

Q&A: Is Hezbollah Behind Bulgaria Attack?

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In the aftermath of the attack on Israeli tourists in Bulgaria, InsideIran interviewed Lokman Slim, a Sorbonne-educated Shia activist, publisher, and filmmaker from Haret Hreik, Lebanon. He directs the organization Hayya Bina, which supports freedom of expression and political pluralism in Lebanon.

Q: The Israeli officials are blaming Hezbollah for the terrorist attack in Bulgaria. Given your knowledge of Hezbollah, do you believe these claims are valid?

A: While the question is straightforward, answering it is not quite so simple. After all, very few bombers and assassins leave their organizational calling cards at the sites of explosions or on the bodies of their victims. Speculation is always rampant in such situations and as history bears out, facts are sometimes “produced” to add weight to an intended outcome.

Nevertheless, similar attacks have been planned or executed worldwide, such as in Thailand, Georgia and India, and Hezbollah is typically implicated. Regarding Bulgaria, the Israeli Prime Minister stated during a U.S. television interview that the intelligence linking Hezbollah to the attack is all but incontrovertible, and the Israelis are not the only ones who see Hezbollah’s “invisible hand” at work behind the July 18 attack in Burgas, Bulgaria. The Pentagon also noted that the attack appears to bear the Hezbollah “watermark” and Bulgarian officials noted that it fell on the anniversary of the July 18, 1994 attack on the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association in Buenos Aires—a crime attributed to Hezbollah.

Cyprus says it detained a man suspected of planning a similar attack there and that the individual is believed to be affiliated with Hezbollah. The Bulgarians recently disclosed that they thwarted an attack against Israelis, but that government has not yet made any specific accusations in the case. But in the event at hand, considering “the target,” the “theater of operations” and the timing involved, I cannot exclude Hezbollah or any other sub-*jihadi* network it manipulates from being involved. Likewise, it’s impossible to ignore the fact that a “Sunni” network could be blamed for the attack.

So let’s consider this with respect to who might profit from such a crime. Given the current environment and “climate,” I don’t see anyone profiting quite as much as the Iranians since the act corresponds with their “agenda.” By extension, the allegation that a “Sunni” suicide bomber committed the act makes sense as well. After all, it is the simplest way to redirect responsibility to those already seated in the “accusation box,” and it is a sure way to send a message directly to Israel.

Q: In recent years some of Hezbollah’s activities could characterize the movement as a moderate. If Hezbollah is responsible, would this be a shift in its strategy?

A: I don’t know what activities Hezbollah is involved with that might help characterize it as a “moderate” organization. Hezbollah carefully maintains a Janus-faced profile based on the one hand to its participation in the Lebanese government and on the other to its inarguable attributes as an “insurgent group.”

Those conditions alone make that organization much more suspect than ever before—at least in my eyes. The first

feature, its “respectable” participation in government affairs, aims among other things to divert attention from the organization’s alter ego.

Although that participation began warily through a series of small steps, it evolved into the springboard which ultimately led to the collapse of the Saad Hariri government—timed deftly to occur at the very moment the former prime minister was meeting with President Obama in the White House. Yet, the organization represents more than a handful of well-dressed politicians: it remains involved in diverse “criminal activities” throughout Lebanon and worldwide, and it maintains an armed cadre of thousands of young Shia and operates a broadly engaged intelligence network.

Thus, Hezbollah’s strength remains viable. We cannot ignore, for example, that it has steadfastly refused to turn over to a quasi-international judicial body the four suspects indicted in the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. After all, only Hezbollah’s strength could embolden its leader, Hasan Nasrallah, to warn that the organization would “cut off the hand” of anyone seeking to arrest a group member in connection with the assassination.

In light of these facts, it should be clear that Hezbollah’s participation in Lebanese politics cannot be viewed as the organization having made an existential shift away from insurgency and violence and toward accepting the democratic rules of the political game. Without doubt, some “sweethearts” were much too quick in attributing such a shift to Hezbollah...I believe that the all-inclusive moral and physical support Hezbollah has given to the Assad regime should more than explain the true nature of the organization.

Q: Do you believe there is any relationship between the attack and the war in Syria?

A: Yes and no. No, because I don’t believe the attack shows much of a relationship per se to the ongoing Syrian violence. Alternatively, I would say that such a relationship might exist since I’m of the opinion that events in Syria have compelled Hezbollah to strip away steadily the varnish of respectability it has applied so diligently in recent years.

One of the realities Hezbollah must confront is the support it has continued to lavish on the Assad regime. Moreover, it must wrestle with a series of debilitating factors that have caused it to fail in the eyes of the international community. For example, the STL indeed received funding despite the tidal wave of propaganda Hezbollah used to portray that body as an evil “Zionist-American” tool.

It has also failed with its constituency at home since despite its domination of the government, the “average Lebanese” have not benefitted from any worthwhile changes. Even more importantly, the organization has been hugely unable to explain its *raison d’être* to the Lebanese in general and to the Lebanese Shia in particular. All told, these failures are pushing Hezbollah to adopt an “edge to the ledge” policy. Along with such a change in policy, I would not be surprised to see Hezbollah return to its “roots” by stirring the old recipes of blackmail by bloodletting. In other words, this steady weakening is pushing Hezbollah to abandon its sexy guise of respectability in favor of returning—most likely with the full agreement of its Iranian patron—to “terrorism.”

Q: In your opinion, how independent is Iran from Hezbollah? Would the party do something like this independently from Tehran?

A: So, you’re asking about *Hezbollah’s* relative independence from Iran...

Despite all the chatter we’ve been hearing and reading about for years via the different political and academic circles regarding Hezbollah’s *Lebanonization*, and regardless of what Hezbollah represents emotionally and symbolically to the collective conscience of the Lebanese Shia and others, one indelible fact remains.

As a military entity and accomplished intelligence network, Hezbollah was and is an integral component of the Iranian military machine. Considering its relative independence from its benefactor, any autonomy Hezbollah might have gained over time was nullified after the July (2006) war in which Iran conscripted parts of Lebanon to serve as military bases

and ordered a series of assassinations. Interestingly, the attacks that eliminated local and regional power brokers, including Imad Mughniyah (Lebanese) and General Muhammad Suleiman (Syrian), were focused on individuals considered seasoned pillars of the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah nexus.

Clearly, Hezbollah could neither have planned nor executed such operations without Iranian permission or direction. Actions of that kind involve the entire, fragile equilibrium and cannot be decided arbitrarily by a random collection of hot-headed anti-Semites. As was reported earlier this year, Nasrallah acknowledged the obvious regarding Hezbollah's subordinate association with Iran, but quickly tried to soften the blow by asserting that the "Party of God" would make its own decisions about engagement. Still, it seems this attack is but the latest chapter in the *covert* war between Iran—complemented by its Hezbollah component—and Israel.

In that conflict, the Israelis are subjecting the Iranians to painful injuries such as debilitating cyber attacks and the assassination of key Iranian scientists, while the Iranians continue to chip away at their archenemy by attacking Israeli interests. Because the Bulgarian attack is indicative of this long-term conflict, I am not convinced that we will see any large-scale response from the Israelis. Still, I do think operations in this covert proxy war will intensify as a result.

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