

Inside the Hezbollah war machine

Hezbollah is proving to be something altogether new, an Arab guerrilla army with sophisticated weaponry and remarkable discipline. Its soldiers have the jihadist rhetoric of fighting to the death, but wear body armor and use satcoms to coordinate their attacks. Their tactics may be from Che, but their arms are from Iran, and not just AK-47s and RPGs. They've reportedly destroyed three of Israel's advanced Merkava tanks with wire-guided missiles and powerful mines, crippled an Israeli warship with a surface-to-sea missile, sent up drones on reconnaissance missions, implanted listening devices along the border and set up their ambushes using night-vision goggles.

KEVIN PERAINO, BABAK DEGHANPISHEH AND CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

HEZBOLLAH'S fighters were as elusive as they were deadly. Thousands of them were dug in around southern Lebanon, and yet encounters with the hundreds of journalists also in the area were rare, and furtive. Like Hussein, as he chose to call himself, who popped out of the rubble in the blasted town of Bint Jbeil, site of what Hezbollah is calling its Great Victory, to crow a little. He was in civvies, the only way the Hezbollah fighters appear in public, but the walkie-talkie under his loose shirt was a giveaway. The hillside nearby glittered with metal in the bright sun. Here and there lay shell casings, mortar tubes, mangled shrapnel from artillery and bombs. Thousands of cartridges, the gold ones from Israeli M-16s, the duller brown from Hezbollah's AK-47s, all mixed together. This was asymmetrical warfare with a fearful symmetry. Hussein picked up a handful of empty brass. "Very close-range fighting," he said, jingling them in his palm. "You can imagine what weapons we have and what weapons they have."

In an olive grove about five miles away, it wasn't necessary to imagine. Under camo netting, half-covered with the broad-leaved branches of a fig tree, was a GMC truck with a rocket-launching platform, probably for the 122mm Katyusha, fired wildly into Israel. It was untouched, unlike its twin a football field away, which lay mangled in an Israeli counterstrike. There was no sign of Hezbollah fighters, though, and locals spoke of seeing little kids running like mad from the rocket batteries after they fired. In Khiam, a teenager on a motor scooter rolled through town, apparently minding his own business -- except that the ear bud of the walkie-talkie hidden under his shirt identified him as one of Hezbollah's many scouts. They were hard to find -- until they wanted to be found.

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Newsweek has learned from a source briefed in recent weeks by Israel's top leaders and military brass that Hezbollah even managed to eavesdrop successfully on Israel's military communications as its Lebanese incursion began. When Lieutenant Eli Kahn, commander of an elite Israeli parachutists outfit, turned a corner in the southern Lebanese village of Maroun al-Ras early in the month-old war, he came face to face with this new enemy. "He had sophisticated equipment like mine and looked more like a commando," he recalled. Lieutenant Kahn ducked back around the corner and reached for a grenade, but before he could pull the pin, the Hezbollah fighter had tossed one around the corner himself. The Israeli picked it up and threw it back, just in time. "They didn't retreat," says Danny Yatom, a former director of the Mossad. "They continued to fight until the death."

That combination of modern lethality and Old World fanaticism has taken a deadly toll. 45 Israeli soldiers had died, and as many as 250 Hezbollah fighters had perished. Thirty-three Israeli civilians had been killed in the rocket barrages, while more than 480 Lebanese had died. But Hezbollah was boasting of its success. As Israel continued to push its ground offensive, progress was painfully slow, one small Lebanese village at a time. Diplomacy was stalled, too, despite agreement on a UN cease-fire resolution expected to pass early this week. The Israeli Defense Forces, with six brigades -- close to 7,000 soldiers -- could claim only to have subdued half a dozen villages, a long way from their goal of establishing a secure buffer zone, possibly as far north as the Litani River.

Israel's cabinet approved the ground campaign after its air war had failed to suppress Hezbollah's fire. Recently the Israelis declared they'd destroyed two thirds of Hezbollah's missile arsenal, but right after that Hezbollah launched more than 200, with almost as many the next day. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah vowed to strike Tel Aviv if Israel bombed Beirut again, and some thought he might be able to.

The whole calculus of this sort of warfare has changed, as even the Israelis gave grudging high marks to their opponents. The sort of weaponry Hezbollah is deploying is normally associated with a state, and states can be easily deterred by a superior military force like Israel's. They have cities to protect, vital infrastructure. Hezbollah depends to some extent on supplies coming from Iran via Damascus, and Israel bombed the last roads from Syria into its neighbor. But the organization is believed to have laid in supplies for at least another month, and when it suits, the Hezbollah fighters can disappear into the population. "We live on onions and tomatoes," said Hussein in Bint Jbeil, as he pulled one off a vine in an abandoned garden.

When Sheik Ahmed Murad, a Hezbollah spokesman, showed up at the Tyre Hospital to rant against the civilian casualties Israel had inflicted, he was in his Shiite cleric's turban and robes. After the press conference, Murad was escorted away by three bodyguards, then reappeared on the street in untucked shirt and slacks, apparently just another civilian. "Their strategy is a strategy of disappearance," says one Israeli military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was talking about operations. "They are well prepared for this kind of invasion. (But) we are much stronger than them. We can bring a much greater force than they can deal with."

But the Hezbollah guerrillas are well aware of that, too, and they know how averse the Israeli military and

public have always been to taking casualties. "The strategy is to make them lose as many (soldiers) as possible," said Hussein, on the cartridge-strewn hillside at Bint Jbeil. "Israel doesn't care about the (loss of a) tank. They care about the people." As the prospect of a quick victory faded from Israeli view, Israel's military tried to regain the initiative, raiding a Hezbollah safe house in Tyre on Saturday, killing at least three militants in a ferocious shoot-out. Earlier in the week it took five Hezbollah prisoners in a raid on a hospital in Baalbek, in Hezbollah's Bekaa Valley heartland. "It was an attempt to re-create the days of Entebbe," said a senior Israeli security source who is not authorized to speak on the record.

How did Hezbollah morph from its terrorist roots 20 years ago to the formidably organized force of today? The short answer is: experience, leadership and Iran. The group was first pulled together in 1982 by members of Ayatollah Khomeini's Revolutionary Guards as a way to spread Tehran's influence while fighting against Israeli forces that had laid siege to Beirut. The following year the organization became infamous for the suicide bombing of the US Marine Barracks in Beirut that cost 241 Americans their lives, and a simultaneous attack on French forces that killed 56. Soon, Hezbollah added airline hijackings and the taking of American and European hostages to its repertoire.

In 1992, Israeli helicopters blew up the then leader of Hezbollah, Abbas al-Musawi, along with his wife and son. His successor was Hassan Nasrallah, who set a new course for the organization. Under Nasrallah, the militia grew quickly into the single most disciplined and powerful political force in the country. It built schools, hospitals, provided social services and got its members elected to Parliament. At the same time, its soldiers honed their skills at guerrilla warfare battling against Israeli troops still occupying southern Lebanon, studying their tactics, learning their weak points.

All this cost money, but there was plenty to be had. By Israeli estimates Iran has underwritten Hezbollah with \$100 million a year. But Hezbollah also gets contributions and "tax" payments from wealthy Shiites in Lebanon and abroad, and revenues from both legal and illegal businesses worldwide. According to a recent study by terrorism expert Magnus Ranstorp at the Swedish National Defense College, its shopping list included night-vision goggles, Global Positioning Systems, advanced software for aircraft design, stun guns, nitrogen cutters, naval equipment, laser range finders and even ultrasonic dog repellers.

Over the years, Nasrallah has dressed like a cleric, but talked like a clear-eyed politician, reciting facts that suited him, cracking jokes and vowing to keep his promises. Cool and charismatic, he broadcast his message not only to all of Lebanon, but to much of the Arab and Muslim world over Hezbollah's Al-Manar satellite television station. The organization's purpose, Nasrallah said, was to fight Israeli occupation. When that ended with an Israeli pullout from South Lebanon in 2000, he argued that Hezbollah must keep its arms and build up its arsenal. The reason: "deterrence."

The effects of Hezbollah's buildup were a dismaying surprise to the Israelis from almost the first day of fighting, when Israel launched a massive retaliation for a Hezbollah raid across the border that had cost them eight soldiers killed and two captured. "The Iranians invested far more than people thought," said the source, who had been briefed by Israel's most senior leaders. "The command and control centers were state of the art. They built a whole network of underground tunnels that enabled them to trap Israeli soldiers ... They were eavesdropping on Israeli military communications with the equipment they received." Hezbollah's high-tech communications heightens its classic advantage as a guerrilla force fighting on home turf. "The plan was to go deep, but we didn't finish it," said 19-year-old Nahum Fowler, a corporal in Israel's Nahal Brigade who fought in South Lebanon. "They know what they're doing. They know their villages really well." His unit never saw the enemy, he said. "We mostly heard them."

A diplomatic end to the fighting may be just as hard to find as Hezbollah's rocket launchers. Recently French and Americans finally agreed on a draft UN Security Council resolution calling for "a full cessation of hostilities." But diplomats cautioned this is the beginning of a process, not the end of it. Hezbollah quickly said it would keep fighting as long as Israeli troops were left on Lebanese territory. And Israeli Ambassador to Washington Daniel Ayalon told Newsweek that Israel expects Hezbollah to do more now than just hold its fire. "What is important to us is not just that Hezbollah's operations end but also the arms shipments from Iran and Syria. And first they must release the two abducted soldiers." In that case, countries like France and Italy would be reluctant to honor pledges to send peacekeeping troops. "An international force arriving in Lebanon without the war having been stopped ... would be exposed to Iraq-style risks," said Italian Foreign Minister Massimo D'Alema. Worse, they would be up against Hezbollah.

With Richard Wolffe, Michael Hirsh, Dan Ephron and John Barry in Washington and Matthew Kalman in Jerusalem.

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ARMED AND DANGEROUS

Hezbollah's collection of weapons and equipment ranges from the simple to the sophisticated and ranks among the most extensive of any active guerrilla group. An overview:

Hezbollah's Forces

Many of Hezbollah's fighters carry little more than Kalashnikov rifles and VHF radio gear, but others have additional equipment.

MORTARS: Low-tech and portable, mortars could have been obtained from Syria or taken from the Lebanese Army.

GRENADES: Widely available in the region, standard-issue Soviet grenades are common within Hezbollah.

KALASHNIKOVs: A staple of Hezbollah's arsenal, the Kalashnikov rifle is relatively cheap and easily acquired throughout much of the Middle East.

NIGHT-VISION GEAR: Only a few have it, but those who do may have captured or bought it.

RPGs: Rocket-propelled grenades, readily available in the region, are prevalent within Hezbollah's ranks.

VHF RADIOS: Hezbollah fighters typically carry VHF radio gear and cell phones.

BODY ARMOR: A small number have bulletproof vests, which may have been taken from fallen Israeli soldiers or purchased.

AT-3 MISSILES: The AT-3 antitank missile, a 40-year-old Soviet weapon most likely supplied by Syria, has reportedly been used against clusters of Israeli infantry.

Suspected Weaponry

Hezbollah's arsenal is said to include several additional arms.

M-16/M-4

United States

Infantry carbine

MILAN

Germany/France

Antitank missile

METIS-M

Russia

Antitank missile

SA-7

Soviet Union

Antiaircraft missile

AT-4 SPIGOT

Soviet Union

Antitank missile

RECOILLESS RIFLE

Various sources

Antiaarmor weapon

Rockets and Missiles

Hezbollah claims to have weapons that can reach Tel Aviv.

LEBANON

Range

Shelomi

ISRAEL

KATYUSHA

10-20 miles

LEBANON

Haifa

ISRAEL

FAJR-5

40-50 miles

LEBANON

Tel Aviv

ISRAEL

ZELZAL (Unconfirmed)

70-80 miles