

HEZBOLLAH: ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS OF AN INSURGENCY

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Counterinsurgency is a complex, multidimensional exercise that requires time and an intricate understanding of an insurgent and their target population to be carried out successfully. Hezbollah, a nearly thirty-year-old insurgency with anti-Israel, anti-Western motivations, has become a legitimate political entity in Lebanon buoyed by radical Islamic states who share their goals. Though Hezbollah is commonly referred to as a terrorist organization, this paper examines Hezbollah through the lens of an insurgency to explain its longevity and the depth of its threat to U.S. interests. Through a discussion of Hezbollah's support from foreign governments, their ability to provide basic human resources to the Lebanese people, and their large political following, patterns emerge that provide U.S. and Israeli counterinsurgents with tools to combat Hezbollah's threat.

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INTRODUCTION

Hezbollah, the “Party of God,” is designated by the United States Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (U.S. Department of State 2009). However, elements of Hezbollah’s political motivation, advanced fighting capabilities, and the level of support it receives from external actors allow it to just as easily be considered a modern insurgency, which requires a unique set of policy responses that this analysis attempts to identify. Hezbollah has morphed from a collection of Shi’a militant groups into one of the most highly organized and efficient insurgencies in the world (Byman 2008, 171).

The organization’s motto, as vehemently espoused by its leader, Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, is “Death to America,” necessitating an American counterinsurgency response; given Hezbollah’s tremendous influence and capacity, they pose a real and powerful threat to the United States and its interests (Byman 2003, 54). However, attempts by U.S. forces to bring down the organization have been hampered by Hezbollah’s worldwide support base that provides them sanctuary and money on nearly every continent (Ibid).

Hezbollah’s insurgency in Lebanon is ongoing. The organization has expanded to a political party, which substantiates its legitimacy and proves its staying power. As the following analysis will illustrate, Hezbollah has had great success in spreading its message, though it has failed to bring about the end of Israel or “Death to America.” By analyzing the Hezbollah organization as an insurgency movement, several key patterns emerge. First, their success is predicated largely on the amount of support they receive from Iran and Syria. Second, Hezbollah has achieved a vast global following, which makes counterinsurgency efforts extremely difficult because of the amount of popular support the organization receives from under-represented Shi’a Muslims, both within Lebanon and across the world. This global following makes it difficult for counterinsurgents to redirect support away from Hezbollah toward more legitimate political representation. Third, Hezbollah’s focus on providing basic services for the Lebanese population has given them invaluable public support in Lebanon that counterinsurgents have trouble matching. These factors will be explored further through this assessment by applying counterinsurgency theory to Hezbollah’s formation and organization. Finally, this paper will analyze Hezbollah’s current strengths and weaknesses, as well as the effectiveness of U.S. and Israeli counterinsurgencies, and make recommendations for future counterinsurgency operations.

WHAT IS HEZBOLLAH?

Hezbollah was formed in Lebanon in the wake of Israel’s 1982 invasion of that country. The organization committed several terrorist acts in the early 1980s, such as the bombing of the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut and the hijacking of TWA Flight 847, though they did not claim responsibility for them until 1985 (Krueger and Maleckova 2003, 129). Initially, their goal was to eliminate Israeli statehood and create a Shi’ite state in Lebanon modeled after Iran (Ibid.).

Hezbollah employed brutal terrorist tactics to spread their message, largely favoring hostage-taking and suicide bombing (Ibid., Krueger and Maleckova 2003, 130). However, Hezbollah differed from traditional terrorist organizations in the extent to which they received

support from external actors. Most guerilla movements are relatively unsophisticated in their proto-insurgent phase, but Hezbollah was different. The funding and military training they received from Iran gave them the initial strength to craft effective terrorist campaigns. Their level of organizational sophistication took their enemies by surprise.

Hezbollah grew in numbers, strength, and effectiveness with the substantial backing of Iran and Syria. The organization's fundamentalist Shi'a doctrine caught the attention of the Iranian government, which was eager to provide early support to the insurgency's efforts to undermine the new Israeli-sponsored regime in Lebanon. In addition to the state support Hezbollah received from Iran, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)¹ trained and financed Hezbollah's militants. Syria also pledged support to the proto-insurgency by overseeing their military operations against Israel and providing a secure supply route and logistical support in the Bekaa Valley between Syria and Lebanon. In addition, Syrian support grew to include the provision of advanced weapons technology to Hezbollah (Rabil 2007, 43).

The United States and several Middle Eastern countries have long believed that Hezbollah is a powerful proxy of Iran that promotes radical Shi'a ideology. In fact, Secretary General Nasrallah follows the guidance of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Hoseini Khamenei, and serves as his deputy in Lebanon (Fuller 2007, 139 & 142). The U.S. government estimates that Iran gives Hezbollah tens of millions of dollars every year. In addition to funding their military activities and weapons purchases, it is likely that this money also supports Hezbollah's vast network of social programs, including hospitals and schools, in Lebanon (Ibid., 143).

Of additional interest are the characteristics of Hezbollah's individual militants. Survey research conducted in 2003 revealed that members of Hezbollah's military wing were less likely to live below the poverty line and more likely to have attended secondary school than other Lebanese citizens. They also tended to live closer to Beirut, Lebanon's capital and center of education (Ibid., 130-132). Since Hezbollah's militants were better educated than their peers, they most likely had an intellectual advantage that made it easier for them to recruit others and master the skills necessary to detonate bombs and carry out other measures that made them effective fighters.

Middle Eastern terrorists writ large in the 1990s and early 21st century tended to come from more economically advantaged backgrounds than those a decade before. Modern-day terrorists are better educated and often have worked in a professional capacity (Victoroff 2005, 7). The skills they developed through these experiences allow them to wield greater intellectual influence over citizens who have not had access to educational and professional opportunities. It is also probable that citizens living in or around Beirut were easier to recruit due to their familiarity with the insurgent's doctrine, as Hezbollah propaganda may have been more prominent in Beirut than in other cities.

THE KEY PLAYERS

U.S. policy makers have pushed for targeting Hezbollah since before the al-Qaeda-sponsored September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States. However, efforts to bring down the organization are not just aimed at Hezbollah, but also at Iran and Syria, the two countries most

responsible for funding and training Hezbollah's militants since the organization's inception (Fuller 2007, 130-132). The Lebanese people are at the center of the insurgency, as both insurgents and counterinsurgents fight for Lebanese "hearts and minds," the support that legitimizes either side's cause. Since Hezbollah's organizational goal is to dismantle the Israeli state, their insurgent activity also targets Israel. However, they must obtain the support of the Lebanese people to achieve this goal, which is far different from trying to grab the attention of the enemy.

Israel and the United States are both counterinsurgents in this scenario. Along with the United States, Israel functions as an external actor intent on bringing down Hezbollah. Israel must ward off direct attacks from Hezbollah, while the United States must mitigate this threat to preserve stability in the Middle East. Hezbollah has also declared their hatred for America and attacked American interests, such as military installations, which makes them a threat that cannot be ignored in the context of U.S. counterinsurgency policy.

The counterinsurgents' task of combating Hezbollah is compounded by the involvement of Iran and Syria, the external actors who support Hezbollah. The training and funding Hezbollah receives from these countries increases their capabilities, making the United States' mission of ending the insurgency even more difficult. Although other foreign governments, numerous organizations, and private individuals worldwide support Hezbollah (Levitt 2005), Iran and Syria have spent the most money training and equipping the organization, and thus wield the most influence over Hezbollah's decision-making and strategy. The Lebanese government is torn between insurgent and counterinsurgent; Hezbollah's seats in the Lebanese Parliament make the organization part of the government, providing new challenges for outside actors, such as the United States and Israel, that are trying to combat them.

EMPLOYING COUNTERINSURGENCY THEORY

The United States has experienced difficulty battling Hezbollah since the early 1980s. Hezbollah's 1983 attacks on the Marine Corps barracks and the U.S. Embassy in Beirut were influential in driving U.S. forces out of Lebanon. Further, they increased pressure on the Reagan administration to respond to a threat from a non-state actor when they took the passengers of TWA Flight 847 hostage in 1985. These well-publicized attacks shifted the direction of U.S. policy toward low-intensity conflict, the art of battling an enemy who relies mostly on guerilla tactics to fight an advanced government. Low-intensity conflict was a term used during the 1980s to describe the type of insurgencies and unconventional warfare with which the United States needed to be more familiar (Shultz 1991, 121 & 130). Hezbollah's skilled fighters and large stores of weapons forced the United States to devise options outside their conventional anti-terrorism strategy to combat the organization because their military capability was far more advanced than that of traditional terrorist groups.

Popular counterinsurgency theory dictates that to be successful, a counterinsurgent must reform civilian institutions and ensure security. Civilian reform can include rebuilding infrastructure, establishing schools and hospitals, providing food to famished local citizens, and a variety of other measures specifically designed to improve the quality of innocent civilians' lives. Successful security reform prepares the local police and militias to combat the insurgency

on their own and provide for their fellow citizens' safety. These two crucial areas of reform are often difficult to implement simultaneously, given the counterinsurgent's often limited resources, but when done correctly provide a safer, more stable country free of insurgents.

Unfortunately for Israel and the United States, Hezbollah has become very good at developing and maintaining both the civil and security pillars of their insurgency. They have been able to provide for the people of Lebanon what the Lebanese government has not, establishing schools and hospitals in remote parts of the country that the legitimate government failed to serve (Waterbury 2008, 64-65). Their massive supply of arms also ensures the safety and protection of Lebanese citizens from what Hezbollah perceives as Israeli aggression. These factors make it extremely difficult for counterinsurgents to wrest control from Hezbollah.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE INSURGENTS

For much of its nearly thirty year existence, Hezbollah appeared to be winning the battle for not only Lebanese support, but also broad support from the Muslim world. Hezbollah was rewarded with increased political support by the Lebanese people after their impressive show of force against Israel in the 2006 war, which they fought in resistance to what they refer to on their news website, www.almanar.com, as the "Zionist Entity" (al-Manar 2009). In 2006, Hezbollah held 14 of 128 seats in the Lebanese Parliament and controlled two Cabinet ministries (Pisik 2006). However, although their political coalition, the 8 March alliance, captured 57 seats during the June 8, 2009 parliamentary elections, it was not enough to guarantee them a majority in parliament (BBC News 2009). The military power of the organization, combined with its fundamentalist Shi'a ideology and close ties to Iran, pushed voters toward the more progressive slate of pro-Western candidates proposed by Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, son of slain former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (Schneider 2009).

Hezbollah remains firm in its opposition to demilitarization, or even reducing slightly the number of arms in its cache; they believe their store of weapons is necessary to combat Israel (Ibid.). This hatred of Israel is the foundation of Hezbollah and its driving force, but it may be alienating younger, more progressive Lebanese and Muslims who favor better ties with the United States and the rest of the Western world. However, it is too soon to predict Hezbollah's outright demise. There are indications that Hezbollah is re-arming despite a United Nations Security Council Resolution that bans such behavior (Bronner 2009). Further, the organization has proven that it can thrive in the face of leadership upheaval. Hezbollah has survived the death of two of its leaders, Abbas al-Musawi in 1992 and Imad Mughnieh in 2008 – events that normally deal crushing blows to a terrorist organization or an insurgency.

Hezbollah's mastery of asymmetric warfare during the 2006 Lebanese war was a major threat to Israel. Israel's use of standard counterinsurgency tactics against an enemy built on the art of improvisation was unsuccessful because Hezbollah made it nearly impossible for Israel to predict their next move. This led to planning failures by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), owing to a lack of flexibility and advance knowledge of Hezbollah's subsequent attacks (Feldman 2008).

Further, Lebanon's historically marginalized Shi'a Muslim minority, which continues to feel repressed by Sunni leaders, views Hezbollah as an outlet to voice their discontent (Fuller 2007, 141). Hezbollah maintains this base by providing social services to Lebanese citizens more efficiently than their oft-corrupt government, which they have been doing since before they were elected to parliament. In addition to funding from Iran, Hezbollah uses its own money, about \$3.5 million each year, to fund schools and hospitals that improve the condition of Lebanese citizens (Waterbury 2008, 58). These services give Hezbollah the advantage of popular support, upon which they have capitalized in parliamentary elections (Byman 2008, 175). Promoting the many ways in which their social programs have improved people's quality of life has helped codify Hezbollah's power, thereby legitimizing their cause in Lebanon. In turn, Hezbollah has also gained the support of Shi'a people worldwide, and has used this support base to gather intelligence. This information has helped Hezbollah wage attacks on Israeli targets abroad (Byman et. al. 2001, xv).

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE COUNTERINSURGENTS

The U.S. government's classification of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization has caused U.S. policy makers to treat it as such, resulting in the intermingling of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts. However, although insurgencies employ terrorist tactics – such as bombings or kidnappings – to draw attention to their message, these are often just one aspect of a broader strategy (Byman 2008, 168). Insurgents espouse deeper political motivations behind their actions, which require careful planning and allocation of aid to effectively combat the insurgency. Unfortunately, Hezbollah's leaders have been mostly unwilling to compromise over their primary goal – dismantling Israel. This requires the United States and Israel to combine their efforts to combat Hezbollah.

The United States and Israel have been engaged in a strategic partnership for decades. U.S. support for Israel is a divisive issue for most Middle Eastern countries. While Israel prides itself on its Western-style democracy that promotes equality for all citizens (Olmert, 2009), the governments of most Middle Eastern countries are based in the Islamic faith and have not made strides toward secular governance. The billions of dollars in aid that the United States has supplied to Israel is an important step in bringing down Hezbollah, but Israel is a country with many enemies, most notably the Palestinians who have been fighting for their own state for years. While aid and good relations with the United States are important, negotiations about how to handle Hezbollah's advanced military capabilities and seemingly endless funding are desperately needed.

When war broke out between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006, the United States put counterterrorism agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other members of the intelligence community on alert (Thomas 2006). Given Hezbollah's vast military capabilities, increasing government awareness of potential threats was a vital first step in preparing for a possible attack either at home or on U.S. interests abroad. The United States has also provided Lebanon with \$500 million in military aid since 2006. Had Hezbollah won the majority vote in parliament during the 2009 Lebanese elections, the United States would surely have curtailed

their support so as not to provide funding to what may have become a state sponsor of terrorism (Salem 2009).

Israel has been warding off small- and large-scale guerilla attacks from Hezbollah since the early 1980s (Byman 2008, 174), but they failed to adequately prepare for the strength of their enemy during the Lebanese War. The IDF attempted to use asymmetric warfare to fight Hezbollah in 2006 when it became apparent that conventional tactics would not work. They opted for close urban fighting, for which they were not as well prepared as they would have been for conventional battle (Cordesman 2006, 14). Hezbollah, however, maintained an army of well-trained militants armed with large stockpiles of weapons. Israel's underestimation of the power and sophistication of Hezbollah's fighters made them vulnerable to increased attacks (Simon and Stevenson 2010). Although the IDF used superior weapons and technology against Hezbollah, these were ineffective for the type of urban fighting in which they engaged. These battles undoubtedly cost them the lives of many of their troops (Cordesman 2006, 23).

Since Hezbollah is a non-state actor, negotiating with them has provided numerous challenges for counterinsurgents. Dealing with their main sponsor, Iran, has proved to be an effective way to reach out to the organization, although that has by no means been easy. U.S. policy toward Iran has been marked by distrust since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. When the United States supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, tensions increased between the United States and Iran. However, George H.W. Bush was able to successfully negotiate with the Iranian government for the release of hostages taken prisoner by Hezbollah. Bush noted that "goodwill begets goodwill" when dealing with Iran, but this was one of only a few incidents where Iran or Hezbollah complied with U.S. demands (Katzman 2009, 35).

Clinton-era policy toward Iran further strained relations between the two countries. Clinton imposed sanctions on Iran because of growing concerns that the nation was developing weapons of mass destruction and supporting terrorist organizations bent on undermining the Israeli-Arab peace process (Ibid.). By the late 1990s, Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made some strides in easing tensions between the Iranian and U.S. governments, but the Iranians still refused to engage in direct dialogue. During George W. Bush's two terms in office, the United States grew even more suspicious of Iran's nuclear program, which contributed to the international vilification of Iran. However, Iran has been willing to work with the United States to ensure the stabilization of Afghanistan and Iraq, as that has regional stability implications for them (Ibid., 36).

Since Iran has shown no signs of slowing or stopping its nuclear program despite U.S. calls for it to do so, the United States has not had much success in effectively engaging Iran in dialogue. President Obama has promised similar vigilance toward Iran as previous administrations (Ibid.). These strong-arm tactics have not served the United States well in their disputes with Iran or Hezbollah. However, Obama does support direct engagement with Iran, and has indicated to its citizens that he accepts their Muslim statehood (Ibid., 37). This acceptance is crucial to negotiating with Iran, as non-secular governments are a prime point of contention between the U.S. government and the Islamic world. As Iran is the primary vehicle through which the U.S. can negotiate with Hezbollah, counterinsurgency negotiation between the two governments based on a mutual understanding of each other could prove more successful than past attempts to simply coax Iran, and Hezbollah, to behave according to U.S. demands.

HEZBOLLAH: THE WAY FORWARD

Hezbollah's hold on power within the Lebanese government and continued provision of health, education, and security services to Lebanese citizens make it unlikely that they will lose prominence any time in the near future. Their mission and continued stockpiling of weapons also means they will remain a threat to Israeli and U.S. interests. The organization has benefited tremendously from Iranian and Syrian backing, and is still funded in large part by Iran.

However, the threat posed by Hezbollah is part of a larger pattern of regional instability in the Middle East, which impacts the United States and Israel's ability to combat the organization. U.S. involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan gives the United States a large presence in the region, which is of concern to Israel. According to some Israeli leaders, stability in Iraq is crucial for Israel-Middle East peace, which includes a *détente* with Hezbollah (Blanchard, et. al. 2008, 26).

Since insurgency and sectarian violence in Iraq led to security threats for neighboring countries (Ibid., 27), the United States must be extremely careful not to neglect those surrounding countries who will also feel the effects of an eventual U.S. troop withdrawal in Iraq and Afghanistan. The successes of the Shi'ite majority in Iraq after the fall of Saddam could inspire confidence in Iran and give voice to marginalized Shi'a Muslims in the region (Ibid., 28). That confidence would undoubtedly mean a boost for Hezbollah as well, who could benefit from increased Iranian and Iraqi strength by attracting even more followers.

Israel has a vested interest in curbing Hezbollah's violence because of the security threat it poses at its border with Lebanon. However, although the IDF maintains a military presence in southern Lebanon, their forces have been largely unable to protect northern Israel from rocket attacks in the past (Haass 1996, 60). In addition, the presence of Israeli troops in Lebanon intensifies Hezbollah's hostility, which may make Israeli citizens the target of increased attacks from Hezbollah.

Withdrawing Israeli troops from Lebanon could provide increased safety for the Israeli army while discouraging further attacks from Hezbollah (Ibid.). Doing so would help Israel comply with the United Nations resolution that ended the Lebanon War (Levinson 2010). It would also send a powerful diplomatic message to Hezbollah, and its Iranian backers, that Israel is willing to sacrifice its military presence in Lebanon for the overall security and stability of the region. Israel has been hesitant to do so, however, because they are concerned about leaving the small number of Israeli citizens who reside in Hezbollah-controlled southern Lebanon without any protection (Ibid.).

England, a U.S. ally that successfully negotiated the disarmament of the militant group Sinn Féin, could provide the United States the assistance it needs in deterring Hezbollah's strength. In 2009, British and Lebanese delegates engaged in months of discussions about how to negotiate disarmament with Hezbollah (Simon and Stevenson 2010). Leveraging this diplomatic relationship may prove effective in diminishing the insurgent threat, but in order for the United States to be involved in the process, it would have to lift its ban on direct negotiations with Hezbollah (Ibid.). This is a problematic proposal for the United States. Given Hezbollah's explicit hatred for the country, talks with Hezbollah are difficult to imagine. However, convening

meetings between junior or mid-level diplomats from both the United States and Hezbollah could prove effective in beginning the careful negotiation process (Ibid.).

Developing this relationship would most likely have huge political ramifications for President Obama, as some might argue that negotiations with terrorists or insurgents make the United States appear weak. However, disarmament negotiations are an important first step in achieving a peaceful resolution to conflict with Hezbollah. Although the group has not directly attacked the United States or its interests in many years, their continued political, social, and military strength in Lebanon require intervention. By leveraging its relationship with England, the United States could have a capable ally in the slow, steady process of improving Israeli-Lebanese relations.

CONCLUSION

Because of Hezbollah's deep roots, support from powerful external actors, and ability to effectively provide for Lebanese citizens, it is evident that Hezbollah is a highly advanced and anomalous insurgency. Considering most insurgencies dissolve just over a decade after they are formed, Hezbollah's nearly thirty year existence is a testament to its resilience. In an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of both the insurgent – Hezbollah – and the counterinsurgents – the United States and Israel – it is clear that Hezbollah possesses a wide range of military and financial supports that must be carefully considered before either country engages them. Hezbollah poses an enormous risk to Israelis and U.S. citizens at home and abroad, given their outspoken hatred for both countries and what each represents. They will remain a threat to both nations unless these counterinsurgents implement careful and thorough measures to combat them.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The IRGC was created after the 1979 Iranian Revolution as a parallel force to the country's legitimate military that retained ultimate loyalty to the Shah of Iran. While the Iranian military serves to protect the country, the IRGC's mission is to uphold the tenets of the revolution (Pasdaran - Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRCG), <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/pasdaran.htm>, accessed April 19, 2010).