

# Afghan Hezbollah?

## Be Careful What You Wish For

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Articles & Testimony

**T**he Washington Post reports that some in the administration see the Lebanese Hezbollah as a possible model for transformation of the Taliban. Describing the Taliban as a movement "deeply rooted" in Afghanistan, much like Hezbollah is in Lebanon, proponents of a Hezbollah model for the Taliban see a scenario in which the Taliban participates in Afghan politics, occasionally flexes its military muscles to benefit its political positions at home, but does not directly threaten the United States even if it remains a source of regional instability.

According to the Post, while the idea has been discussed informally "outside the Situation Room meetings," it has not yet been presented to President Obama. That's a good thing because the notion is deeply flawed, and its implementation would have dire consequences for Afghanistan, the region more broadly, and U.S. counterterrorism efforts all.

Hezbollah in Lebanon is a destabilizing force, as is the Taliban in Afghanistan. Not only does Hezbollah maintain an independent militia in explicit violation of United Nations resolutions, it uses this private army to create semi-independent enclaves throughout the south of Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley where Lebanese Armed Forces are not allowed. In these spaces, Hezbollah maintains training camps, engages in weapons smuggling and drug trafficking, and maintains tens of thousands of rockets aimed at its neighbor to the south, Israel. Hezbollah collects intelligence on people traveling through Beirut international airport, and has built its own communications infrastructure beyond the reach of the national government.

In Afghanistan, an independent Taliban militia that controls territory of its own; maintains bases and training camps; facilitates weapons smuggling; and engages in every aspect of the narcotics production pipeline from poppy cultivation and processing to taxing delivery and smuggling abroad, would certainly seek to maintain its control over its own territory. Indeed, an increasing number of major Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) arrests over the past few months have targeted drug kingpins closely tied to the Taliban, like Haji Juma Kahn and Baz Mohammad.

Neither will Hezbollah today nor a similarly modeled Taliban tomorrow tolerate government challenges to its private army or other sources of power. In the words of then-Principal Deputy Director of National Intelligence Donald Kerr, such groups are out for themselves, and will turn on their fellow Lebanese or Afghan citizens, respectively, when under pressure. "Events in Lebanon since May 7 [2008] demonstrate that Hezbollah -- with the full support of Syria and Iran -- will in fact turn its weapons against the Lebanese people for political purposes," Kerr explained.

"Hezbollah sought to justify its attacks against fellow Lebanese as an attempt to defend the resistance against attacks by the government." Scores of Afghan civilians have been killed in Taliban suicide bombings, including the most recent attack outside the Indian embassy which claimed the lives of 17 Afghans, including 15 civilians and two Afghan police officers. It is all the more difficult to imagine a scenario in which the Taliban play a stabilizing political role in Afghanistan in light of the fact that, unlike Hezbollah, the Taliban adhere to a strict salafi-jihadi doctrine which is anathema to secular politics and requires the strict implementation of shariah law.

Commenting on the philosophical distinctions some in the administration make between the Taliban and Al Qaeda, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs distinguished between the Taliban as an Islamist element in Afghanistan and "an entity that, through a global, transnational jihadist network, would seek to strike the U.S. homeland," like Al Qaeda. But in the assessment of people like Bruce Reidel, an Al Qaeda and Taliban expert who oversaw the administration's policy review regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Taliban's ties to Al Qaeda run deep. "It's a fundamental misreading of the nature of these organizations to think they are anything other than partners," said Reidel. "Al Qaeda is embedded in the Taliban insurgency, and it's highly unlikely that you're going to be able to separate them."

Here too, Hezbollah -- a group involved not only in politics in Lebanon but in terrorist activity worldwide -- is the wrong model. Even as the Hezbollah-led March 8 coalition campaigned ahead of Lebanon's June 7 elections this summer, the group was forced to contend with the unexpected exposure of its covert terrorist activities both at home and abroad. At home, Hezbollah stands accused of playing a role in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Abroad, law enforcement officials have taken action against Hezbollah support networks operating across the globe, including in Egypt, Yemen, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Azerbaijan, Belgium, and Colombia. Just this past week, a court in Azerbaijan found two Hezbollah operatives guilty of plotting attacks on the Israeli and U.S. embassies in Baku, among other plots, and sentenced them each to 15 years in prison.

The Taliban is primarily involved in attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan, though it has been tied to at least one plot in the United States and another in Europe. In the United States, a group of eleven jihadists in Northern Virginia were found to have connections with Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and Lashkar-i-Taiba. In Europe, the Pakistani Taliban -- distinct from but closely allied with the Afghan Taliban -- claimed responsibility for a failed plot to bomb subway trains in Barcelona in 2008. And while historically the Taliban was an adversary of Iran's, the United States believes since at least 2006 Iran has arranged frequent shipments of small arms, RPGs, explosives and other weapons to the Taliban. The Qods Force also provides the Taliban in Afghanistan with weapons, funding, logistics and military training, according to the U.S. government.

As National Counterterrorism Center director Michael Leiter made clear in his congressional testimony last week, Hezbollah is a very poor model for a future Taliban. According to Leiter, the U.S. intelligence community holds the following to be true:

While not aligned with al-Qa'ida, we assess that Lebanese Hizballah remains capable of conducting terrorist attacks on U.S. and Western interests, particularly in the Middle East. It continues to train and sponsor terrorist groups in Iraq that threaten the lives of U.S. and Coalition forces, and supports Palestinian terrorist groups' efforts to attack Israel and jeopardize the Middle East Peace Process. Although its primary focus is Israel, the group holds the United States responsible for Israeli policies in the region and would likely consider attacks on U.S. interests, to include the Homeland, if it perceived a direct threat from the United States to itself or Iran. Hizballah's Secretary General, in justifying the group's use of violence against fellow Lebanese citizens last year, characterized any threat to Hizballah's armed status and its independent communications network as redlines.

Modeling the Taliban after Hezbollah is a recipe for failure. It would doom efforts to promote democracy in Afghanistan and engender long-term instability in both Afghanistan and Pakistan along the traditional Pashtun tribal belt that straddles the country's shared border. It would embolden one of Iran's newer allies in the region and empower a salafi-jihadi organization with close and ongoing ties to Al Qaeda to firmly establish control over parts of the country from which it would continue to produce massive quantities of drugs that ultimately make their way to the West. Looking to Hezbollah as the model for a future Taliban displays both ignorance of Hezbollah and naivete regarding the Taliban. No matter how you slice it, that's a dangerous combination.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11>). ❖

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