

Times Online: Hezbollah Gaza Reply

Contributed by TimesOnline: Nicholas Blanford in Beirut
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Israel's bloody offensive in Gaza may be drawing to a close but there were growing fears last night that a new conflict may be looming with Hamas's ally in Lebanon, Hezbollah.

Nearly a year after suspected Israeli agents assassinated Imad Mughniyeh, the group's military commander, sources on both sides of the Israeli-Lebanese border predict renewed conflict. The Shia militant fighter, credited with transforming his troops into one of the world's most effective irregular armies, passed on to Hamas in Gaza some of the tactics that enabled Hezbollah to battle the Israeli army to a standstill in south Lebanon in 2006.

Hezbollah has vowed to avenge Mughniyeh's death in a car bomb blast in Damascus on February 13 and, with the first anniversary coming up, Israel fears an imminent attack.

The Israelis have reason to be concerned. Speaking two weeks ago, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader, said: "The Zionists will discover that the war they had in July was a walk in the park if we compare it to what we've prepared for every new aggression."

The Times has learnt that at least one attack was foiled in Azerbaijan weeks after Mughniyeh's assassination when Azeri Intelligence discovered a plot to blow up the Israeli Embassy there. Recently, intelligence sources say, Egypt broke up an alleged Hezbollah cell in the Sinai headed by a Lebanese citizen, Sami Shehab, which included Palestinians and was planning to attack Israeli targets.

There are concerns that Hezbollah, operating through its external security organisation, is planning further attacks on Israeli or Jewish targets outside Israel. Hezbollah's "1800 Unit" is said to be working on possible attacks inside Israel.

Hezbollah has avenged past Israeli assassinations of its leaders. In February 1992 Israeli helicopter gunships attacked the motorcade of Sheikh Abbas Mussawi, then Hezbollah leader, killing him along with his wife and five-year-old son. A month later the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires was blown up by a suicide car bomber in an attack allegedly planned by Mughniyeh himself.

"We will retaliate because the Sayyed made that promise," Abu Hassan, commander of a 25-man Hezbollah squad, told The Times, referring to Sheikh Nasrallah. "The Israelis have killed our leaders in the past but we have always grown stronger. Nothing can shake Hezbollah."

Analysts believe that the retaliation will be planned carefully and executed at a time of the group's choosing.

"This was never going to be a tit-for-tat immediate response but a strategic retaliation, one that will take time," said Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, a Lebanese expert on Hezbollah. Some expected a response during Israel's three-week assault on Gaza, which has killed at least 1,100 Palestinians. Hezbollah did put its forces on alert and some rockets were fired from south Lebanon by unknown militants but so far the response has been limited to street protests and rhetoric.

Nevertheless, the group said that it would seek revenge. "The account is known and it is a large one. Revenge is coming from us and from others," Nawaf Mussawi, in charge of Hezbollah's foreign relations, said.

Lebanon holds a general election in June when Hezbollah and its political allies are well placed to form the new parliamentary majority. The replacement of the current Western-backed Government with one dominated by Hezbollah's allies will relieve some of the pressure the group faces to dismantle its military wing. Triggering a fresh war with Israel for the sake of Hamas could however backfire at the polls.

One option open to Hezbollah is to help to rebuild Hamas. "The symbol of Hamas as a resistance is now far greater in the Arab world than before," said Mr Mussawi.

Ibrahim al-Amine, of Lebanon's Al-Akhbar newspaper and a confidant of Sheikh Nasrallah, wrote last week that up until his death Mughniyeh was obsessed with the idea of passing on Hezbollah's military secrets to Hamas.

Dozens of Palestinian fighters travelled to Lebanon, Syria and Iran for training, he wrote. Mughniyeh taught Hamas that communications was a strategic weapon. Hezbollah has installed a complex internal communications system, including a fibre-optic landline network, linking its military bases and command centres.

The military assistance to Hamas apparently continued after Mughniyeh's assassination. A European intelligence source told The Times that two Iranian teams, including communications and rocket specialists, were working with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza last summer.

Hamas reportedly has constructed a network of war bunkers in Gaza similar to those built by Hezbollah in south Lebanon before the 2006 war.

Hezbollah has built new lines of defence farther north, extending to its heartland in the northern Bekaa Valley. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of volunteers have been recruited.

Israeli officials say that Hezbollah has tripled the number of rockets in its arsenal since 2006. Hezbollah fighters have hinted that in the next war Shia militants could launch commando raids inside Israel.

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