

Hezbollah is Secretly Building Battle Positions

Contributed by Thomas Smith, editor of "The Tank"
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Exclusive to CRNews, reporting from Lebanon for the World Council for the Cedars Revolution and the International Lebanese Committee for the Implementation of UNSCR 1559 - this Blog Report.

Hezbollah is Secretly Building Battle Positions [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]JUBAL LUBNAN (east of Beirut) – I write this with some acceptance of risk (everything is a risk here). But it's something that must be published.

I know for a fact that Hezbollah is building defenses and fortifications from which they can launch attacks in the south (where I was two days ago), in the Bekaa Valley, and in Al Dahiye (the Hezbollah security square in Beirut, which we covertly entered and moved through twice during our photo-reconnaissance a few days ago). This is not hearsay: This is reality.

The construction (some of which I have seen with my own eyes) is being contracted through the Lebanese government with Wa'ad, a Hezbollah-owned company created – as both a front and a company based in Lebanon – from Jihad Al-Bina, an Iranian-based company on the U.S. terrorist-watchlist.

Wa'ad ("the promise") is 100-percent owned and operated by Hezbollah. And the company is reconstructing houses and commercial buildings, which were destroyed during the war in 2006. But the houses are being rebuilt – as they were – with secret interconnecting corridors linking the houses together in a link-by-link network of fighting positions. There are tunnels running beneath the houses linking them with other buildings and adjacent neighborhoods, as well as to huge underground command posts. And there are walls being constructed with concealed weapons-storage spaces.

Families living and working in those buildings are renting apartments away from the ongoing construction, and they are doing so on Hezbollah's dime.

Other tunnels (basically arms smuggling corridors), which were constructed before the war, run between Palestinian and Hezbollah-controlled areas in Lebanon to Syria.

Why is the Lebanese government permitting this? It's far too complicated to address here.

More to come.

10/01 08:00 AM

No One Trusts Anyone Here [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]JABAL LUBNAN (Mount Lebanon, just east of Beirut) – Having a cup of Starbucks this morning with my bodyguard and new friend Henry Daoud. He's teaching me (attempting to teach me is a better way to say it) Arabic and Aramaic while I'm pulling together my notes from the interview last evening with Paliamentarian Wael Bou Faour.

Speaking of which, I've learned from a very reliable source who was not with me last evening, that the security forces defending the Phoenicia are concerned because I was asking questions last night about security. My questions were very simple: Typical things – which would mean nothing to U.S. military and police forces – like the significance of specific unit emblems and uniform colors.

I asked the questions. Some security officials have since expressed fear (needlessly I might add) to other parties. Those parties have informed other parties who have informed me.

Nevertheless, I will continue asking questions.

No one trusts anyone here. 10/01 04:52 AM
Sunday, September 30, 2007
09/30 06:17 PM

Under Siege [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]BEIRUT (the Ain El-Mreysseh district) — Lebanon is one of the most crucial fronts — perhaps the most crucial in its strategic sphere — in the war on terror. Yet a majority of the current Lebanese parliament is under siege, literally.

The armed forces are still functioning: Lebanese soldiers — at the individual and small unit level — are as sharp, bright, courageous, and committed as any I have ever served with or observed. And I say this without any reservation whatsoever (I've also said this about Israeli Defense Force soldiers, because I've observed them at the small unit level in the past, and they too are superb soldiers. Which disheartens me somewhat when considering the fact that good men on either side of the fence are spring-loaded to destroy one another, 24/7.).

There are only 50,000 Lebanese soldiers (including the Lebanese Army, Navy, and Air Force), and as is the case with any nation's combined military forces, only a marginal percentage of Lebanon's soldiers actually carry rifles and kick-down doors. And the country has virtually no air force — no serviceable fixed-wing aircraft, no attack helicopters.

Worse, Lebanon is crawling with Syrian and Iranian-supported — and Al Qaeda-affiliated — terrorists. Most are operating covertly. Many are actually in the streets, controlling sectors (where the legitimate army and police do not enter) and they are armed.

As I mentioned a few days ago, a Hezbollah militia camp has been set up between the Lebanese Parliament and the Serail. And more than 50 pro-Cedar Revolution parliamentarians (there are 68 pro-Cedar members of parliament, a majority of the country's total 127 MPs), struggling to elect a president, are holed up in the Hotel Intercontinental Phoenicia in Beirut's Ain El-Mreysseh district less than one mile from the HezB tent city. This doesn't include those parliamentarians elsewhere under very heavy security.

The MPs know they are under threat of death. Their cell-phone calls are being monitored and the signals tracked. It's believed MP Antoine Ghanem, who was killed less than two weeks ago (I've actually seen what's left of his blown-up car) was tracked by his cell-phone signal.

The Hotel Phoenicia is surrounded by internal security force counterterrorism commandos and Army special forces armed with assault rifles and submachineguns, and supported by armored vehicles with light and heavy machineguns.

Earlier this evening — after going through multiple layers of security (I was searched six times. My camera bag was x-rayed three times and thoroughly searched four.) — I met with pro-Cedar MP Wael Bou Faour in a small room in the Phoenicia where we chatted one-on-one about his country's inability to elect a president and who's to blame. Also present were three security men: his two and my one.

During our conversation — the subject of another piece that will appear in NRO — Bou Faour blamed the recent assassinations and the threat of more killings on Syria. “If you are [Syrian President] Bashar Assad, you kill just as easily as if you were giving someone a raise in their salary.”

Much more to come.09/30 03:24 PM
Saturday, September 29, 2007

On the Lebanese-Israeli Border [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]MAROUN AL RASS — Today, standing atop a windswept Lebanese Army outpost overlooking the border between Lebanon and Israel, I watched — through a pair of binoculars — two Israeli Defense Force Humvees racing west along the border road.

I was touring the Lebanese defenses at Maroun Al Rass with General Rafic Hammoud, commanding general of the 11th Brigade (nine companies of light mechanized infantry). Hammoud and his officers tell me there have been no IDF probes or border crossings here on the “blue line.” But as Col. Kheir Freiji, the 11th Brigade's intelligence officer tells me, “Israeli Air Force [jets] penetrate our airspace almost everyday, and sometimes all the way up to Beirut.”

Another intelligence officer, Major Fawzi Chamoun says, they are flying up to and across the border into Lebanon “every day, every night.”

Gen. Hammoud adds, he would shoot them down if he had adequate anti-aircraft systems.

Earlier this morning — before two soldiers drove me from Beirut to Maroun al Rass — I met with Lt. Col. Edmund Homsy, the senior intelligence liaison between Lebanon's military intelligence services and other foreign intelligence agencies worldwide.

I met Homsy for about an hour in his office at the Directorate of Intelligence 'Strategic Branch' at the Ministry of Defense. The Directorate of Intelligence, by the way, is Lebanon's highest-level intelligence service, responsible for foreign intelligence and matters of internal security. The Directorate also has a counterterrorism and espionage branch, as well as a "strike force," as he says.

We discussed several sensitive points for clarification regarding my previous day's meeting with Gen. Sleiman. And this will be detailed in forthcoming NRO pieces.

Prior to leaving Homs's office, he told me I was the first American journalist in the history of Lebanon to enter the Directorate headquarters, and he presented me with a small, gold Lebanese military shield.

In the afternoon, driving along the coast road to south Lebanon with my two soldier-friends (one armed with a folding stock AK-47 and 75 rounds of ammunition), I passed through numerous towns and villages — many flying the fist-and-rifle flags of Hezbollah and the colors of Amal — and one Palestinian refugee camp. Also, lots of huge billboards and posters of Hassan Nasrallah, the Ayatollah Khomeini, the faces of Hezbollah “martyrs,” and banners with phrases like ‐ translated to me ‐ “Israel is the only enemy” and “We will never forget the Hezbollah martyrs.”

The truly nuttiest, most contradictory thing I saw was a military surplus store, deep in Hezbollah country, called “Delta Force.”09/29 04:00 PM

Hezbollah's 'Show of Force' [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]BEIRUT ‐ Hezbollah is rehearsing for something big here. Not sure what or when. But a few days ago, between 4,000 and 5,000 HezB gunmen deployed to the Christian areas of Beirut in an unsettling “show of force,” positioning themselves at road intersections and other key points throughout the city. Two additional objectives were achieved: First, the operation served as a probing action to determine local reaction. Second, it served as an exercise to gauge the time required (speed, synchronization, etc.) to achieve the key points and intersections.

Amazingly, there was no response from the police or the army.

HezB is also jamming cell-phone signals almost daily. Their lookouts are everywhere, at least from my vantage point, because they are watching the people I'm with and me.

HezB is also far better armed, equipped, and tactically proficient than most Americans might realize. They are terrorists to be sure: But they are also a very strong Iranian-trained guerrilla force here in Lebanon, and they seem to be getting a pass from far too many people in high places.

Last night, an anti-Hezbollah “weapons expert” said to me, smiling, “Lebanon needs about 25,000 U.S. Marines.”

This morning, I'm returning to the Lebanese Defense Ministry for a second meeting with General Sleiman. 09/29 02:34 AM

Friday, September 28, 2007

With the Commander of All Lebanese Armed Forces [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]BEIRUT (The Ministry of Defense) ‐ This morning, I spent two hours in a closed-door one-on-one interview with General Michel Sleiman, the commander-in-chief of all the Lebanese Armed Forces, which includes the army, navy, air force, and special operations forces.

Sipping Turkish coffee with Sleiman and one of his aides (a colonel with the Directorate of Intelligence), I asked the general questions ranging from Iranian soldiers training Hezbollah in Lebanon to the recent counterterrorism operation at Nahr al-Bared, all of which will be discussed in a forthcoming piece here at NRO.

At one point during our conversation, Sleiman shared with me a discussion he had with some of his officers on the first day of the fighting at Nahr al-Bared: One of his commanders expressed concern that the estimated number of soldiers killed in action ‐ 250-300 “martyrs” as he called them ‐ might be too great if the Lebanese Army attacked in great strength. Sleiman responded, “We are an army of 50,000 soldiers. If we lose 1,000, we will remain 49,000. But if we don't attack, we will not be an army and we will not be soldiers.”

In the end, Sleiman lost 167 men.

Much more to come.09/28 09:24 AM

Iranian Soldiers in Lebanon [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]BEIRUT ‐ Relaxing tonight with two bodyguards at a safe house on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean. Tomorrow I will meet one-on-one with senior commanders from the Lebanese Army.

Earlier, as we were leaving the 1559 Committee offices, Toni pointed out two Hezbollah lookouts positioned nearby. One was a young man on a scooter. After five minutes of watching us (as we waited for one of the security men to bring Toni's car around to the front of the building), the lookout left. Another driving a small hatchback took up the scooter-man's position, watched us, made a cell-phone call and waited for us to leave before he left.

One of the Committee leaders — whose name I prefer not to disclose (because his family doesn't know) — received a telephoned death threat a few hours earlier. “You don't have much time,” the voice on the line said. These threats I've learned are frequent, as are the Hezbollah lookouts and cars 'tailing' cars out on the roads.

As you may know, the greatest concentration of Hezbollah ("Party of God") fighters worldwide is here in Lebanon. Hezbollah is also outfitted and trained by Iran.

Here are some facts:

Between 2,000 and 3,000 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (Pasdaran) are currently in Lebanon. Here, these Iranian soldiers are supporting Lebanese Hezbollah fighters — actual numbers are unknown — with weapons, military equipment, and cash. They are also training them in camps (at least five such camps in the Bekaa Valley and two or three in southern Lebanon) in a variety of infantry/commando operations and terror-bombing techniques.

The closest of these camps in the Bekaa Valley is about 30 miles from here.

Currently, there are approximately 2,000 Hezbollah fighters under arms in Lebanon. Another 25,000 are capable of being mobilized.

Some of these newly trained Lebanese Hezbollah fighters are being sent to Iraq, crossing Syria to enter that country.

This does not include the approximately 10 Palestinian refugee camps (located throughout the country) which have been inhabited for six decades by Palestinians now numbering in the tens-of-thousands. Also inside those camps — essentially hiding behind the civilian populations — are various terrorist cells.

One of the best-known is Fatah Al Islam, the Al Qaeda affiliate that was recently defeated by the Lebanese Army north of here at the Palestinian refugee camp, Nahr al-Bared. Our friend Walid Phares, who incidentally is one of the senior leaders of the Cedars Revolution (certainly a founder), detailed much of this in previous analysis here at “The Tank.”

I plan to be reporting from Nahr al-Bared within a few days.09/28 02:32 AM

My Bodyguards and House Resolution 548 [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]BEIRUT (an undisclosed neighborhood) – Lebanon is extremely dangerous for Americans right now. In fact, some top officials within the 1559 Committee (essentially the heart and soul of the Cedars Revolution ... for a free Lebanon) believe some sort of dramatic terrorist event is going to take place here in Lebanon between now and mid-October. This is not a gut feeling, but a calculation based on intelligence analysis and chatter from the street.

Tony Nissi, the 1559 Committee chief here in Beirut (whom you'll recall from previous entries), has reason to believe Hezbollah knows who I am. So I am deliberately not staying in hotels: Instead, I'm spending nights in friends' houses — safe houses if you will — and always with bodyguards.

Last night, I stayed in a beautiful home situated on one of the many hills above the city. Henry Daoud, a 42-year-old former Lebanese infantry soldier with quite a bit of combat experience and who trained for several months with U.S. Army Special Forces, was with me all the time. I slept in one of the bedrooms. Henry was up all night in the living room near the front and back doors.

Whenever I am on the road, it's usually with Cedric Achkar driving. I'm sitting in the front passenger seat. Henry is in the back.

You'll remember Cedric: He's the affable 25-year-old — also a black belt in taekwondo — who Toni considers to be his right arm. Henry is Toni's left.

I've bonded easily with these guys (you learn to trust or distrust quickly in this part of the world). We're always exchanging war stories, laughing and joking, and talking about how beautiful the Lebanese women are: And they truly are. Cedric and Henry also are teaching me a lot about Lebanon — more in two days than a student might get in one semester — about its religious diversity and its history stretching back to the Phoenicians.

On another note: There is quite a bit of excitement here regarding the U.S. House's passing of H.R. 548. In summary: Condemns: (1) the attempts by Hezbollah and other pro-Syrian groups to undermine the government of Lebanon; (2) the assassination campaign targeting members of parliament and public figures in favor of Lebanese independence; and (3) Syria and Iran for their ongoing roles in arming Lebanese militias. Confirms U.S. support for U.N. Security Council resolutions concerning Lebanon, and the clear and binding mandate of the international community for the arms embargo and disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon. Expresses appreciation to the countries whose military

personnel serve in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). Urges the government of Lebanon to request UNIFIL's assistance to secure the Lebanese-Syrian border. Affirms U.S. support for efforts to bring to justice those responsible for the terrorist bombing of February 14, 2005, and both prior and subsequent politically inspired assassinations. Pledges continued support for the government of Lebanon and the Lebanese people against the campaign of terror directed at the Lebanese people and at political and public figures opposing Syrian interference in Lebanon. Commends the many Lebanese who continue to adhere to the principles of the Cedar Revolution. Applauds the government of Lebanon's efforts to fully extend Lebanon's sovereignty over the entire country.

On the first and last pages of H.R. 548, the resolution recognizes the Cedars Revolution by name, and says:

Resolved, That the House of Representatives commends the many Lebanese who continue to adhere steadfastly to the principles of the Cedar[s] Revolution and support the democratically elected and legitimate government of Lebanon.

In a few hours I'm leaving on another intelligence-gathering mission.

Much more to come, and we're only beginning.

09/27 06:28 AM

Wednesday, September 26, 2007

A Reconnaissance in Al Dahiyeh [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]BEIRUT (the Al Dekwaneh and Al Dahiyeh districts) – Like Iraq, Lebanon is a country at war . . . and a huge front in the global war on terror. Though not nearly as kinetic in terms of high-intensity combat, it is embroiled in a complex set of interrelated conflicts from key-leader assassinations and other acts of terror to intelligence collection and counterintelligence operations.

The enemy is Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and any number of other terrorist groups and state sponsors of terrorism with a footprint in Lebanon, all hoping to wrest control of the government from the legitimate electors of that government: the Lebanese people.

I've been observing and operating with the good guys: those working toward a free and independent Lebanon.

My covering the work of the Lebanese Army, originally slated for today, has moved to a few days from now. In the meantime, I'm in the field with a few Lebanese counterterrorism experts and operators.

UPDATE: Before posting this entry, I emailed Kathryn informing her I could not discuss any of the details of a mission I was involved in today. But I just received clearance to discuss “briefly” one of our intelligence-collection operations.

It was a basic photo-reconnaissance where we observed, listed particulars, and shot photographs of Hezbollah militiamen and the general infrastructure in the Al Dahiyeh district of southern Beirut. There, Hezbollah controls a “security square” (where no Lebanese soldiers or policemen dare enter), basically a multiple-block square of high-rises in a mixed commercial-residential sector with very high population density. We entered in a thin-skinned SUV armed with only a couple of pistols, a Canon Rebel, and a couple of notebooks. Earlier I mentioned the Hezbollah tent city near the government district. That was something altogether different. In the Dahiyeh district, I observed Lebanese militiamen dressed in khaki uniforms and armed with AK-47s. Buildings in Dahiyeh — particularly the Hezbollah General Assembly building destroyed by the Israeli Air Force during the 2006 war – were being rebuilt (that money is coming from somewhere). Lookouts with walkie-talkies manned street corners, as did roving patrols of young men on scooters.

No Lebanese police or other legitimate authorities were in the area: just Hezbollah fighters on the streets, and a few on rooftops.

We drove through the district taking one route, safely exited. Then regrouped and moved back in along another.

At one point we were blocked in traffic on a very narrow side street: not a comfortable position to be in — particularly without armored protection — but we continued photographing and taking notes.

In fact, I was so close to groups of armed and uniformed Hezbollah men I could have hit any one of them in the head with a softball. And, in all the traffic, they never knew I was there.

09/26 03:02 PM

Face-to-Face with Hezbollah [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]BEIRUT (The Christian Sector) — Last night, following a briefing by Toni Nissi, who runs the 1559 Committee here in Beirut and is one of the founders of the Cedars Revolution; he, team members Carol Sokhen and Alexi Capucci, and I, left the offices and drove through the streets of the city.

Soldiers were everywhere. Carol was a bit nervous – responsibly cautious might be a better description –

because Toni had been watched leaving his office and then followed by Hezbollah men only a few days earlier. And it has been less than a week since parliamentarian Antoine Ghanem was killed on the same route.

All I could think about was how easily the passenger-side door closed, reminding me that we were tooling around the Lebanese capital in a thin-skinned, unarmored SUV.

Toni knows his life is in danger. But as he says, "What are you going to do?"

I slept at Carol's house. The committee's chief researcher, Carol lives in a charming flat in the Christian section of Beirut. French doors to my room opened to a six-story terrace overlooking other residence buildings — spruced up with lovely hanging plants and flowers — all pock-marked with bullet holes and shrapnel scars from previous fighting. Down below on the street was a Lebanese soldier slowly passing through the yellowish glow of a street light. A foreboding-looking solid black figure at first: as he moved through the light, I could see his camouflaged army uniform, green beret, and folding stock AK-47. I slept with the doors open, watching the clouds and listening to the street noise — screeching cars, a few scooters, and a barking dog — for a few minutes before drifting off.

Today, back on the road with Cedric Achkar, special assistant to the general coordinator (basically Toni's right arm). Cedric is only 25-years-old, but well-respected, educated (a couple of engineering degrees), always with a solution (never a problem), and bears the jaw scars of a Kalashnikov rifle-butt. We drove all over Beirut this morning, passing near the Hezbollah camp and literally a few feet from several Hezbollah militiamen who gave us the hard stare.

Hezbollah are not the only terrorists operating here in Lebanon: There are also Al Qaeda affiliates like Fatah Al Islam (they were not totally wiped out at Nahr al Bared), as well as Jund al Sham (Soldiers of Damascus), Jundallah, Hamas, and — though few Americans are aware of this — operating elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps on the Lebanese side of the Lebanese-Syrian border. These are just a few of the problem groups here: All operating under the auspices of Hezbollah.

In a few hours, I'm slated to meet with several senior Lebanese military commanders, and will go with them into the field.09/26 04:48 AM

Reporting from Lebanon [W. Thomas Smith Jr.]ON THE GROUND IN BEIRUT — Arrived here less than two hours ago (after 25-hours of travel and layovers). Now relaxing here in the Al Dekwaneh neighborhood-offices of the International Lebanese Committee for UN SCR 1559 (more on that later).

Between the airport and the committee's office, we (my escorts and I) passed by the sprawling Hezbollah tent city — some 200-plus heavily armed Hezbollah militiamen — positioned between the parliament and the Serail, basically the headquarters of the prime minister, his deputies, and all the cabinet members. Of course, today's presidential elections were thwarted — postponed until November — a result of recent assassinations and threats of assassination, as well as the fact that the assembled deputies failed to meet the required number to hold the election proceedings.

Beyond the Hezbollah camp, Lebanese soldiers can be seen guarding all major roads and intersections. Time for food, sleep. More to come.

09/25 09:59 AM