

Missile Militia

How Hezbollah Evolved a Deterrence Strategy vis-à-vis Israel

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Abstract

This thesis aims to account for the mechanics of how Hezbollah evolved a deterrence strategy covering the period of 1992 to 2006. In the 1990s, a mutual deterrence relationship, predicated on punishment, emerged between Israel and Hezbollah. After Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000, deterrence was further expanded and operationalized both in the form of punishment and denial as exhibited in the 2006 Lebanon war. A case-driven process-tracing approach is adopted, developing a causal framework to holistically account for how these strategic evolutions occurred. The explanatory framework is rooted primarily in organizational learning and, to a lesser extent, in principal-agent theory. The strategic evolution framework holds that Hezbollah's strategy is aligned with learned tactical innovations enabled and encouraged by Iranian sponsorship. The findings show the initial evolution of deterrence by punishment starting in the 1990s occurred through a bottom-up alignment of strategy with tactical innovations. Conversely, the operationalization of deterrence by denial in the 2000 to 2006 period appears more like a top-down, centrally planned strategic evolution. The contribution serves to add nuance and depth to the various literatures on insurgent strategy, learning and state sponsorship of armed groups. The insights derived, whilst partial and case-specific, present the basis for future research into Hezbollah, specifically, and a launching pad for more general theories of change in insurgent strategy.

1 Introduction

On October 1st 2024, Israel launched an invasion of Southern Lebanon, making it the third time the latter has invaded its Arab neighbour to the north since 1948.¹ This action entirely shattered the tense mutual deterrence relationship, mostly characterized by limited flare-ups and a brief war in 2006, that Israel and Hezbollah have enjoyed since the Lebanese group forced Israel to end its occupation of Southern Lebanon in 2000.² The October 1st invasion is sure to go down in history as immensely consequential for Lebanon, Hezbollah, Israel and the entire Middle-East in ways that are impossible to predict as this episode of the Arab-Israeli conflict rages on. This major relapse into war illustrates its importance as Hezbollah and Israel are central actors in the Middle-East and deeper understanding into either of them is key to the future of the region. Hezbollah has been, for some time, arguably, the single best-equipped and most powerful non-state armed group (NSAG) in the world.³ Beyond consideration of its material capabilities, the group has shown a strategic potency unrivalled by other non-state actors, evolving a deterrence strategy against one of the most powerful armies in the world and the only nuclear state in the region.⁴ Answering that question and understanding Hezbollah's evolution of a deterrence strategy is of importance to garner a greater understanding of one of the most significant actors in the region and in the wider category of non-state actors. The failure of deterrence, for instance, implies major consequences for the entire region not least in the form of human suffering, but also has the potential to permanently reshape the region politically. Whilst this thesis does not set out to understand contemporary Hezbollah deterrence

¹ 'Israel's Long History of Incursions and Invasions in Lebanon', *Reuters*, 1 October 2024, sec. Middle East.

² Massaab Al-Aloosy, 'Deterrence by Insurgents: Hezbollah's Military Doctrine and Capability Vis-à-Vis Israel', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 33, no. 6 (18 August 2022): 999–1016. p. 1000-10003

³ El Chamaa, Mohamad, Samuel Granados. 'What to Know about Hezbollah Weapons as Israel Awaits Retaliatory Strikes'. *Washington Post*, 10 July 2024. Israel Defence Forces. 'Hezbollah and Lebanon: An In-Depth Examination Under Hassan Nasrallah's Leadership'. IDF. Accessed 18 December 2024.

⁴ Al-Aloosy, 'Deterrence by Insurgents'; Iver Gabrielsen, 'Hezbollah's Strategy and Tactics in the Security Zone from 1985 to 2000', *Small Wars Journal*, 2013, 1–11; Daniel Sobelman, 'The Rules of the Game', *New Rules of the Game* (Institute for National Security Studies, 2004); Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, 'Israeli Nuclear Weapons, 2014', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 70, no. 6 (1 November 2014): 97–115.

after 2006, a prior understanding of it is valuable for grasping the mechanics that can lead to large-scale conflict in the contemporary Middle-East.

The purpose of this thesis is to try to unpack the mechanisms driving this unique outcome and understand how Hezbollah evolved to adopt deterrence as a core tenet of its military strategy vis-à-vis Israel, which represents an exceptional development among non-state actors. For this end, this essay will employ a process-tracing method of the explaining-outcome variant as it is tailored to the explanation of unique outcomes such as the one being investigated. As an outlier among NSAGs, Hezbollah has received a great deal of attention from all types of scholarly investigation but the emergence and evolution of its deterrence strategy against Israel remains somewhat understudied in the relevant literatures. The other unique reality that sets Hezbollah apart from its peers is its unmatched arsenal of rockets and missiles which encompasses everything from large unguided World War Two era rockets with a few dozen kilometres of range and a few dozen kilograms of explosive payload to modern GPS guided ballistic missiles able to deliver hundreds of kilograms of explosives hundreds of kilometres away with far greater accuracy.⁵ The most recent estimates put Hezbollah's stockpile, as of September 2024, at roughly 150.000 total missiles and rockets.⁶

First, it is notable to observe a non-state actor even possessing and using an arsenal of rockets and missiles as these are usually only reserved for states with the means to procure and operate them. Second, the related evolution of a deterrence strategy as cornerstone of military strategy further illustrates the unique nature of this case and why it was selected for this project. In the literature on non-state warfare, some scholars have paid attention to Hezbollah's deterrence strategy but few have investigated the mechanics of how the militia evolved its strategy.⁷ There have been a number of efforts made to examine the processes of innovation and adoption of novel weaponry and tactics within Hezbollah at the micro-level, all

⁵ 'Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah', *Missile Threat*, accessed 15 October 2024.

⁶ 'What Weapons Does Lebanon's Hezbollah Have?', *Reuters*, 17 September 2024, sec. Middle East.

⁷ Al-Aloosy, 'Deterrence by Insurgents'; Samaan, Jean-Loup. 'Missile Warfare and Violent Non-State Actors: The Case of Hezbollah'. *Defence Studies* 17, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 156–70.

acknowledging the crucial importance of its rocket and missile arsenal.⁸ Few, if any, studies however, have traced the mechanisms that have driven Hezbollah's strategic evolution towards a strategy of deterrence specifically. Thus, the research question of interest in this specific project will be: How did Hezbollah evolve a deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Israel? The scope of the project covers the period from Hezbollah's first encounter with deterrence in 1992, through its development and further expansion up to and including the 2006 war.

Before discussing the main argument of this thesis, some important definitions of key concepts need to be briefly outlined for clarity. Aims, strategy, and tactics will be recurring concepts of analysis as such a framework for their understanding is needed. Aims, refers to the overall *political* goals of an actor such as ending an occupation or destroying an adversary.⁹ Strategy, the evolution of which is the central outcome under investigation, refers to the chosen method of achieving purported aims as informed by the coercion framework.¹⁰ Tactics represent the micro-level of combat operations and how they are carried out in accordance with the strategy that has been selected to fulfil the actor's aims. These definitions align with the foundational and ubiquitous framework first introduced by Clausewitz¹¹ Hence, in this case, ending the occupation of Lebanon or avoiding invasion is an aim, the different varieties of coercion such as compellence and deterrence are strategies, and suicide bombing, hit-and-run attacks, or rocket warfare fall under the category of tactics. These definitions will be further fleshed-out in the forthcoming sections of the essay where necessary.

This thesis will trace a combination of two causal mechanisms that account for the emergence of Hezbollah's deterrence strategy. Most significantly, Hezbollah was able to innovate and adapt its tactics incrementally in an autonomous local process subject to assessment, leading to the bottom-up evolution of its strategy in line with tactical innovations. Additionally, sponsorship from Iran is theorized to have enabled and supported this strategic

⁸ Ackerman, Gary Anthony. 'Title: "More Bang for the Buck": Examining the Determinants of Terrorist Adoption of New Weapons Technologies'. King's College London, 2014. Cragin, Kim. 'Hizballah, the Party of God'. In *Aptitude for Destruction*, by Brian A. Jackson and John C. Baker, 37–55. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005.; DeVore, Marc R., Armin B. Stähli, and Ulrike Esther Franke. 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation: How Hezbollah and Other Non-State Actors Develop New Capabilities'. *Comparative Strategy* 38, no. 4 (4 July 2019): 371–400.

⁹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Col. J.J. Graham, vol. 1, 3 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & C., 1918). p. 57

¹⁰ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, Veritas paperback edition, Veritas Paperbacks (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). p. 70

¹¹ Clausewitz, *On War*. p. 57

evolution towards deterrence through material assistance and encouragement aligning with Tehran's own deterrence interests in the region, specifically, against Israel. After waging guerilla warfare against Israel in Southern Lebanon for a number of years, Hezbollah gradually began to pivot strategically, by exploiting tactical innovations such as rocket warfare, among others, in the 1990s. Hezbollah started making deterrence central to their long-term military strategy in the 1990s.¹² Additionally, during the period of peace between 2000 and 2006, Hezbollah evolved and expanded its deterrence strategy further, combining elements of punishment and denial.¹³ The uneasy standoff of mutual deterrence Hezbollah was able to force Israel into from 1992 to 2006 came in no small part thanks to the punishing threat of missile barrages but was also exemplified in the self-admitted ineffectiveness of Israeli ground operations in 2006.¹⁴

This paper will, after laying out previous research, theory and methodology, divide the analysis into two sub-sections each dealing with one part of the causal mechanism theorized. Each section leverages sources such as interviews, primary and secondary accounts to discuss the mechanisms and attempt to provide a minimally sufficient explanation for the outcome of Hezbollah's strategic evolution towards deterrence. The previous research section will serve to situate this contribution in the academic literature and synthesize the existing scholarship. Furthermore, the gap in the research that this project aims to fill will also be discussed. In the theory section, the case-specific framework of analysis used will be outlined by presenting the different causal mechanisms to be investigated in the analysis. The methodology section will provide an account of why a process-tracing approach, using the explaining-outcome variable, was deemed most appropriate to answer the research question. It will also fully present the operationalization of the mechanisms in detail as part of the greater conglomerate mechanism of strategic evolution proposed.

¹² Iver Gabrielsen, 'The Evolution of Hezbollah's Strategy and Military Performance, 1982–2006', *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 2 (4 March 2014): 257–83. p. 260; James Worrall, Simon Mabon, and Gordon Clubb, *Hezbollah: From Islamic Resistance to Government* (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2016). p. 56

¹³ Brin Najzer, *The Hybrid Age: International Security in the Era of Hybrid Warfare*, 1st edition (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2020). p. 100

¹⁴ Al-Aloosy, 'Deterrence by Insurgents'. p. 1002; Gabrielsen, 'Hezbollah's Strategy and Tactics in the Security Zone from 1985 to 2000'; Ahron Bregman, *Israel's Wars: A History since 1947*, Fourth edition (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2016). p. 305

2 Previous Research

The contribution of this project is situated at the nexus of the literatures on insurgent strategies, Hezbollah, and deterrence. First, this section will outline the evolution of the nonstate warfare literature, at large. Second, it will more thoroughly examine previous research on Hezbollah's strategy and tactics which emphasize organizational learning. Third it will explain the how deterrence literature overlooks nonstate actors. Finally, it will clearly lay out the research gap this project aims to fill. In the early to mid-20th century, Mao (1937) and Che Guevara's (1961) foundational works are published as handguides written by insurgents for insurgents detailing the theoretical and practical underpinnings of guerilla strategies based on their partisan experiences.¹⁵ Emerging for the very opposite purpose, the French school of counterinsurgency encapsulated in Galula and Trinquier's works serve to provide state armies handguides on how to defeat insurgents. They are written by military cadres for military cadres with strategic frameworks for counterinsurgency drawing on the French experience of losing two wars in less than ten years to insurgent movements in both Vietnam and Algeria.¹⁶ Robert Taber's (1965) "War of the Flea" is perhaps one of the first, prominent works on nonstate warfare not produced by parties directly involved in the conduct of it. Taber discusses revolutionary guerilla warfare as an emerging force in the world through mostly descriptive accounts charting the seemingly universal strategies and tactics exhibited from Ireland to the Philippines.¹⁷

The next major revolution in the study of nonstate warfare occurs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is characterized by the perception of a general shift in predominance from conventional, interstate warfare to non-conventional, intra-state conflict exemplified by concepts such as "New Wars" and the "transformation of war".¹⁸ The general trend emphasized the evolving nature of 'War' at large, identifying an 'old' mode of conflict characterized by

¹⁵ See, respectively, Mao Tse-tung and Samuel B. Griffith, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, 1st ed. (Newburyport: Dover Publications, Incorporated, 2005) and Che Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

¹⁶ See, respectively, David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practise* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964); Roger Trinquier, *La guerre moderne, L'ordre du jours* (Paris: Table Ronde, 1961).

¹⁷ Robert Taber, *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare*, 1st [Brassey's] ed. (Washington, D.C: Brassey's, 2002).

¹⁸ See, respectively, Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 3., rev.updated ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).; Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

intra-state conventional warfare contrasted against the ‘new’ emerging mode of conflict defined by intra-state, unconventional dynamics. These works echo the proto-idea of “modern war” (“guerre moderne”) first described in 1961.¹⁹ Some focused on the diffuse character of “new wars” narrowing down on their transnational nature, overlap with criminal networks and ethno-religious causes.²⁰ Others emphasized the diffuse nature of War across all social spheres from the political, to the military, to the popular—eschewing the Clausewitzian trinitarian model of War that tends to neatly separate them.²¹ Both strands of thought do not focus much attention on the dynamics of insurgent strategy generally, or how these change.

The literature on nonstate warfare in the 21st century largely follows the contemporary conflicts as much of what has been written deals with terrorism and counterinsurgency, paying special attention to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. These works, based on experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq have gained great prominence as contemporary manuals of counterinsurgency and general literature on nonstate warfare.²² Alternatively however, scholars have pushed the literature forward conceptually beyond the dyadic of insurgency and counterinsurgency, investigating fundamental assumptions in the field or widening the scope to examine the organizational dynamics and their implications for insurgent groups.²³ Others yet, emphasize the idea of the 4th generation of warfare, building on the past ideas of the 1980s and 1990s, defined by its nonstate character and the role of technology in fundamentally altering the dynamic and nature of conflict.

Meanwhile, insurgents’ ability to learn and adapt their strategy continually remain secondary in focus while larger typologies of what war and nonstate warfare develop. Insurgent strategies and tactics as well as their ability to learn and evolve these over time have, nonetheless, received some attention. A number of authors have applied organizational learning

¹⁹ Trinquier, *La guerre moderne*.

²⁰ Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

²¹ Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*.

²² David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: University Press, 2011); David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²³ See, respectively, Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare: The Military Methods of Guerillas, Warlords, and Militias*, 1st ed (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

frameworks to understand how, why, and when insurgent groups might make tactical changes.²⁴ Some have sought to develop comprehensive theories of terrorist innovation with a focus on the adoption of new technology across a range of case studies.²⁵ Theory-driven approaches have focused on politico-strategic changes, examining several cases that saw major transformations to groups' aims or approaches to conflict in an effort to generate theories of insurgent learning at the macro-level.²⁶ There is some disagreement between what kinds of learning account for Hezbollah's tactical and strategic adaption with some largely emphasizing "incremental" learning while others put more weight on Hezbollah's Iranian sponsorship and "discontinuous learning."²⁷ Fundamentally, these authors are not necessarily expressing diametrically opposed views to each other but they do place varying degrees of emphasis on different empirical factors such as weapons, logistics, external relations and organizational structure in their assessment of Hezbollah's learning. What is common to both strands of thought however, is a lack of attention paid to the potential links between the tactical changes and strategic changes of insurgent groups, including Hezbollah. This is the first aspect of the gap this thesis aims to address as the study of insurgent strategy appears to have made few efforts to study and elucidate this potential link.

More recently, scholars have started attempting to abstract the application of organizational learning frameworks to violent non-state actors and examine beyond the micro-level of tactics or technological adaption.²⁸ Discussion of strategy in the broader sense, and how it relates to this organizational learning at the tactical level remains less prevalent however as the arguments

²⁴ Ackerman, 'Title: "More Bang for the Buck": Examining the Determinants of Terrorist Adoption of New Weapons Technologies'; Cragin, 'Hizballah, the Party of God'; Marc R. DeVore and Armin B. Stähli, 'Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness: Internal and External Determinants of the Rise of Violent Non-State Actors', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no. 2 (15 March 2015): 331–57; DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'; Carolin Görzig, *How Terrorists Learn: Organizational Learning and Beyond*, Political Violence Series (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2024).

²⁵ Adam Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation: Technology, Tactics and Global Trends*, Contemporary Terrorism Series (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2007). p. 2

²⁶ Florian Köhler et al., 'Double-Loop Learning in Terrorist Organizations: Facilitators and Impediments', in *How Terrorists Learn: Organizational Learning and Beyond* (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2024), 19–43. For a short discussion of Hezbollah specifically, Luis De La Calle, 'Downgading or Upsizing Strategies: How Rebels Learn About the Right Repertoire of Violence', in *How Terrorists Learn: Organizational Learning and Beyond*, by Carolin Görzig, Political Violence Series (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2024), 44–63.

²⁷ See Ackerman, 'Title: "More Bang for the Buck": Examining the Determinants of Terrorist Adoption of New Weapons Technologies'. DeVore and Stähli, 'Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness'. And DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation' for a greater emphasis on incremental learning and see Cragin, 'Hizballah, the Party of God'. for a more mixed assessment blending incremental and discontinuous learning.

²⁸ Görzig, *How Terrorists Learn*. p.3

emphasize structural factors such as the nature of the rebels' state adversary.²⁹ A number of scholars have, much like this thesis, taken more case-specific approaches to Hezbollah and focused on micro-level analysis of the groups' tactical innovations and adaptations.³⁰ Studies have put forward the notion that Tehran's funding, arms and training is an enabling factor in Hezbollah's tactical innovation by directly allowing them access to technologies and saving them significant effort in the procurement of weapons.³¹ This is a key concept that this research further builds on by incorporating it as an important part of the theorized supporting mechanism. Again, these studies do not discuss how these factors can affect the broader strategic postures and outlook of Hezbollah. This is something that this project aims to do.

Clearly the literature on nonstate warfare provides little in the way of a comprehensive examination of Hezbollah's strategic change to deterrence as the focus of the niche works that do discuss it is more on the micro-level of tactics. Similarly, the literature on deterrence has generally suffered from a lack of attention paid to nonstate actors such as Hezbollah despite the unique and interesting puzzle this represents. Some scholars have written about the fact that Hezbollah has a deterrence posture, something usually reserved for states and noted it as an unusual case.³² These generally concentrate on the mechanics of the deterrence relationship itself between Hezbollah and Israel, rather than how the relationship came to be. If the existence of Hezbollah's deterrence is so interesting, it follows that the question of how it came about is equally crucial. Scholars in this field have examined the functioning of the Hezbollah-Israel deterrence relationship, specifically, from the Israeli perspective, with some emphasizing Israel's "cumulative deterrence" as an effective long-term military strategy and other, the pitfalls of Israeli red line communication.³³ What appears lacking from these trends in the different literatures is twofold, and precisely what this thesis seeks to explore. First, the nonstate warfare literature appears to have left the question of how Hezbollah evolved a deterrence

²⁹ De La Calle, 'Downgading or Upsizing Strategies: How Rebels Learn About the Right Repertoire of Violence'. p. 61

³⁰ Cragin, 'Hizballah, the Party of God'; DeVore and Stähli, 'Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness'; DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'.

³¹ Cragin, 'Hizballah, the Party of God'. p. 49; DeVore and Stähli, 'Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness'. p.350-352

³² Al-Aloosy, 'Deterrence by Insurgents'. p. 1004; Gabrielsen, 'The Evolution of Hezbollah's Strategy and Military Performance, 1982-2006'. p. 274

³³ Charles P. Kirchofer, 'Managing Non-State Threats with Cumulative Deterrence-by-Denial', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 2 (2017): 21-35; Shmuel Bar, 'Deterring Nonstate Terrorist Groups: The Case of Hizballah', *Comparative Strategy* 26, no. 5 (13 December 2007): 469-93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01495930701750307>.

strategy hitherto unanswered. Second, deterrence literature has given some, but very little, consideration to deterrence from the perspective of Hezbollah or any other nonstate actor.

The contribution of this thesis constitutes an attempt to build on and further develop the existing literature on Hezbollah's tactical innovation towards a discussion of strategic evolution with specific reference to deterrence. At the same time, this thesis attempts to examine the Hezbollah-Israel deterrence relationship from the perspective of Hezbollah rather than Israel as deterrence literature has traditionally approached it. In doing this, it attempts to address to concurrent gaps in intersecting literatures outlined above. First, few works have discussed strategic evolution at a macro-level rather than the micro-level of tactical innovation. Building on these works and developing the relationship between tactical and strategic evolution is one part of how this project makes its contribution while remaining grounded in existing research. Furthermore, the literature on deterrence has, with a few exceptions, generally overlooked the use of deterrence by nonstate actors and remains beholden to an exclusively state-centric logic. With this in mind, this thesis leverages the existing theories of organizational learning and principal-agent theory in order to understand how Hezbollah evolved a deterrence strategy. The focus of this project is on Hezbollah's evolution of a deterrent strategy rather than the nature of the strategy itself. Even so, it still opens the door for further research on deterrence by nonstate actors than what already exists whilst also pushing the scholarship on insurgent strategy further. In order to do this, the forthcoming theory section will present all the key definitions, concepts, and theories used to develop the case-specific framework in the analysis section.

3 Theory and Definitions

The core theoretical framework that will serve to develop the case-specific framework and theorized causal mechanisms is the theory of organizational learning as it will be outlined in this section. Definitions and the supporting principal-agent theory will also be clarified in this section. The first part of this section will define commonly used terms and concepts such as strategy and tactics. It will also present the coercion framework that informs the conception of different strategies more clearly. Second, this section will present the core organizational learning framework in its relevance to the central causal mechanism developed. Finally, the supporting framework of principal-agent theory will briefly be outlined in its relevance to this case. Due to its case-driven nature, this project necessitates such an approach, relying on more than one theoretic framework, in order to account for a mix of internal and external theorized mechanisms.

3.1 Definitions and Coercion Framework

For all discussion of strategy and tactics, this essay relies on the widespread Clausewitzian definitions as they relate to war. Clausewitz says: “[...] tactics is the theory of the use of military forces in combat. Strategy is the theory of the use of combats for the object of the war.”³⁴ With this, there is a clearly delineated hierarchical structure in the overall conduct of war where tactics are subservient to strategy and the latter is in turn subservient to the political aims or ends of war. This definition is exceedingly straightforward, holistic and ubiquitous. The neat hierarchy and distinctions between the tactical, strategic, and aims provide much-needed clarity to investigate how tactical organizational learning affects strategic evolution. The term innovation, denoting, learning and adapting warrants a more precise definition given its importance to this study. For this, Adam Dolnik’s definition of innovation as “an act of introduction of a new method or technology or the improvement of an already existing capacity” is used as it has precedent in relevant literature and is well-adapted to the insurgent context of Hezbollah.³⁵

³⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*. p. 56

³⁵ Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation*. p. 6

As for coercion and its subordinate concepts of deterrence, compellence, denial, and punishment, this thesis emphasizes the psychological threat dimension of deliberately withheld or unleashed violence rather than brute strength as the mechanism of coercion.³⁶ The psychological levers of the latent threat of pain that adversaries can push, or pull is the key constructive aspect of coercive strategies. This umbrella term of coercion includes ideas such as compellence, deterrence, punishment and denial. All of these rely, to some extent, on the latent threat of the use of force. First, deterrence aims to discourage (deter) an adversary from adopting a potential course of action through credible threats;³⁷ Second, compellence aims to force (compel) an adversary to abandon an existing course of action through threats;³⁸ Third, punishment and denial are mechanisms to either force an adversary to abandon a course of action by inflicting violence or making a course of action seem unappealing or unrealistic in the first place.³⁹ This theory also defines the key paradigms underpinning deterrence as capability, credibility, and communication which are all necessary constructive aspects.⁴⁰ These concepts, and the coercion framework more broadly, very simply defined here will be the main lens through which strategy will be understood when discussing its evolution. As the focus of this thesis is more on the mechanics of strategic evolution rather than the strategy itself, a simple and straightforward outline like the one above will more than suffice.

3.2 Core Theory: Organizational Learning

This section will introduce the theoretical framework of organizational learning that acts as the backbone for the theorizing of the central causal mechanism and analysis in this paper. Fundamentally, the question of how Hezbollah evolved deterrence as a strategy is about exploring the mechanisms of its deployment of organizational learning. This project aims to ground itself theoretically in organizational learning and contribute greater depth and nuance to the existing literature. Organizational learning stresses the understanding that organizations are not static entities, but rather, they are continually evolving by seeking new skills and knowledge.⁴¹ The hallmark of organizational learning is that the value of knowledge is realized

³⁶ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. p. 3

³⁷ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. p. 69-70

³⁸ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*.p. 69-70

³⁹ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*. p. 6-7, p. 200-201

⁴⁰ Sobelman, 'Learning to Deter'. p. 155

⁴¹ Köhler et al., 'Double-Loop Learning in Terrorist Organizations: Facilitators and Impediments'. p. 23

and resources are consciously dedicated to pursuing and incorporating new knowledge into operations and plans in a process of improvement.⁴² The process itself involves a multitude of different steps predicated on the diffusion of individual learning to the wider organization. Various forms of inquiry and implementation feed into a transformational change in a whole organization's rules, processes, and operations.⁴³ Learning, conceptualised at the organizational level, is the mechanistic force behind tactical innovation and strategic adaption by insurgents.⁴⁴

The theory has seen the concepts of single-loop and double-loop learning essentially be translated into tactical innovation and strategic learning, respectively. For clarity's sake, one should note, the concepts of single and double-loop learning are also known as incremental and discontinuous learning, respectively, in some of the literature.⁴⁵ Single-loop learning involves "the improvement of operational techniques and their effectiveness" while the underlying aims, strategy, and norms remain taken for granted or unaltered.⁴⁶ This understanding is what underpins many of the existing contributions with reference to Hezbollah's tactical innovation, and adaption of new technologies.⁴⁷ For this project, this well-established understanding continues to inform the first step of the mechanism but is expanded on by situating it inside of a larger mechanism.

According to Argyris and Schön's original theory, double-loop learning, is consistent with a questioning of underlying values, norms and aims and denotes a greater, deeper degree of abstraction in reflection and the resultant adaption.⁴⁸ For instance, changing the detonation mechanism of a roadside bomb from radio to cell phone when the adversary started jamming radio frequencies is an example of a tactical innovation, typical of single-loop learning. On the other hand, shifting from one type of coercive strategy like compellence to another like deterrence is a far bigger change, emblematic of double-loop learning. With this established

⁴² James JF Forest, *Teaching Terror: Strategic and Tactical Learning in the Terrorist World* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006). p. 18

⁴³ Köhler et al., 'Double-Loop Learning in Terrorist Organizations: Facilitators and Impediments'. p. 23

⁴⁴ Louise Kettle and Andrew Mumford, 'Terrorist Learning: A New Analytical Framework', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 7 (3 July 2017): 523–38. p. 523

⁴⁵ DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'; Cragin, 'Hizballah, the Party of God'.

⁴⁶ Köhler et al., 'Double-Loop Learning in Terrorist Organizations: Facilitators and Impediments'. p. 22

⁴⁷ Ackerman, 'Title: "More Bang for the Buck": Examining the Determinants of Terrorist Adoption of New Weapons Technologies'; Cragin, 'Hizballah, the Party of God'; DeVore and Stähli, 'Explaining Hezbollah's Effectiveness'; DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'; Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation*.

⁴⁸ Köhler et al., 'Double-Loop Learning in Terrorist Organizations: Facilitators and Impediments'. p.22

distinction between the two levels of learning presented in the literature, this thesis formulates a mechanism that bridges the relationship between the two types of learning. The causal mechanism in this project theorizes how single-loop learning translates into double-loop learning in the case of Hezbollah's strategy. The logic is that the mechanism, as a whole, builds on the idea that continual tactical innovation is actually the driving force behind strategic adaptation in a process whereby strategies are aligned with tactics as the latter is improved.

The process of 'learning' itself has been further compartmentalized into two distinct phases or parts. Broadly, these have been framed as "inquiry" followed by "implementation" and, theoretically, the process of learning begins with inquiry through self-reflection based on detected errors.⁴⁹ This presupposes that an error or discrepancy has to be recognized for a learning process to begin through assessment but glances over the potential organisations show for incremental improvement through dedicated efforts. Some have developed this idea further and emphasized how organizations can implement "learning-by-doing" and continuously innovate tactically.⁵⁰ It is based in this idea, that experimentation and innovation are continuous processes ensuring long-term effectiveness, that tactical innovation finds its root and not necessarily in the detection of errors. This entails a separate assessment and reflection phase of learning at different organizational levels that channels this continuous single-loop learning into the potential transformations of strategy, in turn denoting double-loop learning. This is the crux of the theorized core mechanism proposed in this project.

3.3 [Principal-Agent Theory](#)

It would arguably be unfeasible to do a case study on Hezbollah without discussing the latter's crucial relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The country's material, ideological, and political sponsorship has been key from Hezbollah's very inception.⁵¹ Discussion of this relationship and how it relates to Hezbollah's strategic evolution is necessary to understand the causal mechanism of state sponsorship. One of the most prominent theoretical

⁴⁹ Köhler et al., 'Double-Loop Learning in Terrorist Organizations: Facilitators and Impediments'. p. 22-23

⁵⁰ DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'. p. 379

⁵¹ Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2007). p. 110

frameworks in the literature on state sponsorship of insurgents is the principal-agent theory.⁵² The theory posits state sponsorship of NSAGs as a delegatory relationship whereby, the principal (state) and the agent (NSAG) enjoy a relationship governed by various dynamics of interest, autonomy and control.⁵³ This provides the framework for understanding how sponsorship drives Hezbollah's strategic evolution of deterrence and serves to construct the supporting causal mechanism accounting for the role of Iranian sponsorship.

This theory will serve to inform the causal mechanism of Iranian sponsorship in its operationalization. Depending on the extent of aid provided, sponsors are expected to exercise some degree of control over the agent's "aims, strategies and tactics."⁵⁴ As such, one aspect of the supporting mechanism is theorized as a manifestation of control or influence predicated on the conditionality of sponsorship as established in this literature. Given the expansive scale of Iranian sponsorship of Hezbollah, one would expect the state to have considerable influence of its strategy. At the same time however, the more the sponsor and agent's interests align, the more autonomy the latter is expected to enjoy. This is because the sponsor is less likely to risk much "agency slack", whereby the agent pursues its own interests using the sponsor's resources.⁵⁵ This is an interesting and rare opportunity to further explore the dialectic between interest alignment and resource dependence in the Iran-Hezbollah relationship through the theorized mechanism. However small, this is in some way a contribution to the proxy-war literature as well, further adding nuance by elucidating aspects of this specific relationship. Next, the methodology section will explain the research design and fully present the framework of strategic evolution theorized.

⁵² See Idean Salehyan, 'The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 3 (June 2010): 493–515; Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, 'Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups', *International Organization* 65, no. 4 (October 2011): 709–44; Niklas Karlén et al., 'Forum: Conflict Delegation in Civil Wars', *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (15 December 2021): 2048–78.

⁵³ Salehyan, 'The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations'. p. 495

⁵⁴ Salehyan, 'The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations'. P. 501

⁵⁵ Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, 'Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups'. p. 714

4 Methodology: A Case-driven Approach

4.1 Method: Explaining-outcome Process-tracing

In order to attempt to answer to the research question, a process-tracing design was chosen as its nature makes it the most apt qualitative methodology well-suited to the focus on a single case study and the interest in causal processes and mechanisms.⁵⁶ This project's research question explicitly frames the object of investigation as causal processes by asking the question of *how* Hezbollah evolved a deterrence strategy and as such, the qualitative approach of process-tracing is particularly apt. The case here appears as a unique outlier based on the observation that Hezbollah is the only NSAG in an asymmetric conflict that has evolved a deterrence strategy, and this is the reason why it presents an interesting research puzzle. As the goal of this thesis is to figure out how this specific, rare outcome was produced, process-tracing provides the best methodological approach due to its detail-oriented nature and aptitude for identifying causal processes.⁵⁷

Within process-tracing, there are different approaches, variably theory-driven and case-driven. Some approaches seek to test existing general theories, or to build new, generalizable ones to account for general phenomena.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, case-driven approaches, such as the one adopted in this project, aim to account for a particularly puzzling outcome by theorizing and investigating causal mechanisms with a degree of specificity to that case with a comparably smaller emphasis on generalizability. Case-driven designs, also known as explaining-outcome designs “[...] can be thought of as a single-outcome study, defined as seeking the causes of a specific outcome in a single case.”⁵⁹ As is evident from the research problem of this thesis, a case-driven, explaining-outcome design has been chosen to match with the unique and puzzling

⁵⁶ David Collier, ‘Understanding Process Tracing’, *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44, no. 4 (October 2011): 823–30. p. 824

⁵⁷ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, United States: MIT Press, 2005). p. 190; Andrew Bennett and Colin Elman, ‘Complex Causal Relations and Case Study Methods: The Example of Path Dependence’, *Political Analysis* 14, no. 3 (2006): p. 261

⁵⁸ Derek Beach, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines*, Second Edition. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019). p. 11

⁵⁹ Beach, *Process-Tracing Methods*. p. 18

character of the outcome in question. Apart from this, theory-driven and case-driven approaches differ in several important ways. Case-driven approaches often rely on “eclectic theorization” and strive towards a “minimally sufficient” explanation for its case accounting for the outcome in its entirety.⁶⁰ This contrasts with the heavily theory-driven approaches that emphasize testing or developing claims, specifically, to be generalized and applied elsewhere.

Hence, the ambition for this project is to craft a minimally sufficient explanation of how Hezbollah evolved a deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Israel from 1992 to 2006 relying primarily on causal inference. In order to do this, various theoretical frameworks relevant to previous literature are leveraged to develop a “case-specific composite mechanism”.⁶¹ The material used in this project ranges from secondary accounts of events surrounding Hezbollah and Israel, to contemporaneous and non-contemporaneous accounts by the two most prominent leaders of Hezbollah in this period.⁶² Minimal sufficiency, is ascertained in arguing that all relevant and strictly necessary factors have been accounted for in the explanatory framework developed. This is in line with the idea that this type of process-tracing is an “[...] iterative research strategy that aims to trace the complex conglomerate of systematic and case-specific causal mechanisms that produced the outcome in question.”⁶³

4.2 Scope and Limitations

This sub-section will discuss the scope, aims and limitations of this project. Like all projects, choices influenced by external constraints had to be made resulting in some limitations. The temporal scope of this study, for example, necessitated limiting due to the afforded word count and the decision to designate 1992 to 2006 as the scope was made for several reasons. First, putting the starting date at the earliest point possible, at Hezbollah’s first sign of a deterrent strategy, allows the case to be focused on the most relevant period possible. Second, the year 2006 was chosen as the endpoint due this being the year of the July war which provides a natural climactic point for Hezbollah’s strategy in action in its first large-scale military confrontation with Israel since 2000. Additionally, the scope of this study necessitates

⁶⁰ Beach, *Process-Tracing Methods*. p. 19-20

⁶¹ Beach, *Process-Tracing Methods*. p. 21

⁶² Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*, ed. Nicholas Noe, trans. Ellen Khouri (Verso Books, 2007).; Na’im Qāsim, *Hizbullah : The Story from Within*, trans. Dalia Khalil (London : Saqi, 2005).

⁶³ Beach, *Process-Tracing Methods*. p. 19, p. 63

delineation due to the sheer complexity and wealth of the case as it would be unfeasible to cover it all, or even most of it, in this project. The ambition is that this case study's contribution will encourage further research into this topic and that a study with a larger scope study can investigate Hezbollah's strategic evolution starting from its inception and continuing post-2006, ideally with a continuous timeline limited only by the time of writing.

Additionally, the reality of the lack of primary sources accessible from the researcher's position is a hindrance. This has meant a reliance on secondary sources and public statements, something that could not be avoided but needs to be considered. Hezbollah's status as an armed organization precludes access by definition to a certain degree, but their involvement in the Lebanese political process since 1992 has led to leadership figures speaking publicly more frequently than other insurgent leaders who may not need or want to make public appearances. Since these few primary sources are accessible and present a unique opportunity, they will be used in this study. It is, however, important to remain conscious of the fact that these are politically motivated public communications and take this into account in the overall assessment.

Additionally, these fail to tell us much about individuals or groups outside the leadership except through inference, imbuing the analysis with a bias towards figures like Hassan Nasrallah and Naim Qassem. As a result of all the secrecy surrounding internal decision-making processes, there is a large degree of inference made from more circumstantial evidence and despite the attempt to do this as rigorously as possible through cross-referencing, it inherently impacts the degree to which analysis can be definitive. This approach emphasizes diverse sources in a triangulating process bringing a greater of reliability to the analysis. Perhaps future projects on Hezbollah, larger in scope and funding, can rely more on primary source material than this one and fill in any blind spots directly resulting from this limitation with new information.

As touched upon earlier, generalizability is more limited in this type of research design when compared with more theory-driven process-tracing approaches. At the same time, it is valuable in accounting for exceedingly puzzling, rare, or unique outcomes. While the generalizability may be lessened in comparison to traditional process-tracing and the conglomerate mechanism as a whole is case-specific, in theory, nothing prevents the core or supporting mechanism on their own from holding relevance for other studies. To be clear, this is not to say that any part of the explanatory framework could be exported and tested elsewhere, but rather that the insights derived about how Hezbollah evolved deterrence could be relevant

to the broader insurgent strategic evolution. In sum, deep case studies such as this one are undoubtedly valuable in generating specific insights about important cases such as this while at the same time partially carrying over to other works centred on insurgent strategy, deterrence generally, or Hezbollah specifically. This strikes a balance between generalizability and specificity that heavily favours the latter without completely abandoning the former.

4.3 Mechanisms

This section will present the conglomerate causal mechanism that emerged through the investigation of the case rooted in the theoretical frameworks and previous research presented earlier. It will start with the core mechanisms and then present the supporting mechanism. The overall conglomerate causal mechanism is made up of one systemic and one case-specific causal mechanism. Theoretically speaking, the conglomerate is a singular composite mechanism capturing the interplay of these mechanisms to jointly account for the outcome in question. The composite mechanism itself necessitates being case-specific but the sub-mechanisms separately, however, have both systemic and case-specific elements.

4.3.1 Core Mechanism – *Tactical-strategic Alignment*

First, it stands to reason from the past literature which has focused on Hezbollah that tactical innovation through organizational learning can be theorized as a major causal component of overall strategic evolution and in this framework will be given primacy. Past research has examined tactical innovation at the micro-level. In this project's mechanism, tactical innovation is developed further and seen to result in strategic changes through an assessment process whereby strategy is aligned with tactics. Second, the examination of Hezbollah's evolution of a deterrence by denial strategy showed that the alignment of tactics and strategy can occur in both bottom-up and top-down fashions. This transformational mechanism appears to be continuous and incremental and flexible, creating reversible dual causal chains upstream and downstream between the micro-level (tactical) and macro-level (strategic).⁶⁴ The mechanism illustrates the flexibility Hezbollah demonstrates in aligning strategy and tactics and vice-versa. It is theorized as follows:

⁶⁴ See Beach, *Process-Tracing Methods*. p. 54

- (1) **Tactical Innovation** – Local commanders and militants use new tactics and/or improve existing ones.
- (2) **Assessment** – Decision-making leaders assess the value of new tactics or improvements in relation to the group’s aims and strategy.
- (3) **Strategic Alignment** – Decision-making leaders adjust overall strategy codifying novel, coherent policies or strategic doctrines.

In other words, through a bottom-up mechanism relying on local commanders and militants diffusing innovation upstream, decision-making leaders adapt the organisation’s strategy as a whole through internal learning, codifying the learning into coherent strategies. Alternatively, leaders show the ability to centrally plan a deterrence strategy and align the organization’s tactics with the strategic vision in a downstream fashion. These processes ensure the overall strategic posture reflects on the ground tactical realities and vice-versa. This core causal mechanism will be dubbed *tactical-strategic alignment* and denotes the process by which tactical innovations drive strategic alignment and strategic outlooks drive tactical innovation.

4.3.2 Supporting Mechanism – *Iranian Sponsorship*

The second mechanism is a case-specific and supporting mechanism. The mechanism reflects how Iranian support is an enabling factor for the core mechanism. By providing weapons and technologies, Iran enables freer experimentation and innovation of Hezbollah’s tactical repertoire than might otherwise be possible. Alternatively, Iran lends its support to more top-down strategic alignment through material support. In contrast to the core mechanism, which is firmly rooted in institutionalist theories of causality, the principal-agent theory applied for this process is rooted in a rational-actor paradigm emphasizing costs and benefits.⁶⁵ Though this may seem at odds with the institutionalist causality in the previously outlined mechanism but there is reason for this. The core mechanism is an operationalization of an endogenous process whilst state sponsorship from Iran is definitionally an exogenous force to Hezbollah. This internal-external distinction justifies what may seem like theoretical incongruence as the mechanisms can be said to represent two different layers of causality, the endogenous and exogenous. This supporting mechanism is theorized as follows:

⁶⁵ Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham, ‘Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups’. p. 715

- (1) **Sponsorship** – Iran sponsors Hezbollah providing largely unconditional material support (ex: funds, arms, technology).
- (2) **Leveraging** – Hezbollah accepts support and utilizes it in its activities.
- (3) **Proxy Alignment** – Iran encourages the codification and expansion of deterrence strategies

In sum, Iranian sponsorship contributes to the evolution of a deterrence strategy by facilitating the tactical-strategic alignment mechanism and further encouraging Hezbollah's alignment in accordance with its own strategic deterrence interests vis-à-vis Israel. This mechanism will be referred to as the *Iranian sponsorship mechanism*

Together, these continuous and inter-linked mechanisms form a composite mechanism, which taken as a whole, is presented here to satisfy a minimally sufficient explanation of the outcome, fully accounting for how Hezbollah's evolved a strategy of deterrence. The conglomerate mechanism whereby *tactical-strategic alignment* is supported by the *Iranian sponsorship* mechanism, is called ***strategic evolution***. The relationship between *tactical-strategic-alignment* and *Iranian* sponsorship is unequal. *Iranian sponsorship* acts as an external exogenous force on Hezbollah, complementing the endogenous *tactical-strategic alignment* mechanism by enabling it in the ways described above. Together, these form the conglomerate mechanism, alternatively referred to as the explanatory framework developed in this thesis.

5 Analysis and Discussion

The analysis and discussion section will first present a brief background section providing context and a general timeline of events. After this section, the *tactical-strategic alignment* mechanism and *Iranian support* mechanisms will be examined, respectively, before the discussion is synthesized in the final part of the analysis. Each sub-section will focus on one aspect of the conglomerate mechanism specifically, tracing it chronologically through key events and issues.

5.1 Background and Timeline

The emergence of Hezbollah can be, most directly, traced back to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 which Norton describes as “creating conditions for the establishment and flourishing of Hezbollah.”⁶⁶ Young Shiaa clerics in Lebanon, many of them long-time members of politico-religious organizations like Amal were motivated by the success of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and gradually coalesced to establish a similar organization with the aim of revolution in Lebanon.⁶⁷ A core of dedicated clerics started slowly but surely vying for influence among the Lebanese Shiites, preaching active resistance against the Israeli occupiers and, with support from the IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps), launching attacks against the occupying force.⁶⁸ By 1983, the first *shoura* council with three members of what would become Hezbollah was formed, establishing the hitherto informal organization’s existence.⁶⁹

It would not be until 1985, however, that the organization formally declared itself to the world in a press conference with an open letter. This letter declared the group’s goals as driving Israeli, American, and French occupiers out of Lebanon, obliterating Israel from existence, and allowing the Lebanese to select a system of government of their own choosing.⁷⁰ This open letter establishes the organization’s aims and sub-goals. Relevant to this analysis are the goals regarding Israel, namely, the liberation of Lebanon from Israeli occupation and the obliteration

⁶⁶ Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 33

⁶⁷ Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (London: Fourth Estate, 1997). p. 48

⁶⁸ Jaber, *Hezbollah*. p. 50

⁶⁹ Jaber, *Hezbollah*. p. 52

⁷⁰ Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 36-39; Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle against Israel*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2011). p. 71-72

of the Israeli state. Given the pragmatic realities of the power asymmetry and impossibility of achieving the latter goal, it is safe to assume, as Nasrallah later stated in 1992, that Hezbollah actually operates with the first goal in mind as a realistically achievable outcome.⁷¹

At first, Hezbollah tactics were mostly centred around suicide car bombings, the kidnapping of foreigners in Lebanon, and rudimentary guerilla tactics conducted in a decentralized manner.⁷² The 1982 to 1985 period was, according to Hassan Nasrallah the “popular resistance” in contrast to the “organized resistance” that began in earnest in 1985.⁷³ The popular aspect of the struggle at this stage is reflected in the diffuse, decentralized nature of the Shia resistance in these early years. This phase of the conflict was marked with stunning strategic success for Hezbollah through suicide car bombing attacks, who forced the French and American Multinational Force to withdraw entirely from Lebanon in 1983.⁷⁴ It also forced Israel to withdraw from most of Lebanon to the security zone in Southern Lebanon in 1985.⁷⁵ By the late 1980s, Hezbollah would more definitively concentrate its focus on guerilla tactics such as ambushes, small-team raids and IEDs in order to effectively implement their punishment strategy against Israel.⁷⁶

By the early 1990s, Hezbollah had almost completely shifted its focus to an intense guerilla campaign against Israeli forces in the security zone, a small strip of land extending from the Israeli border several kilometres into Lebanon directly occupied by the IDF to protect the Israeli border.⁷⁷ A status-quo emerged whereby Hezbollah was consistently waging an ever-improving, sophisticated guerilla campaign against the IDF and their proxy, the SLA (South Lebanon Army) up until the unilateral withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon in May 2000.⁷⁸ Simultaneously, starting in 1992, Hezbollah would discover how to use their Katyusha rockets to bombard Israeli population centres just south of the border marking the beginning of the

⁷¹ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*, Significant Issues Series, 0736-7136 ; v. 29, No. 4 (Washington, D.C: CSIS Press, 2007). p. 34; Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 63

⁷² DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, ‘Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation’. p. 385; Cragin, ‘Hizballah, the Party of God’. p. 41; Daniel Isaac Helmer, *Flipside of the COIN: Israel’s Lebanese Incursion Between 1982-2000* (DIANE Publishing, 2010). p. 50-51

⁷³ Marcus, *Israel’s Long War with Hezbollah*. p. 41

⁷⁴ Worrall, Mabon, and Clubb, *Hezbollah*. p. 44

⁷⁵ Worrall, Mabon, and Clubb, *Hezbollah*. p.44; DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, ‘Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation’. p. 387

⁷⁶ Cragin, ‘Hizballah, the Party of God’. p. 45; Bregman, *Israel’s Wars*. p. 270

⁷⁷ Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 79

⁷⁸ Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 129-131; Bregman, *Israel’s Wars*. p. 285

evolution of their deterrence strategy. The IAF (Israeli Air Force) conducted two major operations in the 1990s: the first in July 1993 dubbed “Operation Accountability” which lasted six days and the second in April 1996 dubbed ‘Operation Grapes of Wrath’ lasting sixteen days.⁷⁹ 1996’s operation was largely a rerun of the 1993 one albeit on a large scale of destruction. More importantly, these two key events established and cemented a mutual deterrence and limited conflict relationship between Israel and Hezbollah following specific “rules of the game” as they have come to be known.⁸⁰

The Israeli withdrawal of 2000 marked a new chapter in the conflict as, Hezbollah and Israel were ostensibly at peace now but engaged in a limited, low-intensity continuation of conflict restricted to the disputed Shebaa farms area.⁸¹ Generally speaking, the period between 2000 and July 2006 was exceedingly calm despite this and was marked by a remarkable build-up of military capabilities by Hezbollah heralding a continuation and further expansion of their deterrence strategy.⁸² On July 12th 2006, the first cross-border Hezbollah attack since 2001, a successful kidnapping operation against an IDF patrol, would spark a 34-day full-scale war between Hezbollah and Israel signalling Hezbollah’s miscalculation and the failure of deterrence between the two.⁸³ The war would see Hezbollah deploy an oft-studied combined strategy of deterrence by denial and punishment that relied on a mix of guerilla and static defence tactics clearly prepared for years.⁸⁴ The war would be result in a political and military stalemate even if claimed a victory by both sides but the culmination of Hezbollah’s strategic evolution towards deterrence was in full show.⁸⁵

5.2 1992-2000: The Emergence of Punishment

⁷⁹ Marcus, *Israel’s Long War with Hezbollah*. p. 142, p. 145

⁸⁰ Jaber, *Hezbollah*. p. 171

⁸¹ Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 90; Marcus, *Israel’s Long War with Hezbollah*. p. 91

⁸² Bregman, *Israel’s Wars*. p. 286; Reuven Erlich, ‘The Road to the Second Lebanon War, 2000-2006: Strategic Changes in Lebanon, the Middle East, and the International Theater’, *The Quiet Decade: (Institute for National Security Studies, 2017)*. p. 18-19

⁸³ Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 134-35; Bregman, *Israel’s Wars*. p. 287; Marcus, *Israel’s Long War with Hezbollah*. p. 93; Cordesman, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*. p. 32

⁸⁴ Najzer, *The Hybrid Age*. p. 100; DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, ‘Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation’. p. 415; Worrall, Mabon, and Clubb, *Hezbollah*. p. 56; Biddle, *Nonstate Warfare*. p. 107-146

⁸⁵ Al-Aloosy, ‘Deterrence by Insurgents’. p. 1004; DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, ‘Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation’. p. 327

The starting point of Hezbollah's evolution of a deterrence strategy is found in the February 1992 assassination of their secretary-general Abbas Al-Musawi and his family by Israeli gunships.⁸⁶ Hezbollah had possessed the infamous 122mm unguided Katyusha rockets for some time as part of their arsenal but it was only in direct response to this attack by the IDF that the spontaneous firing of Katyushas towards Israeli towns, against the leadership's orders, was carried out by local fighters.⁸⁷ In an interview less than 10 days after the assassination of Al-Musawi, Hassan Nasrallah, who replaced him as Hezbollah's secretary-general was asked who had launched the Katyusha rockets and said: "We have no information in this regard, and cannot point a finger at anyone." He continued, also saying "[...] we do not condone this kind of behaviour or work in this manner."

Naim Qassem, the deputy secretary-general and second in command, would also claim that this first use of Katyusha rockets against Israeli towns represented Hezbollah "introducing the rockets as a new factor in the confrontation" and that "[a]fterwards, Hezbollah clearly tied such action to reciprocity of the same suffered by Lebanese civilians...".⁸⁸ Both of the highest-ranking members of Hezbollah claim that the first firing of Katyusha rockets was not a deliberate top-down command or policy, but rather, a decision made in situ by commanders or militants on the ground. This information illustrates the theorized first step of the *tactical-strategic alignment* mechanism whereby experimentation and innovation occurs in the field by local commanders or militants exercising some degree of autonomy.

In the very same interview, though Nasrallah claims to be unaware of who exactly fired the Katyushas in February 1992, he recognizes their tactical success and hints at the resultant strategic adjustment Hezbollah would make saying they should tell the enemy: "If you attack us, we will use our Katyushas, if you do not attack we will not use our Katyushas."⁸⁹ This constitutes an early indication of Hezbollah's leadership beginning to evolve their strategy towards deterrence by punishment through strategic alignment. Next, the two pivotal Israeli military operations during the 1990s will be investigated.

⁸⁶ Al-Aloosy, 'Deterrence by Insurgents'. p. 1002; Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 97, p. 132; Shmuel Bar, 'Deterring Nonstate Terrorist Groups: The Case of Hizballah', *Comparative Strategy* 26, no. 5 (13 December 2007): 469-93. p. 469-470

⁸⁷ Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 132-133

⁸⁸ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 61

⁸⁹ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 62

Operation Accountability was an intensive air and artillery bombing campaign conducted by the IAF for six days during July 1993.⁹⁰ The aim was to depopulate and demoralize Southern Lebanon's civilians eroding Hezbollah's support while pressuring Iran and Syria to reign the latter in by flooding Lebanon with 200,000 internally displaced refugees.⁹¹ Hezbollah's response to the assault, aside from regular operations in the security zone, focused heavily on bombardment with Katyusha rockets of towns and cities in northern Israel, averaging 34 rockets daily during the operation.⁹² This was explicitly articulated as a reaction to the targeting of civilians in Lebanon and an attempt to deter Israel from bombing civilians in response to Hezbollah operations against Israeli combatants. Naim Qassem claims that, as a result of Israeli actions, "[...] the Resistance resorted to aiming Katyusha rockets at the northern Israeli settlements." He emphasizes this as an escalation from targeting Israeli soldiers, saying the latter was "proving insufficient to deter Israeli targeting of Lebanese civilian targets."⁹³

Qassem's account potentially tells us a number of things. His statement alludes to the idea that deterring Israel from harming Lebanese civilians was partly an aim of Hezbollah and that the inadequacy, in this regard, of their previous strategy targeting IDF soldiers was the impetus for the use of Katyushas against civilian targets in response to Operation Accountability. Qassem's explicit framing of reciprocity in the firing of Katyushas supports the existence of the third step of strategic alignment in the mechanism as it presents a coherent policy or strategy of deterrence by punishment emerging. Taking the statement about the initial 1992 firing into consideration, his words indicate that Hezbollah had, by 1993, evolved a rudimentary deterrence by punishment strategy. Furthermore, Nasrallah's statements on August 27th, 1993, one month after the end of 'Accountability' further elucidate the mechanics of how such a strategy came about. The Secretary General said: "Before the end of the aggression, some of the officials started to *evaluate* (emphasis added) the Katyusha policy to determine whether it was wrong and hurried, or correct, and tried to discover its achievements."⁹⁴ This directly belies an assessment phase in Hezbollah's strategic evolution, as Nasrallah clearly speaks of an evaluation process among "officials."⁹⁵ The secretive nature of the internal

⁹⁰ Jaber, *Hezbollah*. p. 173; Cragin, 'Hizballah, the Party of God'. p. 47; Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 83

⁹¹ Jaber, *Hezbollah*. p. 173

⁹² DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'. p. 420

⁹³ Qāsim, *Hizbullah*. p. 74

⁹⁴ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 106

⁹⁵ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 106

workings of a militant organization, especially when it comes to sensitive issues such as internal procedures and decision-making at the highest level generally makes more informative sources like meeting minutes or internal reports difficult to come by. Of course, any interpretation of a public utterance by a political leader has to be tempered by consideration of its potentially propagandic purposes.

Furthermore, Nasrallah goes on to say of the “policy” that:

The Katyusha bombardment has led to a new formula based on mutual forced displacement, mutual destruction, and equal terror. This formula was imposed by the Katyusha, and not the operations of the resistance in the border belt. There is a very sensitive topic for the Israelis right now—namely the security of their settlements in northern Palestine.⁹⁶

This is, like Qassem’s account, consistent with the acknowledgement of a nascent strategy of deterrence by punishment as Hezbollah aims to discourage Israel from bombing civilians by reciprocating the bombing and establishing it as a rule for the future. This event signals the codification of Hezbollah’s rocket warfare as a “new formula” or coherent policy completing the alignment of strategy with tactics. Qassem and Nasrallah’s accounts surrounding the 1993 operation, combined with the evidence of tactical innovation illustrate the processes which culminated in the adoption of deterrence by punishment around 1992 to 1993. Katyusha bombardment first appears in 1992 as a bottom-up tactical innovation that leaders subsequently assess and evaluate before adopting more widely as a coherent policy or strategy illustrated in 1993’s *Accountability*.

April 1996’s Operation ‘Grapes of Wrath’ played out in much the same way as Operation ‘Accountability’ did. Israeli forces launched an expansive artillery and air campaign against in Lebanon killing 13 militants and 165 civilians.⁹⁷ The operation, predicated on the same logic as ‘Accountability’ did not succeed to militarily degrade Hezbollah or disembed them from the local population.⁹⁸ In turn, Hezbollah responded to the opening of the operation on the 11th of April by commencing a consistent Katyusha bombardment of Israeli cities and towns on the

⁹⁶ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 107

⁹⁷ Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 84; Jaber, *Hezbollah*. p. 178

⁹⁸ Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p.176

12th.⁹⁹ Hezbollah would, over the course of the sixteen-day operation, fire roughly 700 Katyusha rockets at Israel forcing 10,000 Israelis into bomb shelters.¹⁰⁰ This time around, Hezbollah's deterrence policy was in full effect and Israeli efforts to destroy the Katyusha launchers failed.¹⁰¹ Hezbollah managed to continue their bombardment all the way up until the ceasefire, even if the intensity saw peaks and troughs, being described as "inconsistent".¹⁰² The capability to fire rockets consistently despite Israeli attempts to destroy the launchers became crucial to establishing deterrence as any would-be relationship relies on Hezbollah's firing as many rockets as possible, as consistently and accurately as possible.¹⁰³ Directly in the wake of the 1996 operation, Nasrallah was once again interviewed by Lebanese media and his statements further bolster the previous analysis. The then-Secretary-General called the operation in 1993 "a good lesson for us" providing support to the notion that an assessment and learning process had taken place.¹⁰⁴

Additionally, he provided more clear-cut testimony that experimentation and innovation are bottom-up processes in Hezbollah. The leader claimed it is in fact a key aspect of Hezbollah, saying:

Thirdly, constant improvement and creativity. Fighters in south Lebanon and the western Bekaa Valley do not see themselves as mere receivers of orders; even local resistance commanders consider it part of their responsibilities to sit and think together, study various options, and figure out what the best courses of action are, and how to improve the resistance's operations. There is no single group charged with figuring out how to improve our operations—it is everybody's responsibility to do so.¹⁰⁵

Though there was some ambiguity concerning the events in 1992, Nasrallah emphasizes the role of "local resistance commanders" in figuring out "how to improve the resistance's operations. One should assume that it is, naturally, in Nasrallah's interest to exaggerate the

⁹⁹ Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 156-57

¹⁰⁰ Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 156-57; Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah*. p. 148-149

¹⁰¹ Jaber, *Hezbollah*. p. 178, p. 202

¹⁰² Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah*. p. 148

¹⁰³ Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 159

¹⁰⁴ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 150

¹⁰⁵ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 201-202

group's capabilities and flexibility in order to project strength. At the same time, his testimony is consistent over time and aligns with other accounts. Scholars have, through interviews with militants in Lebanon and experts in Israel, consistently established tactical innovation as an institutional practice in Hezbollah's armed wing.¹⁰⁶ Golani Brigade commander Kaplinsky was quoted in 1994 as saying: "Hezbollah is a learning organization, they would debrief after every operation."¹⁰⁷ This information, coming from Israeli, Lebanese, and international sources, bolster Nasrallah's claim and make the idea of his statement being false propaganda unlikely. In short, this combination of consistently aligning testimony offsets concerns about over-reliance on Hezbollah leaders' politically motivated statements.

The 1996 operation ultimately resulted in a formalization of the unwritten oral agreement of 1993. The 'rules of the game' as such, were recognized by both sides as the "April Understanding" and a multi-country oversight mechanism was set up to arbitrate violations.¹⁰⁸ This represents an official recognition of the success of the mutual deterrence relationship that Hezbollah had evolved through tactical innovation, assessment and strategic alignment. The 1992 incident, along with the two major operations in 1993 and 1996 are events whose analysis here allows us to trace the mechanism by which Hezbollah evolved its Katyusha-based deterrence by punishment strategy. Testimony from Nasrallah, accounts by Qassem, Israeli commanders, and thoroughly researched secondary accounts point in the same direction when cross-referenced, showing consistency. Despite any limitations of the evidence at hand, it is reasonable to conclude that through analysis of the events in 1992, 1993, and 1996, it is shown that Hezbollah was able to innovate locally and then translate these innovations into wider strategic alignments through internal assessment and learning. The consistent pattern emerging across the three events discussed indicates the evolution of deterrence by punishment started with local tactical innovation with Katyusha bombardment, followed by internal assessment and the implementation as policy of reciprocal Katyusha bombardment. Next, the period that covers the relative peace of the early 2000s and the 2006 war itself will be analysed.

¹⁰⁶ Cragin, 'Hizballah, the Party of God' relies on expert interviews, mostly in Israel ; DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'. gathered information from Hezbollah personnel, UNIFIL personnel, and Lebanese army commanders who gave first-hand accounts.

¹⁰⁷ IDF Golani Brigade Commander Kaplinsky is quoted by the author in Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 148

¹⁰⁸ Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 159-160; Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 85

5.3 2000-2006: The Emergence of Denial

The period from 2000 to 2006 was marked by relative calm on the Lebanese-Israeli border. The 1992 to 2000 period saw over 5,000 Hezbollah operations, compared to the 27 attacks seen in the entire 2000-2006 period preceding the war.¹⁰⁹ The novelty of this period is that, for the first time in its history, Hezbollah had something resembling peace with Israel meaning that the balance between its compellence strategy to any occupation and its deterrence strategy to stave off Israeli aggression was now flipped on its head. With compellence operations being limited to the tiny Shebaa farms area, Hezbollah's deterrence strategy took on an even greater preponderance than it previously had, becoming its core strategy against Israel.¹¹⁰ In 2006, after the war, the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, described Israeli policy after 2000 as "...designed to shape a pattern of deterrent relations..."¹¹¹ This constitutes an official acknowledgment of the mutual deterrence relationship by Israel, in the same way Hezbollah conceptualizes it.

The oft-studied 2006 war has been noted for the unique strategy and tactics deployed by Hezbollah who had spent the inter-war years considerably expanding the depth and breadth of their deterrence strategy focusing on building an "invisible base" in Southern Lebanon mainly through sophisticated tunnel networks, advanced fortifications, and coupling this with increased Katyusha capabilities.¹¹² This marks Hezbollah's deterrence strategy evolving from relying exclusively on a punishment in the 1990s with Katyushas to combining new deterrence by denial mechanisms with further expanded punishment. Hezbollah's approach to the 2006 war has been described as a "prepared trap" designed to bog down the IDF's ground incursion into Lebanon with casualties through static defensive positions while ensuring a steady stream of Katyusha rockets into Israel until a ceasefire could be extracted.¹¹³ These preparations were exposed to the wider world in July 2006 when a tactically successful Hezbollah cross-border

¹⁰⁹ Worrall, Mabon, and Clubb, *Hezbollah*. p. 52

¹¹⁰ Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah*. p. 91; DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'. p. 385; Al-Aloosy, 'Deterrence by Insurgents'. p. 1003

¹¹¹ Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Report on Conclusions Drawn from the Second Lebanon War, December 2007, p. 65. quoted in Erlich, 'The Road to the Second Lebanon War, 2000-2006'. p. 16-17

¹¹² Al-Aloosy, 'Deterrence by Insurgents'. p. 1003; Worrall, Mabon, and Clubb, *Hezbollah*. p. 56; Bregman, *Israel's Wars.*; Uzi Rubin, 'The Rocket Campaign against Israel during the 2006 Lebanon War' (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2007).

¹¹³ Najžer, *The Hybrid Age*. p. 100; Worrall, Mabon, and Clubb, *Hezbollah*. p. 56

kidnapping marked the failure of this deterrence relationship by, unexpectedly, soliciting massive retaliation from Israel.¹¹⁴

Learning from the inconsistent firing capacity exhibited during 1996's Grapes of Wrath episode, Hezbollah built multi-barrelled launchers hidden in camouflaged bunkers, increasing volume and accuracy dramatically, expanding Katyusha capability through tactical innovation.¹¹⁵ When referring to improvements of Katyusha tactics after 1993 and 1996, Qassem credits "engineer and artillery arms unit" with greatly improving "their own feeble areas detected through field battle performance."¹¹⁶ Secondary accounts, based on documented Israeli findings on the ground, indicated that these multi-barrelled launchers fired a large percentage of the rockets during the war.¹¹⁷ Innovations such as moving trucks, pneumatic launcher platforms that could rise and fall as well as time-delayed launch mechanisms are other examples of tactical innovations related to the Katyushas that originate, at least partly, with local commanders and fighters.¹¹⁸ The institutional norm of autonomous tactical innovation, coupled with Qassem's crediting of advancements in the "accuracy" of the Katyusha to these units and secondary accounts all support the paramount importance of this process.¹¹⁹ Through inference based on proxy and secondary evidence, there are many signs, from disparate sources, indicating that innovations to Katyusha platforms and launchers between 1996 and 2006 were continually driven by local commanders and fighters, as expressed in the innovation step of the mechanism.

On a related note, tunnel building as a tactic within Hezbollah dates back to the late 1980s according to testimony by combatants, who claim they were used to create small equipment caches and retreat positions in preparation for common storming raids on IDF/SLA outposts.¹²⁰ Their adoption on a wide scale in preparation for a future Israeli ground incursion was demonstrated in 2006 as part of the larger defensive posture created with bunkers and fortifications. Tunnels show strong signs of originating from experimentation in the 1980s and

¹¹⁴ Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 136; Cordesman, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*. p. 32

¹¹⁵ Rubin, 'The Rocket Campaign against Israel during the 2006 Lebanon War'. p. 8

¹¹⁶ Qāsim, *Hizbullah*. p. 68-69

¹¹⁷ Rubin, 'The Rocket Campaign against Israel during the 2006 Lebanon War'. p. 9

¹¹⁸ Jaber, *Hezbollah*. p. 178; Cordesman, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*. p. 105; Bregman, *Israel's Wars*. p. 286; Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 133

¹¹⁹ Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 133; Cordesman, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*. p. 82

¹²⁰ DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'. p. 35

1990s in the same way much of Hezbollah's tactical repertoire evolved but other denial measures like fortifications and bunkers show no sign of emerging in the same way. When considering the bunkers and hidden fortifications, also called "nature reserves" by the Israelis, their resource cost and defensive nature may account for their use and codification following after, not driving, the development of a denial strategy by the organization as a whole.

No accounts, primary, or secondary were found of fortifications being experimented with prior to their widespread adoption leading up to 2006. In fact, secondary accounts that do discuss these acknowledge that the peace-time context in which they emerged may rob commanders and fighters of the opportunity to continuously experiment and innovate against live enemies.¹²¹ Furthermore, the secondary accounts point to a centralised effort with external support from Iran and North Korea being the driving force behind the institutionalisation and implementation of these tactics in line with the deterrence by denial strategy.¹²² This marks a significant break with the mechanism thus far with reference to deterrence by punishment. The relationship between tactical innovation and strategic alignment appears to be the reverse what emerged in the 1990s and accounted for the emergence of the 'rules of the game'. This may point how the mechanisms or pathways of strategic evolution within Hezbollah are prone to change depending on contextual factors like the dynamic difference of liberating versus defending territory or a lack of opportunity for tactical experimentation in live combat.

Hassan Nasrallah's answer in an interview in August 2006 further indicates top-down planning was key in producing the outcome of Hezbollah's 2006 deterrence strategy in its entirety. Referring to the strategy seen in 2006, Nasrallah claims:

Our evaluation and understanding led us to believe that the day would come when Israel would launch a large-scale attack... [and] we discussed defensive strategies... We prepared ourselves, and assumed that if a war were imposed on us and Lebanon, it would last for months and would be a very harsh and destructive war... Based on this, we logically and naturally assumed that, when Israelis waged such a destructive war, they would cut off all supply lines and isolate areas and towns, which is why we spent the

¹²¹ DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'. p. 56

¹²² Bregman, *Israel's Wars*. p. 286; DeVore, Stähli, and Franke, 'Dynamics of Insurgent Innovation'. p. 427

years between 2000 and 2006 preparing ourselves for such a contingency.

[...]We made sure that the capabilities we needed for a long war were available to us...¹²³

His statement speaks of evaluation, discussion and preparation. The focus on broader strategy suggests that this was process within the leadership that determined a strategy first and then drew on both existing and new tactics to realize and implement it. It is worth mentioning, Naim Qassem's insider account of Hezbollah was published in 2005, before this war, and is written mainly as an account of past events and ideological treatise saying very little of the 2000-2005 period. Because of this, one of the key primary sources used to gain insight into the internal workings of Hezbollah with reference to events in the 1990s proved less useful here. Based on the cross-referencing of Nasrallah's statements and the secondary accounts referred to, the available evidence suggests that a different mechanism capturing top-down planning accounts for the evolution of the denial dimension of Hezbollah's deterrence strategy in the 2000-2006 period.

In conclusion, the causal chain from tactical innovation, to assessment, to strategic alignment was illustrated in how Hezbollah evolved its punishment doctrine based on Katyusha bombardment in the 1990s. When examining events in the 2000-2006 period with reference to the evolution of deterrence by denial however, the majority of the evidence available indicates a causal chain that followed a reversed order. Instead of innovations or experimental tactics being assessed then operationalized as coherent strategies, it seems that a coherent deterrence by denial strategy was conceived and the tactics chosen, developed, and refined in order to align with it. From this, Hezbollah's flexibility and ability to evolve its strategies in both top-down and bottom-up fashion emerges as the key conclusion. Next, the supporting mechanism will be examined.

5.4 [Iranian Sponsorship](#)

The close relationship between Iran and Hezbollah has been conceptualized here as an external supporting mechanism to *strategic evolution* in that it enables greater degrees of tactical innovation. More precisely, strategic evolution and tactical innovation are further

¹²³ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 396-397

enabled by access to Iranian-provided technologies and weapons that may be more difficult to acquire otherwise. Second, Iran's guidance encouraged the alignment of Hezbollah towards a deterrence strategy vis-à-vis Israel as this harmonizes with Tehran's wider foreign policy interests of deterring Israel itself. As this is a supporting mechanism and not the core aspect of the conglomerate mechanism, the depth of the examination will not match that of the core mechanism showcased above. The aim will be to ascertain how far key technology transfers directly fed into tactical innovation relevant to the emergence of Hezbollah's deterrence and how far Iran influenced Hezbollah's decision-making in pursuing deterrence strategies centrally and more generally.

Iran's role and importance when discussing Hezbollah is difficult to understate, the group's very inception is inextricably linked to the Islamic republic of Iran. Many of the founding members studied in Iran and it is a self-admitted truth that their ideological leader is the Ayatollah. As Nasrallah put it:

Iranian revolutionary guards arrived in the Bekaa [in 1982] upon the orders of Imam al-Khomeini, and the faithful were of the opinion that a revolutionary and Islamist current should be established to adequately confront the new challenge facing Lebanon. [...] This is how Hezbollah came to be.¹²⁴

Tehran's extensive sponsorship of Hezbollah is widely known.¹²⁵ Estimates of Iranian funding have put the figure north of \$100 million yearly.¹²⁶ Regular, at times weekly, Iranian weapons shipments channelled through Damascus airport have reached Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹²⁷ Reports indicate this regular supply was key in continually building up Hezbollah's rocket arsenal since the 1990s.¹²⁸ It is important to note, specifically with reference to Katyushas, that while these rockets are not inaccessible through other means, Hezbollah's

¹²⁴ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 26

¹²⁵ Daniel Byman, 'Are Proxy Wars Coming Back?', *The Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (3 July 2023): 149–64. p. 152; Akbar Khan and Han Zhaoying, 'Iran-Hezbollah Alliance Reconsidered: What Contributes to the Survival of State-Proxy Alliance?', *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 7, no. 1 (April 2020): 101–23. p. 157

¹²⁶ Byman, *Deadly Connections*. p. 55

¹²⁷ Norton, *Hezbollah*. p. 110; Blanford, *Warriors of God*. p. 178

¹²⁸ Cordesman, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*. p. 61

supply line from Iran essentially guaranteed a large and reliable stream of Katyushas.¹²⁹ The necessity of large quantities of Katyushas in order for Hezbollah to impose sufficient punishment so as to be effective was noted in the previous section with reference to ‘Grapes of Wrath’. It is reasonable to argue then, that Iranian shipments enable this capacity as theorized. As sponsorship by Iran is abundantly supported by literature and generally known, it serves little purpose to expend more time on it beyond what has been said. Similarly, the enabling effect of Iranian sponsorship on Hezbollah’s tactical innovation is well-documented in the past literature.¹³⁰ In sum, the supporting role *Iranian sponsorship* plays in enabling strategic evolution seems soundly supported by vast literature, just as the sponsorship.

Rooting the analysis in the principal-agent theory’s concepts of interest and autonomy, accounts of Iranian foreign policy strategy, as well as the specific dynamics of its relationship with Hezbollah will be investigated. The analysis will extract a general understanding of the relationship between Iran and Hezbollah that provides a starting foundation that can inform the ways in which Iran exercises influence on, or supports, Hezbollah’s strategic posture. The nature of the relationship between Tehran and Hezbollah, in terms of agency, has been debated in the literature. Some have said that Iran has generally exercised ultimate control over Hezbollah’s direction and have considered it a direct proxy of Tehran.¹³¹ At the same time, Hezbollah itself has continually reaffirmed its Lebanese nature and autonomy. It has emphasized that its strong ties with the state of Iran are an outgrowth of its special, religious and spiritual connection to the Ayatollah as its own ultimate leader.¹³² Of course, Hezbollah could never admit to being a direct proxy of Iran regardless. Such an admission would fatally hurt its credibility in Lebanon where the question has always been a recurring theme and source of criticism.¹³³ Nonetheless, most secondary accounts agree that the relationship between Tehran and Hezbollah falls somewhere closer to collaboration and partnership rather than outright subservience.¹³⁴ The nature of this relationship is not a codified truth that can be

¹²⁹ Cragin, ‘Hizballah, the Party of God’. p. 49

¹³⁰ Cragin, ‘Hizballah, the Party of God’. p. 49; DeVore and Stähli, ‘Explaining Hezbollah’s Effectiveness’. p. 350-52

¹³¹ Bar, ‘Deterring Nonstate Terrorist Groups’. p. 479; Karlén et al., ‘Forum’. p. 2053

¹³² Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 69, p. 91, p. 110; Qāsim, *Hizbullah*. p. 242

¹³³ Nasrallah, *Voice of Hezbollah*. p. 69, p. 91, p. 110

¹³⁴ Nakissa Jahanbani and Suzanne Weedon Levy, ‘Iran’s Proxy War Strategy’, in *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars*, by Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2023), 340–53. p. 349; Marcus, *Israel’s Long War with Hezbollah*. p. 45; Khan and Zhaoying, ‘Iran-Hezbollah Alliance Reconsidered’. p. 108; Byman, *Deadly Connections*. p. 78

discovered in any official document, it necessitates evaluation and inference based on available information. With this in mind, the available literature, is most indicative of a sponsor-proxy relationship that more resembles a partnership, predicated on unconditional support and collaboration towards shared aims.¹³⁵ For instance, accounts point to the fact that Iran was highly against Hezbollah's provoking of war in 2006, but supported them nonetheless after it broke out instead of abandoning them.¹³⁶ This example, to some extent, indicates a strong relationship rather than a transactional one. Put in the typology of the principal-agent theory, it points to a high degree of interest alignment between the parties and a high degree of autonomy by Hezbollah. In short, this shows that Iranian support is largely unconditional, and Hezbollah enjoys strong autonomy generally. The overlapping interests Iran and Hezbollah share, bring them together and generally keep them working together against a common ideological and strategic foe.

As far as Iranian regional interests are concerned, it is no secret that Tehran and Israel enjoy a tense relationship marked by the former's refusal to recognize Israel and the latter's concern over the prospect of a nuclear Iran. One of the main objectives of Israel's 2006 escalation to full-blown war was to destroy the "Iranian Western Command" (Hezbollah) before Iran could go nuclear.¹³⁷ Similarly, it has been suggested that Hezbollah serves "as a means for retaliatory strikes against attacks on its nuclear facilities" and "forward defence" in Iranian grand strategy.¹³⁸ The concept of extended deterrence has been applied to describe the Iranian use of proxies, including Hezbollah, with reference to its broader strategic goals.¹³⁹ If Iran seeks to deter Israeli strikes against its nuclear targets, as the case appears, extending the reach of its retaliatory capabilities to the Israeli border through Hezbollah seems a reasonable approach. It is akin to creating "strategic depth" in the traditional military sense by effectively extending the borders of its sphere of influence.¹⁴⁰ We can, through inference, surmise that this is a reasonable approach based on past literature cited above. It stands to reason then, that Iranian interests and Hezbollah interests overlapping in such a way would be boon for their

¹³⁵ Marcus, *Israel's Long War with Hezbollah*. p. 45

¹³⁶ Cordesman, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*. p. 62

¹³⁷ Cordesman, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War*. p. 6

¹³⁸ Gabrielsen, 'The Evolution of Hezbollah's Strategy and Military Performance, 1982–2006'. p. 274; Vladimir Rauta, "'Proxy War' - A Reconceptualisation', *Civil Wars* 23, no. 1 (2 January 2021): 1–24. p. 13

¹³⁹ Guy Freedman, 'Iranian Approach to Deterrence: Theory and Practice', *Comparative Strategy* 36, no. 5 (20 October 2017): 400–412. p. 404; Wilner, 'The Dark Side of Extended Deterrence'. p. 423

¹⁴⁰ Freedman, 'Iranian Approach to Deterrence'. p. 403-405

cooperating in nurturing and expanding Hezbollah's deterrence strategy and capabilities. In sum, the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran has been shown, strongly supported by secondary evidence, to be one where Hezbollah enjoys generous autonomy. This contrasts with views of Iran's sponsorship as direct control in Hezbollah's strategic decision-making. Even if one can infer that Tehran might have influenced Hezbollah's strategic posture given its own interests in deterring Israel from striking its nuclear facilities, this inference proves difficult to defend and indications point the impetus for strategic evolution arising internally from Hezbollah.

As per the methodology section, the conglomerate causal mechanism of *strategic evolution* has been shown to consist of the *tactical-strategic alignment* mechanism supported by the *Iranian sponsorship* mechanism. The supporting function of the latter is shown as enabling tactical innovation through weapons and technology transfers, the first step of *tactical-strategic alignment*. In the course of the analysis, the supporting relationship between the two was shown as the *Iranian sponsorship* mechanism was key in providing weapons transfers in the form of Katyushas and technological transfers in terms of fortifications and tunnel-building. In sum, this mechanism plays a key supporting role materially speaking. The supporting mechanism of Iranian support plays a less significant, yet nonetheless important, role in the conglomerate causal mechanism than the core mechanism. Next, the conclusion will synthesis all the findings.

6 Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, this project has come to theorize the mechanisms driving *strategic evolution* as an explanatory framework for Hezbollah's evolution of a deterrence strategy between 1993 and 2006. In the course of doing this, key episodes in 1992, 1993 and 1996 illustrate how bottom-up innovations lead to wider strategic adjustments in Hezbollah through assessment and implementation. The first of these illustrated how the initial tactical innovation of Katyusha rockets, occurred through local commanders experimenting of their own volition. Leader testimony also gave indications that a strategic alignment had occurred as a result of the tactical innovation, specifically emphasizing how this was directly linked to an internal assessment that had taken place as a result of the tactical innovation. Next, 1993's escalation between Israel and Hezbollah was analysed in similar fashion. Naim Qassem's own book and Nasrallah's interview immediately after the cease-fire strongly indicate that by this point, an internal assessment had occurred, and deterrence became official policy for Hezbollah. The alignment of a deterrence strategy is further illustrated by the unwritten agreement between Hezbollah and Israel that ended the episode. This same agreement would be formalized as the 'April Understanding' in 1996 which acknowledged the deterrence relationship Hezbollah imposed on Israel. Disparate sources, including Hezbollah's leadership, scholars, and IDF commanders all indicate Hezbollah's tactical innovation as a key vehicle for the group's improvement. The pattern of local tactical innovation which is in turn assessed by leadership and implemented as coherent deterrence by punishment policy or strategy emerges in clear fashion from the analysis of key events in the 1990s.

The same cannot be said for the further analysis conducted encompassing the 2000-2006 period. Analysis shows that the emergence of deterrence by denial during this period cannot be considered to have come about in the same way. Old tactics such as tunnels and Katyushas continued to be improved upon and expanded, illustrating tactical innovation's continued importance. At the same time, entirely new ones were introduced through, by all indications, a deeply centralized, top-down process. The insights gleaned from Hezbollah's implementation of fortifications as well as Nasrallah's account of their strategic adjustment indicate these were the result of leadership planning and thinking, effectively reversing the causal chain of the mechanism that led to the emergence of punishment in the 1990s. This difference seems to only affect half of Hezbollah's deterrence strategy. The picture that emerges from this is that deterrence through the punishment mechanism emerged in a bottom-up process from Katyusha

firing to internal evaluation, to implementation and codification. Conversely, the later novel deterrence by denial strategy evolved during the inter-war years shows central planning and strategic doctrine emerging prior to tactical innovations and adjustments. This is illustrated in the mechanisms of tactical-strategic alignment which is shown as a reversible one based on Hezbollah's demonstrated flexibility in how it is able to make strategic evolutions. As far as the supporting mechanism is concerned it plays a dual purpose. It serves a crucial role in enabling tactical innovation in bottom-up strategic evolutions as well as enabling top-down alignments. This is largely done in the same ways, encompassing weapons and technology transfers exemplified in Katyushas and expert tunnel advisors. This bolsters its importance and necessity in accounting for how Hezbollah evolved its entire deterrence strategy. The relationship between Iran as Hezbollah, is by all indications, a collaborative and partnership oriented one and Iran appears as an actor willing to support Hezbollah's strategic shifts in any way it can owing to the close kinship they share and aligning strategic interests.

In conclusion, the model of *strategic evolution* emerges from this analysis, providing a minimally sufficient explanation for how the entirety of Hezbollah's deterrence repertoire evolved. The evolution of deterrence by punishment through the use of Katyusha rockets manifests as a bottom-up process where the first step consisted of tactical innovation by local fighters. This innovation was then assessed, internally, by Hezbollah leaders and decision-makers, before being implemented as a wider strategy or policy demonstrated in 1993 and 1996. On the other hand, Hezbollah's deterrence by denial strategy, emerging after the Israeli withdrawal, follows an opposing, top-down pattern where central strategic planning precedes the implementation of improved or innovative tactics in line with leadership vision. Furthermore, the supporting relationship between *Iranian sponsorship* and *tactical-strategic alignment* emerges as an important factor in the enabling of strategic innovation in both the downstream and upstream processes highlighted. The *strategic evolution* model, made up of these two mechanisms and their relationship, provides a minimally sufficient explanation of how Hezbollah evolved its deterrence strategy, accounting for the emergence of punishment and denial doctrines in the 1990s and 2000s, respectively. The framework captures the mechanisms deemed necessary, without including spurious or inconsequential ones.

The emergence of a model with mechanisms deeply rooted in organizational learning and tactical innovation continues to push the literature on insurgent strategy further by engaging with theoretical concepts and applying them in case-study form. A valuable contribution was directly made here, highlighting the need for further research and the insights that can be gained

when investing *how* non-state actors evolve unique strategies. The specific role of different organizational levels in Hezbollah was shown to be fluid indicating extensive flexibility as strategic adaptations were made in both bottom-up and top-down fashion. The findings illustrate that Hezbollah evolved a deterrence strategy through its flexible ability to adapt its strategy. The analysis shows, Hezbollah was able to do this, variably, through both concentrated top-down effort and improvisational bottom-up adaptation by leaders to local fighters' innovation. In turn, one can see that Hezbollah is always learning incrementally at the micro-level in ways that can have drastic consequences. Its leaders have also demonstrated, at the macro-level, an ability to take stock of their context and devising broader strategic plans of how to best adapt the organization's strategic repertoire. These findings may be further relevant outside the scope of military strategy as well. Whilst the armed dimension of Hezbollah and the importance of understanding it in regional security has been emphasized in this thesis, it is also an important political actor. There may be significant overlap between the flexibility Hezbollah shows in adapting its military strategy and how it can evolve its political strategy inside Lebanon, or regionally. The group is an important political, military, and ideological force in Lebanon as well as the wider region, a greater insight into the workings of how it adjusts strategy over time has great value.

Strategic evolution, with reference to Hezbollah's evolution of deterrence presents a framework to trace the emergence of a highly unusual strategy in non-state conflict. The framework here was specifically, and iteratively, developed with reference to deterrence and Hezbollah but any insights could hold value for understanding how insurgent groups demonstrate flexibility in their strategic evolution over time. The framework here illustrates how Hezbollah, through a combination of endogenous innovation, central planning and external access to resources, was able to adopt deterrence as a cornerstone of its strategy against Israel. In this specific case, these manifest as the bottom-up adoption of Katyusha bombardment of civilian areas, central planning for future conflict and Iranian sponsorship. If one is to consider other cases that may emerge, insurgents might have access to something that, materially, functions as sponsorship such as natural resources or extensive criminal networks. These could also act as enabling mechanisms for strategic evolution and given reflective leaders that assess tactical innovations and show a long-term planning ability could function in similar ways. Of course, any further research the explanatory framework developed in this project can only be inspired, given the case-specific nature of the framework.

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