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Stronger Hezbollah Emboldened for Fights Ahead

By THANASSIS CAMBANIS

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It was from this shrub-ringed border town that Hezbollah instigated its war with Israel in 2006, and supporters of the militant Shiite movement sound almost disappointed that they have not fought since.

“I was expecting the war this summer,” said Faris Jamil, a municipal official and small-business owner. “It’s late.” He has yet to finish rebuilding his three-story house, destroyed by an Israeli bomb that year.

In 2006, Hezbollah guerrillas crossed the border a few hundred yards from the town center, ambushed an Israeli patrol and retreated through Aita al Shaab with the bodies of two Israeli soldiers.

Hezbollah officials and supporters said they were now sending a pointed message to Israel through their efforts to rebuild, repopulate and rearm the south.

“We are not sleeping,” said Ali Fayyad, a Hezbollah official and member of Parliament. “We are working.” He receives visitors every weekend in a family home in Taibe, the site of a deadly tank battle in 2006.

Four years later, Hezbollah appears to be, if not bristling for a fight with Israel, then coolly prepared for one. It seems to be calculating either that an aggressive military posture might deter another war, as its own officials and Lebanese analysts say, or that a conflict, should it come, would on balance fortify its domestic political standing.

According to Hassan Nasrallah, the group's leader, Hezbollah has increased its missile stocks to 40,000, compared with 13,000 during the 2006 war; Israeli defense officials do not dispute the estimate. (In 2006, Hezbollah fired about 4,000 missiles.)

Hezbollah rejoined Lebanon's coalition government in 2008 as a full partner with veto power, a position of responsibility that many analysts say should discourage any thoughts of provoking a second destructive war with Israel. Yet, because of the party's ties to Iran and its powerful militia, Hezbollah officials say they are ready to fight even if a war would do widespread damage.

There are other reasons that Hezbollah officials say they are feeling emboldened. Hezbollah's patrons in Iran appear to have regained control after a year of internal challenges since the disputed June 2009 re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Officials say Hezbollah proved to its constituents that it could quickly rebuild from the last war, completing a lavish reconstruction project with hundreds of millions of dollars in financing from Iran and donors in the Persian Gulf. Polished 10-story apartment blocks, completed this year, line the center of Haret Hreik, the Beirut suburb almost uniformly reduced to rubble because it housed many of Hezbollah's top institutions and leaders.

New asphalt roads, designed and paid for by Iran, connect the interior and border villages of southern Lebanon — all Hezbollah areas — to the main coastal highway.

And perhaps most importantly, Lebanese analysts said, Hezbollah's role in the government has paved the way for tighter cooperation with Lebanese intelligence units, and Lebanese officials have reportedly arrested more than 100 people suspected of being Israeli spies in the past two years.

The renaissance in southern Lebanon is on full display in Aita al Shaab. Almost destroyed in 2006, it has been ostentatiously rebuilt, and its population has increased by about 30 percent from its prewar level, to 12,000 inhabitants.

Party supporters have constructed dozens of enormous houses along the strategic hills that face the Israeli border, in areas that used to be mostly farmland. The houses, Hezbollah officials say, will complicate a future Israeli advance and could give Hezbollah fighters cover during ground combat.

United Nations peacekeepers and the Lebanese Army now patrol the hilly, wooded border, and under the terms of the United Nations resolution that ended the war, Hezbollah was supposed to demilitarize the area between the Israeli border and the Litani River, a distance of about 18 miles.

But Hezbollah appears to have done just the opposite. Its operatives roam strategic towns, interrogating foreigners and outsiders. New residents have been recruited to the border, and Hezbollah officials say they have recruited scores of new fighters, by their own estimates either doubling or tripling their ranks.

Hezbollah appears to have retained the support of the Shiite Muslims in southern Lebanon. "Hezbollah is not a foreign body. It is an organic, natural part of every house, village," said Hussein Rumeiti, an official in Burj Qalaouay, a town where extensive fighting took place in 2006. "It is part of the Shia."

Several independent Lebanese military analysts, who do not support Hezbollah, say they have seen evidence that Hezbollah has armed, trained and expanded its forces substantially enough to pose a major challenge to an invading Israeli force.

"We're not wasting time," said Mahmoud Komati, one of Hezbollah's founders.

In addition to fortifying its ranks and replenishing its missile capacity, he said in an interview, Hezbollah has adopted a self-described policy of "strategic ambiguity" about whether it has acquired anti-aircraft capacity, advanced Scud missiles or other military equipment that could change the balance of forces with Israel. (The language consciously mirrors Israel's doctrine of strategic ambiguity over its undeclared nuclear weapons program.)

Elaborating on themes that Hezbollah's leader has repeatedly outlined in speeches, Mr. Komati said that the group wanted to maintain a deterrent balance with Israel. Hezbollah, he added, does not want to start the next war, only to burnish its capacity to retaliate.

"Today we are living the balance of fear," Mr. Komati said. "This balance blocks war."

Hezbollah also has become less coy about its strategic alliance with Syria and Iran. In the past, Hezbollah had signaled that it would not necessarily respond if one of its sponsors were attacked. Now, however, Hezbollah leaders have declared that they will find it difficult to stand aside if Israel or the United States bombs Iran's nuclear facilities.

An assessment released last month by Jeffrey White, a former Defense Intelligence Agency official who is now a scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said that a clash between Hezbollah and Israel was likely to be more destructive than the 2006 conflict and that it could rapidly escalate to draw in Syria or Iran.

Walid Sukaria, a retired general and member of Parliament who votes with Hezbollah but is not in the party, said that Israel would have to think twice before attacking any member of the "axis of resistance," which includes Hezbollah, Syria and Iran. Hezbollah could not win such a war, Mr. Sukaria said, but could ensure enough mutual destruction to discourage Israel.

"A war would destroy Syria and Lebanon, but it would not be in Israel's interest," he said.

Along the border, a mixture of fatalism and bravado prevails.

Just up the hill from the Israeli hamlets of Avivim and Yir'on, an Iranian flag flutters on the ledge of the newly opened Iran Park in Marun al Ras, the Lebanese border village where Israel fought one of its first and most bruising battles in 2006.

A photograph of Iran's president, Mr. Ahmadinejad, greets visitors to the terraced playgrounds and picnic gazebos.

"This will be the first place the Israelis destroy during the next war," said Jihan Muselmani, 35, who was preparing a daylong picnic with her extended family from the coast.

Rabab Haidar, 28, said, "Even if they destroy it, we will build it up again."

In Aita al Shaab, Mr. Jamil recently resumed construction on the second and third floors of his bombed house; his family has been living in the basement since 2006. A Christian friend from the neighboring village who sheltered Mr. Jamil's family during the 2006 bombing, and who subsequently lost a leg to a cluster bomb, visited on a recent Sunday and denounced the war talk.

“We don’t want to die,” the friend said.

Mr. Jamil rebuked him. “Our destiny is to die,” he said.