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On a Military Wing and a Prayer

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Articles & Testimony

Europe thinks it can separate Hezbollah's political activities from its terrorist operations, but the Party of God isn't built that way.

Bulgaria's interior minister announced on Feb. 5 the result of his country's investigation into the July 2012 bombing of a bus filled with Israeli tourists in the city of Burgas, which killed five Israelis and the vehicle's Bulgarian driver. Two of the individuals who carried out the terrorist attack, he said, "belonged to the military formation of Hezbollah."

It was not by chance that his statement fingered only the military wing of Hezbollah, not the group as a whole. Within the European Union, the findings of the Bulgarian investigation have kicked off a firestorm over whether to add the Lebanese militant organization -- in whole, or perhaps just its military or terrorist wings -- to the EU's list of banned terrorist groups. But are there in fact distinct wings within the self-styled "Party of God"?

Hezbollah is many things. It is one of the dominant political parties in Lebanon, as well as a social and religious movement catering first and foremost -- though not exclusively -- to Lebanon's Shiite community. Hezbollah is also Lebanon's largest militia, the only one to keep its weapons and rebrand its armed elements as an "Islamic resistance" in response to the terms of the 1989 Taif Accord, which ended the Lebanese Civil War.

While the group's various elements are intended to complement one another, the reality is often messier. In part, that has to do with compartmentalization of Hezbollah's covert activities. It is also, however, a result of the group's multiple identities -- Lebanese, pan-Shiite, pro-Iranian -- and the group's multiple and sometimes competing goals tied to these different identities.

Hezbollah's ideological commitment to Iranian Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolutionary doctrine of velayat-e

faqih (guardianship of the jurist), which holds that a Shiite Islamic cleric should serve as the supreme head of government, is a key source of conflict. The group is thus simultaneously committed to the decrees of Iranian clerics, the Lebanese state, its sectarian Shiite community within Lebanon, and fellow Shiites abroad.

The consequences of these competing ideological drivers was clear in July 2006, when Hezbollah dragged Israel and Lebanon into a war neither state wanted by crossing the U.N.-demarcated border between the two countries, killing three Israeli soldiers, and kidnapping two more in an ambush. They came to the fore again two years later, when Hezbollah took over West Beirut by force of arms, turning its weapons of "resistance" against fellow Lebanese citizens. When the chips are down, Hezbollah's commitment to Iran trumps its identity as a Lebanese political movement.

The ties that bind Hezbollah's political leadership with its international illicit activities are also unmistakable. According to a CIA document, even before Hassan Nasrallah rose to the position of secretary-general in 1992, he was "directly involved in many Hizballah terrorist operations, including hostage taking, airline hijackings, and attacks against Lebanese rivals."

Time and again, Hezbollah's political personalities have been tied to the group's terrorist and criminal activities. Consider a major case in the United States: In 2008, while Hezbollah operative Ali Karaki was planning a Hezbollah attack in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, his brother, Hasan Antar Karaki, was helping lead a broad criminal conspiracy to sell counterfeit and stolen currency in Philadelphia. Luckily, Hasan Antar Karaki sold his wares to an undercover FBI informant posing as a member of the Philadelphia criminal underworld. Hasan Antar Karaki proved to be a major figure in Hezbollah's forgery operations, and he provided an FBI source with fraudulent British and Canadian passports.

Meanwhile, in meetings in Lebanon and the United States, Hasan Antar Karaki's associate, Hassan Hodroj, a Hezbollah spokesman and the head of its Palestinian issues portfolio within the group's political echelon, sought to procure a long list of sophisticated weapons in a black-market scheme involving Hezbollah operatives across the globe. According to court documents, Hodroj wanted "heavy machinery" for the "fight against Jews and to protect Lebanon." But move forward with caution, Hodroj counseled an undercover FBI source, because someone in the United States could "go to jail for 100 years" if caught dealing with Hezbollah.

In light of cases like this one, in which people overtly affiliated with Hezbollah's political activities are engaged in criminal and terrorist activities, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate Hezbollah's overt activities from its covert behavior. "Little is known about [the Hezbollah military wing's] internal command hierarchy," a Western government report noted in 2012, "due to its highly secretive nature and use of sophisticated protective measures."

The structure and manpower of Hezbollah's terrorist operation, which is responsible for its financial and logistical activities as well as its terrorist operations abroad, are similarly opaque. We do know, however, that Hezbollah's terrorist network, the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO), was formally founded in 1983 when Hezbollah master terrorist Imad Mughniyeh fled to Iran after orchestrating the October 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine Corps and French military barracks in Beirut with his brother-in-law, Mustafa Badreddine.

This much is clear: Since its founding, Hezbollah has developed a sophisticated organizational and leadership structure. The overall governing authority, the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council), wields all decision-making power and directs several subordinate functional councils. Each functional council reports directly to the Majlis al-Shura, which, as Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem wrote in his book, is "in charge of drawing the overall vision and policies, overseeing the general strategies for the party's function, and taking political decisions."

U.S. assessments echo Qassem's description. "Hezbollah has a unified leadership structure that oversees the organization's complementary, partially compartmentalized elements," reads a Congressional Research Service

report.

The secretary-general, currently Nasrallah, presides over the Majlis al-Shura and functions as the group's leader under the authority of the "jurist theologian" Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader. Five administrative bodies, organized around thematic responsibilities, run Hezbollah's political, military (jihad), parliamentary, executive, and judicial activities. The Majlis al-Shura considers all elements of the group's activities, including its political and military wings, as part of one holistic entity.

According to Hezbollah's top officials, this unity of purpose among the group's diverse activities is essential to its success. "If the military wing were separated from the political wing, this would have repercussions, and it would reflect on the political scene," Qassem told a Lebanese paper in 2000. "Hezbollah's secretary-general is the head of the Shura Council and also the head of the Jihad Council, and this means that we have one leadership, with one administration."

The Jihad Council is the functional council underneath the Majlis al-Shura responsible for all military matters. Qassem writes that it "comprises those in charge of resistance activity, be that in terms of oversight, recruitment, training, equipment, security, or any other resistance-related endeavors." To accomplish its mission, the council is divided into several smaller units in charge of protecting the leadership and carrying out internal and external surveillance, as well as overseas operations. The party's security branch is further broken down into three subgroups: central, preventive, and overseas security. In 2000, a dedicated counterintelligence branch was reportedly founded as well.

Under this structure, Hezbollah's militia and terrorist activities, along with its security organ, all report to the Jihad Council. Until he was killed, Mughniyeh was Hezbollah's top militant commander and reportedly led the Jihad Council himself. By some accounts, he also held a seat on the Majlis al-Shura, which would be typical for the party's standing military commander.

Unlike its sister councils, however, the Jihad Council enjoys strategic ambiguity. Neither the majority of Hezbollah officials nor the party's elected parliamentarians are aware of the details of their party's covert military and terrorist activities, which are decided on by the most senior leadership. According to the U.S. government, these activities are "executed" by the leadership of Hezbollah's military apparatus, known as the Islamic Resistance and led by Badreddine, and by the IJO, led by Talal Hamiyah, and they are "overseen" by Nasrallah.

Europe's approach to Hezbollah has been varied. Many European governments have resisted international efforts to designate the organization as a terrorist group by distinguishing between Hezbollah's political and military wings. Britain distinguishes among Hezbollah's terrorist wing (the Islamic Jihad Organization), military wing, and political wing, and the country banned the IJO in 2000 and the military wing in 2008. The Netherlands, however, designated Hezbollah a terrorist entity in 2004 without distinguishing between the group's political and military wings. A 2004 Dutch intelligence report highlighted investigations that show "Hezbollah's political and terrorist wings are controlled by one co-ordinating council."

The European Union has taken action against Hezbollah's interests in the past. In May 2002, the European Union froze the assets of a non-European terrorist group for the first time by adding seven Hezbollah-affiliated individuals, including Mughniyeh, to its financial sanctions list for terrorism. It did not, however, sanction Hezbollah as an organization. On March 10, 2005, the European Parliament passed a nonbinding resolution recognizing that "clear evidence exists of terrorist activities on the part of Hezbollah" and calling on the European Council to take "all necessary steps to curtail them."

But the necessary steps did not occur. Instead, most European countries preferred to make convenient distinctions between the different parts of Hezbollah, even when the group's own leadership does not.

Today, as European leaders consider whether to label Hezbollah a terrorist group, they should judge the group by the totality of its actions. Hezbollah cannot be forgiven its criminal, terrorist, or militant pursuits simply because it also engages in political or humanitarian ones. As the Burgas bus bombing demonstrates, the Party of God can and has mobilized operatives for everything from criminal enterprises to terrorist attacks well beyond Lebanon's borders.

And though Hezbollah is composed of multiple committees and branches, it operates as a single entity. Hezbollah, the U.S. intelligence community has determined, is "a multifaceted, disciplined organization that combines political, social, paramilitary, and terrorist elements" and is one in which decisions "to resort to arms or terrorist tactics [are] carefully calibrated."

Hezbollah's Qassem, speaking in October 2012, concurred: "We don't have a military wing and a political one; we don't have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other.... Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, are in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority," he said.

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