

# Hezbollah Expands in North Lebanon, Away From UN Peacekeepers

Contributed by Bloomberg  
Tuesday, 30 October 2007

By Daniel Williams

Oct. 30 (Bloomberg) -- Gunshots echo from nearby valleys as a convoy of black sedans and SUVs carrying bearded men sweeps through the mountains north of Lebanon's Litani River. A sign on a road warns: "Entry to This Area Forbidden. Hezbollah."

The Lebanese Shiite movement, designated a terrorist group by the U.S., is expanding its reach north in the country by buying land to build villages and military camps, Lebanese government and Hezbollah officials say in interviews. The new land marks a new frontier for the group, whose military wing waged war with Israel for 33 days in the summer of 2006.

The Litani was once the informal boundary for Hezbollah-dominated territory in the south, next to Israel. By purchasing real estate, constructing villages and setting up hidden military zones in the mountains north of the river, Hezbollah is able to avoid the attention of 14,000 United Nations peacekeepers, who are stationed only south of the river and whose job it is to prevent Hezbollah rearming.

Government officials say Hezbollah is establishing a fortified defensive line along the Litani's north bank toward the Bekaa Valley, in eastern Lebanon. The Bekaa is a supply area for the militia and gateway for potential arms transfers from Syria.

"This is a new military infrastructure north of the Litani," Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh said in an interview. "They are controlling millions of square meters in strategic spots to link south Lebanon with the Bekaa. This is the geography of their expansion spree."

## Inevitability

In Lebanon and Israel, belief in the inevitability of another war is strong, possibly as part of a wider conflict involving the U.S. against Syria and Iran, backers of Hezbollah.

Hezbollah argues that its militia, which operates outside of Lebanese government control, is a necessary deterrent to an Israeli invasion. The group's military wing is a flashpoint in its dispute with Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, who is backed by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Siniora wants Hezbollah to comply with UN Security Council resolutions that require it to disarm.

"Why should we carry out American policy and disarm?" asked Hussein Haj Hassan, a Hezbollah member of parliament. "We are defending our country. The government does not."

## Hezbollah Recruits

Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General Naim Qasim, in an interview published last month in the London-based newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat, gave an account of war preparations and said the group was training Lebanese youth "flocking to its ranks."

The mountains north of the Litani are familiar turf for Hezbollah. In 1999, it used ambushes and roadside bombs to drive out a Christian Lebanese militia in the region that was armed by Israel. A year later, Israeli troops withdrew from Lebanon, ending an 18-year occupation of the border strip south of the Litani.

The land north of the river, long dotted by Christian and Druze villages, is largely pine and bush. Some residents are willing to sell off to Hezbollah buyers, said Youssef Modawar, a municipal official in Jezzine, a Christian town north of the new Hezbollah zone. "The land is poor. There's not much to do with it but sell it," Modawar said in an interview.

## Settlements

Land has been purchased near the villages of Rayhan and al-Qatraneh for settlements, Modawar said. Haj Hassan, the Hezbollah member of parliament, said the purchases are designed to accommodate "natural growth" of Lebanon's Shiite

population and buttress ``resistance" against Israel.

``In Lebanon, it is legal for anyone to buy land anywhere," Haj Hassan said.

A Shiite businessman named Ali Tajiddine has purchased properties, Haj Hassan said. In a telephone interview, Tajiddine said the purchases were just part of his business dealings and declined further comment.

Travelers on the road south from Jezzine quickly attract attention from Lebanese security forces. At a checkpoint near Kfar Houna, Lebanese soldiers forbid foreigners from proceeding because of ``security." Side roads lead to a new highway near Rayhan. A banner, common to construction projects in Lebanon's deep south reads, ``The Iranian Organization for Sharing in the Building of Lebanon."

#### Secret Phone Lines

In August, Telecommunications Minister Hamadeh announced discovery of a secret Hezbollah underground telephone network that stretched from near Nabatiyeh, south of the Litani, to the Bekaa Valley, and another snaking from the coastal city of Tyre inland.

During an interview at his Beirut home, Hamadeh unfurled a Beirut city map showing locations of more unauthorized phone lines from the southern suburbs, a Hezbollah stronghold, to the downtown. ``All this is worrying. Why do they need these parallel structures?" he asked. ``It's a violation of Lebanese sovereignty."

Hezbollah lawmaker Haj Hassan declined to comment on the telephone lines.

Oussama Safa, an analyst at Beirut's Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, said Hezbollah feels entitled to act on its own as a bulwark against Israel. ``What results are Hezbollah fiefdoms outside the law," he said in an interview.

To contact the reporter on this story: Daniel Williams in Beirut at [dwilliams41@bloomberg.net](mailto:dwilliams41@bloomberg.net) .

Last Updated: October 29, 2007 18:00 EDT

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