

## Hezbollah is not the IRA

Contributed by Tony Badran  
Monday, 15 February 2010

Islamist groups have invited a whole set of analogies purportedly aimed at better explaining them and how best to deal with them. One such analogy that has gained currency in recent years is the oft-encountered comparison between Islamist groups and the Irish Republican Army.

The point of the comparison is to show that as the IRA was purportedly co-opted through dialogue, the same method can be applied to other armed organizations as well. Hence, the argument runs, only such a peaceful process, and not military coercion, will lead to any given group's decision to abandon violence, and ultimately to disarm and integrate into democratic politics. Of course, forsaking violence is not a prerequisite for dialogue, and engagement is further facilitated by a nifty conceit distinguishing a group's "military wing" from its ostensibly more moderate or pragmatic "political wing." Indeed, the British are currently pursuing this policy with Hezbollah — and going nowhere.

The argument has just been trotted out again in a rather fantastical and factually handicapped piece by Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson on the Foreign Affairs website.

The two authors get off to a sound start, noting a major difference between the IRA and Hezbollah, namely the organic ties between the Party of God and Iran, which have no parallel in the IRA. However, when they elide that inconvenient fact and nonetheless claim that "the similarities between the two cases are no less striking than the differences," their argument goes off the tracks.

One "similarity," they contend, is that both Hezbollah and the IRA have "political wings." But this is misleading, not least of all because Hezbollah rejects and ridicules the proposition that it has a "political wing" separate from a "military" one.

Even if everyone knew that the IRA and its political wing, Sinn Fein, were separate only in name, Sinn Fein's leaders still tried to deny any organizational links or knowledge of IRA operations. But that's not how Hezbollah works. For instance, in an interview with the Los Angeles Times last spring, Hezbollah's deputy secretary general, Naim Qassem, dismissed the supposed dichotomy outright. "All political, social and jihad work is tied to the decisions of this leadership," he said. "The same leadership that directs the parliamentary and government work also leads jihad actions."

In other words, far from being ready to "shift more decisively to the political realm," as Simon and Stevenson contend, Hezbollah sees involvement in politics as serving its broader, regional, agenda: "resistance."

It's bad enough to misunderstand Hezbollah, but to make the case that engagement in peaceful dialogue is what leads to moderation and disarmament is to distort the historical record regarding the IRA as well. The British did not bring the IRA "in from the cold" through peaceful talks with its "political wing." Rather they forced them to the table after infiltrating their ranks and cultivating informers even in the top echelons of the movement. Information from these informers was secretly passed to Loyalist paramilitary forces who used it to target IRA members extra-judicially.

In the end, the IRA was cornered, unable to force a British withdrawal, and, worse, unable to even protect its community from Loyalist gangs. It was not the Brits but the IRA that initiated talks when its armed struggle had reached a stalemate.

This is hardly where Hezbollah sees itself today, neither ideologically nor operationally. Instead of finding itself cornered by its local rivals, Hezbollah has used its weapons to extract powerful political concessions, neutralize the unfavorable result of democratic elections, and impose its priorities on its adversaries and the Lebanese government.

Why is Simon and Stevenson's article riddled with so many errors and misconceptions? Because they assume an affirmative response to a key question that they never bother tackling: Does Hezbollah want to disarm? Without addressing this question convincingly, further misconceptions are inevitable, like the authors' proposition, unsupported by any evidence, that Hezbollah is trying to distance itself from Iran, whose Ruling Jurist (Wali al-Faqih), as Hezbollah itself declares, has final say over all important decisions. The proper answer of course is that Hezbollah does not want to disarm since it makes no sense for it to do so, neither from a pragmatic perspective nor an ideological one.

The issue here is not sloppiness, but a chronic ailment afflicting Western writing on the Middle East, as what appears to be analysis is often something else entirely. Simon (who was recently in Lebanon at the invitation of the New Opinion Group) and Stevenson are not writing about Hezbollah or Lebanon, but Washington.

In 2003 the two co-wrote an essay arguing that the example of Northern Ireland was "a strong argument" against adopting a "lenient" policy with Hamas, so why do they now argue that such treatment will work with Hezbollah? Perhaps it is because there are figures in the Obama administration who are sympathetic to a policy of engagement with Hezbollah, like the NSC staff's counterterrorism czar, John Brennan, who has publically implied an acceptance of the "political vs. military wing" dichotomy in Hezbollah, claiming that the "political wing" allegedly denounces the violence of the "military."

Thankfully, when it comes to Hezbollah, as evident from the State Department's quick rejection of Brennan's views, there is more sobriety in Washington than in the poor Foreign Affairs article, or in the British Foreign Office for that matter.

Tony Badran is a research fellow with the Center for Terrorism Research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.