

# Understanding al Qaeda and Hezbollah

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## Understanding al Qaeda and Hezbollah

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JORDAN E. BARBER, JUL 6 2009

### **Terrorism Near and Far, Strategic and Symbolic: The Origins, Intentions and Future Threats of al Qaeda and Hezbollah**

This essay makes a comparative study of al Qaeda and Hezbollah, considering their ideological origins, justifications for terror, and overall objectives and tactics. The author finds that al Qaeda's ideological groundings strongly influence the global, symbolic nature of the group's objectives. In contrast, Hezbollah's origin as a resistance front against Israel has left room for ideological flexibility, resulting in goals that are regional and pragmatic. The different natures of each group should strongly affect counterterrorist policy; however, the US and Israel have not responded to either group in a persistently effective manner. Al Qaeda's reliance on a rigid anti-Western ideology means that the US must focus its effort on resolving lingering problems in the Middle East that perpetuate Western resentment. In contrast, Israel should develop unambiguous policies of deterrence and cooperation because Hezbollah is a rational actor that is accountable to the Lebanese public as well as the government.

#### **Introduction**

The authors of the 9/11 Commission Report, commenting on the particulars of globalization, remarked that "to us, Afghanistan seemed very far away. To members of Al Qaeda, America seemed very close." [1] This statement is startling, considering the rhetoric of Osama bin Laden describing the Muslim world as oppressed by America. [2] Though ignored by the US public until recently, al Qaeda follows an ideological tradition going back to Salafi Islamists like Ibn Taymiyyah, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scholar who argued for jihad against Mongol rulers in the Middle East. Al Qaeda is not a unique phenomenon. However, it is unique in its objectives. Compared to a group like Hezbollah in Lebanon, al Qaeda has goals that are ambitious, long-term and global. Hezbollah is chiefly regional, and acts more as a defensive resistance and support group to Shiites in Lebanon.

Though both groups engage in terrorist acts, terrorism cannot be confined to a single objective or goal. This paper looks to highlight the comparative qualities of al Qaeda and Hezbollah, and advance two key ideas. One, that al Qaeda's rigid adherence to its ideological foundations and its long-term objectives against Western states have led it to become a group focused on symbolic attacks and becoming an ideological banner for a global Islamist movement. And two, Hezbollah's steady distancing from its resistance roots to a pragmatic political organization is due to regional support which makes the group accountable and rational. As a result, Hezbollah's objectives have been flexible and pragmatic. The author will also argue that current counterterrorist policy has had mixed results. In the future, states must take into account these comparative differences. To arrive at prescriptions for future policy, it is first useful to outline the origins and objectives of each group.

#### **Origins**

It is first useful to examine the founding intentions of al Qaeda and Hezbollah. Al Qaeda, born out of a tradition of jihad, frames its justification for terror around a rigid ideology supported by influential Islamist thought. Hezbollah has also been influenced by ideology, but Hezbollah's founding purpose as a resistance and support network in Lebanon means that the group is more concerned with economic and social conditions of its supporters. Thus, Hezbollah's justifications for terror are confined by its grass-roots supporters who are less concerned with ideology than practical

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living conditions.

A prominent theme in al Qaeda's rhetoric of terror is the necessity of separating "true" Muslims from those masquerading as Muslims. This is a central issue for bin Laden and al Zawahiri, who justify violence against other Muslims and Middle Eastern governments under this idea. Two important figures have served as ideological foundations for this justification of widespread terror. Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyyah, an important Islamic scholar born in 1262, issued a *fatwa* against his Mongol rulers for failing to follow *sharia*.<sup>[3]</sup> In Bin Laden's "Declaration of Jihad against the Americans," he cites Ibn Taymiyyah as writing the following: "There is nothing more imperative, after faith, to repel the aggressor who corrupts religion and life, unconditionally, as far as possible."<sup>[4]</sup>

Sayyid Qutb has also contributed to the al Qaeda narrative of global terror. An Egyptian writer born in 1906, Qutb helped establish the necessity for a modern vanguard group to promote true Islam and destroy the contemporary system of *jahiliyyah*, a state of ignorance of Islam.<sup>[5]</sup> In his work *Milestones*, written in 1964, Qutb argues that jahiliyyah is everywhere—both in Western states and the corrupt dictatorships that run Muslim states. Jihad is not just for the defense of Islam against jahili society, writes Qutb, but "to be carried throughout the earth to the whole of mankind, as the object of this religion is all humanity and its sphere of action is the whole earth."<sup>[6]</sup> Qutb, like Ibn Taymiyyah, is responsible for establishing a global conception of an Islamic struggle, a central justification for global terrorism for bin Laden and al Zawahiri's.

Al Qaeda's justification for terror comes from an ideological, broad understanding of Islam's role in the world. Hezbollah, a Shiite political group based in Lebanon, has utilized terrorism for a narrower purpose. Hezbollah arose as a resistance group to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, stating its primary objectives to be removing foreign forces from the state, as well as the destruction of Israel.<sup>[7]</sup> Hezbollah also arose out of Shiite marginalization in Lebanon, which has shaped its direction and justifications for terror as much as its original doctrine. In such a diverse state as Lebanon, the Shi'a community has long been seen as an "invisible community" within the state.<sup>[8]</sup> Hezbollah arose from this feeling, in addition to the general movement of Islamism in the 1980s, with the belief that uniting the Muslim community was the most practical way of redressing imbalances in justice and poverty, in addition to defending Islam against Western aggression.<sup>[9]</sup> Judith Harik calls this Hezbollah's grass-roots support, a fundamental necessity for the group's survival and legitimacy.<sup>[10]</sup>

Comparatively, Hezbollah's justifications for terror are narrower than al Qaeda, in the sense that Hezbollah has restricted its terrorism to regional actors and does not actively promote global religious war. Whereas al Qaeda relies on an ideological connection with its supporters, Hezbollah has fashioned itself as a defender and supporter of marginalized Lebanese Shiites. This has given Hezbollah unusual flexibility in ideology because economic and social factors in Lebanon supersede notions of holy war. Bin Laden and al Zawahiri frequently use Qutb and Ibn Taymiyyah as ideological justification for terrorist acts, but Hezbollah utilizes what Daniel Sobelman calls pragmatic politics over pure ideology.<sup>[11]</sup> Hezbollah has shown its ability to compromise in several instances. Hezbollah's de facto spiritual leader, Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, has long advocated for tolerance between the Muslim and Christian factions within Lebanon.<sup>[12]</sup> He has also vocally steered away from Hezbollah's original adherence to *Velayet-e Faqih*, or subservience to Iran's Supreme Leader. The group has also criticized the undemocratic nature of Middle Eastern states, despite Hezbollah's financial aid from Syria and Iran.<sup>[13]</sup> This is not to say that Hezbollah's acts of terror are driven by ideology. But comparatively, Hezbollah is more influenced by its grass-roots supporters, which make the group accountable to acts that would threaten stability in Lebanon. Al Qaeda is not constrained by its supporters. In fact, it is the opposite: al Qaeda's members join because they are attracted to its ideological purity, allowing bin Laden and Zawahiri to be accountable only to their ideological purpose. Hezbollah is supported because it provides networks of aid to marginalized Lebanese and resistance against foreign aggressors.

## Objectives and Tactics

The justifications for terror for Qaeda and Hezbollah are critical to understanding the strategic objectives of each group. Informed by Qutbist notions of a worldwide *jahili* society and Abdullah Azzam's influential success against the Soviets in Afghanistan, al Qaeda promotes a global Islamist movement that targets the "far enemy": Western states oppressing the reemergence of an Islamic Caliphate. Hezbollah, born as a resistance group against Israel and a

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defender of Lebanese Shiite interests, has since developed into an organized pseudo-state participating in political institutions. As a result, Hezbollah has developed a flexible strategy that covers a multitude of interests, from economic conditions to defending against Israeli aggression.

The primary goals of al Qaeda are to end foreign aid and occupation in the Middle East, and to reestablish an Islamic Caliphate under sharia law.[14] Two important strategies have been employed for these causes: symbolic attacks against the far enemy, and fashioning al Qaeda as the front for a global Islamist movement. The attacks by al Qaeda against the US on September 11 highlight these strategies. Leaders like bin Laden and al Zarqawi had hoped to use 9/11 as a wake up call to all potential jihadis (Ibrahim, 234).[15] This idea was first seen in Afghanistan: Abdullah Azzam, the “godfather of the jihad,” was seen as successfully rallying the Muslim community in a grand defense against the Soviets.[16] Al Qaeda’s intention for 9/11 was to display the US as weak, not only to encourage Islamist movements globally but also to bait the US into a war in the Middle East ala the USSR and Afghanistan.

Since 9/11, al Qaeda and associated groups have committed similar attacks against Western states, though not on the same scale. These attacks—the 2005 Bali bombings, the 2004 Madrid bombings, 2005 London bombings—all directly or circuitously related to al Qaeda, are symbolic because their primary intention is not literal damage. In order to fashion a global Islamist movement, al Qaeda utilizes symbolic attacks to portray the West as weak and rally Muslims to jihad. It is important to understand that al Qaeda’s attacks are symbolic: al Qaeda is primarily promoting an ideological movement rather than tangible goals. There has been considerable scholarship regarding the symbolism al Qaeda since 9/11, with Mark Katz has arguing that bin Laden is potentially a transnational revolutionary leader ala Lenin or Mao.[17] Robert Snyder believes bin Laden to be a civilizational revolutionary, a regional leader, but transnational nonetheless.[18]

Al Qaeda continues to rely on original principles, while Hezbollah now straddles two identities: its original identity as an Islamist resistance movement, and its new identity as a legitimate political actor. During the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the 1980s, Hezbollah’s strategy was that of a resistance organization aimed at terrorizing and disrupting the Israeli military. During this time, Hezbollah helped bring to prominence the tactic of suicide bombing, which formed an integral part in their successful push to oust Israeli and US forces from Lebanon.[19] Suicide bombing, which is symbolic in its unfathomable nature, is more similar to al Qaeda’s tactical attacks designed to promote the cause of Islam. Yet Hezbollah’s has a strategic narrowness and flexibility that al Qaeda does not have. Indeed, post Israel occupation, Sheikh Fadlallah raised “legal objections” to the tactic of suicide bombing, and Hezbollah has since halted its use.[20] Hezbollah still maintains a hostile stance towards Israel, continuing tactics of terrorizing through rocket attacks or capturing civilians. But Hezbollah has other aims beyond terror. Hezbollah has major social programs in Lebanon, designed to gather grassroots support and help the state recover for decades of neglect and war.[21] Hezbollah’s participation in Lebanon’s government is indicative of Hezbollah’s regional obligations of supporting the Lebanese population. Hezbollah’s narrowly defined objectives and purpose has thus necessitated a strategy that is realistic, though the group still fashions itself as a resistance movement against Israeli aggression.

Which group has been more successful at pursuing their goals? It may be more useful to analyze whether its appeal is likely to endure, given Al Qaeda’s reliance on inspiring a global movement through symbolic attacks. If post-9/11 attacks are any indication, then al Qaeda has been fundamental in shaping a global Islamist movement. As a result of its emblematic significance, al Qaeda has the capacity to reach and connect with Islamist groups throughout the world. Bruce Riedel identifies a host of possible targets for al Qaeda in the future, including Yemen, Bangladesh and Algeria.[22] But al Qaeda is no further in achieving an Islamic Caliphate than it was before 9/11. The seemingly infinite gap between its objectives and strategy may be a source of eventual weakness. Al Qaeda faces the danger of frustration and ideological fatigue if its goals are always unattainable. Hezbollah does not suffer from this critical dilemma because of its inherently narrow and pragmatic objectives. Hezbollah continually displaces its original holy war rhetoric, allowing the group to meet strategic objectives.

## Counterterrorist Policies

Before the 9/11 attacks, there were two competing perspectives on how to respond to al Qaeda, outlined by the 9/11 Commission Report: “One school of thought...argued that the terrorist network was a nuisance....Another school saw

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al Qaeda as the 'point of the spear of radical Islam.'"[23] Immediately after the attacks on the September 11, however, the problem of proportion vanished. The new policy sided with the "spear point" school, and the attacks gave immediate support for sweeping action. The new question for counterterrorism was simply where and how to respond. There were obvious responses that were enacted immediately: enacting security precautions at the national borders and ports, proposing legislative packages to support the economy and airline industry. Developing a direct counterterrorist response against al Qaeda, however, was an elusive project. As the 9/11 Commission notes, "[al Qaeda's] crimes were on a scale approaching acts of war, but they were committed by a loose, far-flung, nebulous conspiracy with no territories or citizens or assets." [24]

The US eventually detailed a sweeping plan of action commonly called the War on Terror, designed to address the global ambitions of al Qaeda. The plan called for utilization of all possible resources, including intelligence gathering and sharing, multilateral diplomacy to pressure other states, and direct military action.[25] The US focused particularly on Pakistan and Afghanistan, where al Qaeda had the most freedom to operate.[26] Operation Enduring Freedom, initiated in 2001 against the Taliban in Afghanistan, was an extension of the US's new policy of holding states accountable for the terror groups operating within their borders. Aimed at destroying all Taliban and al Qaeda infrastructure within Afghanistan, the Operation dealt al Qaeda's base of operations a "staggering blow." [27] The CIA efforts at co-opting other Afghani groups were particularly successful; Lawrence Wright notes bin Laden's frustration at how quickly his Muslim allies switched sides.[28]

Shmuel Bar comments that Israeli security experts hold the belief that Hezbollah is an exception to most terrorist groups: Hezbollah has tangible assets and is accountable to an electorate.[29] Because Israel has acted on the assumption that Hezbollah is more similar to a state actor, it has attempted to utilize deterrence as its primary counterterrorist policy, though there have been escalations of conflict resulting in large-scale war. From 1985 to 2000, when the Security Zone existed, Israel used threats of reinvasion to restrain Hezbollah.[30] Operation Accountability (1993) and Operation Grapes of Wrath (1996), two major incursions into South Lebanon, highlight Israel's commitment to its threats, as well as a failure of deterrence.

In 2006, Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers, prompting a massive retaliation by Israel. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert invaded Lebanon for three reasons: to enhance the threat of deterrence in the future, sow public disapproval against Hezbollah, and destroy infrastructure the group had built since Israel's withdrawal in 2000.[31] Like the US operation against the Taliban in Afghanistan, Israel devastated Hezbollah's infrastructure.[32] However, though Israel attempted to focus its fire against Hezbollah, their integration with society and openness in Lebanon inevitably led to collateral damage against the state. Lebanon in general suffered as a result, leading to huge costs to its economy and population-Joseph Alagha estimates the war dead to be roughly 1,200 Lebanese and 1 million peoples displaced.[33] Because of the unparalleled destruction, Hezbollah had little incentive to restrain itself; the group unleashed roughly 4000 Katyusha rockets into Israel, forcing 2 million Israelis to flee to safe shelters.[34] This terrorization of the Israeli population was tremendously effective, and led most Israelis to believe the invasion to be a failure.[35]

Israel continues to assess its operational success in the 2006 Lebanon War against the perception of failure amongst the Israeli public. To a lesser extent, the US is engaging in the same debate in Iraq: communications between Zarqawi and bin Laden indicated a level of desperation, with Zarqawi writing that the "noose around the mujahedeen's throats is growing tighter." [36] Yet the majority of the US public is dissatisfied with the efforts in Iraq. Barry Posen argues that US leaders must "fight political and bureaucratic inertia" that comes from engaging in a protracted, unclear war.[37] Afghanistan proved both successful operationally and within the US public, because there were clear objectives and the response appeared proportionate.

Israel's primary policy of deterrence has largely failed, as seen through numerous invasions required to "remind" Hezbollah. The 2006 Lebanon War is Israel's latest reminder to Hezbollah, though its widespread destruction has likely caused significant operational damage to Hezbollah. Despite both policies, the groups remain largely intact and steadfast in the objectives: Hezbollah continues to function as a pseudo-state and al Qaeda continues to push itself as the front for global Islamic jihad. Moving forward, it is critically important that more attention is paid to the unique features of each group in order to most effectively nullify the justifications for terror.

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## Prospects and Broader Lessons

In terms of strategic objectives Israel hoped to achieve in the 2006 Lebanon War against Hezbollah-deterrence and destruction of Hezbollah infrastructure and popular support-the results are mixed. Another objective of the war, disarmament of Hezbollah, was not achieved. Judith Harik notes that in its current form, Hezbollah is not disarm able; no force-not UNIFIL, the Lebanese Army, NATO-has the willpower or strength to confront Hezbollah.[38] And though Hezbollah has faced criticism within Lebanon, it has gained legitimacy and respect within the Middle East for successfully resisting Israel.[39] Hezbollah is a political group that directly supports people within Lebanon, from medical services to electricity. Hezbollah operates a *Qard al Husn*, or micro credit program, that Harik estimates to be in excess of a billion US dollars.[40] Hezbollah even provides a fundamentalist version of the boy scouts to inculcate children into the organization (Worth, 1).[41]

In short, the 2006 Lebanon War damaged Hezbollah temporarily, but the group has a strong base of support that will guarantee its existence, and does not face the threat of ideological fatigue like al Qaeda. Unlike al Qaeda, Hezbollah is deeply engrained into Lebanese society and is a critical network of support. Hezbollah does not rely on the strength of ideology to survive, and thus is not in danger of becoming irrelevant in the future. At the same time, Hezbollah is held captive to a political process, which forces cooperation and moderation. Hezbollah is also accountable to a population that is weary of war, thus limiting Hezbollah's capacity to attack Israel without provoking internal resentment. This situation presents special opportunities that will never exist with al Qaeda. Hezbollah is capable of being deterred and co-opted. In the aftermath of the 2006 Lebanon War, it was widely reported that Hassan Nasrallah was shocked at Israel's invasion, which indicates that Israel's attempts at deterrence haven't been clear enough. Bar argues that Israel's deterrence failed during the 2006 war because its "red lines" were vague. Far from being an unrestrained front for terrorism, Hezbollah simply miscalculated Israel's response to capturing the two soldiers.[42]

The conclusion from the 2006 Lebanon war is not that Hezbollah cannot be deterred, but that Israel must make clear its threat demarcate what situations would provoke such a response. Does this eliminate the threat of Hezbollah? Not at all. But directly confronting Hezbollah in the same way the US confronted al Qaeda in Afghanistan was a mistake, as evidenced by Israel's postwar standing in 2006.[43] Hezbollah is integrated with Lebanese society in a way al Qaeda never was. But this also means that Hezbollah must remain accountable to government institutions (weak though they may be) and a civilian population weary of war. Hezbollah does not have to be defeated in order to be neutered: making Hezbollah part of the political process will continue to moderate and restrain its actions.

The same cannot be said for al Qaeda. People do not join al Qaeda for a microloan. Economic reasons certainly exist, Al Qaeda, whose singular anti-West purpose leaves little room for other issues, must continually work to convince people to join their network. Elena Mastors and Alyssa Deffenbaugh outline a host of motivations for people to join al Qaeda, with most motivation stemming from poor conditions in their state and a heavily anti-Western perception as a result of the belief that Islam is under attack.[44] Iraq is an unfortunate example: the violence and destruction within Iraq, along with the extended US occupation, is a gift to bin Laden's efforts. Al Qaeda has found a host of recruits as a result, which has led to an unexpectedly resilient insurgency.

Yet al Qaeda has not helped itself greatly in perpetuating its networks, and despite its rebirth in Iraq, it is arguable that al Qaeda is on the decline. Al Qaeda's inflexibility regarding ideology and its long-term strategic objectives has not led to widespread support in the Middle East or Islamic world.[45] Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, lost considerable support in Iraq for his policy of collateral killings of Muslims before his death.[46] Al Qaeda has made some efforts at broader recruitment, with Zawahiri now suggesting that Shiites may be welcome to fight as well (Telhami, "Hezbollah's Popularity").[47] However, given al Qaeda's continuing success against Western states and its ability to inspire new terrorist groups to action, the author is hesitant to embrace the argument that al Qaeda will soon decline into irrelevance.

## Lessons

Counterterrorist efforts must reflect these future challenges for both groups. Al Qaeda is a particular kind of terrorist

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group that relies on a historical narrative to fuel continuing resentment of the West to perpetuate its global movement. Future efforts must be made to soften this hatred. Such efforts do not simply mean historical and ideological argumentation, but action aimed at resolving sources of hatred. To counter al Qaeda's narrative against the US, Bruce Riedel argues that efforts must "address the core concerns that al Qaeda taps into in the Islamic world today and that facilitate its recruitment of terrorists." [48] As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the current Iraq insurgency show, lingering conflicts between Western and the Islamic world only assists in prolonging the narrative that al Qaeda thrives on. Does this mean giving in to terrorist demands? Perhaps, if resolving the plight of the Palestinians is a terrorist concern. As this paper has argued, al Qaeda is a symbolic organization with an ideology based on uncompromising hostility towards its far enemies and moderate Muslims. Resolving lingering conflicts and engaging in a "struggle of ideas" to counter al Qaeda's narrative will provide little reason for people to join the network. [49] Without a narrative against the West, al Qaeda symbolism is meaningless.

While the debate over al Qaeda continues around its future relevance and purpose, Hezbollah will not vanish anytime soon. Hezbollah is firmly entrenched in Lebanon, openly supported by Shiites and operating a host of services within Southern Lebanon. Perhaps this is a more difficult situation. But terror groups that have had strong social and political connections to their population have shown restraint and cooperation before. After decades of conflict, the Provisional IRA in Ireland eventually agreed to use only political and democratic means for achieving their goals ("IRA Statement"). [50] This may be a frustrating comparison. After all, the IRA was engaged in a decades-long struggle, while splinter groups have continued to operate up to present. But a critical idea to retain about terrorism is that beneath the brutal attacks, there exists a cause: a cause perhaps justified by a potent internal logic fueled by selective history and religious doctrine, but a cause nonetheless. Counterterrorist efforts cannot simply attack methods and plans of terror. In some ways, groups like al Qaeda rely upon the West's misunderstanding of their purpose. Moving forward, efforts must address core concerns that give strength and purpose to narratives of hatred.

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