Comparing and Contrasting Hizballah and Iraq's Militias

by Andrew Exum **(/experts/andrew-exum)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrew Exum (/experts/andrew-exum)

Brief Analysis

Recently, U.S. military officers and strategic planners have begun comparing Iraq's Shiite militias -- especially the Mahdi Army -- with Hizballah, the dominant Shiite militia and political party in Lebanon. Analysts hope to both understand these militias today and predict how they will evolve in the near future.

This is not a bad comparison to make. Today's political environment in Iraq has important similarities to that of Lebanon during the 1980s, when Hizballah came into its own as a national military and political force. As the Iraq war is now, the Lebanese civil war was a militia war -- one in which various armed factions struggled to protect their territory, expel external forces, and provide basic services to their constituencies. Besides environmental similarities between Lebanon then and Iraq now, another factor is that after the 2006 summer war with Israel, Hizballah has become a model of resistance and military prowess that the Shiite militias in Iraq may well strive to imitate.

Differences among Lebanon, Iraq, and Their Respective Militias

There are, however, several problems with comparing the militias in Iraq to Hizballah. First off, the environment that allowed Hizballah to develop into a "state within a state" and an effective military force had been in place for over three decades prior to the summer 2006 war between Hizballah and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Lebanon is a historically weak state in which seventeen different religious communities are often administered by sectarian leaders and community organizations rather than by the federal government. This has largely been the case since Lebanon's independence in 1943, and has become even more characteristic since a series of sectarian massacres kicked off the nation's bloody fifteen-year civil war in 1975.

Iraq, in contrast, was administered by a totalitarian dictatorship until 2003, and has only devolved into its current state since the U.S.-led invasion of that year toppled Saddam Hussein and left a power vacuum in his place.

Furthermore, Hizballah is a much more mature and disciplined organization than any of Iraq's Shiite militias. As previously stated, Hizballah's evolution into a mature political force -- which effectively acts as a mini-state in South Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, and Beirut's southern suburbs -- took place over decades. What began as loosely organized bands of Shiite gunmen developed over time into a network providing educational, medical, and other community services. The organization has also enjoyed strong financial and material support from Iran on a scale that may be much greater than anything available to Iraqi groups. None of Iraq's militias -- with the notable exception of the Peshmerga in the Kurdish regions -- should be expected to operate with the levels of discipline and organization that are characteristic of Hizballah in Lebanon.

It is also worth noting the way in which the IDF long held the upper hand over Hizballah on the battlefield. Hizballah

did not begin to enjoy significant battlefield success against Israeli forces in South Lebanon until the 1990s. In this decade, Hizballah evolved tactically, gradually becoming both more proficient in the use of its weapons systems -- so impressive to observers of last summer's war -- and more difficult for Israeli intelligence to infiltrate. Hizballah's summer 2006 successes were the result of steady support from external sponsors such as Syria and Iran, intense preparation following Israel's withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, and a political and military evolution that has been taking place since 1982.

Iraq's Militias in the Path of Hizballah

Although militias in Iraq may not yet be able to fight as effectively as Hizballah, U.S. planners are correct in looking at Hizballah's successes in Lebanon as a model of what Iraq's militias may aspire to achieve. Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr publicly declared his support for and unity with Hizballah during the summer war, and his militia has -- according to recently released U.S. intelligence -- accepted training from Hizballah fighters in both Lebanon and Iraq.

Iraq's militias have a long way to go before they even begin to rival Hizballah in tactics and battlefield performance. However, several disturbing trends suggest that militias and insurgent groups in Iraq have advanced with frightening speed in their acquisition and use of both basic and advanced weapons systems. In the past several weeks, six U.S. helicopters have gone down in Iraq. Sources disagree on whether these helicopters were brought down by conventional small arms fire or by more advanced weaponry such as shoulder-fired missiles. If conventional small arms were used, observers must conclude that Iraqi militias and insurgent groups have grown more proficient in the employment of small arms against U.S. helicopters -- a worrying sign for a U.S. military grown accustomed to the advantage that helicopters have provided in the counterinsurgency fight.

If shoulder-fired missiles were used, then the U.S. military has an altogether different cause for concern -- that Iraqi militias targeting U.S. military units are not just being funded, but also equipped and trained by external sponsors such as Iran. This worry has increased with published reports that Iran is responsible for introducing the most powerful roadside bomb used in Shiite militia attacks on U.S. armored columns, as well as a recent Department of Defense briefing detailing Iranian military support for the militias.

Conclusion

Hizballah -- like the militias of Iraq -- is the product of a unique political and social environment. As such, U.S. planners should be careful before drawing broad comparisons between Hizballah and Iraqi Shiite militias. Some characteristics of one may not apply to the other. At the same time, U.S. military officers and planners are correct in assuming that Iraq's militias will seek to emulate Hizballah's battlefield prowess, tactics, and successes. For that reason, U.S. planners must be wary of any new weapons and tactics introduced by outside sponsors that would enable this emulation. Continued external support for the militias in the form of weapons and training will make the U.S. military presence in Iraq more and more dangerous in the same way it did for the IDF in South Lebanon.

As such, determining what kind of game the Iranians are playing in Iraq is especially important. Perhaps Iran is waiting to see which Shiite militia emerges as the strongest before backing one faction wholeheartedly. Or perhaps it will attempt to support a loyal splinter militia in the same way it broke Islamic Amal -- later Hizballah -- off from Lebanon's Amal militia in the early 1980s.

All this remains to be seen. For now, planners should draw lessons from the Hizballah phenomenon while paying close attention to Iraq's ever-complex political and military environment.

Andrew Exum is the Soref Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and, most recently, the author of **Hizballah at War: A Military Assessment (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=260)** . He led a platoon of Army Rangers in Iraq in 2003. ❖

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