

## NewsWatch

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**Clearing the damage** Hezbollah workers continually clear rubble from Haret Hreik, a southern suburb of Beirut that was the headquarters of Hezbollah and was destroyed by Israel during the summer war. Adam Jadhav | Post-Dispatch

On the streets of Lebanon, people are saying ...

# 'We are Hezbollah. They are us'

Militant group turns to politics, and it may just topple the government.

By Adam Jadhav  
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

**MALIKEYA, LEBANON** • Every now and then, Mustafa Rida hears a boom echo across the lemon, orange and olive orchards that surround his tiny village some 10 miles from the border with Israel.

It's the sound of troops detonating an unexploded bomb, left over from the Israeli's offensive last summer against the militant group Hezbollah. Rida, a 72-year-old farmer, still has an Israeli leaflet dropped from the sky that warned him to leave his home as Israel pursued the guerrilla fighters.

Last month, Rida stared at the village mosque as he leaned against the plaster gateway to his home. When asked about the havoc wreaked after Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers from near the border in July, he smiled.

"Israel attacked us to stop Hezbollah," he told a Post-Dispatch reporter. "But we are Hezbollah. They are us."

Public support for Hezbollah in Lebanon was as much a fallout of the summer conflict as the left-behind bombs. It's that popularity that in part has pushed Hezbollah to seek more power and recognition, pushing the country to the edge of political collapse.

This past week, the capital, Beirut, has been wracked by sit-ins tens of thousands strong by Hezbollah supporters. Before that came the resignation of six cabinet ministers — a quarter of the total number — who represent the Shiite movement and its allies. Another major protest was planned for Sunday.

Though labeled a terrorist outfit by the United States and others, Hezbollah is at once a militia, a social service agency, and, now, a political party.

"We are not concerned with this government anymore," Sheikh Hassan Ezzeddine, a top Hezbollah official, said in an interview last month. "If we manage to topple the government, it is our democratic right to topple it."

The specter of violence and memories of a 15-year civil war now are looming. One cabinet minister, an outspoken critic of Hezbollah's patron Syria, was assassinated last month. As demonstrations continue, tit-for-tat violence threatens the nation.

"The people don't want this, we just want peace," said a security guard at the shrine to former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. A critic of Syria, the popular leader was killed in 2005, some say because the Syrian government saw him as a threat.

The guard himself feared retaliation if he was identified.

### Civil war threat

The situation represents an immensely complicated and historical power struggle between the more than a dozen political and religious groups in Lebanon.

If the government collapses, the country risks being plunged into another civil war, something neither Hezbollah nor the U.S.-backed Sunni-led majority likely want, said Hilal Khashan, a political scientist at American University Beirut. But concessions by either side — power from the ruling majority in the form of a veto over the cabinet or disarmament by Hezbollah — seem unlikely.

"For both sides, that would be political suicide," Khashan said.

The situation also threatens to become a proxy war between the United States and Hezbollah's allies Syria and Iran. This struggle has added significance as President George W. Bush faces increasing pressure to talk to those nations' leaders about the war in Iraq.

Both the United States and Hezbollah denounce what each sees as other countries trying to exert power in Beirut. U.S. State



**A time of support** Mustafa Rida lives in the tiny village of Malikeya, some 10 miles from the Israeli border. A 72-year-old Shiite farmer, he looks to the mosque across the street from his home and praises Hezbollah. Adam Jadhav | Post-Dispatch

Department spokesman Sean McCormack described the crisis as "manufactured outside of Lebanon" during a press conference last week. The Hezbollah Sheik Ezzeddine alluded to U.S. influence in particular when he condemned the "hegemony of other countries on Lebanon."

### Remnants of war

The roughly 60-mile drive past banana plantations and Mediterranean towns from the Israeli border to Beirut can take up to three hours these days. Traffic is diverted from highways to country roads as many bridges remain in ruin, casualties of Israel's massive bombing campaign.

Along the journey, other traces of the war can also be seen — U.N. peacekeeping stations, destroyed homes, and the occasional burned field.

Though largely unscathed by bombs, Beirut saw its tourism founder. Now many of its beaches sit stained by oil that flowed into the sea after bombs fell on stockpiles.

But the most widespread effect of the summer war at least in Beirut, was something far less tangible: the tension caused by Hezbollah's rapid growth in political influence.

Minor demonstrations broke out last month during student elections at American University Beirut. Even in tourist districts, cars occasionally fly Hezbollah flags.

People continued with their lives, but they spoke of uncertainty. The front pages of newspapers were consumed by the political back-and-forth between Hezbollah and its opponents.

"The tensions are probably the highest they've been in 15 years (since the country's civil war ended)," said Habib Battah, a Beirut journalist. "With the rhetoric continuing to ramp up, the people are really nervous."

### Militance, and social aid

Dust flies as vehicles rumble into Haret Hreik, an area in the southern suburbs of Beirut where buildings, cars and even the air are brown. The source of the dust is the flattened remains of the neighborhood, the strongest of Hezbollah strongholds, home to group's headquarters.

High-rises were razed this summer by Israeli bombs, leaving piles of concrete. The main offices of al-Manar, Hezbollah's TV network, were struck with enough fire-power to obliterate the five stories above ground and the two below.

Some buildings stand with shattered windows. Others were sheared in half, leaving twisted spokes of iron rebar jutting into the air.

Hezbollah volunteers have returned to begin reconstruction. Some stores have reopened, and construction crews constantly haul away debris — concrete, but also furniture, books, children's toys. Haret Hreik stood as an important target for Israel, home to Hezbollah's leadership, including Sheikh Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah.

As Hezbollah volunteers huddled over a table inside a massive beige tent last month, they talked about plans for reconstruction and dispersing aid from other Arab countries, including Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Syria. They made no mention of their weapons stores and talked military strategy only when pressed.

That may have been Hezbollah trying to play up its charitable side. But simply put, the organization is not what it used to be.

It maintains arguably one of the most revered militias in the Islamic world, blamed for the 1983 bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks here that killed more than 200. The United States believes that Hezbollah has trained other guerrilla resistance groups — such as fighters in Somalia — along with sending soldiers to Iraq.

But the group also runs a massive welfare program, providing education to poor Shiites and rebuilding its supporters' homes.

In some Shiite areas, it practically acts in place of the U.S-backed coalition government.

### Puppet of Syria?

Critics in the United States and within Lebanon worry that Syria and Iran are behind Hezbollah's bid for power.

"I want to know what Hezbollah wants from Lebanon and what kind of Lebanon they want," said TV talk show host Gisele Khoury, whose prominent activist husband Samir Kassir, a critic of Syria, was assassinated months after the killing of Hariri, the former prime minister.

Hezbollah remains an organization largely outside the control of the Lebanese government or military. Calls for the group to disarm or negotiate will likely go nowhere.

"I want to be very honest with you, we cannot disarm Hezbollah," said Lieutenant Colonel Youssef Mechref. "We know this. But we can also not have a civilian war."

Some U.S. officials and others had speculated that Hezbollah had depleted much of its forces during the summer war. So the organization may be looking to bolster its political influence to avoid disarmament or gain clout in future elections, Khashan said.

The wishes of Syria or Iran are lesser concerns, he added.

"Hezbollah is not really a proxy of Syria. Hezbollah is not a proxy of Iran," Khashan said. "These I believe are overstatements and part of the conventional wisdom that is being circulated."

Israel remains on the horizon, and Hezbollah's sworn enemy. The Jewish state holds dozens if not hundreds of the organization's fighters as prisoners. And Hezbollah still is believed to have custody of the two Israeli soldiers captured this summer.

Asked if Hezbollah would consider negotiations or ultimately coexistence, the Sheik Ezzeddine laughed and puffed on his cigar.

He then launched into a lengthy condemnation of Israel's past, capped by a terse: "Israel doesn't want peace."

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## NEWS QUIZ

1. When teachers in the St. Louis Public Schools were asked to grade the district, what grade got the highest percentage?

- A. A    B. B    C. C    D. D

2. Clayton businessman Sam Fox was nominated to be ambassador to what country?

- A. Luxembourg    B. Belgium    C. Czech Republic    D. Denmark

3. Carbon monoxide fumes forced evacuation of what institution on Wednesday?

- A. Art Museum    B. Science Center  
C. History Museum    D. Living World at the Zoo

4. Data including names and account numbers of what bank were stolen from a car?

- A. Premier Bank    B. Champion Bank  
C. Heartland Bank    D. Reliance Bank

5. Confluence Academy in St. Louis hopes to build a powerhouse team in what activity?

- A. Chess    B. Bridge    C. Table tennis    D. Scrabble

6. Washington University Chancellor Mark Wrighton has been mentioned as a possibility to be president of what school?

- A. Harvard    B. Yale    C. Stanford    D. University of Chicago

7. In March, the Cardinals will play the inaugural game to commemorate the civil rights movement; where will it be played?

- A. Atlanta    B. Birmingham, Ala.    C. Memphis    D. Washington

8. What office was NOT represented on the Iraq Study Group?

- A. Former Supreme Court justice    B. Former House member  
C. Former Cabinet member    D. Former U.N. representative

9. Robert Gates, newly confirmed as secretary of defense, has been president of what university?

- A. Texas Tech    B. Texas A&M  
C. University of Texas at Austin    D. Texas Christian

10. What ingredient was suspected in an outbreak of E. coli at Taco Bell?

- A. Beans    B. Salsa    C. Cheese    D. Green onions

1. D. In the survey, 63 percent of the teachers gave the district a D.

2. B. Fox was nominated to be ambassador to Belgium.

3. C. About 200 people were evacuated from the Missouri History Museum.

4. A. The data belonged to customers of Premier Bank.

5. C. The school is working hard at table tennis.

6. A. Wrighton's name has surfaced as a new president at Harvard.

7. C. The Cardinals will play the Cleveland Indians March 31 in Memphis.

8. D. The group did not include a former representative to the U.N.

9. B. Gates is president of Texas A&M.

10. D. Investigators suspected green onions in the E. coli outbreak.

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## TV UPDATE

Here is the lineup for the Sunday morning television news shows:

### MEET THE PRESS | 8 A.M. | CHANNEL 5

Former Secretary of State James A. Baker III and former Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., co-chairmen of the Iraq Study Group.

### FOX NEWS SUNDAY | 9 A.M. | CHANNEL 2

Baker and Hamilton; Sens. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., and Sam Brownback, R-Kan.; composer Marvin Hamlisch.

### FACE THE NATION | 9:30 A.M. | CHANNEL 4

Baker and Hamilton; Sens. Carl Levin, D-Mich., and Trent Lott, R-Miss.

### THIS WEEK | 10 A.M. | CHANNEL 30

British Prime Minister Tony Blair; Sens. Joe Biden, D-Del., and Gordon Smith, R-Ore.; actor Ed Asner.

### LATE EDITION | 11 A.M. | CNN

Baker and Hamilton; Reps. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., and Jane Harman, D-Calif.; Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq; Israeli Vice Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

## CONTACT US

Comments, suggestions and questions are welcome.

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## YOU SAID IT

Visitors to STLtoday.com's Talk of the Day blog had these thoughts about recent topics in the news:

### ON AMEREN:

"I have lived in St. Louis for two years now, and have never seen such mediocrity in power service from any other city."

**Kimberly Behrendt** | Maplewood

"God bless the linemen, but their bosses need to get a clue."

**Dawn O'Leary** | O'Fallon, Ill.

"From my point of view, as a former electricity-provider employee (albeit an Australian one), I say cut the Ameren crews some slack. I can assure you that they're doing their best."

**Amber Tiver-Weatherley** | Maryland Heights

"I understand that acts of Nature are out of anyone's hands, but these outages are not only from Nature but from poorly maintained lines, and overgrown trees."

**Michelle Merriott** | St. Louis

"Give the men and women behind the scenes and out in the bitter cold a break. Does anyone really think we like not having feeling in our hands and feet because of the conditions we are working in? Storm restoration is a very DANGEROUS job."

**Brandon Lahmann** | Sullivan

"It galls me that now that Ameren owns Illinois Power, it's suddenly my responsibility to keep their power lines safe from falling debris. I thought that part of the \$150 a month I sent them was for taking care of that."

**Jason Moss** | Collinsville

"The solution to this problem is to bury the utility lines. Though this may be expensive, we're losing the money anyway by paying for hotel rooms and to restock the refrigerator after power outages."

**Kimberly Means** | St. Louis

**Daryl Reitzner** | Manchester