



Hizbullah's hybrid posture: three armies in one

by Florence Gaub

After Hizbullah ambushed an Israeli patrol in retaliation for an airstrike which killed six of its commanders at end of January, its leader Hassan Nasrallah declared “the resistance no longer cares about rules of engagement, and we [...] have the right to confront the enemy at any time, place or manner.” This statement captures the hybrid nature of the Lebanese group's military structure: it bears testament to the ease and agility with which it can switch between different forms of irregular warfare, while at the same time maintaining the semblance of a conventional military force.

What is hybrid warfare?

Hybrid warfare, also referred to at times as complex operations, small wars, or irregular warfare, is a term which denotes the combined deployment of irregular and conventional force capabilities in an integrated and coordinated manner. It encompasses elements ranging from regular tactics and formations, to terrorist attacks, criminal activities, and more. In contrast to asymmetric or guerrilla warfare, hybrid warfare is operationally directed and coordinated within the battle space; it therefore requires a centralised command and control structure (and therefore a degree of organisation) most non-state actors do not possess. In this framework, hybrid warfare uses all the available tricks in the book and blends tactics and technologies in new and unexpected ways. As a tactical choice, this type of war is not just limited to non-state or weak actors, and it is not new *per se*.

From civil warrior to resistance force

Although Hizbullah was born in 1985 as a typical militia engaged in asymmetric warfare, it has evolved over time into an organisation capable of fighting several different types of war. During the Lebanese civil war, when it was but one of the country's many militia groups, Hizbullah mostly launched suicide bombings and frontal assaults on Western and Israeli forces – both methods which, militarily, are neither sophisticated nor efficient.

Once Hizbullah became Lebanon's official resistance against Israeli occupation in 1990, its tactics began to shift slightly. It relied on asymmetric methods of warfare, but it also displayed some conventional elements of territoriality within its theatre of operations.

The Shia group would attack Israeli positions within the security zone – a stretch of land within Lebanon held by Israel as a buffer against infiltration – and then withdraw to nearby villages and melt away into the civilian population. In response to any Israeli shelling beyond the buffer zone, Hizbullah launched Katyusha rockets into Israel as part of what Nasrallah described as its ‘retribution policy’. Hizbullah employed this tactic whenever it considered that Israel had broken the unwritten rule of using violence only within this specific area.

That the group adhered to these geographic boundaries shows that, in its second life as a resistance

force, Hizbullah had begun to adopt a more conventional posture. It also rejected certain guerrilla tactics, refraining, for instance, from sending fighters into Israel to perpetrate terrorist attacks, as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation had done.

Three types of warfare

Irregular (e.g. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb)

Organisation: little training or discipline; cellular and decentralised structure.

Weapons: small arms, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), mortars, short-range rockets.

Hybrid (e.g. Hizbullah)

Organisation: moderately trained and disciplined, units up to battalion size, moderately centralised command structure.

Weapons: same as irregular groups but with stand-off capabilities (longer-range rockets, anti-tank missiles, man-portable air-defence systems).

Conventional (e.g. Syrian Armed Forces)

Organisation: hierarchical, larger-sized formations, generally centralised, highly disciplined and trained.

Weapons: all means – sophisticated air defences, ballistic missiles, conventional ground forces, special forces, air forces, navies.

The hybrid surprise of 2006

Hizbullah's silent evolution from a guerrilla force into a more conventional player went unnoticed and only became apparent during its 34-day war with Israel in 2006. The organisation displayed tactics and capabilities well beyond what was expected, and subsequently became the poster child for hybrid warfare. Following the Israeli invasion, Hizbullah fully exploited Lebanon's rocky terrain, which is ideal for dismounted movement but nightmarish for armoured manoeuvre. It also made use of easily defensible hilltop villages, which offer excellent fields of fire and are inhabited by populations sympathetic to its cause. The group blended advanced battlefield tactics with heavy weaponry – such as rockets, mortars, surface-to-air and surface-to-ship missiles – and mined the roads used by Israeli tanks.

Although numerically inferior, its units were cohesive, well-trained, disciplined and versed in how to hold territory. Able to maintain contact with the chain of command thanks to a complex communication system, Hizbullah successfully employed hedgehog defence tactics, i.e. taking up defensive positions in fortified bunkers like a regular force. Throughout the conflict, it continued to launch rockets into Israel using concealed launchers (even behind enemy lines) as part of its strategic messaging.

None of these tactics are characteristic of guerrilla forces, which usually rely on population-centric methods in order to conceal themselves. Essentially, Hizbullah caught Israel by surprise because it acted in a manner which was not conducive to either an irregular or a state actor.

The Syrian chapter

With its involvement in the Syrian civil war, however, Hizbullah has entered a new military phase: now, it is fighting rebel groups alongside the Assad regime's regular forces. Hizbullah's hybrid capacities come into play here, too, with its infantry and reconnaissance units, as well as sniper teams, complementing the Syrian military.

It is also said to be training and assisting Syrian government forces to hold conquered territory, especially in built-up areas. This urban component is once again a sign of evolution for a force accustomed to battle in the hilly, rural areas of southern Lebanon.

Its newly acquired skills were particularly visible during the offensive on al-Qusayr, a town not far from the Lebanese-Syrian border. Hizbullah not only planned and conducted the offensive, but it did so in a conventional military manner: the city was first cordoned off, and then hit with Syrian artillery and airstrikes. Only afterwards did Hizbullah ground forces, operating in company-size units of 100 men, enter the town to clear it of enemy combatants block by block. During the attack, it assigned code names to locations and objectives, allowing for rapid, unencrypted communication.

In Syria, therefore, Hizbullah has morphed from an asymmetric mountain force into a conventional urban one – proving once again its that it is extraordinary adaptable in operational terms.

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