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Hezbollah-Hamas Cooperation: Motivations, Manifestations and Future Outlook

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Abstract:

While cooperation between terrorist organizations is not a new phenomenon, there are certain “unnatural” alliances that are worth taking a closer look at. A particularly interesting example of terrorist group cooperation can be seen in the tactical alliance between the Sunni Hamas and the Shiite Hezbollah, with the blessing and active backing from the Iranian regime. This article examines the Hamas-Hezbollah relationship from the unique perspective of each group, in order to understand the underlying motivations involved, and what each group has to gain from it. The deadly manifestations of this cooperation throughout the years illustrate that both groups have indeed benefited from this alliance. However, the recent turmoil in the region, particularly the unrest in Egypt and Syria, has put a dent in what once seemed like the perfect marriage of convenience. The international community must take the necessary steps in order to further undermine this destabilizing relationship, and it must hold Iran accountable for its active support for terrorism.

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Introduction

Hezbollah (literally: “The Party of God”) is a radical Shiite terrorist organization that was founded by the Islamic Republic of Iran in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War in 1982. It was established as an attempt to counter Israel’s invasion of Lebanon, and to export the

Iranian revolution to the country.¹ Over the years, the organization has developed to become the most effective adversary Israel has ever faced.² Besides the ongoing sponsor-proxy ties with Iran, it has developed close cooperation with the Assad regime in Syria as a conduit for the transfer of Iranian funds and sophisticated weaponry,³ and has strengthened ties with other terrorist groups as well.

One of these groups is the Sunni group Hamas (Arabic acronym for: “The Islamic Resistance Movement”), founded in 1988 by Islamists connected with the Muslim Brotherhood, out of the fear that without direct participation in the first Intifada or uprising of Palestinians against Israel, popular support of the Palestinian people living in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank would ultimately shift to the more secular PLO, or to the more radical Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).⁴ Like Hezbollah (but to a lesser extent), Hamas enjoys the political and financial backing of Iran, after the latter recognized the opportunity to increase its influence in the region and to export the Islamic Revolution to additional locations outside of Iran, as it had in Lebanon. Both groups are similar not only due to their shared state sponsor, but also due to the fact that they are both hybrid organizations with military, political and social/religious wings.⁵

This paper will focus on the intriguing yet deadly alliance between Hezbollah and Hamas, and will attempt to shed light on how two groups with strikingly different ideological backgrounds – one Shiite and the other Sunni - came to cooperate in a mutually beneficial manner. The article will begin with a theoretical framework exploring some of the current theories that deal with cooperation between groups in general and terrorist organizations in

¹ Daniel Byman, “Should Hezbollah Be Next?”, *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 6 (November-December 2003), 57.

² *Ibid.*, 59.

³ Rola El Husseini, “Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria”, *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010): 810.

⁴ Joshua L. Gleis and Benedetta Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, 121.

particular. This will lay the necessary groundwork for a more zoomed-in look at each of the two groups profiled in this paper, in order to assess what motivated each from its own perspective to cooperate with the other. This will be followed by several examples or manifestations of this cooperation throughout the years, touching upon specific events or attacks that were made possible or exacerbated as a product of this alliance. I will then briefly analyze the current state of the relationship in light of the recent developments in the region, namely the ongoing fighting and civil war in Syria. The final section of the article can be divided into two parts: The first part will include a brief discussion that assesses the relationship between Hezbollah and Hamas over the years, and its prospects and outlook going forward. The second part will include several important policy recommendations that are intended to mitigate some of the threats that this alliance poses - not only to the safety of Israel, but to the safety and stability of the entire region.

Theoretical Overview

Cooperation between terrorist organizations is not a new phenomenon, but since we are dealing with a fairly uncommon and unnatural alliance between two groups with radically different ideological backgrounds, it is important to take a step back and see what current theoretical frameworks exist that might help us in our understanding of this odd pairing. The following section will provide an overview of some of the current research on cooperation between terrorist groups, with a particular focus on theoretical frameworks relevant to our case study at hand.

Current research points to several possible reasons for cooperation between terrorist groups. In their 2012 article, Horowitz and Potter examine the issue of terrorist intergroup cooperation, and shed light on this interesting phenomenon. They conclude that just as states

and other non-state actors cooperate in order to survive, improve their situation, bolster mutual power and security, grant access to information and resources and compete more effectively - terrorist organizations act in a similar fashion, making them even more deadly than before.⁶ Similarly, Karmon asserts that strategic incentives, especially the desire to increase overall capabilities, often drive collaboration between terrorist groups - enabling larger scale attacks, an opportunity to jointly train and develop new skills, and to broaden tactical knowledge.⁷

Group survival is a key motivating factor also argued by Phillips, who asserts that cooperative relationships help terrorist groups survive - as he too believes that the group's durability is enhanced by the aggregation of resources essential for survival. Furthermore, Phillips adds that intergroup cooperation enables terrorist groups to operate more frequently and effectively than before, which in turn contributes to future recruitment and growth, and reduces the likelihood of a group giving up or being defeated by the opposition.⁸

Bapat and Bond's 2012 study also highlights the importance of aggregating resources to conduct a more effective military campaign, using the argument that this represents the logic of specialization and comparative advantage, where each group brings his specialties and strengths to the table.⁹ In addition, the authors add an important (and relevant) third player to the discussion - that of the (state) sponsor, arguing that militants often turn to sponsors not only in order to procure material goods and assistance, but also to serve as a guarantor that enforces cooperation amongst the groups, and punishes defectors. This is important, as the costs of cooperation are usually very high - elevating the chances of getting caught or of reprisals from the opposed state against whom the groups have aligned to fight. In order to

⁶ Michael C. Horowitz and Philip B.K. Potter, "Allying to Kill: Terrorist Intergroup Cooperation and the Consequences for Lethality", Journal of Conflict Resolution (January 2012): 2.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Brian J. Phillips, "Terrorist Group Cooperation and Longevity", International Studies Quarterly (2013): 2.

⁹ Navin A. Bapat and Kanisha D. Bond, "Alliances between Militant Groups", British Journal of Political Science 42, no. 4 (2012): 795-796.

help reduce the uncertainty and make sure that both groups maintain the partnership, a sponsor such as a state is needed to alleviate some of these fears.¹⁰

Other studies have suggested additional factors that facilitate cooperation between terrorist groups that are important to mention, among them: the existence of a common enemy, common interests or goals, a common experience or external circumstance, a common ideology (as previously mentioned, not the case with Hezbollah and Hamas), group factors such as structure, size and battle experience, psychological factors such as the need for mutual reassurance and empowerment, and enablers such as ungoverned spaces and geographic proximity.¹¹

With regards to the main driver of cooperation, Moghadam makes an important distinction between interests and goals, in the framework of terrorist group cooperation. He asserts that unlike businesses and criminal organizations that seek to maximize profit, the goals of terrorist organizations tend to be more elusive, vague, subject to change and even mutually exclusive. Interests seem to be a better fit when discussing terrorist cooperation also due to the fact that shared goals implies shared interests, whereas shared interests do not necessarily imply shared goals. This is especially important when dealing with partnerships between terrorist groups with mutually exclusive goals, as might be the case when Shiites and Sunnis collaborate due to common tactical or operational interests, even though they have very different visions regarding the desired strategic end game.¹²

In addition, Moghadam makes an important distinction between the types of cooperation between terrorist groups. “High-end cooperation” includes mergers and strategic alliances, and would usually occur when dealing with groups with very similar and even overlapping

¹⁰ Ibid., 821-822.

¹¹ Assaf Moghadam, “Cooperation between Terrorist Groups”, unpublished paper (2012).

¹² Ibid.

worldviews and goals. On the lower end of the cooperation spectrum we have “Low-end cooperation”, which includes tactical alliances and supplier relations. Strategic alliances usually reflect ideological affinity, whereas tactical alliances are not predicated on ideological agreement.¹³

Now that we’ve recapped some of the theoretical underpinnings for terrorist group cooperation, we can begin to explore the specific motivations that led to the cooperation of the two key players in our current study – Hezbollah and Hamas. Given the fact that each group may have had different reasons for entering the partnership, we must examine each case separately and assess the motivations from each group’s perspective.

Motivations for Cooperation

This section will examine and compare each group’s particular motivations that led them to join forces. We will first examine a couple common motivations that they both share, following which we will take a closer look at the particular motivations that drove each group from its own perspective.

Common Motivations for Both Groups

Whereas similar ideology can clearly help bring groups together, this is not the case with Hezbollah and Hamas. The Shiite-Sunni rift has been well documented throughout history, and many have discounted the likelihood of significant interaction and cooperation between

¹³ Ibid.

Sunnis and Shiites due to their substantial theological differences.¹⁴ In fact, the relationship between the Shiite Lebanese and Sunni Palestinians in Southern Lebanon got off to a rocky start in the early 80's during the civil war, but this rift narrowed over time as Israel overstayed its welcome in the country, becoming a common enemy for both groups and allowing them to temporarily overlook their differences.¹⁵ Hence, fighting a common enemy constitutes an important reason for cooperation.

Another common motivation stems from both groups' interest in undermining the Arab-Israeli peace process, and by doing so also undermining the legitimacy and popularity of the Palestinian Authority – Hamas' main political rival. While each group may have had different reasons for not wanting a peace deal to be reached between Israel and its Arab/Palestinian neighbors, this is still a common interest that both were very active in combatting. The resistance against Israel and against any normalization that other countries or entities expressed towards the Jewish state has become a huge part of Hezbollah and Hamas' raison d'être, and is a key recurring theme that we will explore more closely in the next section, dealing with manifestations of cooperation between the groups.¹⁶

Hamas' Motivations

As the smaller and weaker of the two groups, the motivation from Hamas' perspective to develop closer ties with the much more powerful and experienced group in Lebanon seems relatively straightforward and clear. The presence of Hamas deportees in Southern Lebanon for over a year in the early 90's, as will be expanded upon in the next section, provided them

¹⁴ Christopher M. Blanchard, "Islam: Sunnis and Shiites", *CRS Report to Congress* (February 2005): 1-2, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA476265> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

¹⁵ Gleis and Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

ample opportunity to learn first hand from Hezbollah's success fighting Israeli and western forces in Lebanon, and to learn new tactics and methods that could be replicated in Gaza and the West Bank – among them suicide bombings and the mastering of explosives.¹⁷ Hezbollah was the best, and Hamas wanted to learn from the best in order to become more of a significant player in its own right.

In addition, Hezbollah (and to a larger extent Iran) was a great source for new weapons and technologies. Due to the Israeli and Egyptian blockade on Gaza, Hamas had to rely on weapons that it could either manufacture on its own or smuggle from other countries – drastically limiting their deadliness and overall threat. As we will see, Hezbollah and Iran successfully armed Hamas via weapon ships and via smuggling from Sinai, giving them more advanced weapons so that they could indeed pose more of a threat to Israel, and solidify their power and control in Gaza vis-à-vis their local opposition.¹⁸ Both of the above benefits (new skills and capabilities) fit nicely with Karmon and others' aforementioned arguments regarding cooperation to bolster skills and knowledge, making a group stronger, better equipped and trained than it would have been without the cooperation.

Finally, a more subtle motivation that may have pushed Hamas to ally itself with Hezbollah is Hamas' interest to learn how to successfully balance its military resistance with its growing political aspirations and involvement. Neither group started out as a political player, but both are pragmatic and found political participation as a means that would enable them to gain much needed legitimacy – both domestic and international – so that they could not only gain more support from the local voting population, but also work from within the system to ensure that they continue to hold on to their weapons to wage war against Israel.¹⁹ Becoming

¹⁷ Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 66.

¹⁸ Gleis and Berti, Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study, 164.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47, 54.

a “legitimate” political player helped Hezbollah’s claim that they are essentially providing representation and welfare for Lebanon’s Shiite community, while their military resistance against Israel and other global targets was largely overlooked or considered an aberration. Hamas took note of this, and realized that a bottom-up approach of working from within the government was in its best interest. As the Fatah-led Palestinian authority began to get even closer to Israel, Hamas believed that a “phased solution” granted them political flexibility to temporarily participate in a Palestinian state without forcing them to revise their ideological charter, which calls for the destruction of Israel – ensuring political pragmatism and ideological continuity.²⁰ Therefore, Hamas learned to mimic Hezbollah who had successfully developed a mainstream political party and massive social movement, in parallel to maintaining its armed activities – as it attempted to do the same in Gaza.²¹

Hezbollah’s Motivations

After viewing the motivations for cooperation from Hamas’ perspective, what can be said about Hezbollah’s reasons for teaming up with what then seemed to be a weaker group of exiled Palestinians? As the examples in the following section will show us, there were several factors that played key roles in Hezbollah’s decision to cooperate with Hamas over the years. First and foremost, as its proxy, Hezbollah carries out Iran’s bidding in the region, and supporting the Palestinian terrorist campaign against Israel is an important part of its global strategy.²² Hamas enables Iran to establish another hotspot of terrorism along Israel’s

²⁰ Ibid., 140.

²¹ Ibid., 190.

²² Iran’s aid to Palestinian terror against Israel included: Propaganda and political support; directing terror attacks; providing financial leverage; providing instruction and training; and most importantly – transferring weapons to bolster capabilities. Shaul Shay, *The Axis of Evil: Iran, Hizballah and Palestinian Terror*, (Edison, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 147-148.

southern border, and Hezbollah plays the role of subcontractor in arming and training them.²³

It is important to note that Iran stepped up its support for Hamas after the latter became politically and economically isolated following its violent overthrow of its Fatah opposition in Gaza.²⁴ As Iran was looking to play a larger role in the region, this worked as a win-win for both themselves and for Hamas, and Hezbollah was used as a key mediator.

In addition to being Iran's proxy, Hezbollah often treats Hamas as its own proxy, using it to further its goals vis-à-vis Israel and allowing for the disruption of the peace process, at little cost to Hezbollah itself.²⁵ This is especially important given the harsh retaliation Israel enacted against Hezbollah after the latter had abducted two IDF soldiers, in what led to the breakout of the Second Lebanon War in 2006 – a decision Nasrallah himself later admitted was a mistake.²⁶ Hezbollah needed to be careful not to push Israel too far, in a manner that would force it into another war before the group was interested in doing so. It therefore uses Hamas as a pawn to continue to fight Israel and undermine the peace process as a smart and efficient way to keep pressure and attention off itself. If Israel were to retaliate it would do so against Hamas, not Hezbollah.

The training of Hamas operatives in places like Lebanon and Sinai and then sending them back to operate in Gaza and the West Bank creates additional fighting fronts against Israel, which brings with it many strategic and tactical benefits. This exemplifies Bapat and Bond's aforementioned belief that alliances lead to more efficient combat, and to each side using its comparative advantage to greater effect. This also helps both groups in terms of survivability – Israel must split its attention and forces along both its northern and southern borders,

²³ The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "Hezbollah: Portrait of a Terrorist Organization", 48, 73-74, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20436/E_158_12_1231723028.pdf [accessed: October 4, 2013].

²⁴ Gleis and Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, 132.

²⁵ Byman, "Should Hezbollah Be Next?", 59.

²⁶ "Nasrallah: Soldiers' abduction a mistake", CNN, August 27, 2006: <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/08/27/mideast.nasrallah/> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

making the two-front approach a challenging reality for Israel,²⁷ who historically has had to deal with multiple threats on several fronts and would much rather focus on a specific threat in a single geographical location.²⁸

Finally, Hezbollah's general vocal support for the Palestinian cause²⁹ helps them gain political support inside Lebanon, as pro-Palestinian rhetoric helps the organization gain popularity and provides a good distraction from its own shortcomings. This is similar to how other Arab leaders invoke the Palestinian issue to quiet internal discontent and frame themselves as regional "leaders of the cause".³⁰ This support is evident through speeches by Hezbollah leaders, in which they support the Palestinians and reaffirm their commitment to stand by them,³¹ and also through Hamas' propaganda which is broadcast on Hezbollah's own Al-Manar television station, part of their joint efforts in psychological warfare against Israel.³² Whenever Hezbollah is criticized within Lebanon for its domestic or international policies, it pulls out the "Palestinian card" – allowing the criticism to temporarily subside. This has been evident especially when Hezbollah is involved in controversial moves like backing Assad's regime in Syria – a policy that has been condemned by more and more voices inside Lebanon.³³

After assessing the common and unique motivating factors that led these two groups to

²⁷ Scott Macleod, "The Risks of Israel's Two-Front War", TIME, July 13, 2006:

<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1213591,00.html> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

²⁸ Yaakov Katz, "Security and Defense: Preparing for War on all Fronts", The Jerusalem Post, April 15, 2011: <http://www.jpost.com/Features/Front-Lines/Security-and-Defense-Preparing-for-war-on-all-fronts> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

²⁹ Naim Qassem, the second in command of Hezbollah, wrote in his book that Arabs and Muslims have a responsibility to help the Palestinians resist the occupation, and they need to mobilize everything possible to achieve this. Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah: The Story from Within*, (London: Saqi Press, 2005), 184.

³⁰ Evelyn Gordon, "The Palestinian Conflict with Israel is Not the Core of the Middle East Conflict", JINSA website, November 9, 2012: http://www.jinsa.org/fellowship-program/evelyn-gordon/palestinian-conflict-israel-not-core-middle-east-conflict#UWkObYliu_g [accessed: October 4, 2013].

³¹ "Nasrallah: We will Never Abandon Palestine", Al-Akhbar English, August 2, 2013: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/16619> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

³² Gleis and Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, 162-163, 168.

³³ The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "Hezbollah Involvement in the Syrian Civil War", 17, 41, http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_20521/E_062_13_827044787.pdf [accessed: October 4, 2013].

cooperate with one another (Table 1 on the following page summarizes this section), we can now examine the many examples and manifestations of this alliance since it first started in the early 90's, to understand how this relationship began and how it evolved over time

Table 1 - Motivations for Cooperation

For Hamas	For Hezbollah
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to increase capabilities and learn new skills (suicide bombings, mastering explosives) from the most successful terrorist group around with regards to fighting Israel (successfully forced Israel's withdrawal in 2000) • A great source for new weapons and technologies • To learn to successfully balance military resistance with growing political aspirations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for Palestinian campaign is part of Iran's global strategy, and Hezbollah carries out Iran's bidding in the region • Hezbollah can use Hamas to act against Israel when needed, with little cost or risk for themselves • Training Hamas members and sending them back to Gaza/West Bank creates additional fighting fronts against Israel = Strategic and tactical benefits • Pro-Palestinian rhetoric helps Hezbollah gain popularity and distract from its own domestic shortcomings
For Both	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Israel as a common enemy, enabling both sides to overcome their ideological rift • Ability to undermine the peace process and Palestinian Authority 	

Manifestations of Cooperation

As previously mentioned, Israel's deportation of 415 Hamas members to Lebanon in 1992 brought the two groups closer together than they had been before, and provided them with ample opportunity to share knowledge and train together, despite their ideological differences.³⁴ The war between Hezbollah and Israel provided the Palestinians with a crucial model for fighting the common enemy, and the deportation strengthened the link between

³⁴ Horowitz and Potter, "Allying to Kill...", 7.

that war and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.³⁵ In Lebanon, Hamas learned more effective and deadly new tactics, specifically the weapon of suicide bombings, which Hezbollah had perfected during the 80's against the US and Israeli forces, among others, operating in Lebanon.³⁶ These attacks contributed greatly to the expulsion of foreign forces from Lebanon, and this was a precedent Hamas was willing to learn from and attempt to replicate. Both organizations agreed that Jihad operations were the only solution, and no compromises with Israel should be accepted.³⁷ The main objective therefore was to undermine the peace process and Palestinian Authority, as they were more moderate and less prone to using violence at the time.³⁸ Hamas took what it learnt in Lebanon and applied it back home against Israeli civilians and military, and the casualties per attack increased from around two to ten, on average.³⁹

After Israel's unilateral disengagement from Lebanon in May 2000, Hezbollah seemed to have achieved its main goal of driving Israel out of the country - but this did not mean that the battle could not continue elsewhere. Shortly after the eruption of violence and the Second Intifada in September 2000, Iran assigned Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's international operations commander and the mastermind of many of the deadliest attacks against western forces, to help Palestinian militant groups such as Hamas wage war against Israel. Hamas' most significant terrorist attack to date against Israel, the "Park Hotel" bombing on the eve of Passover in 2002 in which 30 Israelis were killed, was made possible due to Hezbollah's

³⁵ Luca Ricolfi, "Palestinians, 1981-2003", in Making Sense of Suicide Missions, ed. D. Gambetta (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 80-81, 86-87.

³⁷ Important to note, however, that unlike Hezbollah's unwavering and strict stance regarding Israel, Hamas is more pragmatic and accepts temporary "Hudnas" – using a term taken from the time of the Prophet to justify not fighting, Gleis and Berti, Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study, 189.

³⁸ This was an objective that Hezbollah openly supported, *Ibid.*, 91; Naim Qasem, Hizbullah: The Story from Within, 174.

³⁹ Horowitz and Potter, "Allying to Kill...", 7.

guidance regarding how to build extra potent bombs.⁴⁰ The wave of attacks against Israelis during these years included not only suicide bombings, but also other sophisticated tactics and weapons such as roadside bombs and mines that had previously only been used by Hezbollah in Lebanon, indicating Iran's and the Shiite organization's involvement.⁴¹ Nevertheless, this involvement was fairly covert and indirect, and Hezbollah made an effort to conceal its connection to attacks that it had clearly orchestrated. This can be seen in the case of the Matzuva attack in 2002, in which the organization trained and sent Palestinian assailants to cross the Lebanese-Israeli border, killing five Israelis and one soldier – but covering the trail leading back to them.⁴²

In order to provide the Palestinian terrorist organizations, including Hamas, with advanced weapons to improve their operational capabilities, Iran and Hezbollah made several attempts to smuggle weapons to Gaza via the sea – some successful and others less so. Weapon-carrying vessels such as the “*Santorini*”, “*Karin A*”, “*Abu-Hassan*” and “*Victoria*” were intercepted by Israel in the Mediterranean Sea en-route to Gaza, exposing the direct arming, funding and training provided by Iran and Hezbollah to Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups operating in Gaza.⁴³ The weapons on these boats included surface-to-air missiles which would pose a huge threat to Israeli jets, anti-ship missiles, anti-tank missiles, mortars, rockets, rifles and ammunition, explosives, instruction manuals and CDs – often in Farsi. The transfer of weapons via the sea is a common M.O. utilized by Iran, who has used the maritime route to transfer advanced weapons to Hezbollah, as evident through the

⁴⁰ Matthew A. Levitt, “Untangling the Terror Web: The Need for a Strategic Understanding of the Crossover Between International Terrorist Groups to Successfully Prosecute the War on Terror”, testimony before the US Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, October 22, 2003: <http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/testimony/306.pdf> , 5 [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁴¹ Ibid., 13.

⁴² “Hezbollah: Portrait of a Terrorist Organization”, 79-80.

⁴³ The direct link between Hezbollah and the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip was exposed in late 2008 when the Egyptian security services detained members of a Hezbollah network that operated in Egypt. The network was handled by Hezbollah's Unit 1800, which deals with the Palestinian issue in the countries bordering Israel, and provides the Palestinians with training, expertise and funding, *ibid.*, 74, 80-81 and Gleis and Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, 65-66.

interception of the “*Francop*” in 2009, which included 9,000 mortar bombs, 3,000 Katyusha rockets, 3,000 gun shells, 20,000 grenades and half of a million rounds of small ammunition.⁴⁴ The weapon smuggling continues today, with further attempts to deliver upgraded weapons to Hamas in Gaza taking place by sea, ground and underground via tunnels from Sinai.⁴⁵ In the recent IDF operation “Pillar of Defense” against Hamas in Gaza, the latter introduced long-range Fajr-5 rockets that were manufactured in Iran⁴⁶ – a major upgrade to the homemade shorter range Qassam rockets, adding Israeli cities such as Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to Hamas’ range.

The peak year of Hezbollah’s assistance to Palestinian terrorism was 2006, when there were 85 networks operating with Hezbollah’s assistance, which included guidance, funding, smuggling, training and transmitting technological know-how to Hamas and other Palestinian groups.⁴⁷ Hamas’ kidnapping of Gilad Shalit that same year emulated the model that Hezbollah had set in Lebanon, using tunnels and diversions in order to abduct soldiers patrolling the border.⁴⁸ Besides setting the example, secretly monitored communications between the two organizations revealed that Hezbollah leadership urged Hamas to hang tough in negotiations with Israel over Shalit’s return – just as they had in past abductions.⁴⁹ Hezbollah carried out its own kidnapping of two IDF soldiers three weeks later, thereby opening a second front against Israel ostensibly in support of Hamas.⁵⁰ While it is very likely that Hezbollah acted on its own accord, some observers believe that Iran instructed Hezbollah to launch its attack not only due to their support for Hamas, but also to divert international

⁴⁴ “List of Smuggling Attempts By Sea to Hamas, Hezbollah, Other Terrorist Organizations”, IDF Blog, July 19, 2011: <http://www.idfblog.com/2011/07/19/list-of-attempts-by-terrorist-organizations-to-smuggle-weapons-via-the-sea/> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁴⁵ “Hezbollah: Portrait of a Terrorist Organization”, 80-81.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2, 38, 73,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁸ Gleis and Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, 164.

⁴⁹ Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 133.

⁵⁰ “Lebanon: The Israel-Hamas-Hezbollah Conflict”, CRS Report for Congress, August 14, 2006, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33566.pdf>, CRS-6 [accessed: October 4, 2013].

attention from the impasse over Iran's own nuclear program – illustrating the calculated use of proxies by the state sponsor.⁵¹

During Operation “Cast Lead” in 2009 and Operation “Pillar of Defense” in 2012, any cooperation between Hezbollah and Hamas was subtle and indirect, but the IDF's operational challenge in the Gaza Strip bore a close resemblance to the familiar M.O. that Israeli forces had encountered in Lebanon in 2006. Hamas learned from Hezbollah's experience in Lebanon, as evident by its establishment of an underground system of networked bunkers that function as hideouts, command posts, weapons caches etc., and by also establishing “nature reserves” that conceal weapons and explosive booby traps.⁵² Another example of mimicking Hezbollah's tactics included Hamas' use of public facilities, mosques and hospitals to store weapons, and the firing of rockets from such public areas in order to use the surrounding people as human shields - making an IDF air force counter-attack more controversial.⁵³ This is a further example of Hamas' organizational learning from the experience of its ally.

In addition, a key product of the relationship between both groups during these operations was the looming threat of Hezbollah opening a second front in the north – a threat that Israel was very concerned over, and which necessitated the IDF to have large forces prepared on standby.⁵⁴ While Hezbollah's overt support during these operations in Gaza was limited to pro-Palestinian speeches and propaganda, alongside a continuous line of communication

⁵¹ Ibid., CRS-7.

⁵² Boaz Ganor, “Israel and Hamas: Is War Imminent?”, Foreign Policy Research Institute (Winter 2013): 3.

⁵³ Benjamin S. Lambeth, “Israel's War in Gaza: A Paradigm of Effective Military Learning and Adaptation”, *International Security* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 103.

⁵⁴ Jason Koutsoukis, “Israel Wary of Second Front against Hezbollah”, The Sydney Morning Herald, January 6, 2009: <http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/israel-wary-of-second-front-against-hezbollah/2009/01/05/1231003936975.html> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

between the two groups,⁵⁵ the possibility of military intervention continued to loom and will likely continue to trouble Israeli leadership in any future round of fighting with Hamas.

Finally, both Hamas and Hezbollah openly celebrated the fall of Mubarak in Egypt and his replacement by the Muslim Brotherhood, as this shifted the balance of power in the region away from the West and towards the rule of Islam - regardless of the fact that it was Sunni Islam that won out.⁵⁶ Hezbollah still preferred this to the U.S.-allied Egypt under Mubarak, even though the rekindled relationship between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood slowly pulled Hamas away from Iran, and therefore put a dent in the Hamas-Hezbollah relationship for a while.

Testing the Relationship – The Turmoil in Egypt and Syria

The previous section detailed some of the key examples of cooperation between both groups, but we cannot assess the strength of this alliance without examining the two recent events that tested the relationship more than ever before: The change of leadership in Egypt and the ongoing civil war in Syria. With regards to Egypt, as touched upon earlier, the fall of Mubarak and his replacement with the Muslim Brotherhood came as a welcome development by both groups, but began to test the relationship as it became evident that Iran was no longer needed by Hamas as a state sponsor, or at least not to the same degree it was in the past. Now that Hamas had the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, it was much more comfortable relying on them given Hamas' own roots in the Brotherhood and common Sunni ideology.

The relationship was tested even further following the escalation of violence in the Syrian civil war. Until the breakout of fighting, it was the regional “resistance” against U.S. and

⁵⁵ Gleis and Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, 86-87.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 193.

Israeli interests in the region that could be viewed as the driving force behind the alliance of countries such as Iran and Syria, and groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.⁵⁷ This “Axis of Resistance”, however, is being challenged by the current situation in Syria. Hamas’ relations with Hezbollah and Iran have deteriorated in the wake of the Syrian uprising, given the fact that while Hezbollah actively fights alongside Assad’s forces to help maintain his control,⁵⁸ Hamas has been training and supporting some of the Sunni rebels who are fighting against them.⁵⁹ This is partially due to the fact that a key member of the Syrian opposition is the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a sister organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine – Hamas. Assisting Assad would have meant acting against the parent organization – the Muslim Brotherhood.⁶⁰ Hamas therefore decided to shut down its headquarters in Damascus due to the fighting, and to leave Syria. This infuriated Iran who saw this as a betrayal, and it drastically scaled back its support for the Palestinian organization. Hezbollah too voiced its fierce disapproval of the move.⁶¹ While this criticism was made tolerable due to Hamas’ newfound sponsors in Egypt, their situation worsened following the fall of President Mohammed Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood government. The coup in Egypt left Hamas starved for funds, and the group was anxious to revitalize its old alliances with Iran and Hezbollah and restore its financial situation.⁶²

While the ongoing fighting in Syria can potentially cast doubt on future cooperation, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has nevertheless vowed that his organization will

⁵⁷ Hussein, “Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal...”, 812.

⁵⁸ “Hezbollah-Backed Lebanese Shiites Fight in Syria”, Associated Press, April 14, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/hezbollah-backed-lebanese-shiites-fight-syria-195826789.html> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁵⁹ “Hamas training Syrian rebels in Damascus”, YNET, April 5, 2013, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4364337,00.html> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁶⁰ Ganor, “Israel and Hamas: Is War Imminent?”, 9.

⁶¹ Nidal al-Mughrabi, “Cornered Hamas Looks Back at Iran, Hezbollah”, Reuters, August 20, 2013: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/20/us-palestinians-hamas-iran-idUSBRE97J0DO20130820> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁶² Ibid.

continue to support Hamas despite the rift in Syria.⁶³ At the same time, however, Nasrallah also stressed his belief that Syria is the “*backbone of the resistance*”, and that if Assad falls “*Palestine will be lost, the resistance will be lost, and Gaza, the West Bank and holy Jerusalem will be lost.*”⁶⁴ Given statements like these and Hezbollah’s increased military involvement in Syria, it is clear that if Hamas wants to get back into the “Axis of Resistance”, it will have to be pragmatic and “look the other way” when it comes to the fighting in Syria. Recent developments seem to indicate that this is indeed the direction: Iran has resumed its financial backing of Hamas,⁶⁵ and senior members of both Hamas and Hezbollah have announced that they have formed a stronger pact with Iran to watch out for one another’s interests in the Middle East.⁶⁶

Discussion and Future Outlook

The cooperation between Hezbollah and Hamas over the years has mostly overcome ideological differences and geographical distances, having clearly endured and serving the interests of both parties. Hamas became more skilled and armed than they had been previously, gaining proficiency in explosives and more advanced guerilla warfare tactics, while Hezbollah had a partner in its battle with Israel, one that could access the “inside” of the country and provide a second front from the south or even the West Bank. Supporting Hamas and the Palestinian struggle was a popular move for Hezbollah, to be sure, leading to

⁶³ “Hezbollah leader vows support for Hamas despite Syria rift”, AFP, November 19, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/ct6stkh> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁶⁴ “Hezbollah Involvement in the Syrian Civil War”, 6.

⁶⁵ Elhanan Miller, “Iran Reportedly Resumes Backing of Hamas”, The Times of Israel, September 23, 2013: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-reportedly-resumes-backing-of-hamas/> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁶⁶ Cheryl K. Chumley, “Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran agree to ‘Axis of Resistance’”, The Washington Times, September 23, 2013: <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/sep/23/hamas-hezbollah-iran-agree-axis-resistance/> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

an explosion of pro-Hezbollah sentiment in the West Bank and Gaza.⁶⁷ Hezbollah provided a successful model for Hamas to emulate, that of a military/political/social hybrid organization, and Hamas' evolution into a mainstream political and social welfare player while still resorting to terrorist tactics bears great resemblance to its Lebanese mentor.⁶⁸

Looking back at the theoretical framework, which was laid out at the beginning of this article, there is no doubt that the aggregation of resources and the sharing of information and expertise benefitted both groups, as did the relative geographic proximity between the two. The backing of a common state-sponsor, as pointed out by Bapat and Bond, was essential not only helping both groups survive, but possibly also in holding the alliance together – especially during times of turmoil and uncertainty. When looking at Moghadam's distinction between different types of cooperation, the history of the Hamas-Hezbollah relationship points towards this being a tactical alliance of convenience, as opposed to the more strategic relationship between Iran and Hezbollah. While this places the Hamas-Hezbollah partnership on the middle to lower end of the cooperation spectrum, it is still meaningful and continues to withstand many challenges along the way. It is, however, important to stress that in no way should the above analysis lead to the conclusion that these two groups are closer than they actually are – there is no threat that Hezbollah and Hamas will be merging anytime soon. This paper is simply meant to illustrate the peculiar marriage of convenience between the two groups, and the reasons that enabled it. Pragmatism has enabled them to get closer than most thought possible, but at the end of the day one group is Sunni, and the other Shia – and this will continue to be a factor that challenges this coupling.

Regarding the future outlook for this relationship, only time will tell for sure if the alliance can overcome all of the hurdles it faces. It is possible that the local fighting in Syria will spill

⁶⁷ Hussein, "Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal...", 809.

⁶⁸ Gleis and Berti, Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study, 3-4.

over into neighboring countries, and morph into a larger battle between Sunnis and Shiites - as has also been the case in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein.⁶⁹ If this happens, it will be difficult for either group to ignore its ideological and religious allegiances. Nevertheless, analysts maintain that both sides (along with Iran) still have much in common with regards to their joint military activity against Israel, and it seems like Hezbollah will not be abandoning its support for the Palestinian struggle in the near future - especially given the popularity it continues to receive both domestically and globally as a vocal fighter for the Palestinian cause. Since all parties involved still have much to gain from their cooperation, at least for the time being, eulogizing the Hamas-Hezbollah alliance as well as the greater “Axis of Resistance” might yet be premature.⁷⁰

Policy Recommendations

The above analysis indicates that the alliance between Hezbollah and Hamas has overcome many challenges throughout the years, and that it nevertheless remains intact today. The following policy recommendations constitute important steps that Israel and the international community should take in order to limit some of the aforementioned threats:

- **The current rift in Syria is an important opportunity to drive a wedge between the two organizations and to threaten their longstanding alliance.** While this may very well happen on its own without the need for external help given the increase in sectarian fighting in the region, along with the massacring of Syrians at the hands of Hezbollah and the Iran-backed Assad regime, it would be smart to emphasize the substantial ideological chasm and differing worldviews that can hardly be ignored. As

⁶⁹ Nate Rawlings, “Iraq’s Months of Sectarian Violence May lead to a Civil War”, Time, October 1, 2013: <http://world.time.com/2013/10/01/iraqs-months-of-sectarian-violence-threaten-to-trigger-a-civil-war/> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁷⁰ “Hezbollah: Portrait of a Terrorist Organization”, 75.

the battle between Sunnis and Shiites intensifies, unnatural alliances between groups of opposing sects like that of Hezbollah and Hamas will be much more difficult to maintain. Furthermore, Hamas' leadership has always been suspicious of getting too close to Iran, partially due to the ideological differences and also because Hamas prefers to maintain its own freedom of action.⁷¹ Driving a wedge between the players involved would be a positive step towards limiting Iran's control in the region, and keeping Hamas and Hezbollah from getting closer to one another.

- **The United States must lead the way in pressuring the international community, particularly the European Union, not to allow hybrid organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah to continue to operate – there should be no distinction between their political and military activities.** The EU recently blacklisted Hezbollah's military wing by adding it to the list of terrorist organizations,⁷² but this is not enough – it is important to understand that one cannot make such a convenient distinction.⁷³ Even Hezbollah's own spokespeople publicly claim that its military and political wings are one and the same - so the international community must treat them as such.⁷⁴ The EU has already included both Hamas' political and military wings in its designation of the organization,⁷⁵ and it is important that Hezbollah be treated in the same manner without any distinctions. Doing so would severely undermine the group's legitimacy, and it would impose strict obstacles on its funding – making it more difficult for the organization to operate.

⁷¹ Ganor, "Israel and Hamas: Is War Imminent?", 9-10.

⁷² James Kanter and Jodi Rudoren, "European Union Adds Military Wing of Hezbollah to List of Terrorist Organizations", The New York Times, July 22, 2013: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/23/world/middleeast/european-union-adds-hezbollah-wing-to-terror-list.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁷³ The EU is concerned that designating Hezbollah's political wing would negatively affect their relationship with Lebanon, given the fact that Hezbollah is a key player in the Lebanese Parliament.

⁷⁴ "Hezbollah Spokesman: 'Everyone Knows Hezbollah's Political and Military Wings Are the Same', The Tower, July 26, 2013: <http://www.thetower.org/hezbollah-spokesman-everyone-knows-hezbollahs-political-and-military-wings-are-the-same/> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁷⁵ "EU Blacklists Hamas Political Wing", BBC, September 11, 2003: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3100518.stm [accessed: October 4, 2013].

- **Additional international efforts are needed to limit the flow of weapons by land and sea between Lebanon/Iran and Gaza.** Israel’s naval blockade of the Gaza strip has proven successful in limiting the delivery of weapons from Iran and Hezbollah by sea, and the joint Israeli-Egyptian security coordination has limited the successful smuggling of weapons by ground, usually via tunnels from Sinai.⁷⁶ The international community must support these measures of self-defense taken by both Israel and Egypt, aimed at removing the danger posed by deadly and “game changing” weapons like anti-aircraft missiles and long range rockets/missiles that are used against innocent civilians. Without these imperative measures, Hezbollah and Iran will continue arming Hamas and other terror groups in Gaza. Furthermore, states must take responsibility for the cargo carried on ships sailing under their flags, to ensure that they are not being used for the illicit movement of weapons. The aforementioned 2009 case of the “*Francop*” is a good example, in which a German owned vessel was used to attempt to smuggle hundreds of tons of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah.⁷⁷ If states become more aware of this phenomenon, they can work to combat it.
- **Iran, the state sponsor behind these organizations and true leader of the anti-western “Axis of Resistance”, must be held accountable for its ongoing support for terrorism.** Punishing each organization for its own acts of terror is not enough. As long as the financial, military and ideological support from Iran continues, it will be impossible to remove these threats completely. Designating Hezbollah and Hamas as illegal terrorist entities is an important and most welcome step, but in order for it to truly be effective, tougher economic and military sanctions need to be placed on Iran.

While the current sanctions that have been issued have predominantly been attributed

⁷⁶ Yasmine Saleh and Tom Perry, “Egypt Secures Gaza Border, Presses Sinai Campaign”, Reuters, September 15, 2013: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/15/us-egypt-sinai-idUSBRE98E0AP20130915> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

⁷⁷ “List of Smuggling Attempts By Sea...”, <http://www.idfblog.com/2011/07/19/list-of-attempts-by-terrorist-organizations-to-smuggle-weapons-via-the-sea/> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

to stopping the country's nuclear program,⁷⁸ they are also necessary as a punishment for Iran's continued support for terrorism, and must not be relaxed until this support comes to an end. The only way to bring down the "Axis of Resistance" is to make Iran realize that the cost of its continued support for groups like Hezbollah and Hamas is simply too much for it to bear.

⁷⁸ Toni Johnson and Robert McMahon, "The Lengthening List of Iran Sanctions", Council on Foreign Relations, June 6, 2013: <http://www.cfr.org/iran/lengthening-list-iran-sanctions/p20258> [accessed: October 4, 2013].

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