



INSS Insight No. 648, December 25, 2014

Hizbollah Closes a Breach of its Outer Shield: The Threat to Israel

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Lebanese and international media reported recently that Hizbollah exposed and tried a high level security operative and four of his subordinates, accusing them of being Israeli agents. The media reports about the alleged Israeli agents are based on a source within Hizbollah rather than an official statement from the organization. The suspects were allegedly members of Hizbollah's External Operations Unit (also known as Unit 910). The main defendant, Muhammad Shawarba, who formerly served as part of Hassan Nasrallah's personal security cadre, was the unit's deputy commander.

This latest development joins a series of "spy ring scandals" exposed by the organization's security services. Hizbollah, long extremely fearful of foreign "spies," has historically placed an emphasis on counterintelligence. In the early 2000s, as part of Iran's comprehensive support, the group established an ad hoc counter-intelligence unit, while also relying on assistance from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Lebanon to locate and expose potential infiltrators and prevent leaks of information. One of the lessons derived from the 2006 war with Israel was likewise to invest further in the group's preventive security and intelligence systems, again with Tehran's assistance, in order to limit the group's vulnerability to foreign infiltration within its ranks. Since then, Hizbollah's counterintelligence efforts have led to an aggressive campaign to identify and apprehend potential spies and double agents in Lebanon in general, and within the organization more specifically. A prominent case involved Hizbollah's identifying in June and November 2011 a number of members who were also allegedly involved with the CIA. This case had an important impact on Hizbollah, with the group admitting – and for the first time – to have been infiltrated, in turn tarnishing its reputation of invincibility and immunity from internal security breaches.

Though not unprecedented, the recent apprehension of a foreign agent within Hizbollah's highest ranks further exposes Hizbollah's vulnerability to external infiltration, despite its

Thanks to Yael Basford and Einav Yogev for their assistance with this article.

well-cultivated image as a cohesive and loyal organization. In addition, on the operational level, this development is of particular significance. Following the alleged assassination by Israel in 2008 of Imad Mughniyeh, Hizbollah's top security official and the head of external operations in Damascus, the group's Secretary General avowed his commitment to avenge Mughniyeh's death. This proclamation was followed by a string of largely foiled or failed plots against Israeli assets, personnel, and citizens abroad.

With the alleged spy Shawarba playing such an important role within the group's military apparatus, his possible collaboration with Israel may have contributed to the foiling of Hizbollah attacks abroad, from Azerbaijan to Turkey, Cyprus, Thailand, and recently Peru (among others), as well as to serious intelligence against the group's leadership. In avenging Mughniyeh, Hizbollah's only "success" has been its attack in July 2012 against Israeli tourists at the Burgas airport in Bulgaria, resulting in six fatalities – five Israeli tourists and one Bulgarian. This attack, which strongly contributed to the European community's decision to add Hizbollah's military wing to its list of terror organizations, was reportedly ascribed to Hizbollah based on information allegedly provided by Shawarba.

The recent revelations come at an especially complex time for the Lebanese-Shiite organization: over the past year Hizbollah has been engaged in a multi-front struggle that includes support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria, protection of Hizbollah's communities and infrastructure, and assistance and coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces in dealing with the so-called "takfiri" threat – referring to the rise in activism of Salafi-jihadist groups in Lebanon, a phenomenon itself exacerbated by Hizbollah's own involvement in Syria. Over the course of 2014, successful attacks by rival groups against Hizbollah have forced the organization to reexamine its defense and intelligence apparatus, further focusing not only on counterintelligence, but on internal security as well. In addition, Hizbollah's security landscape and calculations continue to be affected by its post-2006 de facto deterrence vis-à-vis Israel. Preserving the status quo has become increasingly harder since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, with Hizbollah struggling between two competing interests. One is the need to signal strength and resolve as well as to re-establish the rules of the game vis-à-vis Israel, as they have been eroded by the alleged Israeli attacks in Lebanon and Syria targeting weapons convoys on route to Hizbollah operatives in Lebanon. Two, the group still needs to avoid escalation and another all-out war with Israel. In this context, over the past few months the organization has assumed responsibility for several small scale operations in Mount Dov (Shab'a Farms) and the Golan Heights.

In light of the complex evolving predicament facing Hizbollah, the alleged discovery of yet another infiltration would probably be branded by the organization as an operational victory. Indeed, by uncovering high level infiltrators, the group can project power and

efficiency and discredit Israel's intelligence apparatus. Even more significant, assuming media reports are credible, and although other intelligence assets may still be utilized by Israel, the arrested senior operative and his four accomplices may have contributed to the successful thwarting of Hizbollah's planned attacks abroad. If so, their exposure can certainly be seen as harmful to Israel in its campaign against the Shiite terror apparatus. The loss of a high ranking asset may limit Israel's ability to thwart future terror operations against Israeli targets abroad.

The continued threat of international terror by the Shiite Lebanese organization reinforces Israel's need to convey a firm warning to Hizbollah to refrain from further attempted attacks. In addition, Israel must strengthen its international cooperation in the effort to uncover the group's activities abroad. Furthermore, given Hizbollah's historical modus operandi, which includes not claiming responsibility for its external operations, a lack of internal informants could complicate efforts to pin Hizbollah down as an international terror player.

