

UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

CASE STUDY COMPARISON: HEZBOLLAH AND THE FARC

SS474: TERRORISM

SECTION Z1

DR FOREST

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WEST POINT, NEW YORK

29 FEBRUARY 2008

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SIGNATURE

Hezbollah in Lebanon and the FARC in Colombia are two of the most well-known terrorist groups in the world. Each group has its own idiosyncrasies and poses a unique security threat to the United States. The differences and similarities between these two groups are best understood by examining the ideologies, capabilities, areas of operations, and potential targets for each group.

The ideologies of the two groups are not as different as they may appear at first. On the surface Hezbollah is a radical Islamist movement and the FARC is a Marxist-Leninist movement.<sup>1</sup> Since Marxism-Leninism is strongly associated with atheism, it seems that these groups could not be more different. However, the ideologies of the two groups have been made closer to each other by their similar enemies and the practical realities associated with conducting an irregular war.

One of the realities of conducting an irregular war is that groups like the FARC sometimes need to made ideological accommodations in order to gain as much support as possible. Early militant groups that gave rise to the FARC were essentially composed of the opponents of the Colombian Conservative Party, which included not only communists, but also splinter groups from the liberal party.<sup>2</sup> The flexibility of the FARC's ideology is contrasted with the less flexible Marxist ideology of the ELN.<sup>3</sup> While the ELN rejected drug trafficking as criminal, the FARC recognized the practical need for income and made some ideological concessions that allowed drug trafficking.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Román D. Ortiz, "Renew to Last: Innovation and Strategy of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)," in *Teaching Terror*, edited by James J.F. Forest (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> Ortiz, 209.

<sup>3</sup> Ortiz, 209.

<sup>4</sup> Ortiz, 209.

Similarly, Hezbollah is a Shi'a organization, but cannot emphasize this aspect of its ideology too much because it needs the continuing support of Syria, a Sunni nation.<sup>5</sup>

Another area where Hezbollah and the FARC are ideologically similar is in their anti-imperialist emphasis. Key tenets of Hezbollah's ideology include the belief that Israel doesn't have the right to exist and that "Hizbu'llah is engaged in a 'civilizational' struggle with the West" as Saad-Ghorayeb describes it.<sup>6</sup> Whereas anti-imperialism is not necessarily inherent in Islamic extremism, the anti-imperialist doctrine that the FARC espouses is an integral part of communism.

Hezbollah and the FARC both have military capabilities far beyond what the typical terrorist or insurgent group possesses. Most terrorist or insurgent groups are dependent on foreign supplies of weapons. The FARC is one of the few groups that is so determined to be self-sufficient that they manufacture many of their own weapons. Examples of weapons that the FARC has managed to produce on its own include 80mm and 120mm mortars and explosives for land mines.<sup>7</sup> Militarily, Hezbollah is usually associated with irregular operations such as suicide bombings, but the group has significant arsenals of conventional weapons as well. Since the 2000 withdrawal of Israel from southern Lebanon, Hezbollah has invested considerable resources in expanding its arsenal to include unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), advanced surface-to-air missiles, and over 12,000 surface-to-surface missiles.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Richard M. Wrona, Jr., "Lebanon, Hizbollah, and the Patrons of Terrorism," in *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century* (Vol. 3), edited by James J.F. Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), pp. 464.

<sup>6</sup> Wrona, 460.

<sup>7</sup> Ortiz, 211.

<sup>8</sup> Wrona, 466.

In many ways, Hezbollah and the FARC operate in similar environments. First, they both operate in states with a weak central government, which has allowed them to expand. Early in the history of the FARC, it received little attention from the Colombian government because the central government had so many other security concerns such as the Foquist National Liberation Army, the Maoist People's Liberation Army, and various emerging drug cartels and paramilitary groups. Similarly, the Lebanese central government was too distracted and fragmented early in Hezbollah's history to devote much attention to the emerging group. Lebanon has 18 recognized religious sects and has a government formed by the National Pact of 1943, which gives most of the power to the Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims, but largely disenfranchises Shi'a Muslims.<sup>9</sup> This is a recipe for a weak central government in a region where religion and politics are so closely tied together. This weakness of the central government allowed Hezbollah to become strong.

One major difference in the area of operations between Hezbollah and the FARC is that the FARC operates in an environment that is more hostile to it than Hezbollah. The FARC has been losing the sympathy of the Colombian population mostly because of its inability to adapt its ideology to the changing social environment. The country has become increasingly democratic and urban while the FARC has maintained its agrarian and anti-imperialist message.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Hezbollah has been on the cutting edge of social change in Lebanon and has the sympathy of much of the population, especially among Shi'a Muslims. Hezbollah entered into the electoral process in 1992

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<sup>9</sup> Wrona, 451-451.

<sup>10</sup> Ortiz, 221.

and won 14 seats in the Lebanese parliament in 2005.<sup>11</sup> Despite the fact that Hezbollah is not a state actor, it provides social services that are normally associated with a state to large segments of the Lebanese population, including sewage and water services, satellite television, and legal services.<sup>12</sup> Hezbollah is not only popular in Lebanon, but across the Middle East primarily because it is the only organization, state or non-state, that has been able to defeat Israel.<sup>13</sup>

The FARC and Hezbollah also have similar targets of their attacks. Both groups tend to attack military and government targets and not civilians, although both groups can tolerate occasional civilian casualties. Hezbollah's primary target is the Israeli military. Hezbollah attacks against Israel include both conventional operations such as rocket or light infantry attacks and unconventional operations such as kidnappings and financial support to Palestinian groups.<sup>14</sup> Although Hezbollah's attacks occur primarily in southern Lebanon and northern Israel, they have conducted attacks in other parts of the world before. In 1992 and 1994, Hezbollah conducted successful attacks against Jewish targets in Argentina, for example.<sup>15</sup> The FARC also targets the Colombian government with its violent attacks although it also conducts kidnappings to raise funds. The group committed over 38 percent of the extortive kidnappings that occurred in Colombia in 2002.<sup>16</sup> The FARC follows the principles of the "Dau Trang", the Vietnamese version of the Maoist People's War, which is aimed at the destruction of the state and taking

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<sup>11</sup> Wrona, 465.

<sup>12</sup> Wrona, 465.

<sup>13</sup> Wrona, 465.

<sup>14</sup> Wrona, 467.

<sup>15</sup> Wrona, 468.

<sup>16</sup> Ortiz, 216.

power.<sup>17</sup> This ideology is not conducive to violent attacks on civilians, so FARC attacks are mostly limited to the government and military.

These groups are very similar in many ways, but the United States should be more concerned with Hezbollah than the FARC. There are several reasons for this. First, the FARC appears to be starting to become obsolete and ineffective in the eyes of many people whereas Hezbollah is young, vibrant, and actively growing. Second, the FARC follows a Communist ideology that is becoming discredited with the fall of the Soviet Union, capitalistic reforms in Communist China, and Castro stepping down in Cuba. On the other hand, Hezbollah is associated with radical Islam, which is on the rise across the world. Third, the FARC is not closely associated with any group or state that is a direct threat to the United States right now. However, Hezbollah was put in place by Iran, who is currently a direct threat to American interests, and Iran has had a close relationship with Hezbollah from the beginning.<sup>18</sup> Fourth, Hezbollah employs tactics such as suicide bombing<sup>19</sup> that America's enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan currently use. If Hezbollah makes any kind of tactical innovations, it would be natural for America's enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan to follow suit. If the FARC makes tactical innovations, America's direct enemies are more likely to dismiss them as irrelevant to their fight. Both terrorist organizations are a threat to the United States, but the FARC's threat is much more indirect than Hezbollah's.

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<sup>17</sup> Ortiz, 209-210.

<sup>18</sup> Wrona, 461.

<sup>19</sup> Wrona, 466.