

Hizbullah upgrades operations in Iraq

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BAGHDAD — Hizbullah has increased military activities in Iraq at the behest of Iran, military officials said.

The officials said Hizbullah was playing a larger role in the Iranian-backed insurgency in Iraq. They said Hizbullah was training Shi'ite militias and smuggling powerful bombs into Iraq as part of Teheran's campaign to destabilize Iraq.

"In some cases, we are seeing Hizbullah take over operations that had been attributed to local militias, such as the Mahdi Army," an official said.

Iraqi and U.S.-led coalition forces have been tracking the expansion of Hizbullah in central and southern Iraq. On Oct. 7, the U.S. military announced the capture of a key Hizbullah operative in Kut, about 150 kilometers southeast of Baghdad.

"Acting on intelligence information, coalition forces targeted a suspected key member of the Kata'ib Hizbullah network assessed to be responsible for Iranian-supplied Explosive Formed Penetrators used against Iraqi and coalition forces," the military said in a statement.

The military said Hizbullah was a proxy of Iran in Iraq. Officials said Hizbullah has responsible for attacks against Iraqi civilian and military targets over the last three months. On Oct. 7, Iraq's government center was rocked by two bombs during the visit of U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte.

Officials said Hizbullah was working with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Brigade for the recruitment, training and equipping of Shi'ite militias. They said Hizbullah operatives, fluent in Arabic, have replaced officers from IRGC's Quds Brigade.

The Hizbullah campaign was said to represent an Iranian effort to undermine the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki. Iran has expressed anger over the Iraqi government's agreement for a proposed strategic cooperation accord with the United States.

"The Iraqi people won't be deceived by propaganda and the psychological warfare launched by the U.S. and its allies to pressure the Iraqi government to approve the security deal," Iranian Deputy Chief of Staff Gen. Masoud Jazayeri said. "Undoubtedly, the Iraqi leaders are careful of any mischief in this regard and won't allow Iraqi history be stained with such a disgrace."

U.S. military commander in Iraq, Gen. Ray Odierno, said Iran was trying to undermine a strategic agreement between Iraq and the United States. In an interview with the Washington Post, Odierno said Iran has sought to bribe Iraqi parliamentarians to block the status-of-forces accord.

"Clearly, this is one they're having a full court press on to try to ensure there's never any bilateral agreement between the United States and Iraq," Odierno said. "What I worry about most is the assassination of candidates as people try to gain influence."

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