An important plank in any organization that uses military force to meet its needs is intelligence, an essential infrastructure for the fulfillment of its operations. Hizbullah and Hamas are the two most prominent organizations that have been implementing an ongoing system of terror and guerrilla against the State of Israel for the advancement of their ideological and political goals in recent decades. Throughout their years of confrontation with Israel, these organizations have been evolving steadily and the nature of their warfare against Israel has been changing as well. Their intelligence activity has developed commensurably, both in gathering operations and the resources used to perform them and in the nature of the research, analysis, and use of the information collected. Concurrently, since their inception the organizations have been emphasizing counterintelligence for the purposes of preventing Israel from penetrating its ranks, maintaining their secrecy, and thwarting attacks on their human and other assets.

Visual and geographic information-gathering is the handiest way for Hizbullah and Hamas, since their inception, to collect operational intelligence (OPINT) as a basis for attacks against Israel. Prime among these methods are observations that allow the organizations to identify a suitable place for an operation and to detect the target’s pattern of activity. During the 1990s, Hizbullah developed an array that carried out observations along the entire Security Zone, mapped the activities of IDF and SLA (South Lebanon Army) forces, and studied their characteristics. After the IDF withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000, Hizbullah solidified its observation array along the Israel-Lebanon border, equipping itself with thermal devices including long-range ones. This array was also active in the course of the Second Lebanon War (summer 2006), helping the organization to attack IDF forces that were operating in Southern Lebanon. After the war, Hizbullah was forced to desist from overt operations along the border. Consequently, it developed ways of carrying out seemingly innocuous camouflaged observations against Israel, using ostensible shepherds and journalists and operating from sites of environmental-protection organizations.

In the course of the first and second intifadas and during the interval between them, Hamas’ gathering of visual intelligence (VISINT) was tactical in nature and served as a basis for terror attacks on Israeli civilians and security forces. Ahead of Israel’s disengagement from the Gaza Strip (summer 2005), Hamas began to set up an institutional array of field observations along the fence (the “mourabitoun”) for early-warning purposes. Subsequently, it also installed a special-purpose observation system that gathered systematic information for use in profiling the activity of IDF forces in the Gaza perimeter area.

Both organizations even developed arrays of unmanned aerial vehicles for intelligence-gathering, with Iranian assistance—Hizbullah from the early “aughts” and Hamas several years later. Both organizations carried out a number of UAV sorties in the direction of Israel territory, including some in which the craft were intercepted. While Hizbullah deployed its UAVs in warfare that it conducted in Syria as part of its assistance to Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war, Hamas has not amassed meaningful operational experience in their use. Notably, both organizations consider the use of these craft, beyond their potential contribution to intelligence, an important achievement in the realm of consciousness.

In regard to the collection of HUMINT, the population from which Hizbullah and Hamas chose most of their sources over the years is that of Israel’s minorities. This traces to their ability to sense motivation to collaborate on the basis of ideological identification and to their potential ability to make contact and establish communication, given visits by members of these minorities to Muslim countries among others, e.g., while carrying out the hajj. During the 1990s in the main, Hizbullah also operated elements within the Security Zone, including some from the ranks of the SLA. After the IDF withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, a “drugs for intelligence” channel developed steadily and with growing intensity. Here, Hizbullah recruited Israel residents, including some in IDF service whose duties gave them access to valuable information, and traded drugs across the Lebanese border for intelligence about sensitive sites in Israel and even information associated with the IDF. After the Second Lebanon War, this activity continued on a large scale and was extended to the identification of targets deep in Israel territory and gathering of information about important Israelis such as the Chief of General Staff at the time, Gabi Ashkenazi. Hamas began to operate human assets at the very beginning of its activity, largely in eastern Jerusalem and for tactical purposes. As its activity evolved, it began to recruit Israel residents and ask them to gather information about air-defense systems, defense sites, and so on.

It is evident that one of the principal goals of both organizations’ quotidian operations in the 2000s was to expand their pool of objectives and targets by amassing a collection of sites in Israeli territory. Over the years, too, both organizations carried out operations in which they developed double agents, using flushed-out collaborators with Israel to gather information about Israel, pass on tendentious information, and attack Israeli security forces and defeat their operations. As social networks developed, both organizations used these platforms, too, to locate, recruit, and operate resources, sometimes behind false identities.

Open-source information gathering has been an important element in the intelligence activity of Hizbullah and Hamas over the years. The fact that Israeli is a democracy where relatively free media concern themselves intensively with defense matters has given these organizations access to copious high-quality information at various levels of intelligence. During the 1990s, Hizbullah used open-source information to study the Israeli discourse about the legitimacy of the IDF’s continued presence in the Security Zone, relations between the IDF and the SLA, and the effect of its own operations on the IDF and Israel. Farther on, the organization used overt gathering to learn about Israel’s weaponry, the structure and units of the IDF, and even, in the course of the Second Lebanon War, the expected course of the battle, all due to Israel’s permissive media policy during the war. Hamas has also obtained voluminous information from open sources. In its early going, it learned from publicly available sources and judicial proceedings about information divulged by its operatives while being interrogated and about Israel’s investigation methods. The Israeli media even helped the organization to learn from its operations and to improve its performance in anticipation of future attacks. After Hamas institutionalized its military wing and took over the Gaza Strip (2007), its intelligence-gathering from open sources became more systematic and included centralization and regular analysis of the information, with the media as almost the only source from which it could assess the probability of large-scale Israeli operations. This was to Hamas’ disadvantage; it even served Israel as a platform for deception operations that caused the organization to be taken by surprise at the beginning of Operation Cast Lead (December 2008) and facilitated the elimination of Ahmad al-Jaabari at the outset of Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012).

Hizbullah ventured into SIGINT activity in the second half of the 1990s, eavesdropping on IDF forces’ open tactical communications and managing to intercept overt UAV signals, as happened in the discovery of IDF Special Force 13 commandos in the Ansariya operation (September 1997). After the IDF withdrew from Lebanon, Hizbullah, with Iranian assistance, developed an extensive system that listened in on IDF forces’ tactical communication transmissions, transcribed the exchanges systematically, and put them to use. These operations continued during the Second Lebanon War. Then and afterward, Hizbullah even seemed to have acquired the ability to eavesdrop on cellular telephone communication. Hamas also conducted SIGINT activity in this century, at least including the interception of overt UAV signals, eavesdropping on tactical communication, and perhaps limited-scale interception of cellphone signals. Notably, both organizations rely on members who can read and understand Hebrew at a high level to carry out open-source SIGINT.

The second decade of this century saw the onset of cyber activity by both Hizbullah and Hamas. Hizbullah cyber operatives have been extensively active in cyberspace, including using homegrown invasive malware. Thus they managed to breach servers and, through them, carefully selected users, for several years until information-security firms discovered what was afoot. In addition, Hizbullah set up an array of fake persons on social networks, through whom it establish relations with elements in Israel on the basis of cover stories that induced them to download invasive malware to their computers or cellphones. Hamas has also been extensively active in cyberspace in the past decade. A Hamas infrastructure evidently began to operate back in 2012, carrying out false-identity attacks on the email addresses of various elements in the Middle East, including some in Israel, for the purpose of luring the users into downloading the organization’s malware. Concurrently, Hamas developed a ramified network of fake members of social networks, most of them disguised as women who develop virtual relationships with men and cause them to download the malware onto their instruments. Some of the organizations’ malware is homegrown; the rest is purchased ready-made in the civilian market. Once installed, it establishes effective control over the attacked instrument and instructs it to carry out a range of operations. It also intercepts users’ content: contact persons, correspondence, visits to websites, keystrokes, and so on.

In addition to intelligence operations that seek information about Israel, Hizbullah and Hamas act to counter Israeli intelligence efforts to penetrate their ranks. To defeat Israel’s daily information-gathering activity, both organizations make maximum efforts to screen those wishing to join them. Here, the extent of devotion to Islam and identification with the organization’s ideology figures meaningfully in assessing candidates’ reliability. The organizations also act indefatigably to detect and trap collaborators with Israel, both within their ranks and amid the society in which they operate. Suspects are interrogated and subjected to violence including injury and, at times, murder. Furthermore, both organizations apply internal compartmentalization so that even if an operative is arrested or betrays the organization, he or she will have been exposed only to the minimum of information, qualitatively and quantitatively, that is needed for his or her duties. To keep Israel’s SIGINT activity in check, the organizations have, from their very outset, tried to avoid the use of advanced communication methods and to prefer primitive ones. They also use codes, both in telephone communication and in correspondence. To keep their communication traffic secure, they have developed an internal communication system, separate from that of the state, over the years.

To defeat Israel’s VISINT efforts, Hamas and Hizbullah try to conceal their doings to the greatest extent possible. They mask their activities in various ways, focusing on sites that are camouflaged or assimilated into the civilian surroundings. An important stratum of this concealment effort is the use of subterranean space. Each organization has developed an underground system that it uses, among other purposes, to safely launch rockets and store munitions, manage warfare as IDF forces enter, and cross the perimeter fence to attack Israel on Israeli territory. Notably, even when they deal with open-source media publications, there is an awareness, both in Hamas and in Hizbullah, of the need to impose censorship and hide some characteristics of their activity. This is evident both when outside media cover the organizations and in their own media releases.

From a comprehensive overview, one may say that the organizations have been successful in hiding their activities from Israeli eyes in many cases, as in Hizbullah’s ability to keep Israel from eliminating high-ranking officials in the course of the Second Lebanon War. In other cases, however, Israeli intelligence has been able to surmount the organizations’ counterintelligence efforts, as in the elimination of the senior Hizbullah operative Imad Mughniyeh in Syria; the exposure of, and the attack on, Hizbullah’s Fajr missile array at the beginning of the Second Lebanon War; and the targeted elimination of Hamas high-ups, including some who had spared no effort to avoid this fate, such as “the Engineer,” Yahya Ayyash. It is also noteworthy that the organizations always accompany their counterintelligence activity with information-gathering and learning about how Israeli intelligence works—by deploying aerial vehicles to gather information and by telephone eavesdropping—both to improve their conduct and their instructions to operatives and to enhance awareness among operatives and among those living in the territory from which they operate, by disseminating information and revealing the threat and its significance.

The intelligence array that Hizbullah and Hamas bring to bear against Israel, both to gather information and to counter Israeli efforts to gather information about them, is the infrastructure upon which organizations base their operations and their assessment of Israel for decision-making purposes. At the tactical level, one can see how the combination of successful intelligence and successful surreptitious conduct has had the practical outcome of high-quality operations against Israel, as in the organizations’ abduction attacks in 2006: Hamas’ capture of the soldier Gilad Schalit and its ability to hide him for years despite Israel’s efforts to find and rescue him in the tiny Gaza Strip, and Hizbullah’s capture of the IDF reservists Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev—the incident that triggered the Second Lebanon War. In addition, their intelligence-gathering efforts led to the creation of a bank of targets that they have been using for firing rockets at Israel. Even when the rockets used cannot be guided to any exact location, they are aimed at a strategic target and are intended to strike it just the same.

After Israel withdrew from Lebanon and, later on, from the Gaza Strip, Hizbullah and Hamas, each in its territory, began to engage in operational intelligence in anticipation of large-scale Israeli activity against them. They gathered information about weaponry in Israeli’s possession, IDF units, warfare doctrine, training and exercises including maneuvers, and so on, and assessed how the IDF would operate in a future incursion into Lebanon or the Gaza Strip. Special emphasis was placed in collecting information about Israel’s armor and tank capabilities as a basis for the use of their antitank instrumentalities. Furthermore, both organizations have entered the strategic level of intelligence-gathering, analyzing the Israeli political situation, social situation, and states of mind as a basis for assessing the possibility of Israel’s launching a large-scale military action against them. Here the organizations’ weakness in obtaining intimate information from the Israeli decision-making processes becomes evident. When they attempt to estimate Israel’s future moves, they base themselves mainly on open-source intelligence, analysis of past cases, and situation assessments based on logic. This has led to several blunders, such as the failure to appreciate the possibility that Israeli would respond as forcefully as it did after the two soldiers were abducted in July 2006, and the failure to uncover Israel’s plan to hit Hamas hard at the outset of Operation Cast Lead (December 2008) and to eliminate Ahmad al-Jaabari at the beginning of Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012).

From an overview perspective, one may see that, over the years, Hizbullah and Hamas have managed to develop intelligence capabilities commensurate with their needs and the resources available to them as nonstate players in order to offset Israel’s significant intelligence edge in their asymmetric standoff. The more the organizations evolved, rose to dominance and importance in their areas of operation, and institutionalized their organizational and military apparatuses—the more they tailored their intelligence activities to the changing needs. Both organizations continually analyze and study the Israeli side on the basis of the information in their possession and previous conception, realizing that information and knowledge are the keys to effective action against Israel. It is evident that the organizations have managed to exploit Israel’s condition as a state and a democracy, for example, in open-source collection activity that gives them access to valuable and inexpensive information, and by exploiting IDF’s nature as an army populated by young people who carry smartphones in order to obtain information through HUMINT activity or cyber attacks.

Nevertheless, there are several differences between the organizations in their intelligence activity. First, Hizbullah has more latitude than does Hamas, which is besieged in the Gaza Strip, and benefits much more from Iran’s tight and close support, which is much scantier in Hamas’ case. This has helped Hizbullah to attain more significant capabilities in some respects, such as SIGINT. Furthermore, Hizbullah’s much greater extent of activity in other countries, with the help of Iranian envoys stationed in those countries among other factors, has led to much more activity abroad by Hizbullah than by Hamas, both in intelligence gathering for attacks abroad and in putting HUMINT to work. Conversely, Hamas appears to be much more active in cyberspace, probably because it identifies this as an area of activity where it can attain a great deal at relatively low cost and with no dependency on freedom of action and geographical location.

The study shows that to carry out a full analysis of nonstate organizations generally and of terror organizations particularly, one must take meaningful account of the intelligence component of their activity. Intelligence, even if sometimes less institutionalized and organized than would be customary among state actors, is integrated into these organizations’ activity at the various levels: tactical, operative, and even strategic decision-making. These organizations have managed to record considerable intelligence achievements in accordance with their limited objectives as nonstate participants in an asymmetrical struggle. While this has not had the effect of blurring the gap between the sides in intelligence strength, the absence of loss in the struggle is tantamount to a victory of the weak party, as is always the case in confrontations of these kinds. These organizations’ intelligence achievements, both in gathering and revealing the state actor’s information and in countering the state actor’s efforts to discover their own, are a meaningful asset for them.