**Hizballah’s intelligence collection leading up to and during the 2006 war with Israel: How a VNSA collects intelligence in a war**

**Introduction**

The 2006 Israel-Hizballah War (Second Lebanon War) was a pivotal moment in the long-standing conflict between the sides. It marked the first time since the IDF’s withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000 that the two engaged in large-scale fighting involving significant ground forces and artillery. In many ways, that war shaped the contours of the conflict until Hamas’ attack on October 7, 2023, and Hizballah’s decision to enter the fray.

Many studies have been written about that war from a range of perspectives: how it broke out, how it developed, and what its effects were. Some studies have analyzed the war fully, while others have focused on a single aspect,[[1]](#footnote-1) including its military dimensions.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nonetheless, no comprehensive study has yet been conducted about a highly significant field of inquiry into the war—namely Hizballah’s intelligence operations. While existing research often addresses intelligence in other contexts, no study has specifically focused on Hizballah’s intelligence activities and their impact on the conduct of the war.

The research question underlying this study is: How did Hizballah develop its intelligence in the years leading up to the war after the IDF withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, and how did this affect how the war was conducted? Between 2000 and 2006, Hizballah strengthened and developed considerably, exploiting its freedom of action in southern Lebanon after Israel’s withdrawal to advance its weapons inventory and manpower capabilities by several levels, including in the field of intelligence. To analyze this development, the sections of this article examine the organization’s progress in diverse intelligence-collection domains and its learning process in studying Israel and the IDF, both in terms of infrastructure and as a foundation for its operational plan in preparation for the outbreak of the next war.

The developing research literature of the last few years about the intelligence operations of violent non-state actors (VNSA), including terrorist organizations, generally highlights specific aspects of intelligence work[[3]](#footnote-3) or focuses on theoretical analysis.[[4]](#footnote-4) Specifically, regarding Hizballah, several studies have examined the organization’s human intelligence capabilities and the structure of its intelligence apparatus.[[5]](#footnote-5) One study briefly addresses Hizballah’s failure in its pre-war assessments as a case study for a broader theory on the matter,[[6]](#footnote-6) and a few examine aspects of counterintelligence.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, this study is a pioneer in examining how a VNSA builds its intelligence collection force and uses it to prepare for a comprehensive campaign against the state actor it is fighting.

**HUMINT (Human Intelligence)**

Given the new reality on the ground after the IDF withdrew from Lebanon in the spring of 2000, with the two sides now facing one another from either side of the border, Hizballah wasted no time before embarking on efforts to generate human intelligence (HUMINT). For example, after the Israeli military left south Lebanon, the Abdul Razek and Sarhan families from Abu Sanan came to the border fence between Israel and Lebanon to reunite with family members. There, one relative named Jamal Hassan Sleiman identified himself as a relatively senior Hizballah operative. He came to this meeting with Salim Abdul Razek and Majid Sarhan, accompanied by his bodyguards. Introducing himself as in charge of operations within the organization, he invited the two to join Hizballah and become his assistants. They agreed to think it over. Jamal gave them a Lebanese cell phone and a phone number for future communication, and the three settled on some code words for concepts such as abduction, attack, army, tanks, soldier, military base, and other military-related terminology for use in further talks. After this initial contact, the two stayed in touch with Hizballah members, primarily with an individual named Yusuf.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Jamal and Yusuf tasked the two with carrying out a range of intelligence missions. They were asked to monitor IDF traffic at the Lebanese border, record the entry and exit of soldiers at army bases, count the number of soldiers per vehicle and the number of vehicles carrying soldiers, and determine the number of IDF soldiers at the various bases and the bases’ locations.

The two carried out their missions and passed on a range of information to Hizballah: details about IDF checkpoints (such as the checkpoint at Admit), the departure and return times of soldier patrols, the external appearance of the vehicles in which they were moving, their number, the weapons they carried, and more. This activity continued for several months until the two were arrested.

Until their arrest, the two were also asked to recruit other Israeli Arabs to work for Hizballah, a task in which they succeeded. Salim Abdul Razek recruited his friend Kamal Habishi to the organization and, together, they planned to eliminate Abu Sanan residents who were cooperating with Israel, going so far as to identify potential suspects. This plot was not carried out, nor was Habishi activated as a Hizballah agent, as all of them were arrested.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Ibrahim Sarhan, Majid’s brother, was recruited at the same time in a similar way. He, too, was given a dedicated cell phone for Hizballah business. They two planned for Ibrahim to fly abroad to meet Jamal, although this never materialized. As part of his operational role for Hizballah, Ibrahim was asked to collect information about IDF bases along the border, from Rosh Hanikra to Arab al-Aramsheh (the western sector of the border). Ibrahim traveled to conduct observations as instructed and then supplied a detailed report of his findings: the locations of two Israeli military bases, guard duty rotations at the bases, and the location of a guard tower at one base and how to enter it. A third brother, Ahmad Sarhan, was also recruited but did not have time to undertake any missions for Hizballah.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Jamal’s nephew living in Israel, Tufiq Bin Abdul Razek (then 19), attended a family reunion at the border fence. During the meeting, one of Jamal’s attendants approached him, introducing himself as Abu Nizar, a Hizballah operative, and suggested that Tufiq join the organization. Tufiq agreed and was given the code name of Abu George. He was asked to smuggle weapons into Israel (probably as an initiation exercise), but he refused, fearing the risks. Still, he gave his phone number to Abu Nizar for future communication. At the same meeting, Tufiq was asked to recruit other young men to act on Hizballah’s behalf and was given $300. A few days later, Abu Nizar called him to ask if he’d enlisted anyone; Tufiq admitted he had not. Afterward, the two tried to arrange a meeting abroad, either in Sweden or Egypt, and Tufiq was also offered the opportunity to participate in Hizballah training abroad. Tufiq agreed, conditional on his father’s approval, but his father refused to allow him to leave Israel.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The last man from Abu Sanan to be recruited by Hizballah was Bilal Sarhan (then 25). He, too, went to see his family at the security fence in June 2006, where Jamal recruited him. Jamal asked to meet him abroad, preferably in Germany, to discuss the nature of Bilal’s activity in the organization. Jamal also tried to recruit Kamal Habishi, mentioned above, but Habishi refused (although a different handler eventually recruited him). Here, too, the recruitment did not lead to actual intelligence gathering, as Bilal was arrested.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Another prominent case of recruiting was that of Nissim Netzer, born in 1967 to a Lebanese Shiite father and a Jewish mother. He immigrated to Israel in 1992 under the country’s Law of Return, was granted Israeli citizenship, and started a family. Over the years, he kept in phone contact with family members, some of whom were still living in Lebanon. In the 2000s, Netzer spoke with his brother Muhammad, who told him that a Hizballah operative named Fuad was interested in speaking with Nissim, and he gave him Fuad’s telephone number. Netzer called Fuad, and in the course of their conversation, Fuad asked Nissim to collect information for Hizballah. From then until his arrest, Netzer was in regular phone contact with Fuad and another senior Hizballah operative. Whenever Fuad needed to speak with Netzer urgently, he would contact him through the brother, Muhammad.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Hizballah’s demanded that Netzer provide the organization with a wide variety of information. He was asked to submit a map of Tel Aviv marked with the locations of strategic infrastructures, such as electricity and gas. He was also invited to submit a photograph of a relative who was serving in Israel’s security services. Netzer managed to obtain this information and started to arrange for a meeting abroad with Hizballah operatives. The meeting never took place, and Netzer destroyed the information he had gathered shortly before being arrested by Israeli authorities.

In his ongoing conversations with Fuad, Netzer was asked to contact a senior IDF officer to obtain military information. He told Fuad that he knew an officer who fit the description and, in that person’s name, informed Fuad that, at that point in time, the IDF had no intention of invading either the Gaza Strip or Lebanon but was merely strengthening its presence along the Gaza border. Netzer was also asked to provide information about Israel’s likely military response to attacks carried out on its territory. At a certain point, Netzer said that Israel was likely to begin assassinating senior figures in Lebanon and the West Bank. This information was conveyed just a few days before the assassination of Ahmed Jabril’s son in May 2002. Netzer presented the timing as proof that the era of targeted assassinations had begun.

Fuad also asked Netzer to collect visual intelligence (VISINT) by counting the number of Israeli tanks and Jeeps on the Israeli-Palestinian Authority demarcation line in Ramallah, but he refused. Netzer did provide Fuad with information about the mood in Israel in the face of the many security incidents and attacks at that time. It is impossible to ascertain whether the information Netzer provided to Hizballah was actually obtained from reliable sources or whether he was passing on his impressions and topics discussed in the media. What is clear is that he managed to establish his credibility as a reliable source among Hizballah members who valued the information he provided.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Hizballah even managed to penetrate deeply into the IDF’s ranks. In the first half of 2002, contact was established between Camille Nahara, a Hizballah HUMINT handler also known as Abu Sa’id, and Lt. Col. Omar al-Hayeb of Beit Zarzir, who served as a tracking officer in the IDF’s Northern Command. Given al-Hayeb’s senior position in the Northern Command, Hizballah viewed him as a very valuable asset. He was tasked with gathering a wide range of information about the IDF, including the movements and security arrangements of Gabi Ashkenazi, then the Northern Command’s General Commander, tank positions in the Northern Command sector, tank movements along the northern border (specifically the Shebaa Farms), and Israel Air Force aircraft.

He met all their requests. Some of the information Hizballah sought was easily accessible to him, but other details, such as those regarding aircraft, were not readily available, and he seems to have tried to obtain them through other sources. Al-Hayeb also passed on information about a terrorist infiltration on the day it occurred. This was conveyed to Abu Sa’id through Jamal Raha’el, who passed information from al-Hayeb to Abu Sa’id on three different occasions. In exchange for the information, al-Hayeb received drugs from Abu Sa’id, which he intended to sell.[[15]](#footnote-15)

At that time, using drugs as a motivation in recruiting and running intelligence assets was becoming increasingly common. A large network exchanging drugs for intelligence—the Kahmoz family—operated in a village called Ajar. It was originally run by Ramzi Nahara, a resident of the village Abel al-Saki in Lebanon, who worked for Hizballah for many years and was killed in an explosion of a bomb placed in his car in December 2002. Sa’ad Kahmoz, the brother of Ahmad Kahmoz and father of Yusuf Kahmoz, contacted Nahara in the spring of 2001 to arrange various drug deals and established a network consisting of his brother and son (referred to hereafter by their first names) as well as two Jews, Charlie Peretz and Dorit Edri (who is said to have been Sa’ad’s romantic partner at the time).

Network members later recruited other Israeli Jews and Arabs to operate a large drug smuggling enterprise. Its members used dedicated cell phones and frequently changed SIM cards to reduce the chances of detection. Sa’ad himself used dozens of cell phones to communicate with network members. The network collected information at two levels: intelligence to smooth the way for drug smuggling, and broader intelligence based on handlers’ requests.[[16]](#footnote-16)

At the level of intelligence collection for the sake of drug smuggling, network members, led by Nahara, would use radios to monitor Israel Police communications devices and pass on warnings to Sa’ad and his men. This enabled them to time their smuggling operations and exit from Ajar when police were not in the area. While smuggling, network members would travel in two vehicles: the first and drug-free vehicle would make sure the road was open and that the area was free of security services personnel; only after ensuring safe passage would the second vehicle—the one with the drugs—start moving.

It should be noted that network members developed friendly relations with IDF soldiers guarding the post at the exit from Ajar, handing out cigarettes, sweets, and hot drinks, thereby gaining their trust. This friendship meant that soldiers would make only a cursory examination of network members’ vehicles and would share information when it came to police requests that the army keep an eye out for network members or knowledge of an imminent police action in the region. In this way, dozens of drug smuggling operations of tons of hashish took place between 2001 and 2002, until the arrest of network members in January 2003.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Nonetheless, the intelligence the network collected was not only aimed at facilitating its drug smuggling operation. In one meeting between Nahara and Sa’ad, Nahara told Sa’ad that he was a Hizballah operative and had participated in the abduction of someone suspected of collaborating with Israel. Nahara asked Sa’ad for help obtaining certain goods from Israel, including books, newspapers, an atlas, electronic translating devices to convert English and Hebrew into Arabic, and a statistical yearbook of Israel. In fact, he managed to secure all these items, at least some of which were purchases by the Jews in the network (the statistical yearbook, for example, was bought by Peretz). In addition, Nahara asked for night vision binoculars, which Sa’ad and his Jewish partners, [Charlie] Peretz and [Dorit] Edri, worked together to purchase. They acquired several night vision binoculars, one of which was tested during the network’s surveillance of police activity. Yusuf delivered all the equipment to Nahara. The network even helped deliver books to Nahara about Israel-Palestinian and Israel-Syria relations purchased for the organization by another organization agent, Muhammad Fatali.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In addition to materials and equipment, Nahara asked Sa’ad to help him film sites in northern Israel near Kiryat Shmona, Gush Halav, Mitzpeh Margaliyot, Mt. Meron, and Manara Cliff, as well as provide him with the numbers of the local roads. Nahara gave him a video camera to help him document the information, and Sa’ad and Edri traveled to the requested locations and filmed the sites for Nahara. They were also asked to film military bases and shopping malls but ultimately did not do so. The footage they did obtain was passed on to Nahara, but because of their poor quality, the process had to be repeated two more times (on the second occasion, the quality again did not satisfy his requirements) before passing the videos to Nahara. It is worth noting that Nahara asked the network members for help in smuggling several handguns, which they did.[[19]](#footnote-19) Sa’ad managed to escape to Lebanon during his trial, where he has since continued, among other things, to work for Hizballah.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Another major case of recruitment of the “drugs for information” type involved four members of the Raha’el family from Beit Zarzir, drug dealers who had both familial ties and friendships with Omar al-Hayeb. Hizballah also recruited them through Camille Nahara (“Abu Sa’id”) to gather intelligence. For ten months, from December 2001 until September 2002, they dealt drugs across the Israel-Lebanon border in coordination with and under the auspices of Hizballah in exchange for intelligence they provided to the organization.

Amar Raha’el used his relative Jamal and brother Ghazal, who served as trackers in the IDF, to collect intelligence. Ghazal provided information about IDF troop movements, border locations, names of military bases, and the number of brigades stationed in the northern sector. Muhammad Raha’el gave similar information to Abu Sa’id, either through his brothers or in face-to-face conversations with Abu Sa’id. Hizballah also asked their operatives to collect information about military units (including special operations units), military bases and camps, and cameras along the northern border, as well as information about IDF officers serving the north, such as where they were stationed and living, and Israel’s intentions regarding attacking Lebanon. For example, at one stage, Abu Sa’id asked his agents to obtain intelligence about an antenna located near Aramsheh as a condition for continuing to supply them with drugs. To reward them for providing that information, they were set up with drug deals with the Lebanese side as well as money.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Thus, it appears that Hizballah invested a great deal in its HUMINT network, refining its processes of recruiting and handling sources, expanding the range of information being collected, and enlarging the geographical scope of the information from the border zone to deep into Israeli territory, seeking to increase its bank of targets both routine activities and in preparation for a large-scale confrontation.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The cases noted herein are only a few examples of many similar incidents involving Hizballah operatives running agents in Israel over the years, which greatly helped the organization in its intelligence collection capabilities.

**SIGINT (Signal Intelligence)**

As part of Hizballah’s post-2000 growth and development, progress was also made in its signals intelligence collection, especially in monitoring communications networks. Hizballah acquired more modern listening systems, which were transferred from Iran to Lebanon in 2004. The shipment escaped detection at the time, as it was brought in by Syrian transport planes returning from a humanitarian mission to help victims of the earthquake that had struck the city of Qom earlier that year. Hizballah’s ability to intercept Israeli beeper communications is evident from the IDF’s 2004 decision to encrypt some of the beepers used by its officers in order to prevent information from leaking to the organization. This step was taken based on intelligence Israel had received, indicating that the organization had developed new collection capabilities using this platform.[[23]](#footnote-23)

At this time, Imad Mughniyeh was a leader in the field of SIGINT for Hizballah. Before the Second Lebanon War, he was busy installing a disruption station designed to prevent wireless communications among Hizballah members from being overheard by Israeli listening units. At the same time, he also worked to strengthen Hizballah’s interception systems by setting up listening centers to monitor calls among Israeli commanders and soldiers. These centers provided Hizballah with high-quality intelligence, allowing it to prepare for some of Israel’s planned operations.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The full extent of Hizballah’s SIGINT force building from 2000 until 2006 became apparent during the Second Lebanon War. Throughout the conflict, the organization tried to monitor the IDF’s tactical communication networks and commanders’ cell phones and intercepted pager messages, including those sent by satellite broadcast channels. Devices discovered by ground forces during the fighting indicate that Hizballah extensively monitored the Israeli military’s tactical communications (at least those on non-encrypted networks), covering both the land and aerial networks that the IDF used along the Lebanese border. Transcripts of conversations indicate that Hizballah was also monitoring more distant communications networks, such as those used in Judea, Samaria/West Bank, and the Golan Heights.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Moreover, the listening devices captured by the IDF were tuned to its units’ frequencies, and Hizballah’s listening posts were found to have documents listing the communications frequencies of IDF forces (such as those of the 91st Division, in charge of the Israel-Lebanon border). The IDF also found notebooks with transcriptions in Hebrew of conversations intercepted by Hizballah wireless operators, demonstrating good Hebrew proficiency.[[26]](#footnote-26) According to IDF reports from the field, some of the monitoring devices had markings indicating they were made in Iran. In addition, some listening posts were placed inside sensitive sites, such as mosques, which, in Hizballah’s estimate, would ensure their survivability as it was assumed the IDF would not target mosques.[[27]](#footnote-27) Moreover, some claim that the bunkers where Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah hid during the war were equipped with technological tools that allowed penetration into Israeli communications networks, providing early warnings about any potential plan to carry out a targeted assassination of the Hizballah leader.[[28]](#footnote-28)

To demonstrate Hizballah’s monitoring, several authentic products of this activity are presented and analyzed below.

To begin with, Hizballah had organized charts of frequencies used by the forces operating in the vicinity. The example below shows the frequencies used by the IDF’s 300th Brigade, one of the two front-line brigades operating in the Lebanon sector.[[29]](#footnote-29) The table shows 18 VHF frequencies that the IDF used. For each, the following information is included: the frequency number, the call sign on the communications network, and the description of the unit or entity using the frequency and its call name in Israel. One can see details of communications frequencies from the brigade headquarters level to the company level, as well as frequencies of certain outposts in the sector.

Some frequencies are accompanied by comments relating to the monitoring task and understanding their organizational content. For example, regarding the frequency associated with the “Liman” battalion, it is noted that, as of now, its signal is concealed (likely intentionally in order to prevent interception). For the frequency belonging to the company called “Malkiya” (a reference to Turmus Outpost located near Kibbutz Malkiya), it is noted that the company that used to use it had been disbanded and downgraded into a platoon. Regarding the frequency belonging to the artillery of the 300th Brigade, it is noted that it is related to the Khirbat Ma’ad position. The frequency belonging to the company called D-C has a notation that its area of responsibility extended from a place called Risha[[30]](#footnote-30) to the sea.

Another finding that illustrates the in-depth listening activity in which Hizballah engaged in the period under discussion is the list of call signs of observation posts and radar positions in the sector of the 91st Division (in charge of the Israel-Lebanon border) dating to 2005.[[31]](#footnote-31) This table serves as a resource for the radio operator and those analyzing the intercepted information, helping them understand the meanings of the communication call signals and names given to the sector's observation posts and radar positions.

Dozens of names of different sensors used by the IDF appear in the table, as well as the location of each position or the means to which the name refers: forward observation post, observation radar, artillery radars, and cameras. Regarding the source of the information in the table, it is impossible to rule out the possibility that it was compiled gradually based on cross-referencing SIGINT data with findings of on-the-ground observations. However, it is more likely that the source is a HUMINT agent Hizballah recruited within the IDF in the 2000s, such as Lt. Col. Omar al-Hayeb, who was known to provide such information.[[32]](#footnote-32)

An analysis of a sample page from a notebook in which Hizballah wireless operators documented the audio they heard best illustrates this activity’s features.[[33]](#footnote-33) The page contains notes on what a Hizballah interceptor heard on Sunday, February 1, 2004; the radio operator even noted that it was the Eid al-Adha holiday. In general, it is apparent that monitoring was conducted on the frequency 177.4326, a network whose most prominent entity was nicknamed “whip.” The notes were made throughout the daytime hours, and, based on the handwriting, it is clear that the same individual took all the notes. There are no notes from 10:12 PM until 3:22 AM; either the radio operator took a break or there was no traffic.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Hizballah gained significant insights from this interception activity. The organization knew exactly when the “dawn alert” of the force being monitored started (5:55 AM) and ended (6:29 AM). From 7 PM onward, Hizballah was able to glean information from reports on the communication devices and about the IDF procedure for handling a “Turkish horseman” event (military code for a border incursion) until its conclusion. At 4 AM, Hizballah was able to learn about a training accident that claimed the lives of two Israeli soldiers just hours earlier, and even in which particular exercise it occurred.[[35]](#footnote-35) One can see that the operator also provided at least an initial interpretation of the content, noting next to the word “storm” that it meant an armored Hummer.

In addition to its independent monitoring carried out during the war, Hizballah made use of information produced by joint listening stations operated by Syria and some nations that were friendly with it. Joint Syrian-Russian and Syrian-Iranian listening stations routinely passed on information to Hizballah. As part of this cooperation, Ibrahim Aqil, Imad Mughniyeh’s deputy, was stationed in Syria to coordinate intelligence cooperation. During the war, Syria gave Hizballah considerable information collected by its intelligence systems, some of which had advanced technological capabilities supported by Russia. In fact, some claim that Russia encouraged Syria to share its information with Hizballah.[[36]](#footnote-36) Throughout the war, Iranian parties supported Hizballah’s interception efforts, both by aiding the fighting troops and by operating the central listening base located at the Iranian embassy in Beirut.[[37]](#footnote-37)

It should be noted that Hizballah also tried to exploit HUMINT for listening purposes. For example, the organization used Sg. Maj. Ahmed al-Hayeb, who served as an IDF tracker in the north. In September 2003, he was recruited by a Hizballah operative with the moniker Abu Ahmed. From then on, al-Hayeb began receiving requests for information and materials, which he started gathering for his handlers. In the course of this work, he obtained a map containing the code names of routes and reporting lines in the northern sector, as well as IDF communications instructions. These included a detailed list of all the frequencies and call signals of the various units operating in the area, as well as aerial photographs marked with routes and other important spots on the map, making it possible to estimate distances to various destinations.[[38]](#footnote-38)

The information Hizballah attained through this channel was extensive and meaningful, enabling the organization to respond rapidly to IDF activity in a war. These capabilities gave Hizballah an advantage in many of the confrontations between its operatives and IDF forces.[[39]](#footnote-39) This advantages was amplified by operational lapses by IDF troops, such as soldiers routinely calling their families on their personal cell phones from the battlefields and speaking about classified matters despite explicit instructions not to bring unsecured telephones into fighting theaters.[[40]](#footnote-40) The best evidence for this is the Chief of Staff’s order, issued at the end of the war (August 11, 2006), albeit too little too late, about ending the use of unsecured pagers in the IDF, reducing the use of unencrypted transmissions, and prohibiting cell phones in combat zones.[[41]](#footnote-41)

**VISINT**

The field of visual intelligence was directly affected by the IDF’s withdrawal from Lebanon, at which point Hizballah placed itself along the border and exploited this proximity to Israel to collect VISINT. In a documented patrol in southern Lebanon in September 2000, an observer reported seeing firsthand how Hizballah established a network of observation posts along the border. Hizballah operatives manning these posts conducted stationary observations and patrols along the border. They wore civilian clothing to camouflage their Hizballah affiliation. In a conversation between the observer and one of the operatives stationed at a post across from Kibbutz Manara, the operative said, “We monitor and track the movements of Israelis all along the border.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Hizballah set up at least 20 observation posts along the border. Every outpost had an observation tower where operatives equipped with binoculars and other optic devices (including night vision equipment) stayed; some cameras were even operated by remote control. Some of the towers included camouflage elements, where part of the tower was visible and part was camouflaged, making it difficult for the Israeli side to determine whether or not the tower was manned at any given moment.[[43]](#footnote-43)

During those years, Hizballah equipped itself with night vision equipment, which the Israeli military learned about after capturing some of it following an unsuccessful Hizballah kidnapping attempt of IDF personnel. Some of these devices were quite advanced, using thermal detection technology (based on body heat), which enables significantly better identification of weapons and humans than standard optical devices. The shipments in which these arrived in Lebanon also included Iranian-developed drones, some designed for observation and some for carrying explosives.[[44]](#footnote-44)

Iran supplied these weapons in shipments that became more frequent after the IDF withdrew from Lebanon. At the same time, Hizballah attempted to buy night vision equipment from other countries through straw companies and Shi’ite Lebanese nationals residing abroad.[[45]](#footnote-45) For example, in 2004, Hizballah tried to procure and smuggle advanced night vision equipment from Canada via Greece using a local individual as well as an Israeli national in Canada. However, in the end, the FBI thwarted the smuggling operation.[[46]](#footnote-46) Hizballah went even further: an agent of the organization living in Rajar used Israeli Jews to purchase night vision equipment in Israel. The Iranians also bought night vision equipment for Hizballah using agents in other Western nations, such as the United Kingdom.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Hizballah’s intelligence advances in the years preceding the Second Lebanon War in all fields, including VISINT, were spearheaded by Imad Mughniyeh, referred to as the military and intelligence commander of the war.[[48]](#footnote-48) These efforts bore fruit, as the VISINT collected was a highly significant aspect of Hizballah’s intelligence collecting during the fighting. In the years preceding the war, Hizballah had developed an extensive observation network, both along the border with Israel and within Lebanese territory. For example, during the war, a Hizballah observation command center was discovered in the town of Meiss al-Jabal, which shed light on how the organization’s observation network operated. Among the items found in this command center were electronic observation devices that transmitted data prior to and during the war to a designated operations center, where the transmissions were recorded on Hizballah computers. The center also had equipment for analyzing the data collected by the observations and aerial photographs of IDF outposts along the border.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Furthermore, Hizballah observers were assigned to the fighting forces and would warn of IDF troop activities. The information they collected enabled Hizballah’s fire and artillery units to target Israeli troops directly in real time. This capability became evident to IDF soldiers during the fighting, as they learned that Hizballah observation units played a central role in its combat operations. The IDF realized that they had to move through the terrain without being observed or exposed to fire, guided by information gained from surveillance. In addition, the Syrians helped Hizballah with its VISINT by passing on satellite images of Israel.[[50]](#footnote-50)

A notebook found in the Bint Jbeil sector documenting the organization’s observations is instructive. The notebook may represent the records of a single observer or of a command center that consolidated reports from multiple observers and operatives. In any event, the notebook documents dozens of reports of IDF activity during the first days of the Second Lebanon War, from July 13 to 23, 2006. Some of the reports focus on Israeli artillery fire, including the number of shells fired, their type, and the targets at which they were aimed. There are also reports about IDF troop movements, including tanks and infantry. For example, On Sunday, July 23, the notebook states: “10 AM – movement of Israeli soldiers; about 5 men; at the old gate towards the tank; are heading for Abu Khalil.” Later on, it continues, “5:25 PM – Merkava tank no. 1 (ע1)… from the direction of Jal al-Deir towards old hiding spot (earth bank?), where it stopped for a short while and afterward returned. Also seen at the same time (on the right?) near the Albatt grove, several soldiers were observed near a tree. Two were seen climbing and then disappearing over the horizon (climbing toward Jal al-Deir) and, at the same time, two soldiers descended… under the same tree where they had been located.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

It should be noted that the “Malkiya” outpost (probably referring again to the Turmus Outpost near Kibbutz Malkiya). Hizballah operatives noted whether the lights in the outpost were on or off, interpreting this as an indication of activity. One day, the lights went out at a time they generally stayed on; this was noted as a deviation from the routine. The consistent handwriting would indicate that the same forward observer or operations sergeant took all the notes throughout the period recorded. A coding chart appearing at the beginning of the notebook with codes for different rooms and activities (such as prayers and sleeping) suggests that the notebook’s author was likely stationed at a facility together with Hizballah personnel. In addition to providing reports on IDF activity, he, at the same time, also reported on the state of the operatives on the ground.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Thus, Hizballah’s observation activities enabled it to collect comprehensive information about developments on Israel’s side of the border and to prepare seriously to fight Israel. Moreover, during the fighting, as detailed below, the observation activities played a major role in enabling Hizballah to identify preliminary IDF preparations and direct the organization’s fighting efforts accordingly.

One example is their identification of IDF engineering preparations for the Battle of Wadi Saluki at the beginning of the war, which involved bulldozing traffic lanes for the armored forces expected to arrive.[[53]](#footnote-53) As will be demonstrated below, all the Hizballah observers had to do was stand on the ridge overlooking Wadi Saluki with their advanced observation cameras, wait for IDF armored troops to move towards them, and operate their anti-tank weapons in what became one of the bloodiest battles of that war.

**OSINT** (**Open Source Intelligence)**

Hizballah made collecting intelligence about Israel from open sources a priority since its inception. As the organization developed, this activity became more structured and institutionalized. The importance of this intelligence channel was highlighted by an incident involving OSINT collection on the Israeli side: Moshe Dayan, who served as Israel’s defense minister during the Yom Kippur War (October 1973), published a book about the war, which he based in part on internal documents. When summoned for questioning by Israeli security authorities, Dayan justified this use, saying: “We published the book for our friends; we know that our enemies are not people who read.”

According to Hizballah testimony, that statement greatly influenced the organization’s activity. From its first days of activity, Hizballah invested considerable effort into listening to Israeli radio, watching Israeli TV, and reading Israeli newspapers to pry out military and security information. While this type of collection had been done previously by other Arab and Muslim entities, Hizballah considered itself the first to do so in an established, continuous way since its very founding.[[54]](#footnote-54)

During the Second Lebanon War, Hizballah also received much useful information from open media sources. This war presented a different media landscape than the IDF had encountered in past conflicts. The battlefield was saturated with media from Israel and abroad, and reports were issued around the clock in real time. The nature of the war, in which the rear of northern Israel became an integral part of the fighting, also led to many real-time reports from locations where rockets had hit. Hizballah exploited this to extract high-quality intelligence about political decisions, IDF conduct, and the mood of the Israeli public from the media, in part through the “Zionist Affairs Desk” operated by Hizballah’s Al-Manar television network.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Due to the nature of Western media in general, and Israeli media in particular, during the war, Hizballah tended to consider open media reports highly reliable. Along with its low cost and accessibility, information flowing through this never-ending channel could also be translated into operational insights that clearly and immediately affected the battlefield. Parties in the media reported on the results of rocket fire, providing exact indications to Hizballah of the outcome of its fire, thus helping it improve precision. Information about the arrival of senior figures to a specific location was translated into rocket fire in that area. Operational information on directions of IDF action was made public, helping Hizballah prepare for these activities, and so on.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Even before the war, Nasrallah used open media sources to study Israel’s leaders. At the time, Israel’s political leadership, especially Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz, had limited experience in security and political matters. Given the absence of previous policies to analyze for insights, Hizballah relied on books and the internet as the chief sources of information about them. During the war, Nasrallah continued to adjust his behavior based on what he learned from OSINT, as reflected, for example, in timing his media appearances to coincide with Israeli leaders’ press conferences.[[57]](#footnote-57)

The value of this collection channel was augmented by the conduct of senior IDF personnel who publicly spoke about matters categorized as classified. An example was a decision made “behind closed doors” to mobilize three reserve divisions in preparation for an expanded military operation. Although the decision was classified, it was explicitly mentioned that same night by the Chief of Staff in a press conference and by the Minister of National Infrastructure, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer. Moreover, one day during the war, the Pit (the IDF post at the General Staff HQ in Tel Aviv) learned about the stationing of U.S. Patriot missiles in the Sharon area. Although this was considered highly classified information, the next morning, the item appeared in the top headline of the Israeli daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*. A media broadcast of troops preparing to enter Lebanese territory and their actual movement across the border was shown in real time, allowing Hizballah to prepare to face those troops very precisely.[[58]](#footnote-58)

During the war, Al-Manar, Hizballah’s TV channel, ran an item about a Hizballah rocket hitting a three-story apartment building in Haifa on July 17. At the beginning of the report, footage was shown of the impact and the Israeli security services’ response. These were taken from Israel’s Channel 10 broadcasts covering the challenges in assessing the number of victims and conducting their rescues. Later, the same Al-Manar broadcast featured footage that appeared to have been taken with private video cameras by local residents and which had purportedly been kept off the air by Israeli authorities. This footage, which included a shot of a fire that broke out in the building and photos of a dead man being pulled from the rubble, had reached Hizballah through unidentified means (possibly through HUMINT).[[59]](#footnote-59)

Al-Manar continued to rely on Israeli media to rocket strike locations and their impact in terms of casualties and property damage. Thus, on August 6, the network broadcast photos from locations where rockets had landed along the Israeli-Lebanese border following a Hizballah rocket attack on Israel’s northern towns. In addition, the Al-Manar broadcast also reported information from Israeli television indicating that ambulances were still on the scene and reporting on the mood of anxiety among those in the area.[[60]](#footnote-60)

After the war, there was strong public criticism of the media for revealing information to Hizballah, reflecting a widespread perception that OSINT had constituted a boon to the organization.[[61]](#footnote-61) Within the IDF, an investigation by the Information Security Department identified hundreds of officers at the rank of major and above who, during the war, communicated with journalists without permission, thereby enabling reporters to obtain and publicly broadcast classified military information.[[62]](#footnote-62) This connection between IDF officers and the Israeli media underscores the significant role the media played in contributing to Hizballah’s intelligence assessments by revealing military details. They also highlight the accuracy of the information that reached reporters, was published, and was ultimately absorbed by Hizballah, as it originated directly from senior IDF officers.

It should be pointed out that some downplay the importance of the contribution of OSINT to Hizballah’s successes during the war. According to this view, the movement of large troops on the border, such as in the area of Metula, could easily have been identified with Hizballah’s observation capabilities. Moreover, they claim that media reports of the locations of rocket impacts had a negligible effect given the inherent inaccuracy of Hizballah’s rockets, a position supported by the IDF’s censors, too.[[63]](#footnote-63) Still, according to many, including Aharon Ze’evi Farkash, head of Military Intelligence, there is no doubt that open media sources provided a welcome gift to Hizballah’s war effort. As Farkash observed, “The exposure in the media and inclusion of reporters in operations centers led to severe and unnecessary damage. Critical information fell into the enemy’s hand during the fighting and helped the other side harm Israel more greatly than before.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

**Analysis: VNSA intelligence collection before and during a large-scale war**

In the Second Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, Hizballah ran an ongoing, multidimensional intelligence effort against the IDF. This followed years of having prepared for a large-scale conflict, focusing on both its intelligence capacities building and studying the Israeli army and its expected modes of operation in the event of extensive fighting. Hizballah’s intelligence effort during the war, consisting primarily of VISINT, SIGINT, HUMINT, and OSINT, served as an important infrastructure for the organization’s operations throughout the conflict.

The intelligence Hizballah collected about Israel and the IDF that summer became the foundation for its battlefield conduct and had a significant impact on the course of the fighting. According to post-war IDF investigations, the level of the Israeli military’s exposure to Hizballah forces—resulting from information leaked from within the army that “just so happened” to fall into the organization’s hands—undermined the IDF’s actions during the war, led to loss of life, and jeopardized the IDF’s intelligence superiority over Hizballah.[[65]](#footnote-65)

In general, according to a statement attributed to a high-ranking Israeli, Hizballah had good tactical intelligence about Israel. It knew the locations of IDF command centers, the routes that troops would probably use, and even the combat tactics of IDF fighters. It was clear that Hizballah built its defensive plan by studying how the IDF would fight and what weapons it would use. Based on this information, it then inferred what steps it had to take to halt or at least hamper the advance of IDF troops once the conflict broke out.[[66]](#footnote-66)

As one of the senior Iranians who have been with Hizballah since its establishment said, albeit with some exaggeration, “Hizballah looked down from its positions of control on the Israelis’ actions, but the Israelis didn’t know what Hizballah was doing.”[[67]](#footnote-67) In post-war analyses, the Iranians highlighted Hizballah’s high-quality intelligence conduct, manifested in the fact that the organization had a bank of targets of Israeli army and intelligence sites at which it aimed its rockets from the opening salvo. In addition, Hizballah, realizing that its senior officers were in the IDF’s crosshairs, took stringent measures to safeguard them; as a result, not a single one was killed during the war. Another achievement, in their view, was Israel’s difficulty in infiltrating the organization’s ranks during the conflict.[[68]](#footnote-68)

The extent to which Hizballah’s intelligence effort was successful is perhaps most evident from the thorough introspection and “housecleaning” Israel, and the IDF undertook after the end of the war regarding information security and data leaks during the fighting. The Winograd Commission report, summarizing the stages of the war, devoted dozens of pages to the issue based on its understanding of the vast amount of information Hizballah managed to collect about the IDF and the effectiveness with which the organization used it to inflict damage to the Israeli troops.

After years during which Hizballah used its intelligence to build an infrastructure and attain tactical intelligence, the organization was, for the first time in its history, required to operate an intelligence effort in a large-scale war, a challenge it met quite successfully.

This study offered several insights into the intelligence operations of a violent non-state actor (VNSA) during a large-scale confrontation with a state entity:

*First,* the VNSA’s state of mind is critically important for optimal preparations for large-scale combat. The VNSA’s transition phase from guerrilla warfare, focusing on tactical intelligence, to preparations for operational-level combat, is essential for building intelligence capabilities. It appears that from soon after the IDF’s withdrawal from Lebanon, Hizballah understood that the day would come when there would be a large-scale war with Israel, one that would include ground maneuvers. This approach, which also drove preparations on the ground, had a significant impact on Hizballah’s intelligence efforts—shaping its intelligence collection requirements (ICR), the development of collection mechanisms, and the direction of its learning processes.

*Second*, the issue of the territory controlled by the organization is highly significant. Clearly, an organization’s control of an area allows it to develop and operate freely in every way, including intelligence. Following Israel’s hasty and unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon, southern Lebanon was left with a power vacuum. Hizballah quickly established facts on the ground, asserting itself as the dominant power in the area it designated. With Hizballah controlling large swaths of southern Lebanon, its members had access right up to the security fence along the Israeli border. This reality profoundly affected the organization’s conduct in general and its intelligence operations in particular. The fact that Hizballah could operate freely in southern Lebanon was a decisive factor in its ability to establish listening and observation posts and run HUMINT effectively, thus collecting critical information before and during the war.

*Third*, external state support acts as a force multiplier for a VNSA’s intelligence capabilities when confronting a state during a large-scale war scenario. In Hizballah’s case, Iran’s support made it possible for the organization to effectively intercept Israeli communications. In addition, intelligence from Syrian-run listening stations provided information that proved invaluable, as this was information unavailable from anywhere else.

*Fourth*, it is evident that Hizballah developed not only in terms of collecting intelligence and learning about Israel but also in its ability to use this information to further its activities. Hizballah operatives integrated what they had learned about IDF into its training of operations and its on-the-ground preparations. This suggests a very strong connection between Hizballah’s intelligence and operational aspects, as they evolve in tandem and influence each other. Operational development requires corresponding intelligence adjustments and intelligence achievements facilitate operational development, creating a reciprocal cycle.

*Fifth*, the opposing side’s conduct has a strong impact on the effectiveness of a VNSA’s intelligence efforts. Israel fundamentally failed to understand the intelligence threat Hizballah posed. Its resulting conduct enabled Hizballah to maximize the effectiveness of its actions. Thus, the organization could easily listen in on IDF frequencies due to a lack of adherence to communications security measures. In addition, Hizballah was able to collect valuable information from open sources because of Israel’s media openness and public sharing of significant amounts of information.

All of these factors enabled Hizballah to notably reduce its inherent asymmetry compared with Israel’s military strength. The organization entered the war in a strong position that yielded many battlefield successes and limited Israel’s ability to maximize its advantages. However, as has been analyzed in the past,[[69]](#footnote-69) Hizballah’s entire intelligence collection system failed to help it on the strategic level. The organization failed to anticipate Israel’s reaction to the abduction of its soldiers, the event that precipitated the war because it had no access to any such information other than OSINT.[[70]](#footnote-70) Along with the forecasting limitations faced by any intelligence actor, such constraints are particularly pronounced in an organization as total, hierarchic, and ideological a player as Hizballah.

**Conclusion**

Often, a VNSA’s intelligence efforts focus on tactics, as it is interested in carrying out acts of terrorism and surgical strikes against the enemy. However, in some cases, due to the evolving nature of a conflict, a VNSA may find itself engaged in large-scale fighting where it must acquire operational intelligence. As seen in this study, Hizballah seriously developed its intelligence capabilities in the six years between Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and the war that broke out in the summer of 2006. Thus, although the war caught the organization by surprise, it was able to attain considerable successes and impede Israel’s ability to realize its goals, in part because of the organization’s ability to use operational and tactical intelligence effectively.

In the coming years, as VNSA activities will likely continue to increase, the research into VNSA practices must expand to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon. Since these actors differ fundamentally from the states fighting them, these states must overcome the fallacy of projection and view the situation from the perspective of the VNSA in order to understand and effectively counter the threats they pose. In this context, learning from historical case studies, such as the one presented in this research, is an important milestone on the path to achieving this goal.

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28. Kfir, *Ha’adama*, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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30. It is possible that what was meant was the Tsiporen Outpost (“Risha” in Arabic), located near Manara. While this is a fairly large field for a single company (from Manara to the Mediterranean Sea), considering the fact that the intention is probably an armored company (the letter D-C would seem to relate to the Merkava Mark 3), it is plausible based on the features of the IDF’s routine security in the sector at that time. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
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34. It is worth pointing out that it is difficult to determine if the radio operator’s notes were written down in real time or represent a transcription of taped communications done at a later time. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For a report of the incident, see, e.g., Hanan Greenberg and Sharon Rofeh-Ofir, “Two Dead in Training Accident in the Heights; One Moderately Injured in Shizafon” (Hebrew), *Ynet*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-2868464,00.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
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63. Ibid, p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Aharon Ze’evi Farkash, “Intelligence at War: Insights and Lessons” (Hebrew), in Meir Elran and Shlomo Brom (eds.), *Milhemet*, p. 81. [the source appears above] [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Winograd Committee, “Information Security During the War,” p. 457. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Andrew Axum, “Hizballah at War,” *Policy Focus*, 63, December 2006, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Interview with Muhammad Ali Husseini, “How Hizballah Dominates Israel,” Shahed Yaran, Issue 11, Mehr 1385 [September 2006], p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Interview of Abbas Hama Yar, Iran’s former cultural attaché to Lebanon and a member of Hizballah’s inner circle with Hassin Hassini, “Sayyed Displayed Full Command Over All Aspects of the War,” Shahed Yaran, Issue 11, Mehr 1385 [September 2006], p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Bitton, “Getting the Right,” 1027–1044. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. The same happened to Hamas. see Flamer, “The Enemy,” 1178–1184. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)