

# Hezbollah's Man in Egypt

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## Abstract

In November 2008, Egyptian authorities broke up what they said was a Hezbollah network plotting attacks in Egypt. While some of the charges appear to have been exaggerated, and it is clear that not all those arrested were in fact Hezbollah operatives, a careful examination reveals that a Hezbollah network was, in fact, operating on Egyptian soil. That it was originally tasked with carrying out neither surveillance nor attacks makes the case all the more intriguing, especially when compared with other cells that faced similar reassignments. As a case study, the Hezbollah network—which demonstrated the use of several known Hezbollah modus operandi—underscores how Hezbollah operates around the world in general, and in the Middle East in particular.

## Introduction

In December 2013, Egypt's public prosecutor filed new charges against former President Mohammed Morsi and other Islamists, including divulging military secrets to a foreign power and conspiring with Hamas and Hezbollah to carry out terrorist attacks in Egypt<sup>(1)</sup>. The original charges also involved Hamas and Hezbollah, in particular allegations that the two militant groups helped thousands of prisoners escape from Egyptian jails in the chaotic first few days of the revolt that toppled the Mubarak regime<sup>(2)</sup>. While claims that Hamas and Hezbollah plotted attacks in Egypt are being received skeptically—and with good reason, given Cairo's recent crackdown on anyone seen as sympathetic to Islamists,

(1) "Morsi Trial Over Egypt Jailbreak Set for Jan 28," AFP, January 2, 2014, <http://news.yahoo.com/morsi-trial-over-egypt-jailbreak-set-january-28112127950.html> .

(2) Maggie Michael, "Egypt: Puppet Ad Draws Terror Accusations," AP, January 1, 2014, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2014/3/8/47562/01/01//egypt-puppet-ad-draws-terror-accusations.html> .

including puppets<sup>(1)</sup>—Hezbollah and Hamas prisoners did escape from Egyptian jails during the revolt. Whether they sought to free other prisoners as well remains to be established, but the history of the Hezbollah network that operated in Egypt from 2005 to late 2008 is a matter of fact, and a telling example of how Hezbollah networks operate in the Middle East and elsewhere beyond Lebanon's borders.

While Hezbollah purports to be a strictly Lebanese "resistance" organisation, it has a significant track record of carrying out operations outside Lebanon, in locations as far afield as Argentina and Thailand. In 1994, it bombed a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, killing 85 people and wounding some 150 more<sup>(2)</sup>. In Bangkok that same year, a plot to bomb the Israeli embassy was foiled by sheer luck<sup>(3)</sup>. Closer to home, Hezbollah also established relationships with militant Palestinian groups. Although fundamentally a Shia outfit, cooperation with Sunni Palestinians against the "Zionist occupiers" lent the organisation additional legitimacy, and won it broad support across the Arab world.

Hezbollah's mentor Iran also encouraged these Palestinian contacts. Typically acting through its Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in particular the elite Qods Force wing, Iran has wielded a commanding influence over Hezbollah since it first sent IRGC officers to help found the Shia group in the early 1980s.

As a rule, the IRGC is responsible for overseeing all of Iran's terrorist activity and supervising its proxies. In the early to mid-1990s, with the Oslo peace accords signed and Palestinian autonomy slowly growing in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, opponents of peace funded, supported, and executed terrorist attacks to undermine the prospects for peace. Iran was especially active in promoting terrorism targeting Israel at this time. According to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, "in February 1999, it was reported that Palestinian police had discovered documents that attest to the transfer of \$35 million to Hamas from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), money reportedly meant to finance terrorist activities against Israeli targets"<sup>(4)</sup>

(1) Buenos Aires, Argentina Investigations Unit of the Office of the Attorney General, Office of Criminal Investigations: AMIA Case, report by Marcelo Martinez Burgos and Alberto Nisman, October 25, 2006, 20, 378.

(2) Buenos Aires, Argentina Investigations Unit of the Office of the Attorney General, Office of Criminal Investigations: AMIA Case, report by Marcelo Martinez

(3) Burgos and Alberto Nisman, October 25, 2006.

(4) Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), "Terrorist Group Profiler: Hamas," June 2002. See also Stewart Bell, "Hamas May Have Chemical Weapons: CSIS Report Says Terror Group May be Experimenting," National

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.Iran's primary proxy group, however, has always been Hezbollah. It should therefore not be surprising that Hezbollah increased its support for Palestinian groups in the 1990s, invested in its own terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank, and went to great lengths to infiltrate operatives into Israel to collect intelligence and execute terror attacks. Hezbollah established a dedicated unit to pursue these goals – Unit 1800.

Beginning in 1995, a select group of operational leaders within Hezbollah's military wing, the Islamic Jihad Organisation (IJO), developed plans to penetrate Israel's defenses. Unit 1800 successfully infiltrated at least five Hezbollah operatives into Israel between 1996 and 2001, though none were able to carry out attacks. For its part, Iran sought to intensify and coordinate the terrorist operations of the various Palestinian groups

it supported through Hezbollah. According to US officials, shortly after Palestinian violence erupted in September 2000, Iran assigned Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's terrorist mastermind, to bolster the operational capacity of Palestinian militant groups, specifically Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Mughniyeh also tasked his European networks with providing clandestine support for operatives who would use Europe as a launch pad for infiltrating operatives into Israel<sup>(1)</sup>.

Other aspirations of Unit 1800 include kidnapping Israelis and recruiting Israeli Arabs, both of which have seen some degree of success. In 2000, one of Mughniyeh's key Unit 1800 deputies pulled off the abduction of a retired Israel Defense Forces colonel. It proved to be an intelligence bonanza for Hezbollah, and ultimately enabled them to secure the release of more than 400 prisoners from Israeli jails. There are also several known examples of Israeli Arabs working for Hezbollah, some of whom were arrested by Israeli security forces, but recruitment efforts continue to this day<sup>(2)</sup>. Finally, as part of its support to Palestinian groups, Hezbollah has found the minimally governed territory of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula to be quite useful for smuggling operations across its border with the Gaza Strip, as well as for preparations for various plots.

## Hezbollah's "Egypt File"

Sometime in 2005, a Hezbollah operative named Muhammad Yousef Mansour

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Post (Canada), December 10, 2003.

(1) Israeli intelligence report, "Hezbollah's International Terrorism and the Penetration of Hezbollah Activists into Israel," undated, author's personal files, received August 5, 2003.

(2) Ali Waked, "Tennenbaum's Kidnapper Recruiting for Hezbollah," Ynetnews, August 26, 2010.

traveled to Egypt on a Lebanese passport bearing the fictitious, Sunni sounding name, Sami Hani Shihab. In fact, Shihab was the name of a Sunni family from Beirut whose son, Sami, tragically died as an infant<sup>(1)</sup>. Mansour was in charge of Hezbollah's "Egypt file," part of a larger Hezbollah file involving the "Ring Countries" surrounding Israel such as Egypt, Jordan, and Syria<sup>(2)</sup>. Their shared borders with Israel made them obvious territories from which to conduct and support operations. In Egypt, Mansour worked closely with another senior Hezbollah operative, Mohammed Qabalan, to build a Hezbollah support network in Egypt. Qabalan, a senior operative within Unit 1800, focused on these ring countries and had considerable knowledge of Egypt—where he had visited in the past—and the Sinai Peninsula<sup>(3)</sup>. The men's mission appears to have broadened over time, but it started out as an operation focused on smuggling weapons and funds through Egypt to Hamas and other Palestinian groups in Gaza. This "Egypt Branch" was also to help oversee the training of Palestinian militants and the facilitating of terrorist attacks targeting Israel<sup>(4)</sup>.

Then, following the February 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah personally vowed retribution against the Israelis, whom he accused of carrying out the killing<sup>(5)</sup>.

In Egypt, some members of the Hezbollah network—by then comprising several dozen operatives, a few Lebanese Hezbollah operatives and many more local criminal facilitators and smugglers—began plotting a variety of terrorist attacks. Some were

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(1) "Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt," ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009, p. 7. [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf) .

(2) "Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt," ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009, p. 3. [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf)

(3) "Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt," ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009, p. 3. [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf);

(4) Patrick Galey and Agence France Presse, "Hezbollah Man Escapes Egypt Jail," Daily Star, February 4, 2011. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/2011/Feb-0461021-/hezbollah-man-escapes-egypt-jail.ashx>; "Egypt Exposes a Hezbollah Network on its Soil," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israeli Intelligence and Heritage & Commemoration Center, April 13, 2009. [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/html/hezbollah\\_eo10.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/hezbollah_eo10.htm); Samer al-Atrush, "Hizbollah Cell Convicted of Plotting Egypt Tourist Attack," Telegraph, April 28, 2010. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/7645956/Hizbollah-cell-convicted-of-plotting-Egypt-tourist-attack.html> .

(5) "Hezbollah Chief Threatens Israel," BBC News, February 14, 2008.

clearly still targeting Israelis, though by carrying out the attacks at Egyptian tourist resorts, the attacks would have had severe economic consequences and have likely killed or injured Egyptians unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Others, however, appear to have targeted Egyptian targets more broadly, including conducting surveillance of critical infrastructure such as the Suez Canal<sup>(1)</sup>.

The cell was broken up in November 2008, when Mansour and two Palestinians traveling on Palestinian passports issued in Lebanon were arrested, but the public was only informed in April 2009 – possibly as part of an Egyptian effort to expose Hezbollah's dark side in the run-up to the June 2009 Lebanese elections<sup>(2)</sup>. Of the 49 operatives Egyptian authorities identified, 26 were arrested, including Muhammad Mansour (aka Sami Shihab) and another Lebanese, five Palestinians, one Sudanese, and 18 Egyptians<sup>(3)</sup>. The others either fled the country, like Mohammed Qabalan, or escaped to the Sinai where authorities believed they went into hiding among the Bedouin smugglers deep in the peninsula's mountains<sup>(4)</sup>.

### A Sunni Dangle Operation

Much like a Hezbollah network recruited in Southeast Asia in the 1990s, the recruits to the network in Egypt were Sunni, not Shia. In Southeast Asia, however, the recruits were aware they were being recruited to work with Hezbollah<sup>(5)</sup>. In this case, the majority of the cell members appear to have believed they were being recruited into a militant Sunni group, not a Hezbollah cell, in what amounted to a simple variation of the classic "dangle" operation – they were recruited by one group by being led to believe they would be working for another. Using the Sunni-sounding name Sami Shihab, Mansour presented himself as a Palestinian living in Syria. An Egyptian member of the network, Nasser Jibril, told investigators he met Mansour through a Palestinian member of the group. Using the name Shihab, Mansour introduced himself to Jibril

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(1) "Trial of Suspected Hezbollah Cell Resumes in Egypt," Haaretz, October 28, 2009. <http://www.haaretz.com/news/trial-of-suspected-hezbollah-cell-resumes-in-egypt-1.5229>

(2) "Egypt Exposes a Hezbollah Network on its Soil, Claiming it Not Only Smuggled Weapons in the Gaza Strip...," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center (IICC), April 13, 2009. [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/html/hezbollah\\_e010.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/hezbollah_e010.htm)

(3) "Egypt to Try 26 People Held Over Terror Plot," Gulf News, August 3, 2009.

(4) Samer al-Atrush, "Hezbollah' Plotters Face Trial in Egypt Security Court," Agence France Presse, July 26, 2009.

(5) For more on Hezbollah's Southeast Asia network see See Matthew Levitt, "A Near Miss in Bangkok," in *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), pp. 117-145.

as a fellow Palestinian and invited Jibril, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, to break with the Brotherhood and join a new group dedicated to helping Palestinian militants. Jibril joined the group and was tasked with procuring 25 weapons for the network. Only after Jibril's recruitment did Mansour reportedly confide that he was a Hezbollah operative. For most, the illusion of belonging to a militant Sunni group was maintained throughout<sup>(1)</sup>.

While the Hezbollah network had been collecting intelligence on Hezbollah's behalf for several years, Egyptian authorities were reportedly unaware until several different foreign intelligence services, including Mossad and the CIA, brought the network to their attention<sup>(2)</sup>. It remains unclear if the Egyptians were completely unaware of the network's existence, or if they were only unaware that the group was plotting attacks in Egypt as well as supporting Palestinian groups in Gaza, primarily Hamas. Egyptian authorities were especially concerned that several Muslim Brotherhood members had been recruited into the network. Commenting on the Muslim Brotherhood connection, then-President Mubarak made a comment several months after the cell's exposure, suggesting that Egyptian authorities may have known the network had been supplying arms and money to Hamas. "They have contacts with Hamas. They have contacts with Hezbollah," Mubarak said of the Brotherhood. "These are well known and they have contacts with many organisations. As long as they do not commit any terrorist crimes, I don't care."<sup>(3)</sup> By implication, had Egyptian authorities known that this or some other network was working with Hamas or Hezbollah but not planning attacks in Egypt, members of the network may have been left alone by local authorities.

## He Said, She Said

Some questioned the strength of the Egyptian accusations, especially since Egyptian authorities originally asserted that the network had been supporting Palestinian militants, only later adding charges about surveillance and possible plans for attacks

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(1) "Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt," ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009. [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf); Abdul Sittar Hatita, "Hezbollah Planned Three Synchronized Attacks in Egypt," Asharq Alawsat, April 24, 2009.

(2) Yossi Melman, Amos Harel, and Avi Issacharoff, "Mossad Tip Led to Capture of Hezbollah Cell in Sinai," Haaretz, April 14, 2009.

(3) "Hezbollah Cell' to be Tried by Egypt Security Court," Agence France Presse, August 21, 2009

in Egypt<sup>(1)</sup>. The official charges – conspiracy to commit murder, weapons possession, and spying for a foreign organisation with the intent of conducting terrorist attacks – appear to have been intentionally broad. The appearance in the Arab media of some more outlandish charges, including one unsubstantiated and apparently erroneous claim that some of the arrested cell members confessed a desire to target not only Israeli but also American interests in Egypt, further eroded confidence in the credibility of the Egyptian accusations<sup>(2)</sup>.

But the fact that the network engaged in smuggling and other logistical activities in support of Palestinian militants was never really in question, considering that Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah confirmed the charges himself days after they were aired. In a televised address, Nasrallah acknowledged that Mansour (Shihab) was a Hezbollah member who was in Egypt for “a logistical job to help the Palestinians get (military) equipment.” But charges that the Hezbollah network sought to destabilize Egypt or carry out attacks on Egyptian soil, he insisted, were “lies and fabrications aimed at setting the people of Egypt against Hezbollah.”<sup>(3)</sup> Nasrallah’s deputy, Naim Qassem, was more adamant, insisting that “the investigation proved that Shihab was ordered by his commanders not to deal with the Egyptian issue, but only to transport weapons to the Gaza Strip.” That effort was done in secret, Qassem claimed, so as not to publicly embarrass the Egyptian regime<sup>(4)</sup>.

A month after the arrests, however, credible reports began to emerge, lending weight to Egyptian officials’ charges. Terje Roed-Larsen, the UN’s Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories, reported to a meeting of the UN Security Council that “over the last few weeks, there has been a growing concern that Hizbollah has engaged in clandestine and illegal militant activities beyond Lebanese territory.” He said UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon had been informed by the Egyptian government about the discovery that a Hezbollah operative led a cell in Cairo until his recent arrest.<sup>(5)</sup> In a sign that the UN took this information to heart, and that it was especially

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(1) Chris Zambelis, “Hezbollah in Egypt: The Politics of Conspiracy and Resistance,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. VII, Issue 16, June 12, 2009, p. 6. [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=35110&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=412&no\\_cache=1](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35110&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=412&no_cache=1)

(2) “The Jihad Cell in Egypt Targeting American and Israeli Positions,” *al Hayat*, February 1, 2009; Samer al-Atrush, “Hezbollah’ Plotters Face Trial in Egypt Security Court,” *Agence France Presse*, July 26, 2009.

(3) “Hezbollah Confirms Egypt Arrest,” *BBC News*, April 10, 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7994304.stm>.

(4) Roe Nahmias, “Deputy Hizbullah Chief: Cairo Looking for Victim,” *YNet News*, April 5, 2009.

2009, “Armed Groups, Weapons Still Threatening Lebanon’s Stability, Reports UN Envoy,” *UN News Service*, May” (5)



concerned that Hezbollah was acting abroad not in the best interests of Lebanon, but of Iran, Roed-Larsen stressed to the Security Council that Hezbollah “should cease any militant activities outside of Lebanon and complete its transformation into solely a Lebanese party.”<sup>(1)</sup>

Mubarak reportedly demanded that Hezbollah sign a statement that the party regretted having “used Egyptian soil for illegal purposes that could put it in danger.”<sup>(2)</sup> That did not happen. Instead, in October, Hezbollah deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem echoed Hezbollah’s earlier acknowledgement of the party’s weapons smuggling operations in Egypt. “We do not wish to enter the bazaar of tense positions with the Egyptian regime because our battle is with Israel and not with them,” he stated. “We do not think we committed a mistake by smuggling arms across the Egyptian territories,” he added. “This is an honorable act and not a sinful one.”<sup>(3)</sup>

### Hezbollah’s Activities in Mideast “Ring Countries”

In fact, the Egyptian Hezbollah network, Mansour told his Egyptian interrogators, was conceived as part of a wider plan aimed at establishing Hezbollah networks not only in Egypt but in Syria and Jordan as well – the so-called “ring countries” – under Mohammad Qabalan’s command. To ensure the success of the Egyptian component of the plan, which was arguably the most important given the geographic reality of Gaza’s border with the Egyptian Sinai, Hezbollah selected Qabalan as overall commander since he had visited Egypt several times and spent time in Sinai himself.<sup>(4)</sup> He too traveled on a fake identity, in his case an Egyptian passport bearing the name Hassan al-Ghul.<sup>(5)</sup> Mansour arrived on the scene in 2005 and, reporting through Qabalan and

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(1) “Lebanon’s Political, Security Situation Markedly Improved, after being Taken to ‘Brink of Civil War and Back’ One Year Ago, Security Council Told,” 6120th Security Council Meeting (AM), Department of Public Information, News and Media Division, New York, United Nations, May 7, 2009. <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/sc9653.doc.htm>

(2) Yoav Stern, “Report: Hezbollah Cell in Egypt Planned to Recruit Israeli Arabs,” Haaretz, April 14, 2009.

(3) “Qassem to Qatari Watan: Will Not Surrender Our Necks to Politicized Court,” al Watan (Qatar), October 31, 2010.

(4) “Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt,” ICT’s Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009. [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf); “Exposure of a Hezbollah Network in Egypt: State of Affairs, Implications, and Reactions in Egypt and in the Arab and Muslim World,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Centre (IICC), April 28, 2009. [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/pdf/hezbollah\\_eo11.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hezbollah_eo11.pdf) .

(5) “Exposure of a Hezbollah Network in Egypt: State of Affairs, Implications, and Reactions in Egypt and in the



the Unit 1800 branch, operated under the guidance of several high-ranking Hezbollah operatives and the senior IRGC commander in Lebanon.<sup>(1)</sup>

Over the course of several years, the network facilitated the transfer of weapons from Sudan to Gaza, breaking up various responsibilities among the four distinct, compartmentalized cells that comprised the overall network.<sup>(2)</sup> Mansour set up shop in the northern Sinai town of el-Arish, where he could provide close supervision to the smuggling operation. Additional apartments were procured as safe houses in the northern Sinai, including in the border town of Rafah abutting the Gaza border.<sup>(3)</sup> At one point, Qabalan personally went to Sudan “to attend to logistical matters” related to the smuggling of weapons and even a small number of foreign fighters into Gaza.<sup>(4)</sup> In other cases, Palestinian fighters were smuggled out of Gaza for onward travel to Sudan, Lebanon, or Syria to receive terrorist training or instructions.<sup>(5)</sup> Some cell members were responsible for procuring weapons and explosives, others for constructing suicide belts, and still others for raising funds. To facilitate their smuggling operation, Mansour and others purchased apartments near the Egyptian-Palestinian border.<sup>(6)</sup>

But the smuggling operation did not stop at the border with Gaza. Mansour reportedly told his interrogators that they “smuggled Palestinian fighters from Egypt

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Arab and Muslim World,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Centre (IICC), April 28, 2009. [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/pdf/hezbollah\\_e011.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hezbollah_e011.pdf) .

- (1) Yossi Melman, Amos Harel, and Avi Issacharoff, “Mossad Tip Led to Capture of Hezbollah Cell in Sinai,” Haaretz, April 14, 2009.
- (2) “Exposure of a Hezbollah Network in Egypt, Claiming it Not Only Smuggled Weapons in the Gaza Strip...,” ICT’s Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009. [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf) .
- (3) “Egypt Exposes a Hezbollah Network on its Soil, Claiming it Not Only Smuggled Weapons in the Gaza Strip...,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center (IICC), April 13, 2009. [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/html/hezbollah\\_e010.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/hezbollah_e010.htm) .
- (4) “Exposure of a Hezbollah Network in Egypt: State of Affairs, Implications, and Reactions in Egypt and in the Arab and Muslim World,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Centre (IICC), April 28, 2009. [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/pdf/hezbollah\\_e011.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hezbollah_e011.pdf) .
- (5) “Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt,” ICT’s Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009. [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf).
- (6) “Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt,” ICT’s Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009, pp. 45-. [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWMG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf) .

deep into Israel, as well as into Gaza, as well as explosives."<sup>(1)</sup> In the course of his trial, Mansour told Egyptian prosecutors that Qabalan trained would-be suicide bombers from Gaza in the use of explosive belts and helped infiltrate them into Israeli in September 2008, but Israeli police arrested the two before they could carry out their operation.<sup>(2)</sup>

Typical of Unit 1800 operations, the network sought to recruit Israeli Arabs to carry out or facilitate attacks in Israel. They also thought Israeli Arabs would be well-suited to help smuggle explosives and detonators into Israel. Under interrogation, some of the detained Hezbollah cell members reportedly confessed that the explosives and weapons authorities found on some of the accused were ready "for that purpose."<sup>(3)</sup> The Hezbollah network was reportedly assisted by an individual who worked for the group's satellite television channel, al-Manar. A Hebrew language speaker, the al-Manar employee was tasked with "contacting elements inside Israel through the Internet in order to collect information on Israeli tourists visiting Egypt."<sup>(4)</sup> Following the exposure of Hezbollah's Egypt cell, Mahmoud Sabri, an Egyptian lawyer, filed a motion to compel Nilesat—an Egyptian Satellite Company—to cease broadcasting al-Manar, based on the fact that the station disseminated false information and violated Egyptian legal ethics. A Cairo court rejected the motion, however, claiming that Sabri did not present enough evidence in support of his case and that al-Manar posed no threat to Egyptian national security.<sup>(5)</sup>

## Operating in Egypt

The Hezbollah network's interest in Israeli tourists appears to have solidified following the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh. At that time, in early 2008, Mohammed Qabalan instructed Mansour and others to carry out surveillance and prepare for an attack on Israeli tourists in Egypt in retaliation for Mughniyeh's death. The cell reportedly planned to carry out three simultaneous, large-scale attacks targeting Red

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(1) Ibid.

(2) Samer al-Atrush, "Hizbollah Cell Convicted of Plotting Tourist Attack," *The Telegraph* (London), April 28, 2010.

(3) Yoav Stern, "Report: Hezbollah Cell in Egypt Planned to Recruit Israeli Arabs," *Haaretz*, April 14, 2009.

(4) "Exposure of a Hezbollah Network in Egypt: State of Affairs, Implications, and Reactions in Egypt and in the Arab and Muslim World," *Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Centre (IICC)*, April 28, 2009. [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/pdf/hezbollah\\_e011.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hezbollah_e011.pdf)

(5) Amro Hassan, "EGYPT: Prosecution demands death penalty for six in 'Hezbollah cell,'" *Los Angeles Times*, January 27, 2010.

Sea resorts popular among Israeli tourists, including Taba, Nuweiba, and Dahab. Cell members collected intelligence on Israeli tourists at Orgada, as well. Allegedly, the cell had already purchased a small van to be used as a car bomb – not unlike similar Hezbollah operations in Thailand and Argentina – and had prepared several suicide belts for the attacks. Ultimately, however, senior Hezbollah officials – by one account Hassan Nasrallah himself – ordered the attacks not be carried out.<sup>(1)</sup>

Those attacks were likely cancelled for fear that costs of carrying out attacks in Egypt, the most populous Sunni country in the region and a leader of the Arab world, would outweigh the benefits. Better to simply use Egypt as a staging ground for attacks in Israel—for many a far less objectionable action. But the cell also conducted surveillance of the Suez Canal, which would have raised the stakes exponentially for a clash with Cairo. By some accounts, the canal was a target itself, as were ships passing through it. In a sign that the surveillance was more than a passing interest, members of the Hezbollah network reportedly rented property along the canal to facilitate the surveillance operation. The Egyptian prosecutor cited “certain information” received from Egyptian intelligence that the Hezbollah network spied on the canal and the traffic traveling through it.<sup>(2)</sup> But the fact that Hezbollah seems to have been worried about the possible repercussions of carrying out an attack on Israeli targets in Egypt suggests that surveillance of the Suez Canal was probably collected as pre-operational intelligence, to have as off-the-shelf contingency planning in the event Hezbollah or Iran ever felt the need to carry out an attack in Egypt.<sup>(3)</sup> Indeed, Hezbollah modus operandi stresses such collection of pre-operational intelligence.<sup>(4)</sup>

Whatever the explanation, the Egyptian government was clearly shaken by the revelations and took them extremely seriously. Media reports subsequently cited

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(1) Abdul Sittar Hatita, “Hezbollah Planned Three Synchronized Attacks in Egypt,” *Asharq Alawsat*, April 24, 2009; “Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt,” ICT’s Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009, pp. 45- [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf) .

(2) “Trial of Suspected Hezbollah Cell Resumes in Egypt,” *Haaretz*, October 28, 2009.

(3) Yoav Stern, “Report: Hezbollah Cell in Egypt Planned to Recruit Israeli Arabs,” *Haaretz*, April 18, 2009; “Exposure of a Hezbollah Terrorist Network in Egypt,” ICT’s Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009, pp. 45- [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/o/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWVG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf) .

(4) For examples, see Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God* (Georgetown University Press, 2013).

government cables recording a conversation between Egypt's then-chief of intelligence, Omar Suleiman, and Admiral Mike Mullen, then-chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, in which Suleiman indicated that Cairo took the Hezbollah plot so seriously that it prepared its own capability to "interfere" in Iran's domestic affairs in retaliation, if necessary. "Egypt sent a clear message to Iran that if they interfere in Egypt, Egypt will interfere in Iran," according to one cable quoted in the press. To that end, Suleiman stated, Egypt had trained agents for just such a mission.<sup>(1)</sup>

If true, it would not be the first time allegations arose that Hezbollah and Iran were targeting Egyptian interests at home. In February 1987, Egyptian press reported that Iranian intelligence met with Egyptian militants in Iran to discuss forming a Hezbollah-like organisation in Egypt. The MOIS office in Cairo was reportedly tasked with monitoring canal traffic and plotted to assassinate key Egyptian officials. Egypt subsequently expelled two Iranian diplomats and shut down the Iran special interests section for a period of time in May 1987. The following year, Egyptian intelligence announced it had foiled an Iranian-hatched plot to trigger a Khomeini-style Islamic revolution in Egypt through a series of sabotage attacks, bombings, assassinations, and the dissemination of subversive literature. According to Egyptian police, the cell was tied to Iran's MOIS, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Iraqi Dawa Party.<sup>(2)</sup>

Nor would this be the last Iranian plot targeting Egypt. Even before verdicts were handed down in the case of the Hezbollah cell, Arab and Israeli media reported that a parallel, two-year investigation uncovered another cell, led by an Iranian intelligence officer who entered the country in the summer of 2006 under a forged Iraqi passport. The press reported the arrests in May 2009, but the Iranian intelligence officer, Muhammad Alam a-Din, and three other Islamic Revolutionary Guardsmen had been arrested five months earlier after Egyptian surveillance caught them making frequent trips to the Sinai, where they contacted Bedouin smugglers. The four hid in plain sight within the Iraqi refugee community near Cairo, and while under interrogation reportedly confirmed being sent by Qods Force commander Qassem Sulaimani to build an intelligence network in Egypt.<sup>(3)</sup>

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(1) Michael R. Gordon and Andrew W. Lehren, "U.S. Strains to Stop Arms Flow," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2010 .

(2) Owen L Sirrs, *A History of the Egyptian Intelligence Service: A History of the Mukhabarat, 1910-2009-* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010, p.159-160-.

(3) Roe Nahmias, "Report: Egypt Finds 266 Rockets Near Israeli Border," *ynet.com*, May 15, 2009

## The Verdicts

In April 2010, a year after the public was told the cell had been broken up, a judge in Cairo's emergency state security court handed down life terms to three defendants, all Hezbollah members being tried in absentia (including Qabalan), and sentences of six months to 15 years to 23 more, including a 15-year sentence for Mohammed Mansour. Mansour's lawyers said their client admitted to recommending attacks against Israeli tourists in the Sinai, but noted Hezbollah officials told him not to carry out these attacks. As the judge read the verdicts, the defendants chanted "God is great" from their crowded prisoner's cage.<sup>(1)</sup> Rejecting their claim that they only used Egypt as a base from which to help Palestinian militants in Gaza, the court found the defendants guilty of plotting to blow up ships in the Suez Canal and to attack tourist sites in Egypt. "Is targeting ships in the canal support for the Palestinian cause?" the judge asked rhetorically in making his ruling. "Is preparing explosives and targeting tourist resorts support for the Palestinians?"<sup>(2)</sup>

The extent to which surveillance of the canal presented a near-term, actionable threat remains a matter of speculation. Indeed, much of the case focused on the defendants' preparation of explosives on Egyptian territory and the fact that they planned to target vacationers – likely Israelis – at Egyptian tourist resorts. Prosecutors screened video footage of explosives found at the premises used by the defendants, leading the judge to decide the group intended "to strike Egypt's economy, destroy the bonds between its people and create chaos and instability."<sup>(3)</sup> For his part, Hassan Nasrallah described the verdicts as "a badge of honour for these noble brothers of the resistance," adding, "it is a source of pride to us for all Arab and Islamic peoples to know that we are detained and jailed for...standing by our brothers in Palestine and Gaza." Challenging the court's decision, Nasrallah reiterated that "these men are honourable brothers, fighters of the resistance, and not outlaws, terrorists and criminals, as the court verdict says."<sup>(4)</sup>

The verdicts amounted to the latest volley in an ongoing tiff between Egypt and Hezbollah, and the Mubarak government surely worried about potential cooperation

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(1) Samer al-Atrush, "Hizbollah Cell Convicted of Plotting Tourist Attack," *The Telegraph* (London), April 28, 2010.

(2) Nadia Abou el Magd, "Hizbollah Bomb Plotters Jailed," *The National* (UAE), April 29, 2010.

(3) Ian Black, "Egypt Sentences 26 for Plotting Hezbollah Terrorist Campaign," *The Guardian*, April 28, 2010.

(4) Natacha Yazbeck, "Hezbollah Hails Egypt Verdict as 'Badge of Honour,'" *Agence France Presse*, April 29, p. 201.

between Hezbollah and Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. In early 2004, for example, the Brotherhood's leader, Mohammed Mahdi Akef, hosted a delegation of visiting Hezbollah officials and issued a statement stressing that the Brotherhood and Hezbollah shared "identical views with regard to resisting the Zionist enemy," adding that "resistance" was the best route to confront "Zionist aggression."<sup>(1)</sup> Popular support for Hezbollah ran high during the July 2006 war the group fought with Israel, and Cairo was further piqued by Hezbollah's frequent criticism of Egypt's decision to seal the border with Gaza once Hamas took over the Strip by force in the summer of 2007. In return, Egypt often accused Hezbollah of being an Iranian proxy and supported its Sunni political opponents in Lebanon.

Additionally, Hezbollah and Egypt found themselves in a war of words. In a statement to Kuwait's al-Rai newspaper, Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah claimed that the verdicts "against the mujahidin who were offering aid to the mujahidin in the Gaza Strip" were "political adjudications" and "arbitrary decisions." In response to his open support of those convicted and his criticism of the Egyptian legal system, the Egyptian media labeled Nasrallah "the monkey sheikh," "an Iranian agent," "a Lebanese from [the Iranian city of] Qom, "leader of the militias in the Iranian party in Lebanon," and "the son of garbage."<sup>(2)</sup>

## Prison Break

Not quite ten months into his fifteen-year jail term, Mansour and the rest of his network escaped from the Wadi al-Natroun prison amid the chaos of the revolution that brought down President Mubarak's decades-long authoritarian rule in Egypt. According to the findings of a six-week investigation carried out by reporters for Egypt's al-Masry al-Youm, it appears "the escapes were performed by Bedouin groups working at the behest of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the families of individual prisoners." The breakout was well-coordinated, involving masked men on motorcycles shooting at guard towers and burning rice, straw, and tires outside the prison to create

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(1) "Cairo: Hezbollah Delegation Visits the Brotherhood's Headquarters," al Hayat, January 26, 2004, accessed through BBC Worldwide Monitoring January 27, 2004.

(2) "Exposure of a Hezbollah Network in Egypt, Claiming it Not Only Smuggled Weapons in the Gaza Strip...," ICT's Jihadi Websites Monitoring Group, International Institute for Counter Terrorism, August 2009, [http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWGMG\\_Hezbollah\\_Egypt.pdf](http://www.ict.org.il/Portals/0/Internet%20Monitoring%20Group/JWGMG_Hezbollah_Egypt.pdf); Jonathan Spyer, "Iran rivalry behind Cairo's Hizbullah tension," Jerusalem Post, April 30, 2010. <http://www.jpost.com/LandedPages/PrintArticle.aspx?id=174349> .

smokescreens covering the movements of the attackers. Three jeeps then pulled up to the prison gates carrying young men with machine guns. Civilians armed with machine guns and rifles can be seen in an 11-minute video clip of the raid. A larger crowd of some 20 men carrying clubs and knives then appears and surrounds the prison walls while others, including children, watch. Some of these people were organised to free Hezbollah, Hamas, and other prisoners, while others were drawn by the opportunity to steal the prison's cattle, which they did. "We saw the Bedouins with their automatic weapons freeing the detainees of the cell block next door," recalled Hassan al-Manakhly, a member of the Hezbollah network who escaped. "We knew they were Bedouins from the way they looked and from their accent."<sup>(1)</sup>

ultimately into the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah operatives reportedly smuggled Mansour across Egypt and into Sudan immediately following the breakout. Shortly after the breakout, Mansour was reportedly seen talking on a cell phone telling someone exactly what was happening, step by step, appearing absent-minded or confused by the sudden turn of events. It is likely the person on the other end of the phone gave Mansour instructions on where to go next, because the next time his colleagues saw him, Mansour was in Lebanon.<sup>(2)</sup>

How he got there underscores the flexibility and utility of Hezbollah's standing support networks, in this case in Sudan. Working through the good offices of "an undercover Hezbollah station in an East African country," Hezbollah contacted people in Syrian intelligence who arranged for the Syrian embassy in Cairo to provide Mansour a new false passport. Traveling on his new passport, officially claimed as a replacement for one he lost, Mansour was reportedly escorted across Egypt, into Sudan, and to the airport in Khartoum by Sudanese-based Hezbollah operatives.<sup>(3)</sup>

Even as he was being covertly smuggled out of the country and back to Beirut, Hezbollah officials happily boasted Mansour was "out of jail and safe." Responding to a press query just days after the breakout, a Hezbollah official said that Mansour "is

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(1) Hisham Allam, "Investigative Report: Escape from Marg Prison," al Masry al Youm, May 3, 2011. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/422118>

(2) Hisham Allam, "Investigative Report: Escape from Marg Prison," al Masry al Youm, May 3, 2011. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/node/422118>

(3) "Hezbollah Operative Fled from Egypt through Sudan: Report," Sudan Tribune, February 19, 2011; "Syrian Embassy Aided Hezbollah Prisoner's Escape," The Jerusalem Post, February 17, 2011.



now in a safe location and will soon be back in Lebanon."<sup>(1)</sup> Less than two weeks later, Mansour appeared unannounced at a major Hezbollah rally in Beirut. Televised on Hezbollah's al-Manar satellite station, Mansour waved a Hezbollah flag to the roaring applause of the audience as he took the stage.<sup>(2)</sup>

## Conclusion

The precise details of Hezbollah's role in the January 2011 Wadi al-Natroun prison break, if any, remain to be determined. What is clear, however, is that a Hezbollah network had been operating on the ground in Egypt. Its primary focus was smuggling weapons into the Gaza Strip, but it was also tasked with providing logistical support to other operations and, eventually, assigned to carry out surveillance of potential targets in Egypt.

As a case study, Hezbollah's Egyptian network underscores three important themes critical to understanding how the group operates abroad:

First, Hezbollah networks are often called upon to provide logistical or other support for operations that go beyond their original remit. Describing Hezbollah's financial support activity in the Ivory Coast, one U.S. official cautioned that even such support networks are "always a bit operational."<sup>(3)</sup> In January 2012, Thai officials stumbled upon a similar case involving a Hezbollah logistician who had been running an explosives transshipment center out of Bangkok for at least a year before being arrested on suspicion of plotting attacks targeting Israeli tourists in Thailand.<sup>(4)</sup>

Second, Hezbollah has a long-established modus operandi of carrying out pre-operational surveillance of potential targets even when no plot is in the offing. According to FBI testimony, while Hezbollah has never conducted a terrorist attack on U.S. soil, "Hezbollah subjects have reportedly been tasked with surveillance of potential targets in the United States." The FBI found that "such tasking to date

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(1) "Hezbollah Confirms its Cell Members Escaped Egyptian Jails," *Ya Libnan*, February 3, 2011.

(2) "Escaped Hezbollah Member Turns up in Beirut," CNN, February 16, 2011; "Sami Shihab, a Hezbollah Operative who Escaped from an Egyptian Prison, Participated in a Hezbollah Rally in Beirut...," The Meir Ami Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, February 20, 2011. [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/html/hezbollah\\_e018.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/hezbollah_e018.htm) .

(3) Author interview with US intelligence official, Washington, D.C., July 2003.

(4) See Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Georgetown University Press, 2013), pp.364-365.

appears to have been intended as a vetting tool to establish the individual's loyalty to Hezbollah and Iran."<sup>(5)</sup> Whatever the purpose, this Hezbollah surveillance enables the group to develop off-the-shelf operational planning that it can dust off and use at a future date, if it so desires.

Third, while most attention has been given to Hezbollah's global footprint in places like South America and Europe, the group has a long and dangerous history of activities and operations in the Middle East, beginning as far back as terrorist operations in Kuwait in 1983 and 1985 (a series of seven bombings in two hours and an assassination attempt targeting the Emir of Kuwait, respectively). Hezbollah's terrorism persisted through the 1990s with the 1996 bombing of the US Air Force barracks at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, into the 2000s with the deployment of Unit 3800—Hezbollah's support mission in Iraq during the 2003 Iraq war—and continues today with Hezbollah's massive investment in Syria.<sup>(6)</sup>

All told, fully appreciating the activities of this Hezbollah network in Egypt is important not only as a matter of historical interest, but also as a case study that underscores how Hezbollah operates around the world in general, and in the Middle East in particular. *Moqawama*, or "resistance" to Israel, is the core aspect of Hezbollah's identity, and until its recent sectarian involvement in Syria, at least, was the basis for its broad appeal among both Shia and Sunnis. While it focused chiefly on Lebanon and the immediate area, Hezbollah demonstrated impressive reach with operations and networks from South America to Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, such capacity is not fundamental to its existence. The destruction of Israel is. Accordingly, even when it has limited international activities outside the Levant, Hezbollah has maintained a steady stream of activities under its "ring strategy" of undermining Israeli security—directly and by supporting Palestinian groups—from the countries bordering Israel.

Since the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, and then again after the 2006 war and Hezbollah's takeover of downtown Beirut by force of arms in 2008, the group has struggled to justify its existence as a true "resistance" organisation battling to free occupied land and has focused primarily on tenuous claim that the

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(5) "Current and Projected National Security Threats to the United States," Hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate, February 6, 2002 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), pg. 339.

(6) Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Georgetown University Press, 2013).

Shebaa Farms are part of Lebanon and must still be liberated.<sup>(1)</sup> Today, Hezbollah is under far more significant fire for taking part in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime. Without an Israeli straw man to justify the maintenance of its arms as “legitimate resistance,” Hezbollah is left with precious little justification for its existence as an independent militia outside the control of the Lebanese government. Worse still, so long as Hezbollah continues to fight alongside Iran and the Assad regime against Sunni rebels, it will increasingly be seen as a sectarian fighting force undermining the security and political interests of the Lebanese state. Under such circumstances, it is all but certain Hezbollah will put renewed focus on the activities of Unit 1800—especially in the ring countries surrounding Israel—in an effort to buttress its reputation as a group primarily focused on “resisting” Israel.

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(1) Yaniv Berman, “Shebaa Farms – nub of conflict,” Ynet News, August 10, 2006, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3289532,00.html>.