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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

30 January 1987

Lebanon: Iranian and Syrian Influence  
with the Hostage Captors

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Summary

Iran has significant influence with the radical Shia Hizballah organization responsible for the recent wave of kidnappings in West Beirut, but Tehran does not control Hizballah's activities. Despite Iran's considerable support--which includes money, arms and training--and shared ideological objectives, Tehran does not dictate Hizballah's decisions. In our view, Hizballah has its own agenda in the hostage affair--focused on freeing imprisoned terrorists in Germany and Kuwait--which motivates its terrorism. Syria has a fundamentally antagonistic relationship with Hizballah which is held in check only by Syria's "strategic alliance" with Iran. Syria has little or no means of influencing the captors as long as it remains committed to the Iranian alliance but will try to take credit for any hostage release to boost its international standing.

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\* \* \* \* \*

The recent kidnappings in Beirut of US and German citizens by Hizballah elements underscores the organization's determination to up the ante against the dwindling Western presence in the Lebanese capital. The kidnappings were precipitated by the arrest

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Levant Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, and [redacted] the Iran-Iraq Branch, Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 30 January 1987 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be addressed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [redacted]

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[redacted]  
of Muhammad Hammadi--one of the hijackers of TWA flight 847 in 1985 and a key Hizballah security commander--by German security officials on 14 January. [redacted]

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We believe that all recent kidnappings were carried out by elements of Hizballah. [redacted]

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[redacted]

--Two organizations have publicly claimed responsibility for kidnaping of the Western hostages: they are the Organization of Oppressed on Earth and the Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine. We believe that these organizations are cover names for Mughniyah's apparatus or other closely related elements of Hizballah. Mughniyah's consistent objective since 1984 has been to free 17 Shia prisoners--one of whom is his brother-in-law--held in Kuwait. We believe this remains his basic objective. [redacted]

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Iran's Role: Influence Not Control

We believe recent developments support our longstanding judgment regarding the relationship between Iran and the hostage takers in Lebanon: Iran has considerable influence with the hostage holders but does not control them. [redacted]

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[redacted] Iran continues to provide significant support to Hizballah in Lebanon and has been involved in many Hizballah activities, including terrorism. [redacted]

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Iran continues to support a broad range of Hizballah activities in Lebanon. It provides military training and equipment, engages in political and religious indoctrination and proselytizing, and finances social welfare projects throughout the Lebanese Shia areas. [redacted]

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[redacted]

We have no evidence that Iran ordered the kidnaping of any of the Western hostages kidnaped in Lebanon since 1984.

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[redacted]

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Nonetheless, Tehran clearly has profited from the continued detention of the hostages, deriving considerable political, military, and economic benefits.

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Tehran, however, is neither able to completely dominate the Hizballah captors nor unilaterally control developments in the hostage crisis.

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We do not believe that Iran, if it decided its own interests would be served by releasing all the Western hostages, could simply order the release and have that order carried out.

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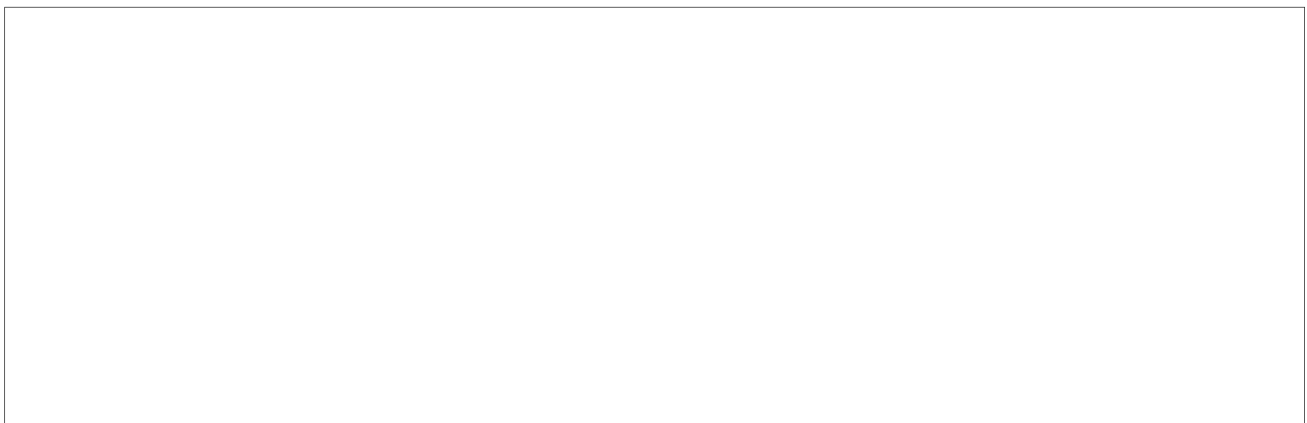
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We believe the Iranians' primary reason for engaging in the recent initiative toward the United States was to use the American hostages as pawns to gain military equipment and spare parts.

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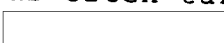
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Syria's Role: On the Margins

Syria currently has only marginal influence with the Hizballah. President Assad has been unwilling to confront directly the organization in Lebanon or prevent its supporters--the Iranian Revolutionary Guards--from using Damascus as a crucial transit point for personnel and supplies between Tehran and Lebanon's Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley.

--Assad's long animosity toward Saddam Husayn's regime in Iraq, Syria's dependence on Iranian oil, and a convergence of certain goals--such as a forced Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon--account for the "blind eye" he has often turned on Hizballah activities in Lebanon. 

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His patent inability to influence the hostage-holders greatly frustrates Assad, however: he wants to demonstrate to the West that Damascus has uncontested control over Syrian-occupied Lebanon and an irrefutable role to play in regional affairs.

--In our view, the growth of the Hizballah organization and the number of hostages it is hiding in crowded West Beirut suburbs has outstripped Assad's ability to forcibly intervene and secure hostage releases. Hizballah's expanded autonomy and activities in Lebanon have significantly diminished its responsiveness to Syrian concerns.

--The 1,000-1,500 Syrian troops in West Beirut are unable to police the city given the complex mosaic of militia factions at work.



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[REDACTED]

--Syria has often even failed in its attempts to merely stage-manage hostage releases.

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[REDACTED]

Assad will be unable to take a more active role in the hostage problem unless he decides to confront Tehran directly by prohibiting the Revolutionary Guard--a primary source of Hizballah's supplies--from using Damascus International Airport as transit point into and out of Lebanon.

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[REDACTED]

Assad is unlikely to risk a complete rupture with Tehran, however: Syria's economic crisis has increased its dependence on Iranian oil shipments and Assad's enmity toward Iraqi president Husayn ensures his continued support for Iran in the Gulf war. The recent Islamic summit in Kuwait offered Assad a convenient venue for abandoning his "strategic alliance" with Iran. Assad's decision not to do so underscores, in our view, both his commitment to Iran and his realization of the heavy costs Syria would pay for a divorce from Tehran.

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[REDACTED]

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