hezbollah has a rich history of kidnapping, dating back to the early 1980s. Then, the organization was a newly created militant proxy designed to serve at the behest of Tehran and Damascus. Iran and Syria shared an interest in driving out Israeli troops and uprooting multinational peacekeeping forces from Lebanon. Hezbollah's chief of operations, Imad Mughniyah, played a big part in masterminding a series of attacks to meet this objective. In addition to suicide attacks against the U.S. embassy in Beirut, simultaneous truck bombings against the U.S. Marines and French barracks in Beirut, and a 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847, Hezbollah pulled off some 30 kidnappings of Western hostages.

Hezbollah's primary motive for building a portfolio of Western hostages was to get life insurance at a time when its more spectacular attacks, designed to drive Western forces from Lebanon, brought a real threat of retaliatory military action. Hezbollah learned well from the trouble the United States had in managing the 1979 hostage crisis with Iran and understood how sensitive the U.S. public was to hostage situations. Hostage-taking is a risky and elaborate operation, considering the operational security needed to locate a target, execute the kidnapping and house and care for the hostage in secrecy. But for Hezbollah and its patrons in Tehran and Damascus, it was a risk worth taking if it meant potential indemnity from retaliatory action as well as political concessions, such as prisoner exchanges.

Hezbollah often outsourced the kidnappings to local criminal groups who would receive a handsome sum for the snatches, particularly if a Westerner was caught. The main front group who claimed responsibility for the kidnappings and issued demands for the release of the hostages went by the name of Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO). By disguising their actions through IJO, Hezbollah obtained some level of plausible deniability in staving off retaliatory attacks.

The kidnappings of CIA Bureau Chief William Francis Buckley and Marine Colonel William Higgins (who were both killed) and American Associated Press bureau chief in Beirut Terry Anderson (who was held for seven years) were the more high-profile cases. However, dozens more cases in the 1980s involved Westerners, including American, French and British journalists; American University of Beirut employees; U.S. military personnel; Soviet diplomats; and American church envoys and ministers. The lengths of the hostages' captivities varied widely, and in most cases the victims were blindfolded, tortured and subjected to mock executions.

Now, sources in Lebanon report that Iran is prodding and perhaps directly ordering Hezbollah to kidnap Westerners in Lebanon. The group is allegedly creating shadowy organizations to carry out the kidnappings and attacks. With the help of Syria, who is facilitating the movement of Sunni jihadists into Lebanon, Hezbollah would likely use Sunni militant labels to disguise its actions. The most likely target set for such kidnappings would be soft targets such as students, professors, business people and travelers. Stratfor has also received information that militant attacks against U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon troops in the South could soon pick up steam.

It must be remembered, however, that while Hezbollah has clearly demonstrated the capability to carry out a high-intensity kidnapping spree in Lebanon, there are substantial political restraints on the organization now that did not exist in the 1980s. Hezbollah has evolved into a potent political force in Lebanon with a sizable Shiite constituency that is still feeling the effects of the summer 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. Hezbollah is sensitive to popular support in Lebanon and has painstakingly attempted to present itself as a nationalist resistance organization whose interests and actions are independent of the group's supporters in Tehran and Damascus. The group is internally focused on

the Lebanese political scene, particularly over the past year as it has struggled to increase its share of seats in the Lebanese Cabinet. The Hezbollah of today is simply not the Hezbollah of the 1980s, and it would take a major shift for the group to want to risk inviting foreign military intervention by returning to its operational model of hostage-taking.

The threat of hostage-taking, however, is another matter. Iran is engaged in an intense standoff with the United States over the fate of Iraq and the Iranian nuclear program. With U.S.-Iranian negotiations stuck in a rut, and with Washington refusing to budge on its position, Iran could be intentionally spreading these rumors through Hezbollah to pressure the United States into meeting its demands. Meanwhile, Syria is attempting to break out of diplomatic isolation and consolidate its influence in Lebanon while Hezbollah is struggling to force its demands on the Western-backed government of Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. While Iran and Syria are not exactly looking to derail the tenuous talks they have going with the United States, they are always looking for an additional lever to bolster their negotiating positions. For all three players — Iran, Syria and Hezbollah — the mere threat of making the situation uglier than it already is could serve some purpose.

Nonetheless, the threat of hostage-taking in Lebanon cannot be ruled out. At the very least, it appears that Hezbollah has the assets in place to source out such an operation. And with Mughniyah playing a stronger role in the organization's planning and training, more spectacular acts by Hezbollah can be expected. Westerners, specifically Americans, in Beirut should enhance their situational awareness and be on the lookout for pre-operational terrorist surveillance. STRATFOR

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