

Terrorists in the Middle East:

The Military Capabilities of Hizballah, Hamas, and al-Qaeda-Inspired Groups

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On October 17, 2009, Daniel Byman, Matthew Levitt, and Jeffrey White addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Daniel Byman is director of the Security Studies Program at the Center for Peace and Security Studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, as well as a senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow and director of the [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence \(templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchPr](#) at The Washington Institute. Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq and the Levant.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Daniel Byman

Popular opinion suggests that Hizballah -- especially its leader, Hassan Nasrallah -- emerged victorious from the summer 2006 conflict with Israel. Yet, with no precedent of success to imitate, Hizballah is currently wading in uncharted waters and faces critical questions regarding its existence as a resistance organization. What does a terrorist group do after gaining credibility and political legitimacy by defeating the most potent military in the region? Should it continue down this path and transform itself into a political organization, or would a resumption of violence against Israel make more sense?

One thing is certain: if Hizballah continues as a resistance organization, it cannot simply abandon violence as a political tactic. In Lebanon, the group is viewed as a collection of fighters; even with the credibility it gained from the 2006 victory, it cannot exchange its arms for a seat at the policy table as a nonviolent political entity. In fact, in the Lebanese political environment, violence often serves as a tool to bolster credibility. Hizballah is fully aware of this dynamic and has deliberately used violence to gain political power.

That said, Hizballah today is notably distinct from the violent resistance organization that emerged in 1982. It no longer operates as a "conventional" terrorist group insofar as it actively participates in political processes, garners significant support in Lebanese elections, and fields parallel militias and terrorist cells. Moreover, its use of force has diminished since the 2006 war, due in large part to the deterrent effect of Israel's massive military response. Yet the group could resume using violence in the near future for any number of reasons, such as (1) supporting its main sponsor, Iran, in the event of a U.S. or Israeli military strike, (2) avenging recent targeted killings carried out by Israel (e.g., the assassination of Imad Mughniyah), or (3) disrupting the peace process by aiding Palestinian resistance efforts.

Hizballah's current transitional state is remarkably stable compared to Hamas's situation. The January 2009 Israeli incursion into Gaza -- Operation Cast Lead -- substantially crippled the group's military and organizational capabilities. In addition, Hamas is facing challenges on multiple fronts simultaneously. In Gaza, it must contend with Salafi jihadist groups intent on taking its place. More broadly, the organization is battling Fatah for Palestinian political power, at a time when the latter has improved conditions in the West Bank under the leadership of Prime Minister Salam Fayad. Hamas is also subject to pressure from Iran and Syria, both of which oppose any perceived political or strategic moderation in the wake of the January hostilities. Last but not least, the Hamas government is charged with caring for its constituents in Gaza, a duty it assumed after filling the political vacuum created by Israel's 2005 withdrawal. All told, Hamas is in an unenviable position.

Matthew Levitt

Although al-Qaeda-inspired groups currently have only limited representation and support in Gaza, their influence could spread. As many as eighteen such groups are active in the volatile territory today, but most include only a few members, aside from Jaish al-Islam, Jaish al-Umma, Jund Ansar Allah, and Jaljalat. Since Hamas came to power in 2006, it has proactively targeted and weakened its rivals, with special attention given to al-Qaeda-inspired factions that challenge its authority. In August 2009, for instance, Hamas raided a Gaza mosque sheltering Jund Ansar Allah members, killing more than twenty people after the group's leader announced the establishment of an Islamic emirate in Gaza.

Salafi jihadist groups in Gaza have increased the pace of their attacks against Israel, though they have not yet carried out large-scale al-Qaeda-style strikes. At the same time, one group -- Jaish al-Islam -- has carried out several attacks tied to global jihadist rather than Palestinian interests. For example, after kidnapping a BBC journalist in early 2007, the group's leaders relayed their demands for releasing him using an al-Qaeda-linked website. They also called for the release of an al-Qaeda leader jailed in Britain -- an issue far removed from the cause of armed resistance against Israel. Later, in July 2008, Jaish al-Islam came close to mounting a high-profile, al-Qaeda-style assassination attempt against former British prime minister Tony Blair (the plot was thwarted by Israeli intelligence).

Israeli experts claim that the threat of Salafi jihadist attacks emanating from Gaza remains serious, despite the fact that al-Qaeda has not shifted its focus to Israel. Clearly, though, al-Qaeda would look favorably on any attack that served as inspiration for a budding Gaza-based group. Al-Qaeda could also use local events to motivate attacks against Israel, whether by Gaza-based supporters or external affiliates such as the North Africa-based group al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM -- it should be mentioned that this affiliate has garnered increased attention recently because of its access to European Islamist operatives). In addition, al-Qaeda-inspired groups in Gaza could grow stronger if foreign fighters enter Gaza in significant numbers, or if Palestinians who have fought abroad decide to return to the territory in support of the Palestinian cause. In the past, many foreign jihadists left Gaza out of disgust for the inadequacies of local groups, so any returning supporters would likely be welcomed. Whatever the case, officials in Israel and elsewhere remain focused on nascent cells that could carry out their own large-scale attacks, thereby thrusting Gaza onto the center stage of al-Qaeda's global jihad.

Jeffrey White

The performance of Hizballah and Hamas in their conflicts with Israel in 2006 and 2009, respectively, reveals much about their current capacities. Assessing their status in the wake of those conflicts shows that both groups have become something more than terrorist organizations: they can also employ conventional fighting strategies against an enemy military by using well-defined forces, regulated tactical behavior, and formal organization and doctrine.

Although Hizballah and Hamas are capable of participating in conventional conflict, they have traditionally turned to irregular and asymmetric warfare instead. Irregular warfare is understood as a violent struggle between state and nonstate actors for control of a population. Asymmetric warfare is defined as conflict between parties whose relative military power, strategy, or tactics differ significantly. Both Hizballah and Hamas are highly capable in the realm of irregular warfare. Hizballah advances a coherent and persuasive ideology, oversees extensive social and financial structures, controls influential media outlets, and maintains potent armed forces. Hamas is similarly capable in this regard and has also succeeded in suppressing its main opponents, namely Fatah and local clans.

The two organizations differ, however, in their asymmetric capabilities. Hizballah has adaptable, experienced leadership and well-trained, professional forces. In addition, it claims crucial support from Iran and Syria and follows a cogent theory of combat calling for attacks against Israel and the defense of southern Lebanon. All of these elements were on full display during the 2006 conflict with Israel, resulting in a perceived Hizballah victory. That is, the group's theory of combat proved correct: its forces carried out their missions effectively and professionally; it received the support it needed from Tehran and Damascus; and, aside from a poor decision to kidnap Israeli soldiers, its senior members displayed effective leadership. In contrast, Hamas lacks effective military leadership, receives significantly less foreign support, and has poorly trained, unprofessional, inexperienced, and limited forces. In Operation Cast Lead, Israel exposed these inadequacies, leaving Hamas substantially weakened.

Although both groups incurred heavy losses in their engagements with Israel, they have learned from their mistakes and are refining their irregular and asymmetric capabilities. Yet Israel's abilities are evolving as well, with the aim of effectively countering Hizballah and Hamas should hostilities erupt in the coming years. ❖

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