

The Hizballah project: last war, next war

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Since then it has reinvented its strategy, arsenal and thinking to pose an even greater threat to its enemy to the south. A forensic portrait of the world's most sophisticated non-state force from Amal Saad-Ghorayeb.

One of the main "lessons learned" from the war of July-August 2006 is that the modern concept of asymmetric warfare, which emerged in the late 1990s in the United States, is already in dire need of revision. Hizballah's military performance during the war demonstrates that asymmetric warfare can no longer be identified exclusively with political actors who adopt "non-traditional" methods "that differ significantly from the opponent's usual mode of operations" (as per the US military's definition).

The thirty-three days war illustrated that Hizballah had not merely perfected the art of guerrilla warfare, but had surpassed it altogether with a new paradigm of warfare which fuses "non-traditional" methods with the "usual mode of operations" conducted by conventional armies (see Frank G Hoffman, *Hybrid Threats: Reconceptualizing the Evolving Character of Modern Conflict* [Strategic Forum, Institute for National Strategic Studies, April 2009]).

At the forefront of those dissecting this new model of combat are American military strategists who fear it will set off a "hybrid warfare" contagion among both non-state and state actors opposed to the US, for whom the Hizballah resistance template will function as a means of balancing out power-asymmetries (see Paul Rogers, "America's new-old military thinking", 23 July 2009). The expectation is that non-state opponents of the US will mimic the conventional aspects of the Hizballah hybrid, while enemy states will borrow its unconventional methods.

In response to such a prospect, many defense planners at the Pentagon are now urging advocates of repositioning the US military for irregular warfare and counterinsurgency to abandon this strategy and refocus on conventional methods better suited to fighting anticipated "hybrid threats". Thus, while the US and Israel were busy adapting their conventional armies to face unconventional threats, Hizbollah was effectively conventionalizing its military doctrine, tactics and weapons while regularizing its armed forces.

The strategic entity

The Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah reflected on this paradigm shift, just days after the assassination in Damascus on 12 February 2008 of the resistance's leading military strategist, Imad Mughniyeh. As elaborated by Nasrallah, the resistance has undergone a three-stage development process, from being an armed resistance that fought alongside a spontaneous "large popular resistance", to an "organized and concentrated armed military action", leading to the final stage which ushered in "an unparalleled new school of warfare that functions as a combination of a regular army and guerrilla fighters. "In this synthesis Hizbollah appears to have struck an artful balance between the conventional and unconventional in its military strategy, tactics, weapons, and organization, signalling its shift from a resistance group to a resistance army.

On the strategic level, Hizbollah's resistance has evolved from a classic guerilla group which forced Israel to unilaterally withdraw from south Lebanon in 2000 after a protracted war of attrition, into a "quasi-conventional fighting force" that prevented Israeli forces from staging a reoccupation. Nasrallah expounded on Hizbollah's radical departure from standard guerilla strategy by drawing distinctions between the strategies underlying the two modes of warfare:

I draw attention to the strategic difference between a resistance that fights a regular army occupying the land and launches operations against it from within the land, meaning a guerilla war of attrition, and a resistance that stands in the face of an aggression seeking to occupy the land and prevents it from doing so and inflicts defeat on it... Resistance liberates land but for resistance to prevent an aggression against a country, this is something new"

Until 2000, Hizbollah's concept of resistance was in line with conventional usage, meaning a popular liberation struggle foreign occupation, with the sole mission of expelling the occupiers. In the post-withdrawal phase beginning in 2000, Hizbollah

revised its military doctrine from one centred on liberating territory to one which sought to deter Israel from attacking Lebanon and, should that strategy fail, would defend the country from Israel aggression. The definition of resistance was consequently expanded to include the withstanding of an invasion or in other words, resisting the threat of occupation. By reconstructing the concept of resistance in his fashion, Hizbollah had entrusted itself with the mission of defending Lebanese territory from attack, a role traditionally carried out by state militaries.

The technological army.

The rationale behind Hizbollah's redefined military strategy was that Israel would «retaliate for its defeat and humiliation in June 2000.» Once liberation had been realised, Imad Mughniyeh immediately set about preparing for the forthcoming war, toiling «day and night». Reports from Israeli officers corroborate these claims, revealing that the resistance had constructed its prepared defences years ahead of the 2006 war, most likely beginning in 2000 (see Andrew Exum, «Hizbollah at War: A Military Assessment» [Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus 63, December 2006]). As one high-ranking Israeli officer observed: «We found an enemy that had prepared a long time for battle. Very resolute, well equipped, skilled and coordinated, unlike what we encountered in Gaza and the West Bank.» Equally confounded by Hizbollah's preparations, were Unifil observers who seemed oblivious to the construction beneath them as expressed by one officer: «We never saw them build anything. They must have brought the cement in by the spoonful.»

While such advance planning and preparation are not unique to conventional armies, Hizbollah's «elaborately prepared defensive works» shared more in common with a regular army's preparations for repelling an invasion than with a guerrilla group's plans for staging an attack and absorbing the anticipated counter-attack. The resistance's intricately designed network of underground bunkers, well-camouflaged and concealed launcher sites (dubbed «nature preserves» by Israelis), fortified firing positions and defensible communications, constituted a formidable military infrastructure constructed for the clear purpose of maintaining a campaign of sustained defence.

Hizbollah's adoption of both conventional and unconventional tactics, weapons and organisation must therefore be viewed within the framework of this overarching defensive strategy and within the limits imposed by the asymmetrical nature of the conflict (see Stephen D Biddle & Jeffrey A Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and*

the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy, Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, September 2008). In contrast to its previous liberation strategy which utilised standard guerrilla tactics designed to exhaust an enemy over an extended period of time, the conventional defensive strategy Hizbollah embraced had to be pursued swiftly - to repel an invasion before giving it the chance to turn into an occupation - with the limited resources and capabilities at its disposal. Translated in operational terms, this meant Hizbollah could only partially employ the means that conventional armies use in pursuit of their defensive strategies, having also to rely on unconventional methods originally formulated for guerrilla-style wars of attrition against occupation forces.

On the tactical level, the low visibility Hizbollah shares with other irregular forces served it well in pursuing its strategic objectives in so far as it did not have exposed targets like barracks and tanks; nor did it leave behind a «logistical footprint» that could be hit. Resistance forces used combined tactics whereby they «would hold in some places but yield in others, counterattack in some locations but withdraw elsewhere», as detailed in one US military report.

On the one hand, the resistance dispersed its forces into small cells who engaged in mobile-combat tactics and surprise attacks, in line with other unconventional military actors.

On the other hand, it adopted tactics that are usually identified with conventional armies. In contradistinction to guerrillas' hit-and-run raids, Hizbollah fighters also fought a positional war, holding their ground for long durations of time and refusing to cede territory to Israel's advancing forces. Furthermore, although the resistance's fighters are embedded in the civilian population, as are most irregulars, they refrained from blending into it as do guerrilla groups. Like classic conventional armies, resistance fighters donned military uniforms to distinguish themselves from civilians and concealed themselves in bunkers.

The conjoining of unconventional with conventional warfare was also mirrored in the wide range of weapons Hizbollah used, combining rudimentary weapons accessible to most guerrilla groups, with advanced weapons' systems which even rivalled those of some states. But it was not simply this juxtaposition of the outdated and the modern which testified to Hizbollah's unique contribution to warfare, but more tellingly, its skill in turning the primitiveness of these weapons to its advantage while using more

advanced weapons creatively (see Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, «Hizbollah's Outlook in the Current Conflict» [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Outlook 27, August 2006])

Hizbollah succeeded in effectively paralysing northern Israel with its daily salvos of unguided, short-range Katyusha rockets which evaded interception by Israel's high-tech missile-defence shields, enabling the group to extract much strategic value out of this tactically useless weapon. The movement also launched conventional, medium-range artillery rockets against other Israeli towns and cities which were previously out of its reach, giving substance to its threats to hit Tel Aviv in the event of an Israeli attack on Beirut.

More sophisticated still was Hizbollah's surprise strike on an Israeli warship, with a radar-guided, anti-ship cruise missile, presumably an Iranian variant of the Chinese C-802. In parallel with its hybridisation of missiles, the resistance employed both older, Russian-made wire-guided anti-tank missiles like the AT-3 Sagger, the AT-4 Spigot and AT-5 Spandrel and more advanced ones such as the AT-14 Kornet, AT-13 Metis-M and the RPG 29. In fact, the resistance inflicted the highest number of Israeli casualties with these anti-tank munitions by targeting tanks, personnel, and any houses, shelters and vehicles used by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). All this displayed Hizbollah's resourcefulness in combat.

In the field of electronic warfare as well, Hizbollah neutralised Israel's technological superiority with «simplicity», to borrow Nasrallah's terms. By relying on fiber-optic landlines rather than more advanced wireless-signals for its communications' network, Hizbollah immunised it from Israeli attempts at electronic jamming. In this manner, the movement managed to circumvent Israel's highly vaunted electronic-warfare system and preserve its command-and-control system for the entire duration of the war.

At the same time, Hizbollah was able to penetrate Israel's electronic-warfare devices with its own advanced intelligence-gathering capabilities. Aside from its Mirsad-1 reconnaissance drones, which it flew over Israeli airspace as far back as 2004, the movement acquired other surveillance technology including electronic-eavesdropping equipment which it used to monitor cellphone conversations in Hebrew between Israeli reservists and their families. Moreover, using other devices and techniques, Hizbollah intercepted and decoded Israeli radio communications, enabling it to track the movements of Israeli tanks as well as to monitor casualty reports and supply-routes.

The pressure exerted on Israel by these innovations is reflected in its planned introduction of the Trophy system (TAPS) which uses radar to track incoming missiles; in August 2009, it began to be installed on Israel's latest generation Merkava IV tanks, which suffered a number of damaging strikes in the 2006 war.

The resistance university

In terms of organisation, Hizbollah's resistance is characterised by several features of an irregular force. As a community-based movement, Hizbollah's fighting forces consist of an elite core of around 1,000 professional fighters in addition to an inestimable number of village-men who serve as reservists. The decentralised command-and-control structure coupled with virtually impenetrable organisational secrecy is typical of guerrilla groups. However, these characteristics are offset by the tight discipline and strong coordination of its fighters, which is peculiar to conventional armed forces.

Moreover, Nasrallah's threat to unleash «tens of thousands of trained and equipped» fighters on Israeli forces should they stage a ground invasion, alludes to the possibility that Hizbollah could be transforming its reservists into a professional fighting force. Reports of Hizbollah's launch of a «sweeping recruitment and training drive» months after the 2006 war, lend some credence to such inferences.

But despite the demonstrated success of its model of warfare, Hizbollah has re-evaluated its combat performance, and tried to anticipate Israel's operations' plan for the forthcoming war based on the latter's weaknesses. The movement's future strategy and tactics will therefore be governed by these calculations as affirmed by Nasrallah: «We also learned from the July war experience and made the required evaluation and discovered the points of strength and the point of weakness on our side as well as on the enemy side, and acted based on that.»

It is precisely this ongoing effort to meticulously study its enemy which sets Hizbollah apart from other forces in the region that have previously engaged Israel in combat. In a manner reminiscent of Orientalists' probing of the «Arab mind», Hizbollah has striven to penetrate the Israeli psyche and not merely its military mindset as a means of overcoming its arch-foe.

Another factor which accounts for the success of the Hizbollah resistance model is the process of self-evaluation and adaptation to circumstances and needs. Rather than adhering to a rigid military strategy, no matter how successful it has proven to be in the past, the resistance constantly re-adapts itself to a changing political and

military environment. Hizbollah's strength therefore lies in its adoption of a non-doctrinaire military doctrine.

This could well mean that the resistance will revise its military strategy for the next war, shifting it from a purely defensive doctrine to one which is partly defensive and partly counter-offensive; in other words, one which remains essentially defensive but which is injected with a strong dose of offensive capability. Furthermore, there is a strong likelihood that the movement will introduce new tactics to meet its wider strategic objectives. This possibility is insinuated by Nasrallah's well-known threat of unleashing a «big surprise» in the event of an Israeli war on Lebanon.

Most observers initially thought that Nasrallah's surprise was the resistance's acquisition of anti-aircraft missiles which it would use against Israeli planes violating Lebanese airspace. While Hizbollah is already known to have the SA-7, and presumed to have obtained the more advanced SA-18 in 2002, many reports surfaced in 2008 about its acquisition of the sophisticated SA-8 mobile air-defence missile-system. However, although the movement will use the advanced SAMs if these reports are proven true, it is doubtful that this is the surprise Nasrallah referred to now that he has openly threatened to shoot down Israeli planes with these missiles, removing the element of surprise from their use.

A more plausible theory is that Nasrallah's surprise alludes to the resistance's adoption of a new military strategy and tactics as suggested by his subsequent threat to Israel: «The army of our enemy will witness an unprecedented method of fighting by courageous, tough and devoted resistance fighters in the battlefield; something they had never seen since the establishment of their usurping entity.» Nasrallah reinforced the challenge by - in response to the so-called «Dahiyeh doctrine» enunciated by Gadi Eizenkot, the head of the IDF's Northern Command - reformulating the old equation of «Beirut for Tel Aviv» as «Dahiyeh for Tel Aviv».

The tactics envisaged by Nasrallah could also include incursions into Israeli territory, as suggested by resistance fighters interviewed by the respected journalist, Nicholas Blanford: «One local commander in south Lebanon said that Hizbollah had fought a defensive war in 2006. 'Next time, we will be on the offensive and it will be a totally different kind of war', he says. Jawad [a local fighter] says that the next war will be 'fought more in Israel than in Lebanon', one comment of many from various fighters that suggest Hizbollah is planning commando raids into northern Israel.»

Though these remarks may be construed as psychological warfare, the Israeli defence establishment has been preparing for a scenario whereby resistance commandos would infiltrate northern border communities and kill Israelis.

The last war

Regardless of which tactics are employed, Hizbollah has to ensure that they fulfill Nasrallah's «promise» of dealing a decisive blow to Israel. As recounted by the Hizbollah leader in 2007, the surprise he has in store for Israel has the potential to «change the course of the war and the fate of the region» and «realise a historic and decisive victory.» A year later, Nasrallah repeated that «our next victory will be definite, unequivocally decisive and crystal clear», as Hizbollah would «crush» the five divisions which Ehud Barak had threatened to deploy in Lebanon. The expected finality of the next-war's outcome is further underlined by Nasrallah's prediction of the eventual «destruction» of the «usurping entity» which would result from Israel's foreseen defeat.

It is useful at this point to compare Nasrallah's post-war discourse with Hizbollah's declared objectives during the July-August war. In 2006, the movement did not lay out any military objectives except to defend Lebanon from Israeli aggression and prevent its enemy from occupying territory. As such, Hizbollah was able to proclaim victory - at least in the tactical sense of having won that particular battle - when it acted in self-defence and denied victory to its opponent whose forces were compelled to withdraw without achieving a single one of their government's declared aims.

But the movement has already set the strategic bar very high for itself for the next round of conflict. Having pronounced as its new objective a «decisive victory» with profound regional implications, Hizbollah will have to ensure that it achieves a strategic victory in its next battle with Israel. Such a victory must end, once and for all, the state of «open war» that exists between the two enemies, and more significantly, neutralise the perpetual threat which Israel poses to the region. Accordingly, any future war with Israel must necessarily be the last for Hizbollah.