

Cloning Hizballah: Easier Said Than Done

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“The Lebanese resistance today inspires all the resistance in the world,”

—Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, September 2006¹

Hizballah’s performance in the “Summer War” between Israel and Hizballah in July-August 2006 has been touted as an effective new model of war fighting that will likely be emulated throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world. Replicating Hizballah’s performance on the battlefield, however, is likely to be more difficult than many imagine. The Hizballah military model is a product of special circumstances that pertained in Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s and may not be applicable to many other situations. As a result, attempts to copy Hizballah are likely to result in a profusion of different imitations exhibiting varying degrees of military effectiveness each of which would have to be addressed on a case by case basis.

Some are radical groups and states in the Middle East appear to be trying to follow in Hizballah’s footsteps. The regional Arabic newspaper al-Hayat reported in August 2006 that leaders of the Palestinian Islamic militant group HAMAS were discussing how to “clone” Hizballah.² Information from Israeli analysts prior to HAMAS’s capture of Gaza in June 2007 suggested that HAMAS was in the process of building a paramilitary force similar to Hizballah’s to wage war in the same manner.³ Israeli sources indicated in March 2007 that one of Israel’s neighbors, Syria, may be preparing to do something similar.⁴ More recently, US intelligence officials said Iran is trying to model Shia groups in Iraq after Hizballah.⁵

As a global superpower with vital interests in the Middle East and worldwide responsibilities, the United States should be concerned about the prospects for exporting the Hizballah model of “resistance” and what the implications might be. Hizballah has been called the best guerrilla group in the world.⁶ Even the limited adoption of Hizballah’s methods could add to a profusion of guerrilla conflicts, improve the capabilities of guerrilla, insurgent, and terrorist groups globally, and increase the difficulties involved in counterterrorist and stability operations. Counterinsurgency expert Thomas X. Hammes points out: “As the only Goliath in the world, we should be worried that the world’s Davids have found a sling and a stone that work.”⁷

The purpose of this article is to assess the prospects for duplicating the Hizballah military model. The article will examine the Hizballah style of fighting and the reasons behind its appeal; and the obstacles and limitations involved in trying to copy Hizballah. Special attention will be paid to the conditions in Lebanon that enabled Hizballah’s military success and whether they are likely to exist elsewhere. A final section will explore some of the implications if Hizballah is widely emulated.

Military operations are but one aspect of Hizballah's multifaceted modus operandi. Hizballah is a terrorist group with a global reach that has been linked to deadly acts of violence, a political party with a grassroots organization and representatives in the Lebanese government, an extensive social welfare system that provides services for a large swath of Lebanon's Shia Muslim community.⁸ Because of increased attention to Hizballah's military methods and their implications for guerrilla war and insurgency, the focus here is on the strategy and tactics Hizballah has employed against Israeli military forces in southern Lebanon.

Hizballah's military operations overlap with but are distinct from its terrorist activities. Terrorism involves the deliberate targeting of noncombatants usually in areas far removed from any recognized field of battle, whereas Hizballah military operations are directed at military forces primarily in and from the zone of conflict of southern Lebanon using clearly identifiable military weapons and tactics. A degree of definitional ambiguity is unavoidable. Some Hizballah actions, such as taking soldiers hostage and launching rockets at civilian areas, qualify as terrorism under some definitions of the term, but they are also part of Hizballah's war plans.

The Hizballah Way of War

Hizballah in many ways is a classic insurgent movement with revolutionary aims. In an open letter published in February 1985 that is generally regarded as the organization's founding document, Hizballah listed its goals as obliterating the state of Israel, terminating the influence of "imperialist powers," and bringing about Islamic rule in Lebanon.⁹ Since its founding, Hizballah has demonstrated willingness to compromise, for example, by participating in the Lebanese political system which it ostensibly opposes, but the organization has never explicitly renounced the open letter. Hizballah scholar Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh believes Hizballah alternates between militant-jihadist and gradualist-pragmatic approaches according to the circumstances, but its ultimate goal remains the same: seizing power and establishing an Islamic order.¹⁰

Hizballah's military strategy is based on guerrilla warfare. It does not aim to seize and control territory or defeat enemy military forces. Hizballah's target is the enemy's will. In the Summer War, Hizballah sought to influence Israeli policymakers by convincing them that their aims were unattainable at an acceptable cost. Hammes refers to this kind of strategy as "fourth-generation warfare," an evolved form of insurgency.¹¹ Hizballah's plan was to raise the cost to Israel in terms of casualties and international pressure while demonstrating staying power in the battlefield. Nasrallah told an interviewer just after the cease-fire:

I said on the first day that we are not waging a geographic war. Therefore, if one or two towns, cities, a hill, a mountain, a valley, or a frontline were to fall, there would be no problem. Our motto is a war of attrition and incurring as much (sic) losses as possible on the enemy.¹²

Analysts of the Summer War have identified several components to Hizballah's guerrilla strategy. Five elements stand out in particular: small-unit surprise attack tactics, innovative use of technology, intelligence and battlefield preparation, reliance on popular support, and manipulation of the media. These elements constitute the key aspects of the Hizballah model that other groups can be expected to emulate.

Hizballah forces employed the standard small-unit "hit-and-run" tactics used by guerrillas everywhere with an emphasis on stealth, mobility, and surprise. Hizballah tacticians have shown a preference for ambushes and stand-off attacks, using anti-tank weapons, mortars, and roadside bombs. During the Summer War, Hizballah unveiled a new tactic that could be called "stand-and-fight." Hizballah fighters did not disperse after attacking as they had in the past.¹³ Instead, well dug-in Hizballah forces fought doggedly for control of villages along the border. The new tactics, however, do not indicate a shift away from a traditional guerrilla war of attrition. As at least one military analyst noted, they were designed to cause as many casualties as possible.¹⁴

Hizballah demonstrated a capacity for innovation in its use of sophisticated weapons technology. Hizballah made effective use of anti-tank missiles, including relatively advanced wire and laser-guided systems, against Israeli armor and infantry formations,¹⁵ and it stunned many outside observers by seriously damaging an Israeli ship cruising off the Lebanese coast with a Chinese C-802 anti-ship missile. Perhaps the most noteworthy example of technical innovation was Hizballah's deployment of surface-to-surface rockets, including short-range katyushas and longer range Syrian and Iranian rockets, as strategic terror weapons against the population of northern Israel.¹⁶ Hizballah also attempted to attack Israel with at least one armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV).¹⁷ Hizballah's military apparatus displayed remarkable skill in choosing weapons suited to its strategy and tactics and integrating advanced weapons into its overall force capability, something which sets the group apart from the past performance of other Arab militaries.¹⁸

Hizballah's strong intelligence capability was a key factor in the war. As one insurgency expert has pointed out, without mobility and intelligence guerrilla warfare would be impossible.¹⁹ To compensate for their inferiority in conventional military power, successful guerrillas must be able to anticipate their opponent's moves and identify weaknesses. After 20 years of battling the IDF, Hizballah has developed an extensive intelligence network in Lebanon and has become adept at second guessing the Israeli military.²⁰ Former spokesman for UNIFIL, the UN observer force in Lebanon, and long-time Hizballah observer Timor Goksel noted that Hizballah excelled at pre-war staff work.²¹ Some analysts believe Hizballah even was able to eavesdrop on Israeli communications during the Summer War,²² an impressive achievement especially considering that Hizballah's military expenditures, though difficult to estimate, are surely only a small fraction of Israel's multibillion dollar defense budget.²³

Like most guerrilla and insurgent movements, Hizballah relied on popular support to help level the playing field against its adversaries. The local population provided Hizballah with recruits, resources, intelligence, and protection. Indeed, most of those fighting for

Hizballah during the Summer War were ordinary villagers from southern Lebanon who form a kind of ready reserve that can be called upon in times of emergency.²⁴ The close association between Hizballah and the civilian population complicated Israeli targeting and raised the risk of harm to civilians that Hizballah exploited for propaganda purposes. More broadly, Hizballah's popularity discourages criticism of the group from foreign governments and deters the Lebanese government from trying to disarm the group.

Lastly, Hizballah recognized the importance of the information war. Throughout the conflict in 2006, Hizballah officials conducted a skillful propaganda campaign designed to demoralize Israel, evoke sympathy for Hizballah, and increase international pressure for a ceasefire. Nasrallah's wartime speeches sought to portray his forces as righteous, determined, and unbeatable valiantly facing a callous Israeli aggressor backed by the United States. A study by Marvin Kalb of Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press shows how Hizballah was able to shape media coverage of the war.²⁵ For example, using its control over access to the battlefield in Lebanon, Hizballah directed reporters to scenes of devastation to promote media criticism of Israeli actions. Proof of the importance Hizballah attaches to the media is the fact that its al-Manar television station stayed on the air throughout the war.

Hizballah did not invent these strategies and tactics. Hit-and-run tactics, technological innovation, the use of intelligence, reliance on popular support, and wartime propaganda are as old as guerrilla war itself. What is unique about Hizballah is the way it brought the various components together. The Hizballah model represents a fusion of Islamic ideology, skillful military operations, a strong commitment to providing social services, and a hospitable geopolitical environment. Hizballah's contribution was to combine these elements effectively in the Arab-Israeli context.

Nothing Succeeds Like Success.

The Hizballah model is likely to be emulated not so much because it is novel but because its methods work. At least many people in the Middle East seem to think so. The question of who won the Summer War continues to be debated, but judging from the public reaction, a significant segment of Arab opinion believes the answer is Hizballah. During and after the war, demonstrations in solidarity with Hizballah and critical of Arab regimes were held in Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states.²⁶ One hundred thousand people marched in support of Hizballah in Baghdad.²⁷ In the West Bank and Gaza, Hizballah reportedly attained "superhero" status.²⁸ So strong was the reaction that several Arab governments backtracked on their initial criticism of Hizballah for starting the war.

Identification with Hizballah extended beyond the Middle East to the wider Muslim world. Hizballah supporters rallied in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, and Kenya.²⁹ In Indonesia, Islamic militants openly recruited volunteers to fight alongside Hizballah.³⁰ Offering a backhanded endorsement, Sudanese President Bashir warned that he would treat any international peacekeeping force sent to Sudan just as Hizballah treated Israeli forces.³¹ Western and Israeli analysts contend that others will be inspired to follow Hizballah's example.³²

This is not the first time a triumphal model has captivated the region. Some of Nasrallah's admirers have compared him to Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian leader whose perceived success in the 1956 Suez Crisis inspired the creation of Nasserist parties in many parts of the Arab world.³³ Hizballah itself was inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Nor are such examples confined to the Middle East. Mao Tse-Tung's successful theories on guerrilla warfare sparked revolutionary movements throughout Asia and beyond. A generation of revolutionaries in Latin America attempted to follow the example of Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba. Like these movements, Hizballah probably will have many imitators.

The Hizballah model is likely to have a greater impact than its predecessors because Hizballah is perceived to have stood up to the seemingly invincible Israeli military on the battlefield, something no other Arab armed force has been able to do. A Palestinian taxi driver gloated that "a force of just 6,000 or so with light weapons superseded an organized army that all the Arab countries are scared of."³⁴ Nasrallah portrayed the Summer War as a victory over the United States which he said conspired with Israel to draw out the conflict.³⁵ Defying the strongest military in the region and the world's only superpower has a potentially powerful attraction for people frustrated by decades of military failure.

Modern media helped spread the word about Hizballah like never before. Mass communications in the Middle East used to be slow and largely limited to official channels, but this is much less true today. Government-controlled national media have been eclipsed by satellite television and 24-hour news stations that transmit information quickly, vividly, and repetitively, amplifying its impact. Web-connected individuals can exchange information, reach recruits and supporters, and create communities of interest with Internet users thousands of miles away whom they may never meet in person. Extensive media coverage of the summer war brought unprecedented attention to Hizballah's battlefield performance and carried knowledge of its methods to the rest of the Middle East and beyond.

A widely shared ideology of militant Islam facilitates the process of publicizing Hizballah. Hizballah leaders can share knowledge and skills via extensive familial and collegial ties to fellow clerics in the Shia centers of learning in Najaf and Qom. Maintaining and expanding centuries-old connections among the Shia communities in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran has become easier after the fall of Saddam. The international Shia community is far from monolithic, but common commitment to themes of anti-Zionism and opposition to western imperialism can overcome many factional differences. Asked by an interviewer about his contacts with Hizballah and HAMAS, Iraqi Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr in February said "Every honorable person is my brother and every resistance man is my counterpart."³⁶

Hizballah's cross-national connections are not limited to Shia communities. Hizballah also has ties to several Sunni Palestinian organizations, especially HAMAS and the Palestine Islamic Jihad, with whom Hizballah shares militant opposition to Israel and the

perspective of a guerrilla group.³⁷ Hizballah has tried to further develop these links by fostering what Hizballah expert Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh calls a “Jerusalem liberation culture” that transcends religious, factional, and ideological divisions.³⁸ The strength of these ties is evidenced by the fact that they have persisted despite the widening Sunni-Shia rift in the region.

The impact of these connections is already evident. Some militant groups are adopting some of the same weapons and tactics used by Hizballah. Cleverly disguised Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) like those developed by Hizballah are turning up in Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁹ HAMAS’s home-made “Qassam” rockets which HAMAS uses to terrorize Israeli towns and settlements are the functional equivalent of Hizballah’s katyushas and longer range rockets. The Iraqi Shia militia, Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army), that Sadr heads, has established its own social service network,⁴⁰ just as HAMAS provides welfare and relief services in the Palestinian territories.⁴¹ A senior US intelligence official said in November 2006 that Hizballah has trained members of the Jaysh al-Mahdi, and a Jaysh al-Mahdi commander claimed his militia had sent fighters to Lebanon, although other officials stressed that pinning down the exact linkages between Hizballah and armed Shia groups in Iraq is difficult.⁴²

Success Has its Limits

The Hizballah model is a compelling example for others, but Hizballah is not untouchable. Despite the admiration the group has won, its image could suffer if it is seen to have mismanaged the war’s aftermath. Hizballah’s ability to satisfy the material and social needs of its constituents will be tested by the scale of damage caused by the war. The aura of victory could suffer if it overplays its hand politically or if it triggers renewed fighting with Israel or sectarian violence in Lebanon.

Nasrallah implicitly acknowledged the political constraints faced by Hizballah when he tried to put the onus for the Summer War on Israel after the ceasefire. He admitted that the kidnapping of the IDF soldiers that triggered the war was a miscalculation, but his larger point was that Israel was ultimately responsible for the war because the Israeli leaders broke the tacit rules that had governed the fighting in southern Lebanon since the withdrawal of Israeli forces in 2000. Nasrallah further claimed that by acting when it did Hizballah pre-empted Israeli plans to launch a war a few months later in any case.

Other shortcomings could pose unacceptable limitations for those seeking to emulate Hizballah. One possible problem involves the defensive nature of Hizballah’s guerrilla strategy. Hizballah’s military strategy was designed to harass an occupying force and fend off invasions. It is far less suitable for power projection. Hizballah has shown that it can fire rockets and mount raids into Israel, but it cannot defeat Israel militarily. The Hizballah model is probably not appropriate for a force seeking to vanquish a neighbor or change the military status quo.

Nor is Hizballah a model for those in a hurry. It took Hizballah over 20 years to achieve its current level of military proficiency and political support. Other groups may not have

that kind of time. Militants that are looking for quick victories probably will find the Hizballah game plan too time-consuming.

The Hizballah model is labor intensive. Hizballah must balance its militant ideology against the practical needs of its constituents for peace and stability, its opposition to Lebanon's sectarian politics against its need to work within the political system, and its aspiration to be a regional leader against its need to project a national identity. Any group seeking to emulate Hizballah would have to take care to avoid becoming overextended while attempting to balance competing priorities.

Lastly, Hizballah is subject to the influence of outside forces beyond its control. Hizballah is heavily dependent on Iranian funding and on weapons, training, and logistical support from Syria and Iran, making the group vulnerable to political shifts in Tehran or Damascus. Regional events can also have an impact. Arab-Israeli negotiations in the 1990s nearly brought about peace agreements that would have seriously constrained Hizballah's ability to continue waging war against Israel.

Hizballah also faces challenges because it is not the only show in town. Hizballah competes for attention internationally with al-Qaida which represents a rival model of resistance from an extremist Sunni theological tradition that is hostile to Shia Islam. Both Hizballah and Al-Qaida are transnational organizations; both oppose Israel, the US, and at least some other Western powers; and both constantly seek to improve the quality of their operations while spreading knowledge to others. But al-Qaida has a much more diffuse organization with no strong base of popular support in any one country.

The two organizations differ in their methods as well. Al-Qaida, which calls for overthrowing most governments in the Middle East and stirring up Sunni-Shia tensions, has a more nihilistic bent than Hizballah and places a greater emphasis on often spectacular acts of international terrorism to accomplish its goals. Hizballah condemned the attacks on September 11, 2001 and has criticized al-Qaida for conducting the wrong war in the wrong place.⁴³ The two organizations are likely to continue propagating competing views of Islamic resistance among what one scholar recently called the "jihadi subculture."⁴⁴

Exceptional Circumstances that Shaped Hizballah

Perhaps the most important stumbling block involved in replicating the Hizballah experience is Hizballah's close links to a particular set of geopolitical circumstances that pertained in Lebanon during the civil war and its aftermath. Military historian Ian F. W. Beckett explains that theories of guerrilla warfare usually reflect a particular time and particular circumstances and may not produce success in a different context.⁴⁵ Mao's theories about "People's War" were widely emulated, but those who tried to copy them were frequently unsuccessful because the political conditions in China did not apply elsewhere. Similarly, no Cuban-style revolution succeeded elsewhere in Latin America because of special conditions in Cuba that made success uniquely possible there.

Hizballah is a product of a long process of evolution and adaptation in response to a particular set of physical and political conditions. Initially, in the midst of the civil war in Lebanon, Hizballah adopted a strategy based on terrorism. In addition to bombing the US Marine barracks and the US Embassy, Hizballah conducted large-scale attacks against several Israeli military facilities and was responsible for the kidnapping of more than a dozen foreign hostages. But conditions in Lebanon changed. By the early 1990s, law and order was being restored in Lebanon, Syria was consolidating control over security matters, and Iran was moving toward a more pragmatic foreign policy after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. Hizballah released its foreign hostages and shifted focus to guerrilla warfare, concentrating on developing its capabilities as a militia with encouragement from Syria and Iran.

Hizballah's military capabilities steadily improved throughout the decade of the 1990s. The professionalism of its operations improved, and it demonstrated increased ability to conduct coordinated and combined arms attacks. In the early 1990s, five Hizballah fighters were killed for every Israeli casualty, but ten years later Hizballah had cut the ratio to nearly 2 to 1.⁴⁶ The number of Hizballah attacks against Israel increased dramatically from 1,500 attacks in 1990-1995 to almost 5,000 in 1995-2000.⁴⁷ In each of three successive major clashes with the IDF—Operation Accountability in 1993, Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996, and the Summer War in 2006—Hizballah demonstrated increased capacity to threaten Israel, greater sustainability in the face of Israeli fire, and broader political support.

Several factors in Lebanon made Hizballah's development possible. Chief among them were Lebanon's favorable geography, the receptivity of the local Shia population, extraordinary state sponsorship, and a particular pattern of organizational development. Together these special circumstances provided Hizballah with the time, space, and resources necessary to perfect its military skills.

Favorable Geography. The history of guerrilla movements shows that favorable geographic conditions usually are important to their success and in that sense the case of Hizballah is no exception. As several observers have noted, the topography of southern Lebanon is ideal for irregular warfare. Deep ravines and steep slopes dotted with villages and dense underbrush impede the movement of vehicles and large conventional forces and provide cover for irregular fighters operating in small units. There are limited avenues in which an invading or occupying army can operate, creating opportunities for ambush. These factors figured heavily in Hizballah's plans in 2006.

Hizballah found sanctuary in inaccessible parts of Lebanon and benefited from the proximity of friendly neighbors. The northern Bekaa Valley where Hizballah gained its first foothold in Lebanon⁴⁸ is a particularly isolated area where government authority is weak. The Bekaa quickly became the nexus for Hizballah's guerrilla training activities.⁴⁹ Proximity to the Syrian border means weapons and supplies from Damascus can reach Hizballah easily and Hizballah officials can travel to the Syrian capital or onward to Iran.

Geography also helps Hizballah save on operational overhead. The small size of the battle space—Lebanon is about the size of Connecticut—means Hizballah is not required to raise and maintain a large force. Hizballah can cover its area of operations effectively with only a few hundred full-time fighters backed by a larger reserve force. A small force is easier to equip, supply, train, and control. It is also harder to monitor and provides fewer targets for enemy bombs and intelligence services. Military expert Ralph Peters notes that a critical ingredient for Hizballah was that it had a relatively small piece of terrain to defend.⁵⁰

Other kinds of geography are conducive to guerrilla war, but not necessarily in the same way as in Lebanon. Guerrillas can find protective cover in dense jungles, mountainous areas, vast open spaces, or complex urban environments, but different situations make for different patterns of human habitation with different political, organizational, and logistical requirements. For example, it may be harder for guerrillas to live off the land in sparsely populated jungle. Geographic isolation can constrain access to needed supplies and contacts with other groups and state sponsors. Guerrillas operating over large areas probably would need an organization that is larger and harder to control than Hizballah. Geographic conditions shape strategies and dictate outcomes that may differ significantly.

A Receptive Political Base. Lebanon's political landscape has been nearly as friendly to Hizballah as its terrain. The founding of Hizballah in the early 1980s coincided with an extraordinary political awakening among Lebanese Shia, long the most disadvantaged of Lebanon's sectarian communities. Several factors influence the growth of Shia political activism, including socioeconomic pressures produced by rapid population growth and urbanization, rising expectations associated with new wealth introduced by Shia expatriates, the destabilizing effects of the Lebanese civil war and the 1982 Israeli invasion, and the inspirational appeal of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.⁵¹

Shia activists were initially attracted to a variety of secular leftist parties promising reform, but in time they gravitated toward more sectarian movements.⁵² An early beneficiary was the AMAL movement founded in 1975 by Imam Musa Sadr, an Iranian-born cleric of Lebanese descent. Sadr created AMAL (an Arabic acronym for "Lebanese Resistance Detachments" and the Arabic word for "hope") as the military wing of his Movement of the Disinherited, a secular group to advance Shia interests. Sadr disappeared in 1978 while on a visit to Libya, and by the late 1980s AMAL was eclipsed by Hizballah which was more unambiguously committed to fighting Israel and opposing western influence in Lebanon.

Hizballah attracted support by meeting the needs of its constituents. Hizballah gained a reputation for piety, integrity, and effectiveness that contrasted with the corruption in the Lebanese political system. As Hizballah assumed a greater role in Lebanese politics, first winning seats in parliament and then joining the government, it came to be seen as the main champion of the Shia community.

Hizballah's social service network strengthened its bond with the population. Residents of predominantly Shia areas received health care in Hizballah-run hospitals and clinics, sent their children to Hizballah schools, obtained loans and rural development aid from Hizballah institutions, and turned to Hizballah for legal assistance and to seek arbitration of local disputes. After every major battle with Israel, Hizballah was usually first on the scene with offering emergency relief and help with reconstruction faster, more efficiently, and in greater amounts than anyone else, including the Lebanese Government. Three months after the end of fighting in the Summer War, Nasrallah declared that Hizballah had paid \$300 million in rental reimbursements and compensation to those who lost their homes as a result of the war, considerably more than the amount distributed by the Lebanese Government.⁵³

Weak state authority greatly assisted Hizballah's efforts. Because of the country's sectarian divisions the Lebanese state has never been strong and by the time of Hizballah's founding, state authority had been devastated by nearly a decade of civil war. Hizballah was able to organize and operate openly without fear of government interference. The collapse of the Lebanese state created both a need for Hizballah's social service network and space for it to operate. Lacking confidence in the ability of the Lebanese army and security services to provide security, residents turned to Hizballah for protection, adding to the group's status and political clout. The Taif agreement, which ended the civil war fighting, allowed Hizballah to retain an independent armed capability after other civil war era militias were disarmed. Because of the popular appeal of Hizballah's "resistance" against Israel, successive Lebanese governments were reluctant to try curbing the group. By the time of the summer of 2006 the Lebanese Government had largely ceded policing of areas adjacent to Israeli border to Hizballah.

Populations with rising expectations and weak states exist in many places, but they are not universally present. Even in politically turbulent parts of the world, like the Middle East, the state has proven remarkably durable. Broad popular movements often fragment, creating a multiplicity of factions with no clear winner. Even where conditions like those experienced by Hizballah are present, militant groups may not be able to elicit the same level of popular support that Hizballah has acquired. Like al-Qaida in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan, militant groups and political movements may turn to terrorism as a way to extract support from the public, alienating potential supporters and leaving the groups vulnerable to political isolation.

State Sponsorship That is Not Overwhelming. Hizballah would not have achieved the level of military skill it has reached today without the support of its state sponsors, Syria and Iran. Such support was possible because of an unusual confluence of interests bringing together all three parties. Iran in the early 1980s was looking for ways to export its Islamic Revolution in the face of pressure from Iraq and the West. Syria aligned with Iran against its Ba'athist rival, Iraq, and sought allies in Lebanon to help withstand what the Syrians viewed as attempts by Israel and the West to intrude into their traditional sphere of influence. Tehran and Damascus viewed Hizballah as an ideal tool to dilute Western influence in Lebanon and apply military pressure to Israel.

Without support from Iran, Hizballah might not exist. Iran virtually created Hizballah by bringing together local Lebanese clerics and smaller groups and organizing them into a movement—the Party of God (Hizballah).⁵⁴ Ayatollah Khomeini gave Hizballah its spiritual direction and justification and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) assisted in the drafting of Hizballah's charter.⁵⁵ Iran provided indispensable military training and the bulk of Hizballah's financing and weapons, especially more advanced armaments like surface-to-surface missiles.⁵⁶ Without Iranian support, Hizballah probably would not be able to maintain the extensive social services network that undergirds much of its popular support. Early in the group's development as a fighting force, a Hizballah official once assessed that without Iranian support, it would have taken the group fifty years to achieve what it had accomplished.⁵⁷

Though secondary to Iran, Syria nonetheless, provides essential support. Syria provided Hizballah with weapons for use in the recent conflict and for years has allowed Hizballah to receive arms and other supplies from Iran via Syrian territory.⁵⁸ Syria provided a kind of political sanctuary in Lebanon in which Hizballah could grow and develop its skills, suppressing challenges from other groups and mediating truces with competitors, especially AMAL. The presence of a degree of order and stability in Lebanon after the Taif agreement meant that Hizballah was not required to fend off challengers and could concentrate on fighting Israel. One of the reasons Hizballah has fared better against Israel in Lebanon than the PLO is that Palestinian forces, operating under civil war conditions for a longer time than Hizballah, had to prepare to fight two radically different kinds of war, one against Israel and another against rival militias in Lebanon.⁵⁹

Despite the high level of support it receives from Iran and Syria, Hizballah has maintained its independence. Notwithstanding its close ties to Iran, Hizballah has on occasion pursued a separate agenda, for example in the 1980s when Hizballah leaders resisted Iranian attempts to secure the release of western hostages and end fighting between Amal and Hizballah.⁶⁰ At the same time, Hizballah on several occasions clashed with Syria's ambition to assert hegemonic control in Lebanon.⁶¹ Hizballah's popularity among Lebanese Shia and its role as the most effective military force confronting Israel made it a valuable asset for Iran and Syria and gave the group leverage with both governments. In addition, Hizballah was able to exploit the competition for influence in Lebanon between Syria and Iran and clerical divisions in the Iranian leadership.⁶² By maintaining the balance between its interests and those of its state sponsors, Hizballah has reaped the benefits of outside support without paying much of a price in terms of domestic political legitimacy. As one analyst of Hizballah put it, Hizballah profits from state support that is not overwhelming.⁶³

In an era of stateless and transnational terrorist organizations, state sponsorship may not be as important as it once was, but it is still highly desirable. Groups like al-Qaida have shown that it is possible to raise funds from private donors, front companies, or criminal activities, but such sources can be unreliable. They may not produce the kind of advanced technology and technical skills needed to fight modern guerrilla wars, and fundraising absorbs organizational energy and resources that could have gone into the fight. Building a popular support base, which was critical for Hizballah, takes enormous

resources that only exceptionally wealthy organizations or states can provide. On the other hand, groups that become too dependent on outside state support can lose popular legitimacy by appealing to be nothing more than puppets for foreign governments. Historically, few terrorist or insurgent groups have managed to square that circle.⁶⁴

Organizational Development. Hizballah developed an organizational structure especially suited for guerrilla fighting. Hizballah fielded small squads that operated with considerable latitude under ‘mission-type’ orders that allow for the kind of rapid response that is needed on the modern battlefield where conditions change rapidly.⁶⁵ Hizballah combines the flexibility of a laterally-structured network with the focus and discipline of a traditional hierarchical organization. Former UNIFIL spokesman Goksel explained that Hizballah has a flat military organization with no real command hierarchy.⁶⁶ Other experts describe Hizballah as a “hybrid of hierarchical and network arrangements.”⁶⁷

Hizballah’s unusual organizational structure is a byproduct of its formation and early development. Hizballah incorporated several different groups, including breakaway elements of AMAL, the Lebanese branch of the Da’wa Party, followers of Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, and local Shia religious leaders from southern Lebanon. Magnus Ranstorp, a leading authority on Hizballah’s origins and structure, describes Hizballah in its early years as “a coalition of clerics, who each had their own views and networks of followers.”⁶⁸ Clan affiliations and family ties were important as well. In a sense, Hizballah is a network of networks.

Despite its decentralized structure, Hizballah is a disciplined organization. The authority of the Hizballah leadership is maintained by common ideology which serves as a unifying force. In its founding document, the open letter of 1985, Hizballah vested ultimate authority in Iran’s Supreme leader, at the time Ayatollah Khomeini.⁶⁹ Decisions taken by the Supreme Leader and Hizballah’s religious and clerical leaders are considered to be divinely sanctioned and therefore deserving of respect and obedience. Yet even within this strict hierarchy, there is room for flexibility. Because the Supreme Leader makes his rulings according to his interpretation of Islamic law, there is room for adjustment; for example, the Supreme Leader Khomeini ruled in 1992 that it was permissible for Hizballah to run candidates in parliamentary elections, reversing Hizballah’s longstanding aversion to participation in the political system.⁷⁰

Exceptional leadership is another of Hizballah’s organizational strengths. Scholars have long debated about whether history is made primarily by leaders or by great social forces, but it is hard to argue that the quality of Hizballah’s leadership has not been a factor in its success. Nasrallah’s leadership of Hizballah since 1992 has brought stability to senior levels of the organization and helped overcome centrifugal tendencies. Former Deputy Secretary of State Armitage described Nasrallah as “the smartest man in the Middle East” in terms of public relations and political gamesmanship.⁷¹ Hizballah leaders have proven exceptionally skilled at navigating Lebanon’s complex and shifting political landscape, steering the group through the latter years of the Lebanese civil war, death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the post-Taif period of Syria dominance in Lebanon, and the more free-wheeling political environment since the departure of Syrian troops in April 2005.

Duplicating Hizballah's organizational structure is likely to be especially difficult. Organizations led by charismatic individuals or operating under rigid command structures may be unwilling to allow decentralized authority. Officials may be reluctant to allow the kinds of organizational processes that encourage the emergence of effective new leaders. Authoritarian regimes that might want to emulate Hizballah's command structure will particularly be challenged because they generally have not been willing to allow subordinates sufficient initiative and freedom of action. They may elect to continue outsourcing guerrilla war with non-state actors as Syria does with Hizballah.

A Glimpse of the Future.

The Hizballah experience suggests that other groups will try to follow Hizballah's lead, but the importance of special circumstances in Hizballah's development suggests that Hizballah will be more an inspiration than a template. Hizballah imitators will probably pick and choose those elements of the Hizballah model that suit their own experience and circumstances. Each is liable to develop according to its own situation. Some probably will be more effective than others.

The result is likely to be a hodgepodge of Hizballah wannabes of different shapes and sizes, but that does not mean imitators of the Hizballah model will not pose a threat. None of Mao or Castro's imitators succeeded in taking power, but the guerrilla movements they created were responsible for several years of instability and violence. Even a handful of would-be Hizballah's could create serious challenges. In the extreme, they could help bring about what New York Times journalist David Brooks described as a second Thirty Years War in the Middle East with a bewildering array of small and large conflicts among faiths, tribes, and local groupings, including a legion of mini-Hizballahs.⁷²

Hizballah is likely to contribute to trends that are changing the nature of warfare. The Hizballah model sends a message of empowerment to groups with grievances that might otherwise have been deterred by conventional military power. As a result, there are likely to be more wars, and more of them will be unconventional wars fought by irregular forces. Since unconventional wars are usually protracted affairs, wars will be longer in duration and harder to end. Wars will be nastier too. They will tend to involve a larger segment of the local population, blurring the line between combatants and noncombatants, inciting ethnic and sectarian tensions, and making the battlefield a more confusing and morally ambiguous place.

But the situation is not hopeless. The case of Hizballah shows that groups like it have vulnerabilities. They need a secure base in an operating environment where state authority is weak. They need the support of a receptive population that has grievances and is looking for practical solutions for real problems. They need money, weapons, training, technical support, and political backing from states, especially nearby states. Lastly, they need a coherent and flexible organization led by smart leaders who at least appear sincere and committed.

The Hizballah experience suggests that coping with its likely imitators will also require a flexible approach. Each group will have to be evaluated according to its own strengths and weaknesses. Some may need to be confronted directly. In other cases, it may make more sense to try an indirect approach. Groups with a narrow political base may be isolated while those with a broader following may need to be co-opted. Perhaps the most important lesson is that counterterrorist and counterinsurgent policies must be as agile and adaptive as Hizballah has proven to be. When it comes to confronting Hizballah and its imitators, one size does not fit all.

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² "HAMAS Discussing How to 'Clone' Hezbollah Experience, Leader Says," *Al-Hayat*, 30 August 2006.

³ Michael Hirst and Clancy Chassay, "Security Service Boss Says Rockets, anti-Tank Missiles And Millions of Rounds of Ammunition are Being Smuggled Across Egyptian Border," *The Sunday Telegraph*, 3 September 2006; Abraham Rabinovich, "Israel Fears Fight against HAMAS; Sees Iran's Hand in Fortifications," *The Washington Times*, 20 March 2007, A11; and Joshua Mitnick, "Pre-emptive Attack on HAMAS Eyed: Arms Buildup Feared," *The Washington Times*, 25 October 2006, A11.

⁴ "Syria Deploys Thousands of Rockets on Israel Border: Sources," *Agence France Press*, 9 March 2007.

⁵ Joshua Partlow, "Iran's Elite Force is Said to Use Hezbollah as 'Proxy' in Iraq," *Washington Post*, 3 July 2007, A8.

⁶ Edward Cody and Molly Moore, "The Best Guerrilla Force in the World," *Washington Post*, 14 August 2006, A01.

⁷ Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith Press, 2006), 5.

⁸ Hezbollah An Octopus with Tentacles Around World, Officials Say," *US Fed News*, 28 September 2006; and Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 86.

⁹ "Text of Open letter Addressed by Hizb Allah to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World," in Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 172-173.

¹⁰ Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 3-4.

¹¹ Hammes, 2.

¹² Hassan Nasrallah, "Hizballah's Nasrallah Discusses Recent War, Supports Army, UNIFIL Deployment," (Interview by Maryam al-Bassam, *Beirut New TV*, August 27, 2006).

¹³ Hizballah's new tactics are analyzed by Daniel Helmer in "Not Quite Counterinsurgency: A Cautionary Tale for U.S. Forces Based on Israel's Operation Change of Direction," *Armor* 116, No.1, (1 January 2007): 7-12.

¹⁴ See Andrew Exum, "Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment," *Policy Focus* no. 63, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 2006).

¹⁵ David Makovsky and Jeffrey White, "Lessons and Implications of the Israel-Hizballah War: A Preliminary Assessment," *Policy Focus* no. 60, (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2006): 39-41; Anthony Cordesman, "Preliminary Lessons of the Israeli-Hezbollah War" (working draft, Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2006): 22-23; Exum, 5-7; and Helmer, 10.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Cordesman, 20.

¹⁸ See Kenneth Pollack, *Arabs At War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Anthony James Joes, *Resisting Rebellion: The History of Counterinsurgency* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 13.

²⁰ Helmer, 9.

²¹ Helmer, 9.

²² "Eye for an Eye: Israel Shadow-boxes with a Surprisingly High-Tech Foe," *Newsweek*, 14 August 2006, 20.

²³ Journalist Jeffrey Goldberg estimated Hizballah's annual budget at \$100 million in 2002. Jeffrey Goldberg, "A Reporter At Large: In the Party of God (Part II)," *The New Yorker*, 28 October 2002. Other sources say \$100 million is Iran's annual financial contribution to Hizballah and that Hizballah also receives funds from other sources. See Byman, 88; and Hamzeh, 63-64. Dr. Rachel Ehrenfeld, Director of the American Center for Democracy, testified before a subcommittee of the Canadian House of Commons that Hizballah's annual budget is about \$200 to \$500 million. Dr. Rachel Ehrenfeld, "Testimony before the Subcommittee on Public Safety and National Security of the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness," 26 October 2005, Canadian House of Commons, Available at <http://www.public-integrity.org/articles/publications102605.htm>, accessed 27 June 2007.

²⁴ "Middle East: Hizballah's Lack of Structure is Its Strength," *Radio Free Liberty*, 8 August 2006; available on www.rferl.org; accessed 26 October 2006; and Exum, 9-10.

²⁵ Marvin Kald, "The Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006: The media as a Weapon in Asymmetrical Conflict," *Faculty Research Working papers Series*, (John F. Kennedy School of Government-Harvard University, February 2007); Available at <http://www.public-integrity.org/articles/publications102605.html>; accessed 23 August 2007.

²⁶ "Nearly a Month into Lebanon Fighting, Arab Anger at their Governments Grows," *Associated Press*, August 7, 2006.

²⁷ "100,000 Iraqis March in Support of Hezbollah," *International Herald Tribune*, 5 August 2006, 6.

²⁸ "Palestinians Said to See Hezbollah as "Superhero," on Al-Jazeera.net website; and "In Gaza, Cheers for Hezbollah: Battered Palestinians Happy to See Pain Inflicted on Israel," *International Herald Tribune*, 3 August 2006, 5.

²⁹ Ariel Cohen, "Rallying for Jihad," *Washington Times*, 18 August 2006, A16.

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- ³⁰ Jay Solomon and James Hookway, "Five Years Later: In Indonesia, War on Terror Shows Both Gains and Worrisome Trends," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 September 2006, section A, 1.
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- ³⁵ Nasrallah, "Text of Hizballah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah's Speech," 1.
- ³⁶ "Exclusive Interview with Muqtada al-Sadr on Situation in Iraq, Other Issues," Amman al-Ghadd, 18 February 2006.
- ³⁷ Byman, 86.
- ³⁸ Hamzeh, 39-40.
- ³⁹ Bazzi, 6.
- ⁴⁰ Sudarsan Raghavan, "An Encave of Normalacy in Fearful Baghdad; In Shiite Slum Named for his Family, Radical Cleric Offers Aid, Hope," *Washington Post*, 27 March 2007, A01; and Nancy Youssef, "Iraqi Cleric Tries to Expand Militia into a Political Bloc," *Knight Ridder Tribune News*, 7 May 2007, A28.
- ⁴¹ Joshua Mitnick, "Palestinian Charities Help Hamas Endure," *Christain Science Monitor*, 16 October 2006, 7.
- ⁴² Michael R. Gordon and Dexter Filkins, "Hezbollah Said to Help Shiite Army in Iraq," *New York Times*, 28 November 2006, section A, 1.
- ⁴³ Robin Wright, "Hezbollah Has Not Abandoned Its Extremist Origins," *Washington Post*, July 18, 2006, A9.
- ⁴⁴ Bruce Riedel, "Al Qaeda Strikes Back," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2007): 37.
- ⁴⁵ Ian F. W. Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies: Guerrillas and their Opponents Since 1750*. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 70.
- ⁴⁶ Augustus Richard Norton, "Walking between Raindrops: Hizballah in Lebanon," *Mediterranean Politics* 3, no. 1 (Summer 1998), 97.
- ⁴⁷ Hamzeh, 89.
- ⁴⁸ Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: the Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 34-36.
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⁵⁰ Peters, 42.

⁵¹ For a broader discussion of the factors influencing the Shia political awakening in Lebanon, see Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a*; Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *Hizbu'llah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 7-15; Ranstorp, 25-58; and Hamzeh, 6-26.

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⁵³ Hassan Nasrallah, "Nasrallah Promises New Lebanese Government, Says Reconstruction to Continue," (*Beirut al-Akhbar*, 14 November 2006). Information on compensation provided by the Lebanese Government is based on Lebanese Government figures provided at www.rebuildlebanon.gov.lb; accessed 3 November 2006.

⁵⁴ Shimon Shapira, "The Origins of Hizballah," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 46 (Spring 1988), 124-129; and Ranstorp, 34-35.

⁵⁵ Ranstorp, 36.

⁵⁶ Byman, 88.

⁵⁷ Martin Kramer, Redeeming Jerusalem: "The Pan Islamic Premise of Hizballah," in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 106.

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⁵⁹ Yezid Sayigh, "Palestinian Military Performance in the 1982 War," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 12, no. 4 (Summer 1983), 9.

⁶⁰ Ranstorp, 125-126 and 130-133.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 100-108 and 132.

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⁶³ Interview by author, Washington, D.C., 26 February 2007.

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⁶⁹ "Text of Open letter," 168.

⁷⁰ Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007), 100; and Saad-Ghorayeb, 43.

⁷¹ Seymour M. Hersh, "The Redirection; Is the Administration's New Policy Benefitting Our Enemies in the War on Terrorism?" *The New Yorker*, 5 March 2007, available online at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/03/05/070305fa_fact_hersh, accessed 3 July 2007.

⁷² David Brooks, "After the Fall," *New York Times*, 12 December 2006

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