Interviews and Presentations

Hezbollah: A Case Study of Global Reach

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Thank you very much for your kind introduction. It's a pleasure to be here at ICT, an institution that makes such important contributions to both the academic literature available on the critical issue of terrorism and to the practical policy debates surrounding these issues as well.

Examining Hezbollah's international terrorist activity, that is its international presence and operations outside the Levant, not only illuminates the group's proactive and ongoing terror activities but provides a useful case study of a terrorist group of global reach as well.

Global Reach and Cross-group Pollination

Though the term has yet to be officially defined, "global reach" has nonetheless become the yardstick for determining whether or not a terrorist group warrants inclusion in the post-September 11 war on terrorism. Even within the "global reach" designation there exists an unstated spectrum of priorities. For example, al-Qaeda is legitimately going to receive more attention and resources than ETA in Spain or FARC in Colombia, even though both those regional terrorist groups are known for their links to other international terrorist groups and state sponsors.

To develop a more telling barometer for measuring the severity of a group's global reach, and therefore its prioritization as a potential target in the war on terror, it is useful to develop an understanding of the matrix of relationships between terrorist operatives, groups, fronts, and state sponsors. To be sure, these relationships are what make the threat of international terrorism so acute today, just as they served as the single most critical factor in facilitating the success of the devastating attacks on September 11, 2001.

Indeed, while terrorist groups remain the central structural unit in international terrorism, I believe the relationships between individual terrorists belonging to different groups are even more important. This crossover and pollination facilitates cooperation among groups -- in many cases operational, in others logistical and financial cooperation. Such links exist even between groups that don't share similar ideologies, leading to cooperation between religious zealots and secular radicals; between ideologically- or theologically-driven terrorists and criminal entities (as has been the case in several terrorist attacks in Iraq, where criminal elements played critical roles in attacks in return for monetary compensation); between Sunni and Shi'a groups; and between individuals whose person-to-person contacts require no agreement between their respective headquarters.

A particularly interesting example is the Madrid al-Qaeda cell, perhaps the most important cell broken up since September 11. Mohammad Zouaydi, a key al-Qaeda financier and the head of the cell, not only funded the Hamburg cell but dispatched a Madrid cell member to collect pre-operational surveillance of the Twin Towers and other U.S. landmarks a few years before the attacks. At the same time he financed al-Qaeda operations, Zouaydi also transferred money to Hamas. Similarly, the cell established relationships for logistical support not only with other al-Qaeda cells but with Basque terrorists (ETA) in the north of Spain.

These relationships become all the more important to terrorists operating outside their home regions in their respective Diasporas. In the case of radical Islamic extremists, Diaspora communities in the West often serve as a radical melting pot where like-minded individuals affiliated with different groups from geographically distinct regions assist one another for the sake of their larger cause. It is not uncommon to find a Tunisian member of an-Nada helping a Palestinian member of Hamas, or any number of other combinations of radical causes. Authorities therefore need to understand that terrorists do not carry membership cards in their wallets identifying themselves as members of a specific terrorist group, and that even if they did that would not capture the full scope of the individual's terrorist affiliations.

The case of Abu Musab al Zarqawi (aka Fadel Nazzal Khalayleh) offers a particular insightful perspective on the scope of the informal links, personal relationships, and organizational crossover between disparate terrorist operatives and groups. As the Zarqawi case makes abundantly clear, such networks of relationships are both geographically and organizationally diverse.

Zarqawi's links span the globe, including strong ties to terrorist networks in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Jordan,
Syria, Afghanistan, Germany, Britain, and elsewhere in Europe. The U.S. Treasury Department highlighted his ties to Hezbollah in its September 24, 2003, announcement designating him and several of his associates as Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entities.

Similar links between other Hezbollah entities and international terrorist members and groups are equally informative of Hezbollah's global reach. Take, for example, Bilal Khazal, a man now believed to be the senior al-Qaeda operative in Australia who is also suspected of ties to Hezbollah, and the al-Aqsa International Foundation, recently banned by the United States, Germany and Great Britain (though not the European Union). While al-Aqsa primarily served as a Hamas front organization, Sheikh Moayad, the head of the the al-Aqsa office in Yemen, was arrested in Germany and extradited to the United States for providing financial support to al-Qaeda as well. Moayad proudly told an undercover FBI informant that he not only funded Hamas but also raised millions of dollars, recruited operatives, and provided weapons to al-Qaeda. According to one report, one of the foundation's offices in Europe also raised funds for Hezbollah.

Clearly, assessing a group's global presence demands not only noting the activities of its operational activists -- those who pull the trigger, detonate the explosives or crash the airplane -- but also the logistical and financial supporters that make such operations possible. If September 11 taught us nothing else, we should all now recognize that logistical and financial support is critical to terrorist operations.

By any standard, including terrorist operations from Thailand to Argentina, logistical and financial support operations across the globe, and links to other terrorist groups, Hezbollah represents a classic example of a terrorist group of global reach and should be a prioritized target in the war on terror.

Hezbollah's Global Reach

Hezbollah holds a particularly disturbing, though often overlooked, place in the matrix of international terror. A few studies have noted Hezbollah's ties to other groups, like the Treasury Department announcement about Zarqawi, while others, like a report of the Council on Foreign Relations' Task Force on Terrorist Financing, highlight the crossover between Hezbollah institutions and those of other terrorist groups. For example, the Council report points out that "other Islamic terrorist organizations, Hamas and Hezbollah specifically, often use the same methods -- and even the same institutions -- [as al-Qaeda] to raise and move their money."

Published reports suggest that Al-Qaida and Hezbollah have formed additional tactical, ad-hoc alliances with a variety of terrorist organizations to cooperate on money laundering and other unlawful activities. And yet, the debate persists. Is Hezbollah the "A-team of terrorists," as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage suggests, or is Hezbollah purely a "resistance" organization whose "role is limited to the Lebanese lands," as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad insists?

After a careful assessment of Hezbollah's global presence and operations, research I conducted in preparation of an upcoming book on the subject, I suggest that Hezbollah is indeed a terrorist group of global reach. Moreover, this conclusion is the consensus among the various intelligence professionals I've interviewed, including Israeli, Arab, American, Asian and European officials, and is also clear from the documentary evidence I've collected from sources as diverse as Filipino and Chilean law enforcement agencies.

Take, for example, a map produced by Israeli officials marking the locations of Hezbollah networks across the globe. While not necessarily indicative of an entire network in each of the highlighted countries (it may represent a single operative), the map provides a disturbing snapshot of Hezbollah's global presence.

Moreover, as the following surveillance photograph illustrates, Hezbollah operatives -- like those of other professional terrorist groups -- mold into their environments and can be very difficult to identify. This picture was taken by Canadian intelligence, and captures a Hezbollah member purchasing false identification for use in procuring dual-use technologies for Hezbollah. Unlike Hezbollah operatives patrolling the Lebanese-Israeli border, these members leave their yellow Hezbollah bandanas and flags at home.

According to U.S. authorities, concern over the threat posed by Hezbollah is well placed. FBI officials testified in February 2002 that "FBI investigations to date continue to indicate that many Hezbollah subjects based in the United States have the capability to attempt terrorist attacks here should this be a desired objective of the group."

Similarly, CIA Director George Tenet testified in February 2003 that "Hezbollah, as an organization with capability and worldwide presence, is [al-Qaeda's] equal, if not a far more capable organization."

Hezbollah Modus Operandi

Though Hezbollah cells are not all identical, they do tend to display similar operational signatures in the form of typical modus operandi.

Consider a few examples:

• Subtle Infiltration: Hezbollah operatives are expert at gaining entry to their target locations through extremely subtle infiltration. This should not surprise, as many Hezbollah operatives receive sophisticated training both in Lebanon and in Iran from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) al-Quds Brigades. Members of a Hezbollah cell operating in Singapore in the late 1990s and into 2000 entered using a visa-waiver program similar to the one that recently suspended in the United States. Once they arrived, they quickly married local women to legalize their presence. Members of a Hezbollah cell in North
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In Southeast Asia, the Hezbollah network operating there throughout the 1990s was under the command of a who is also known to procure material for Iran. The network was under the direct command of Hajj Hassan Hilu Lakis, Hezbollah's chief military procurement officer. He supplied Hezbollah with technologies such as night vision goggles and laser range finders for Hezbollah operational squads. The Canadian government froze Hezbollah's assets and made 600,000 back from Hezbollah for their donations, including receipts from the office of then-Hezbollah spiritual leader Haraki, a senior Hezbollah military commander in South Beirut. Members of the Charlotte cell received receipts from Iranian officials. In Charlotte, North Carolina, Hezbollah operatives were responding directly back to Sheikh Abbas al-Mashhad, Iran. Upon their return, one student recruit, Shafri Ibrahim, was caught, while another, Sharif Wadulu, is believed to have escaped to one of the Gulf States. The two were trained by the MOIS, together with new students, one of whom was Ibrahim Bah. Bah is an affiliate of deposed Liberian strongman Charles Taylor, as well as a commander with the RUF rebels in Sierra Leone. Bah underwent military and terrorist training in Libya, Lebanon (where he fought with the Hezbollah units), and in Afghanistan. Of particular concern to Law Enforcement officials throughout South America is Hezbollah's activity in the Tri-border area. The group's activities received special attention in the wake of the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center there. The recently released Argentine indictment in the AMIA bombing reveals an extensive Hezbollah operational presence in South America. What is less well known, however, is that Hezbollah is also active in Chile, Venezuela, Cuba, Panama and Ecuador. Of particular concern to Law Enforcement officials throughout South America is Hezbollah's increased activity in free trade zones, especially under the cover of import-export companies.

Operations in other locations: Hezbollah activity in South America has been well documented, including its frenetic activity in the Tri-border area. The group's activities received special attention in the wake of the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center there. The recently released Argentine indictment in the AMIA bombing reveals an extensive Hezbollah operational presence in South America. What is less well known, however, is that Hezbollah is also active in Chile, Venezuela, Cuba, Panama and Ecuador. Of particular concern to Law Enforcement officials throughout South America is Hezbollah's increased activity in free trade zones, especially under the cover of import-export companies.

Hezbollah conducts extensive fundraising operations in Africa -- as it does in other corners of the globe like South and North America -- not only through trading in illicit diamonds but by raising funds from the local Shi'a expatriate community as well. In some cases Shi'a donors are unwittingly conned into funding Hezbollah, while in others they are knowing and willing participants in Hezbollah's financing efforts.

As noted above, in one particularly interesting case in 2002, Ugandan officials disrupted a cell of Shi'a students who were recruited by Iranian intelligence agents and sent on scholarships to study at the Rizavi University in Mashhad, Iran. Upon their return, one student recruit, Shafri Ibrahim, was caught, while another, Sharif Wadulu, is believed to have escaped to one of the Gulf States. The two were trained by the MOIS, together with new Lebanese Hezbollah recruits, and sent home with fictitious covers to establish an operational infrastructure in Uganda.

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Intelligence officials are equally concerned about Hezbollah activities in such diverse places as Romania, South Africa, Canada and Thailand.

Hezbollah and Iranian Commanders

The most significant modus operandi that runs through all Hezbollah global operations -- financial, logistical and operational -- is that all Hezbollah networks are overseen by and are in contact with senior Hezbollah and/or Iranian officials. In Charlotte, North Carolina, Hezbollah operatives were responding directly back to Sheikh Abbas Haraki, a senior Hezbollah military commander in South Beirut. Members of the Charlotte cell received receipts back from Hezbollah for their donations, including receipts from the office of then-Hezbollah spiritual leader Sheikh Mohammad Fadlallah.

The Charlotte cell was closely tied to a sister network in Canada that was primarily engaged in procuring dual-use technologies such as night vision goggles and laser range finders for Hezbollah operational squads. The Canadian network was under the direct command of Hajj Hassan Hilu Lakis, Hezbollah's chief military procurement officer who is also known to procure material for Iran.

In Southeast Asia, the Hezbollah network operating there throughout the 1990s was under the command of a
senior Mughniyah deputy named Abu Foul. As noted above, Iranian MOIS agents stationed in Malaysia originally recruited some of the Hezbollah operatives there. Senior Hezbollah operatives and Iranian agents were also involved in the 1995 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, in Hezbollah’s efforts to smuggle weapons to Palestinian terrorists through Jordan since 2000, in Hezbollah operations in South America (including the 1992 and 1994 bombings), and in the recruitment of students like those in Uganda. Throughout these and many other cases, a key common thread is the direct contact each cell maintains to senior Hezbollah and/or Iranian intelligence operatives.

Crossover Between Terrorism and “Resistance”

According to many, Hezbollah is merely a “resistance” organization responding to Israeli occupation of disputed land. The distinction is, appropriately, lost on most Western experts, given that the “resistance” groups in question employ acts of terrorism such as suicide bombings to achieve their goals. But no goal, however legitimate, legitimates the use of terrorist tactics and the killing of innocent civilians.

Moreover, even by Hezbollah’s own definition the group's acts of terrorism and resistance are not purely compartmentalized. Indeed, the same Hezbollah operatives are frequently involved in the group's terrorist activities and its support for Palestinian “resistance” (i.e. terrorist) groups like Hamas.

For example, Yousuf Aljouni and Abu al-Foul, two of the masterminds of the failed 1994 effort to bomb the Israeli embassy in Thailand, were subsequently apprehended in Jordan for smuggling weapons to Palestinian terrorists in 2001. In another case, Mohammad Dbouk, the one-time head of the Canadian procurement cell, underwent terrorist training in camps in Iran before serving Hezbollah in Canada and, upon his return to Lebanon from Canada, provided pre-operational surveillance for Hezbollah attack squads working under the cover of Hezbollah's satellite al-Manar television station. The pre-operational footage he took was used to plan Hezbollah attacks on Israeli positions prior to the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, and the live footage of the actual attack was then used to produce propaganda videos of the type seized in the homes of the Charlotte cell members. Perhaps the most blatant example of this crossover between terrorism and resistance is the case of the Karine-A weapons smuggling ship. The failed effort to supply 50 tons of military grade weapons to Palestinian terrorists was subcontracted to Hezbollah by Iran and was overseen by Hajj Bassem, a senior Mughniyah deputy.

West Bank Foothold and International Plots

Recently, Hezbollah has proactively mixed its “resistance” and terrorist activities by establishing a network of its own Palestinian cells in the West Bank. Hezbollah's West Bank foothold not only threatens Israel with terrorist attacks there, but in at least one case a Palestinian Hezbollah recruit sought to supplement his terror activities in Israel with attacks abroad.

Ghulam Mahmud Qawqa was arrested in 2003 for his role in al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade bombings in Jerusalem. Subsequent investigation determined he was also behind two international plots that were set in motion in late 2002. In one, he tasked a Lebanese woman living in Berlin to conduct surveillance of the Israeli embassy there in an effort to target either the embassy or the Israeli ambassador to Berlin, Shimon Stein. In a second operation, Qawqa asked a Jordanian friend living in China to help facilitate his travel to China, and, at the same time, sought the assistance of a Hezbollah operative in planning a mission to assassinate the Israeli ambassador to China, Yitzhak Shelef.

Avoiding Past Mistakes

Hezbollah maintains ad-hoc, person-to-person contacts with al-Qaeda terrorists, but this is not the main reason for prioritizing the group as a target in the war on terror. Its own activities are far more significant. As all of the above cases and many more make clear, Hezbollah is indeed a terrorist group of global reach. Current intelligence assessments from a variety of security services concur that Hezbollah remains capable and intent on attacking Israeli, American and other Western targets and therefore poses a current, serious threat. Hezbollah officials like Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah make this perfectly clear in their bellicose, threatening statements. In the wake of the Iraq war, these threats have become even more pronounced, venomous and unqualified.

Past experience teaches that failure to deal with the real and immediate threat Hezbollah poses today will have severe and painful consequences for the future. It took the international community more than a decade to get up to speed on the threat posed by al-Qaeda. In that time, al-Qaeda successfully built an entrenched and sophisticated international logistical and financial support network of the kind that eventually facilitated the attacks of September 11. There is no question that Hezbollah is engaged in exactly the same infrastructure-building today. Given our experience in September 2001 it should be abundantly clear that we ignore such activity, and the acute security threat it represents, at our peril.

Thank you very much.