BULLETIN

Hezbollah: The Model of a Hybrid Threat

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Built by local Shia Muslims with support from Iran, Hezbollah (the Lebanese Party of God) is a model of an organisation that uses hybrid warfare methods in its struggle against Israel. Its tailored use of force and means, conventional and asymmetric tactics combined with civilian structures and propaganda machinery, suggest that NATO should also look closer at this case in the context of its own needs to better counter threats generated by Russia.

The conflict in Ukraine is frequently described as a new type of hybrid warfare. However, the theory of hybrid warfare not only is not new but has been employed by states other than Russia and non-state actors against their enemies. Hezbollah might be recognised as one of the best examples. In 2006, it shocked observers with the effectiveness of its fight against the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), previously seen as the best armed force in the region. Hezbollah shows all the elements of hybrid warfare: the simultaneous use of a conventional arsenal, irregular forces and guerrilla tactics, psychological warfare, terrorism and even criminal activities, with support from a multi-dimensional organisation and capable of integrating very different sub-units, groups or cells into one united, large force.

State within a State. Hezbollah has become a real alternative to the weak structures of the Lebanese state. It was initially a splinter group from the larger Shia Amal ("*Hope*") movement, with leaders inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran and supported by that country's government after 1979. Hezbollah then was stuck in the mire and only later revealed itself in 1985. With the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1989, it began to integrate into the country's party system and achieved success in all of the subsequent parliamentary elections (it currently has 10% of the seats in Lebanon's parliament and two ministers in its government). The Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon (1982–2000) was the main reason for the elites in Beirut to tolerate the party's associated militia, which engaged in attacks against Israel. Hezbollah is still associated mainly with those activities but the party side has very extensive civilian structures. These encompass a wide range of organisations subordinated to the party leadership and include special administrative units for religious affairs, culture, education, healthcare, women's issues, charities and media. It is hard to estimate how many Lebanese are in Hezbollah because it does not issue formal membership cards. Its civilian side's annual budget is estimated at a minimum of $500 million. At the same time, Hezbollah's military units and reserves are part of the Lebanese Resistance Brigades and may have up to 8,000-10,000 trained members, including 2,000-4,000 with expertise in guerrilla warfare and advanced weaponry. Of no less importance is Hezbollah's security apparatus, which is responsible for intelligence, counter-intelligence and the supervision of its co-conspirators) outside Lebanon. Paramilitary and indoctrination functions are assigned also to the mass organisation called Scouts, from which some are recruited to the military wing of Hezbollah.

Relations with Iran and Syria. Since its beginning, Hezbollah's terrorist cells, Security Apparatus and military units have been supported by Iran's Revolutionary Guards. The country's assistance led to improvements in training, equipment and discipline of the group. The Iranian support (estimated at $50–100 million annually) was also important for the leaders of Hezbollah to extend their autonomy towards the Syrian regime, which for decades had engaged in Lebanese politics. For the governments of Iran and Syria, Hezbollah's camps in the Bekaa Valley were also useful places to train radicals from terror groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Both governments and Hezbollah then promoted themselves among Arabs as pillars of the anti-Israeli "Resistance Front." The apex of this alliance was the war in 2006, presented in their propaganda as the first Arab victory over Israel. However, the Syrian civil war in 2011 changed Arab public opinion due to the support of Hezbollah and Iran for the regime in Damascus. The war in Syria

became a problem for the leaders of both Iran and Hezbollah, who wanted to preserve and protect their long-time ally, but at the same time risked a regional Shia-Sunni conflict and a weakening of their military capabilities aimed at Israel.

Conventional Arsenal. The war between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006 showed that the former had created a arsenal of both a quality and quantity unseen among other terrorist groups. During the war, Hezbollah levelled the asymmetry in its fight with the IDF and knowingly exploited the weaknesses of its enemy. During the 34-day conflict, Israel was forced to mobilise around 30,000 soldiers and reservists. In the end, 119 troops were killed and 1,244 injured and 42 civilians were also killed. Hezbollah was especially effective with combining local, village units with experts using light anti-tank rocket launchers (RPG-7 and RPG-29) and anti-tank guided missiles (AT-5, AT-13, AT-14 and TOW), which caused the majority of Israeli losses in terms of equipment (including 50 Merkava tanks). In contrast to previous attacks of sporadic rocket fire, in 2006 Hezbollah used 3,790 artillery rockets. This intensive fire was not militarily effective but it terrorised the north of Israel, paralysed the country's economy and forced over a million civilians to temporarily evacuate. The psychological effect of these strikes was enormous and became the impulse for Israel to build its now famous Iron Dome counter-rocket and missile-defence systems, which would be used successfully during subsequent conflicts between the IDF and Hamas. Currently, it is estimated that Hezbollah might possess a minimum of 100,000 artillery rockets and ballistic missiles. These are mainly modifications of Katyusha, Grad, Uragan and Smerch systems (with ranges of 35–75 km) and the much more dangerous Zelzal-2 rockets and Fateh missiles (with ranges of up to 250 km). Still unconfirmed are reports of transfers of Syrian Scud missiles to Hezbollah with ranges covering all of Israel (so, 750 km). Another surprise for the IDF in 2006 was Hezbollah's use of different unmanned aerial vehicles and anti-ship guided cruise missiles (one attack damaged the modern INS Hanit corvette). Hezbollah was also armed with and trained in the use of man-portable air-defence systems (SA-7 and SA-16), which is notable even if in 2006 the missiles fired by the group shot down only one Israeli CH-53 helicopter.

Unconventional Capabilities. Before Al-Qaeda's attacks on the U.S. in September 2001, Western intelligence services recognised Hezbollah as one of the most dangerous and capable terrorist groups in the world. Its most spectacular terrorist acts were the bombings of the Beirut barracks of U.S. and French soldiers in 1983 (300 killed) and two bombings in Buenos Aires—the Israeli embassy in 1992 and a Jewish cultural centre in 1994 (106 killed in all). The last major Hezbollah attack was the suicide bombing of a bus with Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, in 2012 (seven were killed). It should be stressed that the huge Lebanese Shia population outside the Middle East gives Hezbollah global potential for its operations and many of them were prepared in cooperation with Iranian intelligence and the Revolutionary Guards. Hezbollah is also advanced in intelligence and counter-intelligence activities, as shown by the neutralisation of CIA informants in Beirut in 2011, a few cases of Palestinian recruits and even cooperation with some Israeli organised crime groups. However, Hezbollah also suffers in this area, illustrated by the assassination of its terrorist network leader, Imad Mughanya, in Damascus in 2008 and confirmation in 2014 that one of its deputies was an Israeli informant. Hezbollah's mastery of unconventional warfare is visible also in its large media propaganda apparatus, which includes TV Manar and Radio Nour. The TV Manar satellite channel was especially useful in the 2006 conflict in Arab and Western media in a favourable light. With the growing capacity of Iran to conduct cyberattacks, it should be expected that Hezbollah also will be capable in this field in a conflict with Israel.

Hybrid Future? Hezbollah is probably the best indicator of the direction of future conflicts and warfare, and not only in the Middle East. It is also a mostly successful case of a non-state actor sponsored by a state (Iran) and is a crucial political force in its own primary country (Lebanon) with military capabilities for conflict with other state armed forces (IDF). Hezbollah's success has meant that it has become a model also for other terrorist groups, even including its enemies in the Al-Qaeda network. Its 2006 war with Israel inspired Palestinian Hamas, though that group also lost militarily with the IDF during the conflicts in Gaza in 2012 and 2014, mainly because of the effectiveness of Iron Dome. Hybrid warfare and organisation has also been demonstrated by Islamic State (a.k.a. ISIS/ISIL) during its expansion in Iraq and Syria in 2014. The Hezbollah case is of clear relevance to debates about the adaptation of NATO to the new threats and hybrid warfare demonstrated by Russia in its conflict with Ukraine. Naturally, Russia has far greater capabilities than Iran does in Lebanon to build alternative structures to the government in Kyiv and to consolidate territorial gains by the separatists in Donbas. The Russian combination of well-trained and organised forces, support with weapons and equipment, psychological warfare and cyberwarfare on behalf of the separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine might transform them into a very dangerous and long-term threat.