



Spotlight on Terrorism : Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria May 5-18 , 2023

Overview

- ▶ Hezbollah plans to hold a live-fire military exercise near the Israeli border on May 21, 2023.
- ▶ On May 12, 2023, Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah gave a speech in which he represented the most recent round of fighting in the Gaza Strip (Operation Shield and Arrow) as an achievement for the resistance axis. He also warned that any targeted killing [carried out by Israel] in the future would not go without a response, and hinted at the possibility of extending the arenas in a future confrontation. He also denied Iran's involvement in the international drug trade.
- ▶ The Lebanese minister of energy announced that in September 2023 the TotalEnergies and ENI oil and natural gas-drilling companies would begin drilling in Block 9 off the coast of Lebanon near Lebanon's maritime border with Israel.
- ▶ Reservations are increasing in Lebanon regarding the candidacy of Suleiman Frangieh for president; he is close to Hezbollah and the Syrian regime.
- ▶ Hezbollah continues recruiting Syrian civilians in the areas near the Israel-Syria border.
- ▶ The Washington Post exposed Iran's [alleged] efforts to conceal military equipment within aid deliveries to Syria after the disastrous February earthquake. The deliveries were intended for the use of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and its affiliates in Iraq and Syria.
- ▶ Jordanian army aircraft attacked a facility for the manufacture of the synthetic drug Captagon and the house of a drug baron working for Hezbollah's drug networks. The factory was destroyed and the baron and his family were killed.
- ▶ Two Hezbollah operatives were arrested in Germany after having been active in the northern part of the country for many years.

Lebanon

Hezbollah plans to hold a military exercise on May 21, 2023

- ▶ According to reports from Lebanon, Hezbollah plans to hold a military exercise using live fire near the Israeli border on Sunday, May 21, 2023. It will mark the anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000¹ and is expected to include the use of missiles, tanks and attack forces (@HoseinMortada Twitter account, May 17, 2023; al-Diyar, May 18, 2023).
- ▶ Muhammad Afif, head of Hezbollah's media information unit, said the exercise would be covered by many foreign, Arab and local media outlets and by more than 200 correspondents (al-Diyar, May 18, 2023).
- ▶ In ITIC assessment, the exercise is being held as part of Hezbollah's preparations for a confrontation with Israel and to promote its concept of the "unity of the arenas." According to the concept, in a confrontation with Israel the entire "resistance axis"² will coordinate operations against it. The display of force is intended to close ranks and raise the morale of "resistance axis" operatives, especially given the outcome of Operation Shield and Arrow, which exposed the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) vulnerability to Israel's operational and technological capabilities.

Nasrallah's speech marking the anniversary of Mustafa Bad al-Din

- ▶ On May 12, 2023, **Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah** gave a speech marking the seventh anniversary of the death of Mustafa Bad al-Din, a Hezbollah military leader who was killed in an explosion near Damascus in May 2016. Nasrallah's main points were the following:
 - ▶ **Regional and international changes:** Nasrallah claimed there were positive regional and international changes, such as the return of Syria to the fold of the Arab world and inter-Arab and -Islamic cooperation, which Lebanon should profit from.
 - ▶ **The most recent round of fighting in the Gaza Strip (Operation Shield and Arrow):**
 - ◆ Nasrallah noted the importance of the strategic vision of the "resistance axis" and of the unity of the campaign against Israel.
 - ◆ He praised the Palestinian people, the leaders of the resistance and the PIJ for its fighting.

¹ Marked annually by Hezbollah on May 25 as "the resistance and liberation holiday."

² Iran, Hezbollah, Syria, the Palestinian terrorist organizations and the pro-Iranian militias.

- ◆ He claimed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had begun the round of fighting by ordering the targeted killings of the PIJ's military wing commanders, their wives and children. He criticized the world for its silence in the face of Israel's attacks on women and children.
 - ◆ He said Netanyahu had several reasons for initiating the round of fighting: to restore and rehabilitate Israel's deterrence, escape Israel's internal stalemate, cope with the breakdown of his government coalition and improve his political and electoral status.
 - ◆ He added that during the most recent round of fighting Israel wanted to isolate the PIJ and separate it from Hamas and the other Palestinian organizations, and to cause internecine struggles and confrontations, collapse the PIJ's senior command structure, destroy its rocket capabilities and send a message of deterrence to the other fronts. He claimed Israel had achieved none of its objectives because all the Palestinian factions coordinated politically and militarily through the joint operations room. He said the rocket fire was massive despite Israel's hopes it would be less extensive, and the rockets fired at Tel Aviv and Jerusalem "confused" Israel. The PIJ, he claimed, had overcome the deaths of its commanders and proved the firm stance of the Palestinian resistance.
 - ◆ He said that "every targeted killing [carried out by Israel in the future] would not go without a response." He added that Hezbollah was in constant contact with the heads of the Palestinian organizations, monitored the situation and developments, and provided all possible support. He claimed that if Hezbollah "is forced to take measures it will not hesitate to do so," hinting that the fighting arenas would be extended.
- **The return of Syria to the fold of the Arab world:** Nasrallah said Bashar Assad's return to the fold of the Arab League was very important. He added that the Iranian President's Ebrahim Raisi visit to Syria was also important and was an expression of bilateral strategic relations in military and economic affairs. He called on the Lebanese government to institute normal diplomatic relations with Syria, which he regarded as in Lebanon's interests. He accused the United States of stealing oil and natural gas from Syria.

- ▶ **The Syrian refugees in Lebanon:** Nasrallah said Lebanon and Syria had to coordinate the refugees' return to their own country because the confrontational discourse on the issue did nothing but cause damage.³
- ▶ **Hezbollah's involvement in the international drug trade:** Nasrallah vigorously denied the accusations that Hezbollah was involved in the international drug trade in general and in the trade of the synthetic drug Captagon in particular. He claimed drug-trading was immoral and against Islam, and the claims that Hezbollah used drug dealers to smuggle weapons to the "occupied lands" (Israel) through Jordan and Syria were "baseless." He also claimed Hezbollah helped the Lebanese authorities deal with some of the local drug dealers.
- ▶ **The Lebanese presidential elections:** Nasrallah said there had been positive developments. He reiterated Hezbollah's support for Suleiman Frangieh, but said the organization would not impose a candidate on any party, and that the "doors are always open for discussion." He called on the Lebanese to exploit regional and global developments for their own needs and not to focus on internal dissension.

Preparations for the Lebanese presidential election

- ▶ Nabih Berri, speaker of the Lebanese parliament and head of the Amal movement, and close to Hezbollah, said the presidential elections should be held by June 15, 2023, to prevent a governmental vacuum and instability (al-Nur Radio, May 10, 2023).
- ▶ Given Hezbollah's support for the candidacy of Suleiman Frangieh, who has ties to the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, sources both inside and outside of Lebanon expressed reservations:
 - ◆ Walid Jumblatt, head of the Progressive Socialist Party and a prominent Druze leader in Lebanon, said he had reservations about appointing Frangieh as president (almarkazia.com, May 13, 2023).
 - ◆ Samy Gemayel, president of the Kataeb [Phalanges] Party, and a member of the Lebanese parliament, and who opposes Hezbollah, noted his objection to the appointment of a Hezbollah-affiliated president. He was apparently talking about Frangieh's candidacy (lbcgroup.tv, May 4, 2023).

³ The remarks were made in response to claims that Hezbollah was involved in measures to use force to expel the Syrian refugees out of concern they would cause demographic and political changes in because most of them were Sunni Muslims.

◆ Anne Grillo, the French ambassador to Lebanon, said France would no longer support a candidate for the presidency of Lebanon, although it had previously supported Frangieh (naharnet.com, May 10, 2023).

Lebanon will begin drilling for gas off its coast in September 2023

- ▶ On May 11, 2023, Walid Fayad, Lebanese minister of energy, announced that in September 2023 the oil and natural gas-drilling companies TotalEnergies and ENI would begin drilling in Block 9 off the coast of Lebanon and near Lebanon's maritime border with Israel. He added that by the end of 2023 it would become clear whether there was oil or natural gas in the block. He claimed both companies had been very optimistic about the presence of a gas and oil reservoir at the site (al-Arabiya, May 11, 2023).
- ▶ Finding natural gas or oil off the coast of Lebanon would shore up Lebanon's collapsing economy, but there is also significant concern the funds generated would be funneled to Hezbollah and not serve the Lebanese general public.

Claims Hezbollah and Amal are behind efforts to expel Syrian refugees from Lebanon

- ▶ Orient News, the Syrian oppositions website, claimed that Shi'ite interests in Lebanon, headed by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, were behind the move to expel refugees who had fled the Syrian Civil War. The Palestinian media reported the expulsion from Lebanon of hundreds of Syrian refugees, which led many people to object, especially Sunni Muslims (Orient, May 10, 2023).
- ▶ According to the report, the internal Lebanese security forces, subordinate to Hezbollah and Amal, along with the Lebanese army's general intelligence directorate, is erecting temporary roadblocks on the roads to locate Syrian refugees and expel them from the country (Orient News, May 10, 2023).
- ▶ According to al-Jazeera TV, the Lebanese government expelled at least six hundred Syrian refugees and closed humanitarian organizations providing the refugees with services, accusing the ministry of the deterioration of Lebanon's economy (al-Jazeera, May 6, 2023).
- ▶ There are an estimated two million refugees in Syria, the overwhelming majority of whom are Syrian. Apparently, Hezbollah's motives are a fear of the increase of Sunnis in Lebanon, which could weaken the organization's strength; the difficulty Lebanon is having in dealing with the economic and societal consequences of the refugees' presence in the country; and the

possibility that they might eventually become supporters of Salafist-jihadist Islamist movements, especially ISIS.

Additional Hezbollah Reactions to Operation Shield and Arrow

- ▶ Na'im Qassam, deputy Hezbollah secretary general, related to Operation Shield and Arrow on his Twitter account, saying "the Palestinian people again proved they were worthy of victory and liberation; the resistance of the Islamic Jihad and the unity of the Palestinian factions in the confrontation successfully established an equation of deterrence...Netanyahu's failure will have a great influence on his political future and on the temporary occupation entity (Israel)." He added that "the Palestinian and regional resistance are amassing strategic achievements in the struggle against the arrogance of America and the temporary entity" (Na'im Qassem's Twitter account, May 15, 2023).
- ▶ On May 9, 2023, Hezbollah offered its condolences for the deaths of PIJ commanders Jihad Shahr al-Ghannam, Khalil Salah al-Bahtini and Tareq Muhammad Izz al-Din, who died in Israeli targeted killings before dawn the same day. Hezbollah called it "a crime against humanity" and called on international and humanitarian organizations and governments around the globe to take a stand and act against the "crime." Hezbollah also claimed that killing the commanders would add to the [Arab-Muslim] nation's awareness, unity and determination to continue the path of jihad and resistance until total victory had been achieved. Hezbollah declared its full solidarity with its Islamic Jihad brothers and the full support and readiness for all possibilities and measures the movement leadership and Palestinian resistance forces took to deter the Zionist enemy and defend the Palestinian people and its holy sites (al-'Ahed, May 9, 2023).
- ▶ On May 9, 2023, Na'im Qassem participated in a ceremony in Nabatieh, south Lebanon, where he related to the IDF activity against PIJ commanders during Operation Shield and Arrow. He strongly criticized Israel for attacking them in their houses along with their wives and children instead of in [military] facilities or on the battlefield. He claimed it was proof of cowardice, hostility and crime, and there had to be a response. He added that they supported all the actions of the Palestinian factions of the Islamic jihad, and stood by them to respond and clash [with Israel] (al-'Ahed, May 9, 2023).

- ▶ The Hezbollah Brigades, one of the dominant pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, affiliated with Hezbollah-Lebanon, reported they were renewing their support of the Palestinian people and their "brave resistance." According to the announcement, the response to the "crimes of killing" the leaders of the Jerusalem Brigades [the PIJ's military-terrorist wing] had to be "a difficult lesson the entity [Israel] would pay for [sic]." The crime, according to the Hezbollah Brigades, would not prevent the continuation of the "option of resistance" (Telegram, May 10, 2023).

Syria

Hezbollah recruits Syrians along the border with Israel

- ▶ On May 7, 2023, according to reports, a leading figure in Hezbollah-Lebanon nicknamed "Abu Ali" had returned to Hezbollah's "Golan file" in southern Syria, recruiting local residents to collect intelligence about Israel. In January 2023 an IDF force detained a Syrian civilian named Ghaith Abdullah, 26 years old, who crossed the border into Israel from Syria. He had been photographing IDF posts and documenting the movement of IDF forces in the southern and central Golan Heights. When Abdullah was detained Abu Ali went underground and only recently returned to his former activities. During interrogation Abdallah said Abu Ali had given the recruits large quantities of oil and food, exploiting their poverty to turn them into collaborators. He added that Abu Ali had represented himself as a Syrian intelligence officer and had tried to speak Arabic with a Syrian accent to hide his Lebanese origin. He said Abu Ali had no trouble passing through Syrian security force roadblocks (Israeli Public Broadcasting Company Kan, May 7, 2023).
- ▶ Following Hezbollah activity among Syrian residents near the border with Israel, on May 10, 2023, it was reported that Israeli planes dropped leaflets in southwest Syria near the border warning local residents not to cooperate with Hezbollah. Hezbollah, said the leaflet, was exploiting them and recruiting collaborators, who were being monitored. Local residents were called on to stop cooperating with Hezbollah, and the circular also had pictures of two local Hezbollah collaborators, Ahmed Ibrahim Qassem, aka Abu Laith Kuya, and Abu al-Majed Fahed (North Press Agency, May 10, 2023)



The circular dropped in southern Syria (North Press Agency, May 10, 2023)

Iran sends military equipment in deliveries of "humanitarian aid" to Syria

- ▶ On May 7, 2023, the Washington Post reported that a new, recently leaked Pentagon document which had not yet been published exposed Iran's efforts to conceal military equipment in deliveries of aid to Syria after the February 2023 earthquake. According to American intelligence, the equipment included light arms, ammunition and UAVs. According to the paper, the arms were transferred in convoys from Iraq coordinated by the pro-Iranian militias and the Qods Force (Washington Post, May 7, 2023). The arms were intended for the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and its affiliates in Syria, especially the Iraqi pro-Iranian militias, whose operations were fully coordinated with Hezbollah.

Aleppo International Airport reopens

- ▶ On May 10, 2023, the Syrian ministry of transportation announced that air travel through Aleppo International Airport would be renewed (Syrian ministry of transportation, May 10, 2023). On the night of April 30, 2023, Aleppo International Airport and the nearby al-Nayrab military airport were attacked. According to reports, the international airport was damaged and an ammunition warehouse in the area went up in flames; it apparently belonged to Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian militias. The attack was attributed to Israel (SANA, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and al-Jazeera, May 1, 2023).

Hezbollah's Drug Networks

Drug dealers attacked on the Syria-Jordan border

- ▶ Before dawn on May 8, 2023, warplanes, apparently from Jordan, attacked a facility for the manufacture the synthetic drug Captagon. According to other versions it was warehouse

where a large quantity of the drug was stored in the village of Kharab al-Shahm, about five kilometers (three miles) northwest of Dara'a and one kilometer north of the Syria-Jordan border. According to the reports, the facility or warehouse was used by Hezbollah (Reuters, al-Arabiya, SOHR, May 8, 2023).

- ▶ Another target for aerial attack was a building in the village of al-Shaab, about 40 kilometers (about 25 miles) southeast of al-Suwaydaa and 12 kilometers (about 7.5 miles) northwest of the Syria-Jordan border. It was home to Mar'i al-Ramthan, the most prominent drug lord in southern Syria, who headed a network that smuggled drugs to Jordan and the Persian Gulf; he, his wife and six children died in the attack. Affiliated with Hezbollah, he was known as "the Pablo Escobar⁴ of southern Syria." He also had ten files pending in Jordan for drug smuggling, and had recruited dozens of Bedouin who served in armed groups with connections to Iran and were involved in smuggling and delivering drugs (al-Arabiya and, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, May 8, 2023). The government of Jordan did not claim responsibility for the attack (al-Ra'i al-Yawm, May 8, 2023).



Mar'i al-Ramthan, killed in the attack (al-Arabiya, May 8, 2023).

- ▶ The events provide another illustration of Hezbollah's extensive global drug-smuggling network, which also operates in Syria, apparently in collaboration with the Syrian regime. The Jordanian response indicates the country's determination to counter drug-smuggling activities from its territory.

Exposure of Hezbollah and Iran's connections to an Irish drug cartel

- ▶ The London Times published a long article about the investigation of a transnational organized crime group known as the Kinahan Cartel, founded by an Irishman named Christy Kinahan in the 1990s. According to the article, it is run by Christy Kinahan, his son Daniel and

⁴ The Colombian drug lord, head of the Colombian cartel that was active in the 1980s).

a relative named Christopher Kinahan, Jr., all of whom are under a United States investigation for supporting Iran and Hezbollah. The cartel, which cooperates with drug cartels in Colombia and Mexico, as well as criminal organizations in Italy and Russia, is accused of funding Hezbollah and carrying out terrorist attacks for the Iranian regime, such as killing members of the Iranian opposition (The Times, May 14, 2023).

Two Hezbollah Operatives Arrested in Germany

- ▶ On May 10, 2023, German federal prosecutors announced the arrest of two alleged members of Hezbollah suspected of recruiting and organizing activities for the organization in the Bremen area of northern Germany. They were named as Lebanese national Hassan M. and German-Lebanese dual citizen Abdul-Latif W, and face charges of membership in a foreign terrorist organization. According to the federal prosecutor's office, Hassan M. began working of Hezbollah in 2016, and Abdul-Latif W. in 2004, if not before.
- ▶ Abdul-Latif W. operated as a Hezbollah foreign representative in Germany and as an operative of the Radwan Unit (aka Radwan Brigades), an elite Hezbollah unit. In 2012 he was chairman of the Al-Mustafa Community, which was outlawed in Germany in 2022 for incitement and other activities, and participated in the establishment of its youth movement. Between 2015 and 2016 he was in Syria and fought in the Radwan Brigades.
- ▶ Hassan M. operated in the Community for at least seven years as a member of its foreign relations department. According to the charge against him, he fostered relations with Lebanese organizations in Germany, especially in the north, and in 2018 worked in a conference of Lebanese associations in Germany under the aegis of the Community, where he was also a preacher in 2022 (AFP and tagesschau.de, May 10, 2023).

The Battle for Hearts and Minds

- ▶ On May 11, 2023, it was reported that the United States blocked 13 websites affiliated with Hezbollah (al-Akhbar, May 11, 2023):
 - ◆ moqawama.org
 - ◆ almanarnews.org
 - ◆ almanar-tv.com
 - ◆ alshahid.org

- ◆ almanar-tv.org
- ◆ manarnews.org
- ◆ manartv.ne
- ◆ almanar-tv.net
- ◆ alemdad.net
- ◆ Ibrahim-alsayed.net
- ◆ alidaamouch.com
- ◆ manarnews.net
- ◆ naimkassem.net



The American notice of its seizure of the moqawama.org website (moqawama.org website, May 12, 2023).

- ▶ In ITIC assessment, blocking the websites was a measure taken by the United States administration to prevent the organization from publishing propaganda. However, it will have little effect because Hezbollah uses many other website, such as <https://www.almanar.com.lb>, the al-Mayadeen TV website, al-'Ahed, and others.