

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1184
August 2, 2006

Israel Should Confront the Forces Behind Hezbollah

By Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.

On July 26, 2006, The Heritage Foundation hosted Patrick Clawson, Aaron Mannes, and Daniel Pipes to discuss the current Israel–Hezbollah conflict. Heritage’s Ariel Cohen chaired the event. The panel analyzed Hezbollah’s national and transnational status, Iran’s involvement in the fighting, and Israel’s strategic challenge in confronting its most powerful Arab enemy. This paper summarizes the panelists’ discussion.

Hezbollah was founded in 1982 by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and elements of Iranian intelligence to fight the U.S. and Israel. Over the past 25 years, it has remained a wholly owned subsidiary of Iran.

Two factors are the keys to Hezbollah’s rise: killing its rivals and Iranian support. After murdering hundreds of U.S. and French peacekeepers in 1983, Hezbollah targeted domestic opponents and decimated Amal, its rival for power in Shi’a Lebanon.

Hezbollah also built an elaborate network of businesses, such as banks, gas stations, four radio stations, and a satellite TV channel, al-Manar. It established schools, hospitals, welfare offices, businesses, and tax agencies throughout Lebanon. Above all, however, the group remains a terrorist organization. Its unremitting guerilla campaign against Israel, despite the presence of UN peacekeepers, gave hope to rejectionist elements throughout the Middle East—and especially Iran and Syria—that there is a military solution to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Israel’s 2000 withdrawal from

its security zone in southern Lebanon gave Hezbollah an unprecedented prize: a perceived Arab military victory over Israel. Overnight, the Party of God became a hero of the region, and today it is the best-trained and best-equipped non-state military organization in the Middle East.

Hezbollah’s two primary political patrons are Syria and Iran. Tehran supplies the majority of military hardware: surface-to-surface missiles, including highly portable Katyusha rockets that are used to terrorize northern Israel and longer-range and heavier Zelzal missiles that can strike south of Haifa; anti-ship missiles; sophisticated surveillance equipment; anti-tank and anti-personnel weapons; and large supplies of ammunition and explosives. Iran also provides financial assistance of up to \$300 million a year, as well as military and terrorist training and expertise. Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards train Hezbollah soldiers in Lebanon’s Beqaa valley, adjacent to the Lebanese–Syrian border, where most of Tehran’s materiel is stationed.

The Islamic Republic’s support for Hezbollah is based on several factors. Hezbollah is radically Shi’a Islamist, as is Iran. Hezbollah lets Iran stay involved

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/wm1184.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

in the war against Israel at a low cost and helps distract the world from its nuclear program. Hezbollah sponsorship is raising Iran's prestige in the Middle East and the Muslim world. In Lebanon, like in Iraq, Iran can continue to expand its vision of militant anti-Western theocracy while confronting the American democratic makeover of the Middle East.

Israel views Hezbollah as a strategic threat and has been fighting it for decades. Hezbollah presents a different challenge to the Jewish State than do Palestinian terrorists like the Fatah-affiliated al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades or Iranian-supported Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Unlike Gaza and the West Bank, Lebanon is a sovereign country with significant international sympathy due to its 1975–1990 civil war and a recent democratic election. Islamist radicals on the Lebanese border elicit a different world reaction than do suicide bombers on Israeli buses, in supermarkets, or at nightclubs. Whatever outrages it commits, Hezbollah is still fighting in Lebanon and still looks to many, especially in the Middle East, like an Islamist “resistance” group. Israel had less room to maneuver than in Gaza and the West Bank, and thanks to open borders and plentiful supplies, its enemy there had more.

Palestinian Islamist groups, such as Hamas and PIJ, are benefiting from Hezbollah's assistance. Their tactics are evolving, and their expertise is growing. For example, in a recent attack on a Gaza patrol, a Merkava tank was destroyed by a giant improvised explosive device and Gilad Shalit, an Israeli recruit, was kidnapped—typical Hezbollah tactic.

Because Israel controls access to Gaza and the West Bank, it can limit somewhat Hezbollah's contact with the Palestinians. But it cannot stop the glorification of Hezbollah activities in Lebanon. And it cannot continue to limit its engagement of Hezbollah on the northern border without bur-nishing the organization's image in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

According to Daniel Pipes, Israel should reinstitute its decades-old policy of laying the blame—and responsibility—for terrorist attacks at their sponsors' feet. Israel should tell Syria that it will be held responsible for further terrorist acts. Damascus, not Beirut, should suffer the consequences. When threatened by Israel, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, King Hussein of Jordan, and Hafez Assad of Syria all acted to rein in Palestinian terrorists operating from their territories. Israel should put current Syrian president Bashar Assad in the same position.

The panelists agreed that the United States should not stop Israel's war of self-defense until its strategic objectives are met. These include Hezbollah's disarmament, the cessation of missiles attacks on Israel, and the return of the two Israeli servicemen captured by Hezbollah.

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security at the Sarah and Douglas Allison Center of the Davis Institute for International Studies at the Heritage Foundation.