**The Road to the “Spider Web”**

**How Non-state Actors Form an Enemy Image of their State Adversary: Lessons from Hizballah's Perception of Israel during the Warfare in South Lebanon 1992-2000**

**Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation Grant Proposal Research Plan**

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**Introduction**

Since Biblical days, groups in conflict have generated images of their enemies. The well-known Biblical story of the twelve spies started with Moses sending leading Israelites to Canaan to collect intelligence about the land, such as "what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak."[[1]](#footnote-1) After forty days, the spies returned and presented their mission results. In addition to a few pertinent facts, ten of them shared with Moses and the Israelites their image of the future enemy. They claimed the following:

We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we... The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim; and to ourselves, we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."[[2]](#footnote-3)

The consequences of this enemy image were dramatic. The Israelites wailed and wept, complaining to Moses and Aaron that they would have been better off staying in Egypt than dying in the desert. This resulted in divine punishment – the whole generation would die without reaching the Holy Land.

The phenomenon of an enemy image having a significant impact is not limited to ancient days. Throughout human history, the enemy image has been a crucial component in every conflict and a determining factor in its development. For this reason, it is important to analyze the way enemy images are developed and shaped in order to understand the conflict and to find ways to bring it to a conclusion or, if that is impossible, to manage it effectively.

**“Enemy Image” – Theoretical Framework**

In every conflict, adversaries find themselves on opposite sides of the barricades, each one holding an image of the enemy that divides the world into "us" versus "them."[[3]](#footnote-4) An enemy image is not just an objective picture based on analytical thinking. It is the product of cultural, social, and subjective projections of the group and its members, gradually developed and assimilated through the socialization process. Given this fact, the development of the enemy image also serves some psychological needs. For example, groups and individuals tend to think that they become more human if their adversary is less so. Demonization of the other group strengthens the social identity and self-esteem of their own group.[[4]](#footnote-6)

The development of an enemy image also contributes to the formation of the in-group’s ethos. Throughout the years of conflict, societies develop an ethos based on the accumulated and continuous experiences of their members. Enemy image contributes to this process in two of the eight main themes of the ethos. The first is societal beliefs about the delegitimization of the opponent that justifies carrying out major violence against it. The second, related to the first, is societal beliefs about victimization. The in-group sees itself as a victim of unjustified violence and damage caused by the enemy, who is fighting for unjust goals and conducting immoral warfare. This very powerful theme is sometimes maintained for generations.[[5]](#footnote-7)

Another aspect of enemy image is cognitive. Enemy image is often shaped by misconceptions. For example, the distinction between the in-group and outgroup sometimes leads to a *double-mirror image* of “denigrating enemy intentions by portraying them as opposite to one’s own.”[[6]](#footnote-8) United States’ foreign policy rhetoric, for example, reveals assumptions that are based on the biased construction of its “enemy image,” such as “our differences are fundamental and existential,” “they do not value human life;” “their word cannot be trusted;” “negotiations are a waste of time;” “they are not realistic;” or “they only understand the language of force.” These often mistaken beliefs significantly impact the decision-making process.[[7]](#footnote-9)

The repercussions of this construction of the enemy image are severe. How a group perceives its adversary determines its interpretation of the latter’s actions and declarations. Analyzing the adversary's intentions and assessing its current situation and future steps depend on this interpretation. The decision-making process of political leaders is influenced by this estimation.[[8]](#footnote-10) Enemy image includes not only the perception of the adversary as a whole but also components of it as well. For example, leaders assess their enemy’s intentions based on the impressions they hold of their leadership.[[9]](#footnote-11)

When it comes to radical Islamist movements, the phenomenon of dividing the world into “us” versus “them” is even more significant. These movements tend to maintain a rigid dichotomy between the “us” group, which adheres to all their morals and values, and the enemy who is “pure” evil.[[10]](#footnote-12) Thus, in the last decades of the twentieth century, Jihadism declared a war, becoming gradually global, on the near enemy (pro-Western regimes even within the Arabic world) and the far enemy (the United States and its allies, with a main focus on Zionism).[[11]](#footnote-13)

In modern Shiite movements, this point of view is adjusted in accordance with Shiite beliefs. The Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 was followed by massive anti-Western rhetoric.[[12]](#footnote-14) Its enemy image, established by the Iranian spiritual leader Khomeini, represented the West as imperialist and colonialist, eager to exploit Iran’s wealth for its own good and to impose its hegemony over the Islamic world.[[13]](#footnote-15) Thus, the United States of America was called “the Great Satan,” a concept that appeals to both Islamic and Zoroastrian perceptions of pure evil whose mission is to destroy the earth.[[14]](#footnote-16) As will be demonstrated, this conception is a crucial *raison d'etre* for Hizballah's *jihad* and resistance efforts against Israel and the western world.[[15]](#footnote-17)

Finally, it is important to note that the enemy image formulated by non-state actors has special characteristics. The activity of non-state actors diverges from the state in many aspects, including visibility, structure, intentions, and strategy.[[16]](#footnote-18) The non-state actor is, inherently, the weaker side in its asymmetric warfare against a state, unable to compete on an equal footing with the stronger actor. Therefore, it tends to adopt strategies based on exploiting the weaknesses of the stronger actor in order to offset the latter’s ability to exert its power.[[17]](#footnote-19) In the words of Mao Tse-tung, renowned theorist of guerrilla warfare: “In guerrilla strategy, the enemy’s rear, flanks, and other vulnerable spots are his vital points, and there he must be harassed, attacked, dispersed, exhausted, and annihilated.”[[18]](#footnote-20) Consequently, its “enemy image”' is the basis of identifying what the adversary state's strengths and weaknesses are in both military and civilian matters.

**Hizballah's Struggle Against Israel During the 1990's – a Historical Overview**

Hizballah was founded in 1982 by Shiite clerics and warriors with support from Iran. The Iranian post-revolutionary regime, which had come to power only three years earlier, was seeking venues to spread its Islamist agenda to other areas of the Middle East. Lebanon provided a fertile ground for Iranian ideology because of its Shiite minority and its lack of centralized government. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon to fight the Palestinian militias who were using the country as a base for launching operations against Israel provided another perfect opportunity for the Iranians. Within three years, the disorganized activities of a few Hizballah cells became an organized, well-managed movement that garnered further support from the Syrian regime.[[19]](#footnote-21)

Although Israel partially withdrew from Lebanon in 1985, Israeli forces continued to control a wide area in South Lebanon known as “the security zone.” Simultaneously, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) allied with a local army, known as the South Lebanon Army (SLA). The SLA consisted of a heterogeneous collection of militiamen from a variety of Lebanese sects, such as Sunnis, Shiites, Maronite Christians, and Druze. Despite these efforts, Hizballah continued its kidnapping and terror attacks against Western and Israeli targets in South Lebanon during the 1980s. Eventually, it managed to improve its military capabilities, as shown in Maidun Operation (May 1988).

It was only in the 1990s when Hizballah began to present a significant threat to Israel. Two developments influenced this process. First, after almost a decade of in-house conflict, Hizballah claimed victory over 'Amal, the former leading movement of the Shiite population in Lebanon. Second, in February 1992, after the assassination of Hizballah's Secretary General Abbas al-Musawi, Hassan Nasrallah was appointed to the post.[[20]](#footnote-22)

By 1992, Hizballah's activities against the IDF and the SLA were becoming more intensive, sophisticated, and destructive. Hizballah attacked Israeli military outposts, headquarters, and convoys of military vehicles. It also carried out assassinations of senior commanders as well as operations against special Israeli units. The fatality rate of 1:3 in Israel’s favor continued to decline until it reached an equal 1:1 rate in 1997. Israel was losing 20-25 soldiers in Lebanon per year. In the meantime, Hizballah was attacking Israeli cities in the north of the country, causing loss of life and property.[[21]](#footnote-23)

Israeli society suffered the consequences of these activities. Increasingly, officials and civilians were voicing their concerns over Israel’s military presence in Lebanon. In 1999, Ehud Barak’s campaign promise was to withdraw from Lebanon within a year. Under his administration, Israel completely withdrew from the security zone in May 2000. This action was controversial in Israel and was perceived by some as escaping from Lebanon or as surrender.[[22]](#footnote-24) In contrast, Hizballah and its leader Nasrallah gained recognition in the Muslim and Arab world for being the first to force an Israeli withdrawal from an occupied territory through armed struggle.

**The Development of Hizballah's “Enemy Image” of Israel During the 1990's – Key Points**

On 26 May 2000, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizballah’s Secretary General, delivered a famous speech in which he declared: “this Israel, that owns nuclear weapons and the strongest air force in this region, is more fragile than a spider web.” Nasrallah gave this victory speech as part of the celebrations for Israel's unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon in the town of Bint Jbeil, which the IDF had left the day before. Nasrallah’s words capture his organization's basic conception of Israel: despite its military might, Israel lacks the social resilience and spiritual-moral willpower necessary to fight and defeat its enemies. This conception has been carefully cultivated over the years of Hizballah's existence, especially during the daily confrontations that took place in the Israeli security zone in southern Lebanon in the 1990s.

Generally, Hizballah's perception of Israel rests upon three foundations. The first is the ideological worldview of Hizballah as a Shiite-Islamic movement confronting a Jewish-Western state. Directly influenced by its Iranian patron, Hizballah views the Israeli Zionist project, supported by and allied with the United States, as an imperialist and occupying power seeking to destroy Arab and Islamic civilization. From its point of view, this project is bound to fail. Ostensibly, Israeli society is a fundamentally infidel and hedonistic one and therefore cannot persist and will eventually surrender to Islam.

The second foundation is Hizballah's observation of Israeli society over the years of the struggle, especially during the Nasrallah era. Over that period, Hizballah has collected information from various sources, mostly open-source materials, dealing with “soft” characteristics of Israel. These include the Israeli political system and trends in Israeli society and public opinion.

The third foundation stems from the previous two, specifically Hizballah’s monitoring of Israeli society and politics. To assess Israeli capabilities and intentions, Hizballah interpreted the insights it developed through the first two foundations to calculate what Israel can and will do.

Over the course of the 1990s, Israeli society’s belief in the justice of the IDF presence in southern Lebanon gradually eroded. On the one hand, this presence did not seem to have achieved its goal, namely to protect the settlements of northern Israel. Hizballah still managed to continue its activities and strengthen its position in the region. On the other hand, the cost of this presence was evident, first and foremost, in the number of dead and wounded, while it also took an increasingly heavy economic toll.

Three major events in 1997 triggered a shift from public criticism to a broader movement calling for an exit from Lebanon: first, the helicopter disaster that killed 73 IDF personnel; second, the Saluki disaster in which five IDF soldiers were burned to death; and finally, the failed Anssariya operation in which Hizballah killed eleven commandos from the Shayetet 13 unit. As a result, the "Four Mothers" organization, backed by some Knesset members, openly called for a withdrawal from Lebanon. The withdrawal was part of the official platform of Ehud Barak’s campaign, which helped him win the elections in 1999. It took place in May 2000.[[23]](#footnote-25) However, the quick withdrawal from Lebanon and the abandonment of the SLA members who had been Israel's partners for years was also interpreted by Hizballah as an act of weakness.

Hizballah closely followed the evolving public discourse in Israel regarding its military presence in southern Lebanon. In this way the organization identified cracks in the Israeli tolerance for warfare and acted to exacerbate them through a combination of military activity and psychological warfare. Hizballah fighters carried out targeted and well-planned attacks on IDF outposts, exacting a heavy toll on their Israeli counterparts. These attacks were accompanied by a psychological campaign to eliminate Israel's desire to remain in the “Lebanese mud.”[[24]](#footnote-26)

It is also worth noting that Hizballah was carefully watching SLA activity in the security zone. Being Israel’s official proxy in the area, SLA's soldiers and facilities were an target for Hizballah's attacks and a litmus test for gauging Israel’s commitment to the fight. Hizballah also attempted to recruit members from the SLA by exploiting their ethnic diversity.

As part of its efforts to learn more about Israel, Hizballah gathered information from the media, mainly from Israeli sources but also from Arab and international media as well. The organization closely followed statements made by politicians, watched interviews with IDF commanders and soldiers, and reviewed academic and professional reports. They paid special attention to how successful Hizballah operations were received by public opinion. This constant collecting and gathering of data played a significant role in the way Hizballah analyzed the struggle in real time. In addition, Hizballah's officials studied how the Zionist ideology developed throughout the twentieth century and how it was implemented in the state of Israel.

**Research Scope and Contribution**

This research is driven by one main question: how do non-state actors shape an enemy image of their state adversary? Hizballah's perception of the state of Israel developed during the 1990s will be used as a case study. Towards this goal, this research will explore the following questions:

1. How did Hizballah interpret the Israeli leadership and the Israeli public’s conflicting attitudes towards prolonged fighting in southern Lebanon before and after the withdrawal?
2. How did Hizballah judge the IDF commanders and soldiers’ motivation to fight in Lebanon despite Hizballah's ongoing actions, the number of casualties, and the controversy in the Israeli public opinion?
3. How did Hizballah evaluate the SLA’s strength and stability while acknowledging that it was an Israeli proxy?

Each of these questions will be analyzed according to the following principles:

1. How did Hizballah's beliefs, stereotypes, and biases shape its image of Israel?
2. Which events and experiences did Hizballah select to develop its image of Israel and how were they interpreted?
3. What sources did Hizballah use to collect the information that constituted its “enemy image” of Israel?

It is important to highlight that Hizballah's struggle against Israel in the 1990s is an ideal case study for the research question because the conflict was multi-dimensional. It was ethnic (Arab Hizballah vs. Jews), religious (Shiite-Muslim Hizballah vs. Judaism), national (Lebanese Hizballah vs. Israel as border state), and territorial (local South-Lebanese Hizballah vs. the Israeli occupier). Therefore, this case study will shed light on how non-state actors develop an “enemy image.”

Most scholarship on the development of an “enemy image” tends to deal with states or nations rather than non-state actors. The latter’s “enemy image” of their state’s adversary is usually analyzed by exploring their ideology and its expressions. This research is the first attempt at an in-depth, detailed study of how a non-state actor gradually shapes its “enemy image” as a by-product of continuous and day-by-day warfare against a state. Furthermore, research on the Hizballah-Israeli struggle in South Lebanon over the 1990s is insufficient. This period is viewed as a series of incidents rather than as holistic warfare. Only recently has Israel recognized this period officially as warfare.

Therefore, the proposed research would contribute to three fields of inquiry: history, theory, and policy-making. Historically, it would shed light on an important but insufficiently studied warfare that dramatically influenced the entire region. On the theoretical level, it would yield a better understanding of the development of the “enemy image” in general and of how it develops among non-state actors in particular.

In terms of policymaking, the repercussions of the Hizballah-Israeli warfare in the 1990s are still felt today. A better understanding of the ethos that was established in that period would expose Hizballah's current state of mind. Furthermore, the study’s theoretical implications would allow policymakers to understand how policy shapes the adversary’s “enemy image” and alert them to their own conceptions and misconceptions of their “enemy image.”

**Methodology and Sources**

This research is based on various sources, most of them in Arabic and some in Hebrew and English. The most important sources come from literature published by Hamas and Hizballah: interviews, official publications, books, and media articles. This includes, for example, the book series *Ṣafaḥat ʻIzz fi Kitab al-Ummah* published annually during the conflict, as well as media produced by the organization itself, featuring interviews and speeches by Hizballah officials. A main example of a newspaper produced by Hizballah is *Al-'Ahed*, which expresses an authentic voice of Hizballah's beliefs and points of view. These materials are available in several archives and libraries in Israel and the USA.

Another important source of information comes from reliable intelligence and research agencies, mainly Israeli and American. These include information drawn from the IDF intelligence corps, the Shabak, the CIA, the Institute for Terrorism Research and Intelligence, and so forth, in addition to interviews with officials who served in these organizations.

Due to the close relationship between Iran and Hizballah, both ideologically and operationally, Iranian sources dealing with Hizballah's perception of Israel will be analyzed as well. Secondary literature and journalistic sources will be used to provide the necessary background and present a complete picture of the topic. Israeli sources, describing Hizballah's subject perception will be useful for understanding the situation as a whole.

There is a wide variety of sources is in Arabic, Persian, English, and Hebrew. These sources will be carefully collected and filtered. They will then be cataloged and classified according to the research questions to which they correspond. By applying this methodology, each aspect of Hizballah's “enemy image” of Israel will be analyzed and consolidated into a systematic and coherent narrative, which will provide an in-depth and holistic analysis of the research aim.

**Research Activities and Timing**

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| ***Period*** | **Research Activities** |
| *January-June 2022* | * Working in different archives and libraries to identify relevant primary and secondary materials written by Hizballah or about Hizballah (in four languages: Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and English) * Filtering, cataloguing, and categorizing the collected materials according to the research sub-questions |
| *July-September 2022* | * Organizing the collected information for each sub-question into a clear, coherent analysis * Combining all sub-conclusions into a holistic picture to construct the case study narrative and articulate its theoretical consequences |
| *October – December 2022* | * Writing a research paper and submitting it to a peer-reviewed journal * Publishing and presenting findings at professional conferences (such as the International Studies Association, the American Political Science Association, and the Middle Eastern Studies Association) * Writing a book proposal and sample chapter to submit to a university press that is recognized in the field |

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