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SIDON, Lebanon -- Abou Ali is calm and curious, oblivious to the fact that it's 3 a.m. and he's making small talk with sleepy foreigners, uninvited, in the home of someone he's never met. He wants to know about America's view of his organization, Hezbollah. He wants to talk about the Bush administration's plans for the "new" Middle East.

"What do Americans really think of us?" he asks through his lieutenant, a burly businessman who went to college in Mississippi and speaks perfect English. "Do they really think we are just soldiers? They think we are like al Qaeda?"

Abou Ali -- a pseudonym -- has his own plans for the new Middle East: They include a rebuilt southern Lebanon patrolled by the national army, with Hezbollah backing, and friendly relations with a neighboring country called Palestine -- occupying what is now the state of Israel.

Four weeks of relentless Israeli air strikes and bloody ground fighting may have degraded Hezbollah's military capability, but seem to have done little to break its spirit, at least in Sidon.

These optimistic and determined midnight visitors say the world is witnessing a reborn Hezbollah that is trained, armed, dedicated and ferocious. "We have not been asleep for six years," Abou Ali says, referring to the years since the Israeli army withdrew from the security zone it had occupied until 2000 in southernmost Lebanon. "We have the Internet, TV, magazines. We adapt and we learn. They have been preparing for this war, and so have we."

Abou Ali and his colleague, who uses the name Sam, came to the apartment shortly after 2 a.m. yesterday, after five armed Hezbollah lookouts found two reporters on the roof transmitting their stories by satellite.

Mid-level Hezbollah officials subsequently established that the writers were no threat to their operations, but warned that Israeli aircraft could target the apartment building. Polite and genuinely contrite about the shouting and the firearms, they offered to escort the reporters back to the roof to finish their work.

An hour later, Abou Ali appeared at the home where they were staying with their Lebanese driver and translator. Dressed in blue jeans and short-sleeve pullover with a closely trimmed beard, the head of Hezbollah's local social welfare operations does not cut a dangerous figure. All that sets him apart from any other overworked man in his mid-40s was the enormous chrome-plated two-way radio

squawking quietly beside him on the sofa.

Smoking the occasional cigarette and listening intently to Sam's translation, Abou Ali is especially concerned about how the American people view Hezbollah, or the "Party of God." He seems aggrieved to learn that Americans are much more aware of its military wing than of its political power and vast relief operations -- now geared up to assist tens of thousands of evacuees from the southern front.

The two men complain that Israel is waging an unfair war by targeting civilians and, especially, children. But they reject criticism of their own Haifa-bound rockets, refusing to admit the similarities. Hezbollah has no airplanes, Sam argues.

Both Abou Ali and Sam, who wears heavy silver rings on several fingers and fiddles with prayer beads, shrug off any suggestion that Hezbollah's power will be diminished after a cease-fire. They are incredulous that President Bush or any other leader thinks the organization can be destroyed.

Unlike al Qaeda, they say as cups of sweetened tea are brought from the kitchen, Hezbollah -- labeled a terrorist organization by the United States -- is integrated into the fabric of Lebanon and has broad support among the people.

Hezbollah is already preparing for the future, the two men say, beginning with the day when Israeli troops return across the border. An international force will be welcome, briefly, they say, but they would prefer that it be based in Israel since Lebanon is already hosting a U.N. peacekeeping mission.

In their view, Hezbollah will patch up the infrastructure in the south as residents return to their homes. The Lebanese army may protect Lebanese citizens at the border, but armed Hezbollah forces will be right behind them, where they have always been, in towns and villages.

The two men are already counting on direct investment from Arab nations to rebuild the ruined roads, bridges and homes in the area south of the Litani River.

"The Saudis were the first," says Sam, referring to a contribution of \$1.5 billion to shore up the central bank and provide relief. "The others will follow. Why? So that Iran and Syria cannot take credit for rebuilding the south."