

May 18, 2003

Video Game Mounts Simulated Attacks Against Israeli Targets

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

BEIRUT, Lebanon, May 17 — The introduction is an exploding Israeli tank. A row of burning Israeli flags marks time while the computer loads a "training session" in which shooting Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's electronic forehead on a target is worth 10 points.

"Victory comes from no one but Allah," exhorts the screen before the mission begins.

The hottest video game for the teenagers of Beirut's southern Shiite neighborhoods is "Special Force," a creation of Hezbollah, the strongly anti-Israel militant organization that is on the United States' terror list.

"Special Force," with its simulated attacks on the Israeli military, was released in February, quickly took off and is to be followed later this month by a more sophisticated version that can link multiple players on a network.

While not the first politically oriented video game to enter Middle Eastern cyberspace, "Special Force" is a sign of Hezbollah's elaborate propaganda efforts. Its popularity is also an indication of Hezbollah's success in permeating popular consciousness in Lebanon and in gaining political legitimacy here.

Washington has implicated Hezbollah in terrorist attacks in the 1980's and says it remains a terrorist force with worldwide operations. With the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, the United States has renewed pressure on Lebanon and one of Hezbollah's sponsors, Syria, to disarm the group and halt its activities.

Hezbollah says it is focusing on resisting the Israeli occupation of a disputed patch of land on Israel's northern border and on providing moral support to the Palestinian struggle in the West Bank and Gaza.

Its relentless attacks helped drive out Israeli forces from southern Lebanon in 2000, ending a 22-year occupation. That has given Hezbollah a certain stature here and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Hezbollah has capitalized on that stature, entrenching itself in Lebanese society with the patronage of Syria, the power broker here, and with Iranian financing and arms, United States and Israeli officials say.

A shrewd media presence has helped. Hezbollah operates a television and radio station and Web sites.

The latest effort is the "Special Force" game. Segments are based on actual attacks on Israeli positions, the makers say, and include maps provided by Hezbollah's military wing.

In one game situation, the player fires simulated pistols and Kalashnikov rifles, seeking to infiltrate an Israeli military position. The opportunities for martyrdom, from exploding land mines and snipers, are rife.

"You must oppose, confront and destroy the machines of the Zionist enemy and remind them that entering Lebanese villages is not a stroll," the text reads. The session ends with a medal awarded by the leader of Hezbollah, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah.

The packaging says the game seeks to show "the defeat of the Israeli enemy and the heroic actions taken by the heroes of the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon."

A member of the game's design team, Bilal Zain, said "Special Force" was intended to disseminate Hezbollah's "values, concepts and ideas," as well as to give Hezbollah fans a chance to feel as if they were taking part in attacks they cheered from afar.

Mr. Zain said the video game also served as a counterweight to other games on the international market that depicted Arabs as terrorists instead of as freedom fighters with legitimate grievances. He said "Special Force" was less bloody than many other games.

"We want others to know our land is occupied, our people are imprisoned in Israeli jails, our houses are being demolished," he said.

The border area controlled by Hezbollah is quiet for now, he said. "But we do not want the resistance concept to vanish," he said. "We want this idea to live among the Arab people, the Islamic people."

He said about 10,000 copies of "Special Force" had been sold in Lebanon, Syria, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Canada, Germany and Australia. It can be played in English, French, Arabic and Farsi.

The game is often played at places like the Champions Internet Cafe in the Haret Hreik neighborhood in south Beirut, a predominantly Shiite area of rundown buildings where several computer stores said "Special Force" had sold out.

The cafe's window is adorned with Hezbollah's yellow flag, depicting an upraised arm holding a Kalashnikov aloft, and one of the many posters advertising "Special Force" found in the area.

The decor is combat chic. Bamboo partitions are intended to evoke the Vietnam war. Red sandbags line the walls, which are painted with camouflage designs and hold several rows of plastic Kalashnikovs. Photographs of Sheik Nasrallah and Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei sit on a display shelf.

Ibrahim Tohmaz, 14, firing away on a mission, said he liked the game's realism. "Shooting at Sharon — it was nice to shoot at his head," he said. "He's a bad person."

A dozen others were playing another violent game called "Counterstrike," in which generic terrorists fight generic commandos. Players can choose which to be. This was another of Ibrahim's favorites. He said he liked to take the part of the terrorist.

"We have a better chance of killing our opponent," he said.