

## Hezbollah, an Imminent Danger

Contributed by OLIVIER GUITTA (Middle East Times)  
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CIA Director Michael Hayden said last week that al-Qaida was still the largest threat to the United States. He added, "If there is a major strike on this country, it will bear the fingerprints of al-Qaida."

But some analysts say that the focus should not go entirely on al-Qaida, stressing that the capabilities of the Shiite organization Hezbollah should not be underestimated.

Pre Sept. 11, 2001, Hezbollah was the organization believed to be responsible for the deaths of the largest number of Americans killed in terrorist attacks. Former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage called Hezbollah "the A-team of terrorists, while al-Qaida may actually be the B-team."

Today in a context of major tension with Iran regarding its nuclear program, Iraq and Lebanon, just to mention a few, intelligence analysts warn that the Hezbollah threat against the West should not be taken off the radar.

Hezbollah is believed to maintain a vast network of operatives across the world; from Europe to Africa to the Middle East, to Latin America and even North America.

In Africa, and in particular in the predominantly Sunni Maghreb, extremist Shiites are making inroads. The threat of potential Shiite terrorism is something Morocco knows something about, having dismantled earlier this year a large terrorist cell known as the Belliraj network. Members of this cell included a correspondent of the Hezbollah-run Al-Manar TV. According to intelligence sources they were planning terror attacks in Morocco.

Hezbollah has long had a presence in Latin America. It is believed to maintain a large base of operations in the tri-border area where Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina converge.

Following the assassination by Israel of its leader Abbas Moussawi, Hezbollah launched in 1992 and 1994 two terror attacks in Buenos Aires against the Israeli embassy, killing 29 people and the Jewish community center, killing 85.

Intelligence sources say that Hezbollah's activities in Latin America have expanded into Venezuela and other countries. In October 2006 homemade bombs were left in front of the U.S. embassy in Caracas. Police subsequently arrested a student in possession of Hezbollah material in Spanish.

Europe presents other possible targets. Counterterrorism officials, especially in Europe, are sometimes privately more concerned by Hezbollah than al-Qaida. Intelligence officials say that infiltrating the movement is almost impossible, mostly because of the lack of a large Shiite population on the continent, and when compared to Intel on Sunni terrorist groups, European law enforcement officials say they are almost blind.

Hezbollah has an impressive network in Europe with, according to intelligence officials, operatives in Belgium, Bosnia, Britain, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and Ukraine.

Germany is thought to have about 900 Hezbollah members and authorities fear it could become a target. A recent report issued by Germany's security services, says Hezbollah could launch damaging terrorist attacks in Germany, the UK and elsewhere in Europe. British authorities confirmed recently that Hezbollah sleeping cells disseminated throughout the UK are threatening to strike in case of attacks against Iran.

The Middle East remains the region where Hezbollah can inflict the most damage to the West. Being clearly in command in Lebanon, UNIFIL forces in southern Lebanon remains vulnerable to attacks.

Hezbollah's arsenal is impressive and includes some 40,000 rockets that have been supplied by Iran, Syria and Eastern European countries. These weapons could also end up in the hands of the insurgents in Iraq.

Finally, Hezbollah could also be a threat to the U.S. homeland. In February 2004, then-CIA Director George Tenet stated that Hezbollah had cultivated an extensive network of operatives on American soil and an "ongoing capability to launch terrorist attacks within the United States."

After its most successful operative, Imad Mughnieh, was assassinated in Damascus in February, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security warned state and local law enforcement agencies of a potential risk of Hezbollah's

revenge against targets in the United States.

Hezbollah's activity in the United States has so far been limited to major fund raising through business ventures, criminal activity (such as cigarette smuggling) and donations from supporters. Some experts think that Hezbollah would never dare attack the United States on its soil because it would endanger its huge fundraising operations. This, say others, might be wishful thinking. A confrontation with Iran could well change that.

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