

Hezbollah as an Army

Yiftah S. Shapir

It is difficult to view Hezbollah through a single prism. Hezbollah is a political party. It is an entity that provides welfare, education, and health services. It is a terrorist organization operating in Lebanon and throughout the world. It is also a crime organization involved in drug and weapons trade in order to finance its activities.¹ In addition, however, it is an orderly and efficient military organization. This essay will address solely the military aspect of Hezbollah – the branch referred to by Hezbollah members as the “Islamic Resistance.”

This essay argues that the Islamic Resistance is a well-organized, well trained, and well equipped army that has learned from its conflicts with Israel and has built itself in a sophisticated way. It deploys advanced equipment and trained manpower, and is driven by motivation and operates a unique doctrine of warfare.

Hezbollah has operated in Syria in recent years alongside the Syrian army and members of the Iranian Quds force. Since September 2015, it has also fought shoulder-to-shoulder with the Russian army. These years of combat have given it both equipment and battle experience it never previously had. These factors are turning Hezbollah into the most severe threat currently facing the IDF in particular, and Israel in general.

Hezbollah’s Development until the Syrian Civil War

The IDF was familiar with Hezbollah as a terrorist organization that operated against IDF forces since it was founded in 1982. After the IDF withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000, however, Hezbollah changed substantially, and began intensive preparations for the possibility of another IDF incursion into Lebanese territory, while continuing to harass Israel with attacks along the border and attempts to kidnap Israeli soldiers.²

Yiftah S. Shapir is a senior research fellow at INSS.

The Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006 surprised Hezbollah, and its timing suited neither Hezbollah nor its supporters in Tehran. The organization quickly recovered, however, and over the 34 days of fighting succeeded in demonstrating impressive combat capabilities. Yet even though Hezbollah emerged from the Second Lebanon War with a sense of victory, the war created an uncomfortable situation. The war gave Israel a sharpened sense of Hezbollah's capabilities, equipment, organization, and combat doctrine, long before Hezbollah wanted them disclosed. The war also prematurely emptied Hezbollah's stores of munitions and equipment, and destroyed the extensive land infrastructure it had built over six years.³ UN Security Council Resolution 1701 likewise affected the organization's freedom of action in South Lebanon. Hezbollah therefore moved its deployment to other areas in Lebanon and began massive procurement of weapons, especially rockets.⁴

Hezbollah in the Syrian Civil War

The outbreak of violent events in Syria in March 2011 and their rapid escalation posed a difficult problem for Hezbollah.⁵ Syria is its strategic rear, through which weapons and ammunition flow from Iran, and through which its soldiers travel for training in Iran. Thus, when the upheaval in Syria began, the Hezbollah secretary general expressed unqualified support for Bashar al-Assad in his struggle against the rebels.

At the same time, there were good reasons for refraining from intervention in Syria. First, fighting in Syria was liable to detract Hezbollah from its primary purpose, namely, to fight against Israel. Second, there was no ideological common denominator between Hezbollah and the secular Ba'ath regime. Third, intervention in Syria meant fighting against Muslims, while Hezbollah wishes to portray itself as a pan-Islamic entity, and not necessarily a Shiite organization.

However, Syria is Iran's most important ally in the region, and the connection with Syria gives Iran a foothold in the region. From the beginning of the turmoil in Syria, Iran expressed unqualified support for the regime, and openly sent aid in the form of arms, equipment, and personnel. In turn, for Hezbollah, Iranian interests overcame Islamic ideology. In the fall of 2011, reports began to appear of involvement by Hezbollah operatives in the fighting in Syria, and of fatalities among Hezbollah members. In August 2012, more reliable reports of Hezbollah involvement in Syria began to surface.⁶ Only in April 2013, however, did Hezbollah secretary

general Hassan Nasrallah publicly admit that Hezbollah was militarily involved in Syria.⁷

Over time, Hezbollah became increasingly involved in the combat. In May 2013, Hezbollah's first major battle began in al-Qusayr, in which some 1,200-1,700 Hezbollah soldiers participated. These fighters were the vanguard, while the Syrian army provided assistance with firepower and logistics.⁸ Together with Shiite militias from Iraq, Hezbollah soldiers later took part in the battle for the neighborhoods bordering Damascus – an area known as Rif Dimashq or East Ghouta. At the same time, Hezbollah waged a campaign along the Syrian-Lebanese border in the mountainous Qalamoun area.⁹

Aside from the prominent battles, the information about Hezbollah involvement in other parts of Syria is less clear cut. The number of the organization's soldiers deployed in Syria at any given time is estimated at 4,000-5,000.¹⁰ They apparently operate all over Syria, primarily in training and consulting roles. Early in the war, these soldiers served in Syria for one week at a time, but these periods became longer as the war continued.

In September 2015, Russia entered the campaign on the side of the Assad regime, and Hezbollah continued its activity alongside the Russian army. The Russians equipped the organization, and it was reported that they relied on Hezbollah more than on the Syrian army in carrying out missions. Fighting together with the Russians exposed Hezbollah to the advanced weapon systems and organizational methods of a veteran army trained in operating large scale echelons and in cooperation between different military branches. Hezbollah thus took another significant step toward becoming a modern army.

On November 11, 2016, Hezbollah staged a military parade in the Syrian city of al-Qusayr, in which it exhibited armored, artillery, and air defense units. Hezbollah deputy secretary general Naim Qassem emphasized that the parade reflected the fact that Hezbollah had established a regular army, and was no longer a guerilla force.¹¹

Hezbollah: Structure and Organization

Recruitment and Training

Early in its history, Hezbollah recruited individuals with deep religious motivation and commitment to fight Israel. While as it expanded the organization had to turn to broader sections of the Shiite population, it continued to stress indoctrination, starting in childhood.¹² Until the

outbreak of the war in Syria, Hezbollah conducted rigorous checks of those volunteering to serve in its ranks, but its growing need for manpower as a result of the war in Syria required it to relax the requirements in character and ideology that it demanded of candidates, and to lower the minimum age for recruits from 18 to 16.¹³

Military training begins with one month of basic training designed to give soldiers physical strength and endurance. They learn to use all the types of light weapons possessed by the organization, including AK-47 rifles and RPG launchers. They learn to prepare roadside bombs, lay mines, and administer first aid on the battlefield. They study the IDF, its battle vehicles, and the weak points of each vehicle.¹⁴ After the training stage, a wide range of specialized military courses is offered to soldiers. More advanced training takes place in Iran.

During the period when the IDF was in Lebanon, Hezbollah kept its training secret, but since 2006, the organization has been less concerned about exposure of its actions. Today, there are several publicly known training facilities that can be seen in online satellite photographs.¹⁵

Until the war in Syria, most of Hezbollah's forces were part-time soldiers. They were not paid, and earned a living from civilian jobs. The organization helped them with housing, health services, and education for their children. These individuals also knew that if they were wounded on the battlefield, the organization would take care of their families. Soldiers who were invited to join special units underwent intensive courses and served as full-time soldiers, earning relatively low wages. It is unclear whether Hezbollah succeeded in retaining this method of force operation during the years of tough fighting in Syria.

Units

Hezbollah soldiers fall into two categories: full-time and part-time soldiers. In 2006, the number of regular Hezbollah soldiers was estimated at only 1,000, but the number is now believed to be about 20,000, 5,000 of whom have undergone advanced training in Iran.¹⁶ They wear uniforms and unit tags, but it is not known whether they have ranks or symbols on their uniforms, which makes it difficult to understand their organizational structure.

In addition to the regular soldiers, there is a reserve force of an unknown size; estimates range from 15,000 to 70,000 men. The estimates vary greatly probably because not every man who has undergone military training, and is therefore regarded as a reserve soldier, is fit for combat.¹⁷

Organization

Until the war in Syria, Hezbollah assumed a flat organization structure, with only three command levels.¹⁸

The Mejlis Jihadi (Jihad Council), which is responsible for military activity, is subordinate to the Shura Council. The Shura Council also appoints and approves the Mejlis Jihadi. A number of units (*wahidah*, plural: *wahidat*) operate under the Mejlis Jihadi. Such a unit is comparable to a division; a *wahidah* may consist up to 3,000 men, or be much smaller. The second level is a *qism* (plural: *qusum*). Most *qusum* consist no more than 200 men, and these are professional units: battle engineers, anti-tank warfare personnel, and so on. The third level is a *fara'* (plural: *furu'*). These units are very small, comprising of six to twelve men. It is rare to see a *fara'* with more than 15 men. Each *fara'* is headed by a commander – *haj al-sejid*.

Several sources note that Hezbollah is organized in five or six brigades. This probably refers to the *wahidat*, and these are presumably territorial units, with each responsible for an area within Lebanon.

Special Units¹⁹

Short Range Rockets

Short range rockets units constitute the principal force designed to attack Israel. Hezbollah currently has an estimated 100,000 short range rockets. This array consists mainly of 107-mm standard rockets with a range of up to eight kilometers, and 122-mm rockets with ranges of 20-40 kilometers. The launchers for these arrays are diverse, varying from standard launchers, such as BM-21 vehicles carrying 40 rockets, to improvised launchers carried on jeeps and trucks and in stationary installations.

Insofar as is known, the rocket units operated independently of the infantry units during the Second Lebanon War. Rocket fire was not used to assist infantry operations directly, which were in any case defensive. In the war in Syria, however, at least in the offensives supported by Hezbollah in al-Qusayr and Qalamoun, rockets were also fired as artillery support for infantry operations. Special use was made in Syria of improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs) – heavy loads of high explosives fired to short range using standard rocket engines.

Long Range Rockets and Missiles

Hezbollah has one or more units that operate long range rockets designed to attack Israel from deep within Lebanon. These arrays include Iranian-

made Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 rocket launchers, 220-mm rockets, and 302-mm Syrian-made rockets, as well as Zelzal rockets and Fateh-110 missiles (known as M-600 or Tishreen in the Syrian version).²⁰ If Hezbollah has received Scud C/D missiles from Syria, there is presumably a special unit for these missiles.

Anti-tank Missiles

Hezbollah uses anti-tank missiles on a large scale, not only against armored fighting vehicles (AFVs), but also against buildings. Its equipment currently consists of both advanced Kornet 9M133 missiles and non-guided rockets such as the RPG-7 and the more modern RPG-29. The organizational category of the missile operators and the organizational connection between them and the infantry units is unknown.

Air Defense

After 2006, Hezbollah saw air defense as its weak point. Immediately following the war, air defense units were founded, and personnel was sent for training in Iran on medium range missile systems. It is not known whether these systems were transferred to Hezbollah. Hezbollah's procurement of various types of man portable (MANPADS) missiles is known, however – mainly Igla and Igla-S (SA-18 and SA-24). In 2011, after the outbreak of the war in Syria, Russia began supplying advanced weapon systems to the Syrian army, including Buk-2 (SA-17) and Pantsyr (SA-22) surface-to-air systems. It appears that Hezbollah personnel has received access to these systems, and has been trained to operate them. It is also possible that attempts were made to transfer these systems to Lebanese territory – transfers that the Israeli Air Force apparently attempted to thwart via bombing attacks.²¹

Coastal Anti-ship Missiles and Naval Forces

Hezbollah procured Iranian-made coastal anti-ship missiles as early as 2006. These included an Iranian version of the Chinese-made C-701 and C-802 missile systems.²² After 2006, Hezbollah tried to obtain additional quantities of these missiles. Another system supplied to Syria by Russia, which may have reached Hezbollah's coastal anti-ship missile unit, is the K-300P Bastion – a land-based launching system for the P-800 Yakhont supersonic missiles.²³ In addition, Hezbollah's naval forces include naval commando units trained in attack missions and in gathering intelligence by sea using high speed inflatable rubber boats.

Air

Hezbollah has no force operating manned aircraft, but it has a unit that operates Iranian-made Misrad-1 and Ayoub remotely piloted vehicles. These are used for both intelligence gathering missions and for attack missions as “suicide” airplanes. In recent years, Hezbollah has penetrated Israeli territory a number of times using these aircraft.²⁴ The organization also recently began operating commercially acquired drones. These drones have been adapted to carry munitions.²⁵

Armored Corps

In the military parade at al-Qusayr, Hezbollah showed its armored unit for the first time. T-72 tanks equipped with reactive armor, T-55 tanks, and armored personnel carriers, both Russian-made BMP-3 and US-made M-113s, appeared in the parade. There were also self-propelled artillery, including howitzers (inter alia, 155-mm American M198 howitzers and 85-mm anti-aircraft guns from WWII) installed on trucks or on APCs. Also shown in the parade was the unit’s flag, which bore the insignia “Fawj al-Mudara’at” (= armored regiment); the insignia was likewise painted on the tanks.

Many vehicles carrying anti-aircraft artillery were paraded as well: 14.5-mm machine guns, 23-mm cannon installed on APCs and trucks, and old ZSU-57-2 mobile anti-aircraft cannon, as well as units equipped with light vehicles: motorcycles and small all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) carrying Kornet anti-tank missiles, machine guns, grenade launchers, or rocket launchers. These units flew different unit insignias than the armored unit, and it is unclear whether they are completely separate units or sub-units of the armored unit.

Intelligence and Counterintelligence

Hezbollah has intelligence units that gather various types of intelligence mainly about Israel, but presumably these units were also used in Syria to gather intelligence about the rebel groups Hezbollah was fighting. Hezbollah takes pride in its “bank of targets” with respect to facilities in Israel. It gathers technical information about the weapon systems used by the IDF for the purpose of finding Israeli weak points. Hezbollah has units that operate agents and units gathering technical intelligence: SIGINT as well as IMINT obtained both from open sources, and from its UAVs.

Hezbollah also has counterintelligence that attempts to thwart efforts to gather intelligence about the organization. As early as the 1990s, Hezbollah succeeded in intercepting communications from Israeli UAVs, and this may have enabled it to thwart a 1997 Israeli naval commando operation. Hezbollah also succeeded in breaking the code used for UAV broadcasts after Israel began encoding them.²⁶ The counterintelligence units succeeded in locating and destroying the Israeli electronic eavesdropping and observation devices buried in Lebanese territory. They traced an eavesdropping device on their fiber optics in 2009, and in 2011 exposed cameras camouflaged as boulders that photographed Hezbollah activity. The unit likewise managed to track networks of agents among Hezbollah members, and in 2009-2011 arrested approximately 100 people suspected of espionage on behalf of Israel.²⁷

Welfare Services

Hezbollah provides personal and welfare services to help soldiers obtain housing and jobs and educate their children, and provides health services. A Hezbollah soldier knows that if he is killed in battle, his family will be taken care of. These services are also a means of pressure on part-time soldiers. The soldier knows that if he refuses missions, he is liable to lose all these benefits. With the expansion of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, this lever became an important means for the organization to retain its manpower.

Doctrine of Warfare

Hezbollah does not want its soldiers to act like robots and obey every order. The contrary is true. In contrast to most regular Arab armies, which tend to observe a rigid hierarchy, Hezbollah has taught its soldiers to operate on their own initiative, and has given its field commanders great freedom of action.

From its earliest stages, Hezbollah performed excellently in the fighting in Syria. Whether this was a result of its orderly recruitment and educational methods, or a result of its experience in the prolonged struggle against Israel, the fact is that already from the early stages of its publicly acknowledged operations in 2013, Hezbollah was entrusted with leading missions, while the Syrian army gave it fire support and logistical backing. This outstanding record continued when the Russians entered the war.

Until the civil war in Syria, Hezbollah's organizational structure was very simple. As early as the Second Lebanon War, and also in the first battles in Syria, Hezbollah operated in small unit frameworks – squads

of five to ten men operating relatively independently under a command that controlled a large number of such units. The fighting in Syria brought about a gradual change. The existence of the armored unit displayed in November 2016 proves that Hezbollah is gradually establishing larger units.

Large combat frameworks necessarily require a change in combat doctrine. A flat organizational structure of only three levels is clearly inadequate, and it is much more difficult to give commanders in the field full autonomy, as Hezbollah did in 2006 and even early in the war in Syria. Furthermore, the quality of recruits necessarily declined, which makes it more difficult to allow autonomy.

Consequently, Hezbollah today will be much more similar to a modern army than it was five years ago. At the same time, the organizational culture and unit spirit are not features that vanish overnight, and it can therefore be expected that even as a large army, the independence of commanders in the field, their ideological dedication to the goal, and their morale will persist. Even as a large army operating in large frameworks, Hezbollah should not be expected to operate according to an inflexible hierarchy.

In a future war against Israel, the organization will return to its original goals, and it can expect full support from both its men and host society. Israel will have to deal with an organized, trained, and determined army. The fact that Hezbollah has acquired experience in operating in large frameworks, including the use of armored forces and coordinated air support, does not mean that it will act in the same way against Israel. Its armored force is far from being able to stand up to the IDF in a frontal war of armor against armor. It is therefore likely that it will prefer to focus again on operating its rocket and missile arrays and extensive use of anti-tank arrays – all of them larger and better equipped than in the past. In addition, the organization can use part of the new capabilities it has acquired, specifically its anti-tank forces mounted on light vehicles, and especially its UAV deployments, which it will use to both gather intelligence and conduct attacks deep inside Israeli territory.

Conclusion

Hezbollah may not be the largest military force threatening Israel, but it is definitely the most determined and best trained. Its years of fighting in Syria have pushed it in two opposite directions. On the one hand, the organization has gained in strength, acquired weapon systems it did not previously possess, for example in the realms of armor and air defense, and has acquired

experience in using them. It has also acquired considerable experience in managing campaigns and has been able to learn from professional armies. On the other hand, the fighting in Syria has sapped its forces, particularly the morale of its men, who found themselves fighting for prolonged periods not against the enemy they were taught to fight, but against other Muslims. This situation has also seriously eroded the organization's image in Lebanon and in the Arab world in general.

Still, a future war against Israel will no doubt bring Hezbollah back to its original ideological goals. Such a war will restore to its men the determination to act as they did in the past, and will also regain extensive support in the Arab world that it enjoyed before the war in Syria. Hezbollah is therefore currently the gravest military threat to Israel.

Notes

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