



JOINING HEZBOLLAH

An Inside Look at How the Shia Group Sustains Its War against Israel

By Nicholas Blanford

The process of joining Hezbollah, the nearly thirty-year-old Shia Muslim “resistance” organization in Lebanon led by Hassan Nasrallah, has evolved as the organization has grown in size and become more institutionalized and entrenched within Shia society. In the initial stages following Israel’s 1982 invasion, personnel were recruited in the Bekaa Valley through a process of mass mobilization along family and clan lines, which helped preserve internal security as well as facilitate the enrollment of hundreds of volunteer fighters. In south Lebanon, devout young Shias needed little incentive to join the nascent resistance, given that it was their homes and land that bore the brunt of Israeli occupation.

Today, however, the motivations for joining Hezbollah are more multidimensional, blending religious observance, hostility toward Israel, and the Shia commitment to justice and dignity. On a more prosaic level, many young Shias naturally gravitate toward an organization that has helped empower their community in Lebanon and has earned respect for its martial exploits over the years. “Our fighters are driven by complex motives— patriotism and Islamic motives,” Sheikh Khodr Nouredine told me in 1996, when he was Hezbollah’s political chief in south Lebanon. “Our Islamic beliefs make these young men refuse to accept injustice. They will do anything to resist Israel. I know the West does not understand, but our youth cannot live with Israel.”

Recruits drawn from the south who have grown up with an inherent distrust of Israel will dwell more on the aspect of defending their border communities against the perceived perpetual threat of the Jewish state.

“It’s an honor to serve,” said one veteran Hezbollah fighter, explaining in 2009 why he still served with the Islamic Resistance even though Israel had withdrawn from Lebanon almost a decade earlier. “It’s like this. If you have a house or a villa and someone powerful takes it over, you have

◁ Hezbollah fighters during a paramilitary parade, Beirut, Nov. 12, 2010. Hussein Malla/Associated Press

a long struggle and after a while he gives you a room. You struggle a bit longer and then he gives up and hands back the house to you. You might think the struggle is over, but then he parks his car in your parking spot outside the house. Do you accept this? We are in the south because Israel is like this powerful usurper and there is no government to protect us and the UN can't protect us, either. That's why we need the resistance."

Given Hezbollah's long-term strategic perspective and commitment to building a "society of resistance," the process of mobilization and radicalization of its potential recruits begins at an early age. Children as young as six or seven are encouraged to participate in Hezbollah's youth movement, a first step on the long path to becoming a resistance fighter. Activities include lectures, plays, and sporting events through which the youthful participants are immersed in Hezbollah's moral, religious, political, and cultural milieu. Hezbollah-affiliated cultural associations and publishing houses churn out books and pamphlets and hold seminars and conferences to spread the creed of resistance. Among them are the Islamic Maaref Cultural Association, the Imam al-Mahdi Institute, and the Imam Khomeini Cultural Center all of which promote the teachings of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Other institutes produce materials that range from explaining Hezbollah's concept of jihad and promoting hostility toward Israel to treatises on the role of women in Islamic society and the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Some of the material is intended for a youthful audience, with cartoon books telling stories of resistance fighters or fairy tales featuring villainous Israelis and heroic Palestinian and Lebanese children.

During the summer holiday months, a common sight in the southern suburbs of Beirut is rows of wide-eyed children sitting patiently at desks in outdoor classes being taught the way of Hezbollah. They are raised in a heavily militarized environment in which the youngsters are encouraged to venerate and emulate the fighters of the Islamic Resistance. During the Ashoura commemoration or the annual Jerusalem Day parades, small children march alongside regular combatants, all of them dressed in camouflage uniforms and carrying plastic toy rifles, wearing headbands inscribed with slogans such as "O Jerusalem, we are coming."

The process continues in the Hezbollah-affiliated nationwide network of Mustafa schools, where pupils study religion and pray for Islamic Resistance fighters. Hundreds of youngsters each year pass through the dozens of summer camps held by the Hezbollah-run Imam Mahdi Scouts in valleys and hills in southern Lebanon and the northern Bekaa, where they are imbued with a sense of military brotherhood and discipline replete with uniforms, parades, and martial bands.

Hezbollah generally does not accept combatants into the Islamic Resistance below the age of eighteen, but basic military training and familiarization with weapons does begin at a much younger age. A tall, rangy Hezbollah fighter in his mid-thirties, whom we shall call "the Chief," once showed me video footage shot on his cell phone

of more than fifty children aged between six and nine dressed in camouflage uniforms marching through rugged mountains and woodland in a south Lebanon valley. The children were the sons of “martyrs”—Hezbollah fighters killed in action—and they were participating in a military-style training exercise. Uniformed adult instructors walked alongside the children, helping them plunge across a narrow river and scramble up steep, rocky slopes. They smeared their faces with dirt, and some even fired a few rounds from an AK-47 rifle, each one aiming at rocks in the river with a kneeling instructor helping prop up the heavy weapon.

“The next generation of *mujahideen*,” said the Chief with a smile of paternal pride.

In addition to the childhood induction process, Hezbollah deploys recruiters in every village and neighborhood where the party wields influence to look out for likely prospects among the local young men and women. The recruiter is looking for pious, disciplined, modest, intelligent, healthy, well-behaved individuals who could fit into Hezbollah’s way of life. Young men who listen to music, drink alcohol, drive fast cars, and flirt with girls stand little chance.

“The idea is to meet potential recruits and cultivate a friendship. You don’t hit him at the same moment with an offer to join. You make him love Hezbollah first. You sell the idea, then he can choose whether to join or not,” explained the Chief, himself a recruiter.

After observing a potential recruit for a period of months, even years, the recruiter will make his move, inquiring whether he or she would consider joining Hezbollah. If the person accepts there follows an intensive initial phase known as *tahdirat*, or “preparation,” lasting up to a year, in which recruits are taught the ideological foundations of Hezbollah. “At this stage, we give them Islamic lessons, ethical, political [and] social lessons, as a preparation, as part of the resistance. He will live in an atmosphere of religion and faithfulness,” says Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah’s deputy leader.

“Our Life Dictates Our Death”

The new recruits absorb the principles of the Islamic revolution in Iran, obedience to the *wali al-faqih* [the head of an Islamic state, according to the system of *wilayat al-faqih*, which holds that the preeminent religious authority should be the supreme ruler], and enmity toward Israel. They are taught the Islamic texts according to the interpretation of Hezbollah’s clerics, and learn to pursue the “greater jihad” of spiritual transformation to bring them closer to God. “The religious lessons are first,” says the Chief. “Religion first, before you even see a gun.”

A recruit can have different reasons for joining the party in the first place—a desire to resist occupation, religious commitment, or simply peer pressure—but realizing the importance of jihad as it is taught by Hezbollah is critical to understanding what drives the fully trained and committed Islamic Resistance fighter.

Sheikh Naim Qassem describes the world as a “perishable home,” a transient “place of test and tribulation for man,” and how a person chooses to live his life will dictate his fate in the hereafter. The “greater jihad” is the daily spiritual struggle within the carnal soul to resist and overcome the temptations and vices of the human condition in order to achieve divine knowledge, love, and spiritual harmony. According to Hezbollah, success on the “greater jihad”—the inner spiritual struggle—is a necessary precondition to undertaking the “lesser jihad”—the outer, material struggle. The “lesser jihad,” or “military jihad,” falls into two categories. The first is “offensive jihad,” in which Muslims are permitted to invade other countries or wage war against other societies on the basis that Islam is the one true religion. However, “offensive jihad,” according to the interpretation of Hezbollah’s clerics, is not considered applicable until the return of the “awaited imam.” The second category is “defensive jihad,” which confers not just the right but the obligation of Muslims to defend their lands and communities from aggression and occupation. For Hezbollah, the call for “defensive jihad” can be made only by the *wali al-faqih*. Hezbollah’s campaign of resistance against Israeli occupation in south Lebanon and its post-2000 military confrontation with Israel were conducted under the rubric of “defensive jihad” sanctioned by Khomeini in his role as *wali al-faqih*, and later endorsed by his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Accordingly, Hezbollah fighters are taught that when they confront Israeli troops in the stony hills and valleys of south Lebanon, they are not merely resisting occupation but also fulfilling the deeper religious obligation of pursuing jihad.

Central to Hezbollah’s observance of the “lesser jihad” is the culture of martyrdom. For the Shia, the paradigm of jihad, resistance, and sacrifice is Imam Hussein, whose death at Karbala against the numerically superior forces of Yazid epitomizes the struggle against oppression and injustice and serves as a powerful inspiration and exemplar for new generations of Shia warriors serving with Hezbollah. Hezbollah teaches that Imam Hussein actively sought martyrdom at Karbala, rather than choosing to engage with Yazid’s army knowing that despite the odds there was a faint possibility of survival.

A Hezbollah fighter who has advanced in the “greater jihad” will have spiritually moved beyond the human fear of death, instead welcoming it as a sacrifice in God’s name during the fulfillment of the “lesser jihad.” Unlike suicide, which is forbidden by Islam, Hezbollah considers the act of self-sacrifice as a paramount demonstration of faith in God, far removed from earthly, corporeal concerns. The motifs of martyrdom are inescapable in Hezbollah’s strongholds, where streets and roads are lined with the portraits of “martyrs”—fighters who have died in battle—and billboards with paintings of fallen fighters entering garish representations of paradise with richly colored landscapes of green hills, wild flowers, and flowing rivers bathed in bright sunlight. The annual Martyrs’ Day commemoration held each November 11 (the anniversary of

Ahmad Qassir's suicide bombing of the IDF headquarters in Tyre in 1982) is one of the most important events in Hezbollah's calendar. Each Hezbollah fighter is photographed for an official "martyr's" portrait on joining the Islamic Resistance. His picture will adorn his neighborhood's lampposts should he be killed in the course of duty, and each year he updates a "martyr's letter," containing his final thoughts and wishes.

Conversations with committed Hezbollah fighters on the subject of martyrdom hold a certain surreal quality. When I met Maher, commander of a sector in south Lebanon, in May 2000, he mentioned that two of his friends had been killed days earlier in an operation inside the occupation zone. Normally, one would offer a polite commiseration, but Maher forestalled any expression of condolence with a raised hand. "Do not be sorry for them, be happy for them," he said with a wistful smile. "God chose them to be martyrs, and, God willing, one day I, too, will be martyred fighting the Israelis."

Maher had light brown crew-cut hair and a neatly trimmed beard, and his pale blue eyes shone with unquestioning confidence in the certainty of his convictions. At thirty-three years of age, Maher was a combat veteran, having joined the resistance in 1983. He was in charge of four units, two assault and two fire support. But he was also married and a father; when I met him, his wife was pregnant with their fourth child. If he were to die in combat, Hezbollah would provide for his family—a house, free education for his children, medical care, and a pension of around \$350 a month. Yet how could he relish the prospect of death when he would leave behind him a widow and four fatherless children? Maher smiled again, nodding sympathetically.

"It is difficult for you to understand because you are not a Muslim. My wife will feel great joy and pride if I am martyred," he said. "Martyrdom is a religious and philosophical concept. Islam is the same as Christianity and Judaism in the sense that if you follow God you will go to Heaven. But in Islam, it's explained differently. We are born to get acquainted with God. Our goal of living is to reach God. To reach God we have to move from the living world to the next world. This is done by death. We are all going to die, but each person has a choice of how to die. The way we lead our life dictates our death. According to Islam, the best way to die is to die for God."

Hezbollah fighters can volunteer to join the Martyrdom (*Istishadiyun*) Unit, which means that they could be selected for specific suicide attacks or particularly perilous missions where chances of survival are low. Although Hezbollah has always been associated in the public mind with suicide bombings, it conducted only eleven such operations in Lebanon during the years of Israeli occupation between 1982 and 2000. Of the eleven, only four were carried out during the 1990s.

"Martyrdom is a personal initiative," says Maher. "A potential martyr makes his decision, then tells his religious leader [*marja*]. The religious leader decides whether the candidate is suitable or not. Sayyed Nasrallah is the only one who can decide these

things in Lebanon. He makes the decision according to priorities. He assesses whether the result is worthy of the act, then decides. It also depends on the situation on the ground. An act of martyrdom is like a military operation.”

This type of martyrdom is an alien concept in Western philosophy, which emphasizes the sanctity of life, but for many Hezbollah combatants, seeking death is a desirable outcome, one that is nurtured and constantly reinforced by the religious and cultural environment in which he lives. For unlike a member of a political party in the West, the Hezbollah recruit is submitting to a way of life that will dictate almost every aspect of his or her future: choice of friends, employment, social amenities, and often even marriage.

“In one home you could have a brother who is a communist, another who is with Amal, and a third who is with Hezbollah,” explains the Chief. “They are all brothers in the same family, but for the Hezbollah man, Hezbollah is his family. He breathes Hezbollah, eats Hezbollah, everything is Hezbollah. . . . None of our fighters join because they want a job. Many of us are educated people—university graduates, teachers, doctors. We are like everyone else. We want to live in peace, but we also want to live in dignity and without having our rights trampled upon.”

After a recruit has passed through the initial *tahdirat* phase, he will enter the second stage of induction, known as *intizam*, or commitment, which also lasts around a year, during which the rigors of party discipline are instilled along with basic military training. “Afterward, it depends on his improvements, he can undergo other courses with higher levels that enable him to hold positions within the organization,” Qassem says. “Some are gradual and some are specialized. You can say it’s like a university.”

Paradoxically, despite the cultish aspects of the indoctrination and educational process, Hezbollah is not interested in churning out an army of mindless drones blindly sacrificing themselves. A degree of self-reliance and autonomy is encouraged, so long as the parameters of party discipline are not breached. Even within Hezbollah, there are those who practice their religious observance more deeply than others. Speaking in the context of the resistance against the Israeli occupation in the late 1990s, Nasrallah admitted that there were two categories of fighters in the Islamic Resistance: “Fighters and officers whose objective is eventually to go back home, and those whose objective is martyrdom, pure and simple. The latter have a far higher morale on the battlefield, and regardless of the kind of weapons they carry, their faith and spirit makes them strong and steadfast and allows them to deal the enemy a severe blow.”

The lengthy and intense process of religious instruction attempts to inculcate within the recruit the moral and religious rectitude of the second category to which Nasrallah refers. Maher, for example, fitted into this category. Raised in an austere and violent environment in south Lebanon and devout from childhood, he had known nothing but resistance and jihad throughout his young adult life. Maher was a single-minded

combatant for whom the act of resisting Israel was considered a religious obligation that even took precedence over his human desire to end Israel's occupation of his natal village.

The Chief, on the other hand, although pious, had not reached the same level of religious intensity as that attained by Maher. He admitted to me that his principal motivation was a desire to protect Lebanon from Israel. The Chief's upbringing was generally secular, and he had been a talented athlete before joining Hezbollah. His easygoing, friendly nature made him a popular figure in his neighborhood, which is why Hezbollah appointed him a recruiter and placed dozens of fighters under his charge. The Chief was an organizer and a team leader rather than a resolute seeker of martyrdom.

“A Matter of Conviction”

Still, despite the arduous induction process, there is no compulsion to join Hezbollah. The party seeks only those who are unreservedly committed to its ideology and willing to follow the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*, which is an unconditional prerequisite for membership. Recruits who remain unconvinced after weeks of educational courses are free to leave.

“The *wali al-faqih* is the leader as far as we are concerned,” Qassem says. “His status in Islam is a religious one. If we are to be reassured that our applications of the teaching of our religion are correct, we need to know the restrictions and the rules that the religion endorses. He gives us these rules and our general political performance. He does not interfere in details.”

As an example, Qassem said that the resistance campaign against Israel in Lebanon from 1982 was religiously sanctioned by the *wali al-faqih*, Khomeini at the time. But the *wali al-faqih* did not bother with the tactical details of how Hezbollah waged its resistance campaign. Similarly, the *wali al-faqih*, this time Khamenei, was the ultimate arbiter of Hezbollah's decision to enter parliamentary politics in 1992. But Hezbollah's parliamentary policies are left up to the party and do not individually require approval by the *wali al-faqih*.

“During this period, the [recruit] will have a vision forming through information. If he becomes convinced . . . he will become a member. If he doesn't believe in it, he will leave us. It's a matter of conviction,” Qassem explained to me. “Hezbollah has a doctrinal intellectual Islamic code of law. It regards the *wilayat al-faqih* as part of its system. We believe in the leadership of the *wali al-faqih*. This is a religious issue as far as we are concerned. All those who want to be a part of Hezbollah have to commit themselves to its intellectual code of law, and the *wilayat al-faqih* is part of this.”

Many recruits receive little or no pay from Hezbollah for the first two or three years, and most will find day jobs to provide an income. Later they will receive monthly salaries and financial support for housing, education of children, and medical needs.

After the 2006 war with Israel, Nasrallah authorized a one-time payment of \$100 to each Hezbollah fighter and members of his immediate family in a simple gesture of appreciation. The sum was deliberately kept small. “If we gave them all Range Rovers, they wouldn’t want to fight anymore,” noted one Hezbollah official.

Hezbollah fights for God, not Mammon, but the party’s leadership knows from the experiences of others the temptations that arise when an organization is awash with funds and practices lax accounting. The lure of cash can easily dull the sharp edge of commitment to the cause. In the 1970s, Hezbollah’s future leaders had watched the PLO leadership become corrupt and lazy when it was the recipient of substantial funds from foreign donor countries. The Amal movement today is inefficient and bloated by graft, corrupted by access to state funds to sustain its patronage networks—a grubby legacy to the integrity of Musa Sadr’s original vision.

Recruits into Hezbollah are expected to be financially honest and reliable in accordance with Islamic tenets. Anis Naqqash, the early tutor of the young Imad Mughniyah, recalls sharing a taxi from Damascus to Beirut with a young Hezbollah fighter who had just returned from a training session in Iran. Naqqash offered to pay the fighter’s \$15 taxi fare, but the youngster insisted on paying for himself. Naqqash took offense and told him, “Shame on you. I am like your father. I am a businessman and you are a student.” But the youngster would not yield. Later, Naqqash discussed the incident with a friend in Hezbollah.

“Yes, this is normal,” the Hezbollah man said. “We would have given him the fifteen dollars for the taxi fare. It was impossible for him to keep the money for himself.”

Although salaries may be limited, the Hezbollah member knows that his needs will be met by the party, which acts as a vast social welfare network in a country where state social support is almost nonexistent. If a Hezbollah fighter has an accident and requires hospitalization but lacks insurance or the funds to be admitted for treatment, the party will step in and provide the financial coverage and handle the paperwork. I heard of one young Hezbollah man who fought bravely on the front lines in south Lebanon during the 2006 war who was rewarded afterward with a grant of \$40,000, allowing him to marry and purchase a home.

Self-discipline and obedience are integral characteristics of Hezbollah. Hezbollah fighters are expected to obey all orders promptly and fully when they are given. They are also expected to behave correctly toward each other as well as toward people outside the party, a natural outcome of successfully pursuing the “greater jihad.” Transgressors face being fined, having pay docked, or spending time in Hezbollah’s own prison in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

During the preparatory phase, each recruit is subjected to a rigorous background security check by Hezbollah’s internal security apparatus. Anyone who has lived

abroad for a lengthy period of time, for example, will be treated as a potential security risk and face great difficulty in joining. The security assessment is constantly updated during the recruit's subsequent life within Hezbollah. Hezbollah has managed to maintain a high level of internal security over the years due to each recruit's learning self-discipline and developing a sense of security. Nevertheless, individual Hezbollah fighters feel the tug of human emotion—anger, jealousy, humor—just like anyone else. Many of the Hezbollah fighters who spoke to me were not authorized to do so, but some of them had become friends over the years, and others were willing to talk on the assurances of mutual acquaintances.

Hezbollah men tend to be wary of strangers and are required to report any contact with a foreigner to their superiors. Foreigners appearing in Hezbollah-controlled areas are sometimes stopped and questioned and occasionally followed. Every now and then one hears stories of unsuspecting foreign tourists swooped upon by vigilant Hezbollah men while innocently snapping photographs in Beirut's southern suburbs. A newcomer to Lebanon doubtless will be unsettled, to say the least, when apprehended by burly Hezbollah men or tailed by a militant riding an off-road motorcycle while driving through southern villages. But Hezbollah personnel are generally disciplined and polite, albeit firm, when quizzing a visitor. Over the years I have run the gamut of Hezbollah security procedures, from the mild (being stopped and politely questioned for a few minutes) to the mildly annoying (being stopped, politely questioned, and having a roll of film confiscated) to the disconcerting (being stopped, politely questioned, and photographed, face-on and profile, mug-shot-style, by a Hezbollah security officer) to the thoroughly vexing (being stopped, detained, interrogated, accused of being a spy, handed over to Lebanese military intelligence, and thrown in jail for the night).

Walking in the Path of *Abl al-Bayt*

Khodr was not even born when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, but the soft-spoken university student knew from childhood that he would join Hezbollah one day and serve in the ranks of the resistance just as his father had done. Raised in a pious environment in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Khodr was twelve when he joined Hezbollah's youth program in 1998.

His stocky physique and thickly muscled arms are testament to the hours he spends pumping iron in a local gym. But while he mixes with his neighborhood Shia friends even though they do not share his beliefs, Khodr has no appetite for listening to music, going to parties, or generally enjoying the indolence of youth. "I look at my friends and see them chasing girls and drinking, but in the end I am laughing and they are crying," he says. "Everything I do is with the Prophet Mohammed and the *Abl al-Bayt* [the Prophet's family line through Imam Ali] in mind. I am walking the same path."

Each recruit undergoes an initial military training program lasting thirty-three days, during which the rudiments of guerrilla warfare are taught and basic fitness attained. During the 1980s and early 1990s, much of the training was carried out at established camps in the barren valleys of the Anti-Lebanon Mountains on the eastern flank of the Bekaa Valley beside the border with Syria. There was no ground cover to mask Hezbollah's activities from Israeli jets and drones, and the recruits usually slept in tents, caves, and huts. Hezbollah assumed that the presence of air defense systems—its own rudimentary weapons and Syria's more advanced missiles on the other side of the adjacent border—were sufficient to deter the Israeli Air Force from attacking the training sites.

However, on the night of June 2, 1994, Israeli jets and Apache helicopter gunships swooped on the Ain Dardara camp east of Baalbek, where some 150 recruits were sleeping in their tents. The jets dropped bombs on the camp and the helicopter gunships mopped up, using thermal imaging to locate fleeing militants and tear them to shreds with bursts of fire from their 30 mm guns. More than forty recruits were killed in the raid, the deepest into Lebanon in seven years. Hezbollah and Lebanese army anti-aircraft units shot blindly into the night sky without hitting any Israeli aircraft, and the Syrian SAM batteries remained quiet. It was Hezbollah's largest loss of life in a single incident, and party leaders were quick to vow revenge. "We are preparing an operation that will surprise the world," Hajj Hassan Huballah, a top official, warned.

Six weeks later, on July 18, a suicide bomber blew up a van packed with more than six hundred pounds of explosive beside the seven-story building of the Mutual Israeli Association of Argentina, an umbrella group of Jewish charities in Buenos Aires. The blast killed eighty-five people and wounded another three hundred and completely demolished the building. Hezbollah denied responsibility, but for Israel, the bombing again demonstrated Hezbollah's ability and will to exact revenge on a global scale to extraordinary actions undertaken by the Israeli military. Whether Israel would have repeated the Ain Dardara air strike in view of the blow-back in Argentina is unclear, although Hezbollah would not give them the opportunity.

"We Could Hear the Sizz of the Fuse"

Following the Ain Dardara raid, Hezbollah changed its training procedures in the Bekaa Valley, switching to the more wooded western flanks of the valley, which provided better ground cover from Israeli aircraft. The training, while as intensive and rigorous as ever, was conducted on a more ad hoc level, with recruits no longer sleeping in fixed locations on a regular basis.

Basic military training begins with the recruit receiving instructions to be at a certain rendezvous point at a given time. The recruit brings nothing with him apart from a change of underwear and toiletries. He is picked up by a minibus with windows

masked by black cotton sheets, and along with some fifteen other recruits begins the journey to a training area in the Bekaa Valley. Although it normally takes only about ninety minutes to reach the nearest Hezbollah training areas from Beirut's southern suburbs, the journey for the recruits is usually considerably longer, as the minibus driver deliberately follows a meandering route, doubling back more than once to thoroughly disorient his passengers. When close to the training area, the recruits leave the minibus, and for the final stage of the journey along rough dirt tracks, they sit hidden beneath canvas awnings in the back of pickup trucks or large SUVs. By the time they are deposited on a mountainside along with perhaps two more groups of recruits from elsewhere in Lebanon, none of them will have any idea where they are.

The emphasis of the first thirty-three-day training period is to build fitness and endurance. The recruits, in batches of around fifty and dressed in camouflage uniforms, are sent on punishing marches across the rocky limestone mountains weighed down with rifles and backpacks filled with stones. Sometimes they carry cement-filled ammunition tubes for the B-10 82 mm recoilless rifle. They are given one canteen of water a day, which they use for drinking and for washing before prayers. Their instructors are experienced combat veterans, usually in their mid-thirties or older, who maintain steady pressure on their youthful charges. The marches are augmented by uphill sprints and seemingly endless push-ups.

"They wore me out," recalls Khodr of his initial training session. "I had to do fifty push-ups, but I could only do thirty, so they made me run back up the hill. One time, they told us to take off our boots and socks and climb a mountain while they shot at us. You should see how we suffered. I spent nights when I couldn't sleep because of the pain from blisters and sore muscles."

Training occurs throughout the year, regardless of weather. In the winter months, Hezbollah takes advantage of the snowy conditions in the mountains to teach Alpine warfare techniques. Alpine training is not as incongruous as it might at first seem. The peaks of Mount Hermon between Lebanon, Syria, and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, the scene of fierce confrontations in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, are topped with snow for about five months of the year. The IDF's Unit Alpinistim is deployed on Mount Hermon to protect the signals intelligence (SIGINT) station on one of the lower peaks.

"When it's very cold, I stay away from water," Khodr says. "The first time I washed in water in winter I couldn't breathe. We spent one night in an open field without tents or sleeping bags. I spent all night awake shivering and trying to get a little warmer. One guy sleeping beside me was so cold that he stood up and cursed and cursed and cursed and then fell back down and went to sleep."

At night, each recruit does at least one hour of guard duty, fighting off fatigue and trying to remain alert in case the instructors decide to spring another surprise. "One hour

on guard duty can seem like one year. The trees seem to be walking in the darkness. We see wild boar, hyenas, and in the summer we have big problems with snakes,” Khodr says.

The recruits also have to endure a “toughness day” when they are forced to crawl on thorns or jump from heights. The instructors keep the recruits on edge with “shock tactics,” such as ambushing them by firing live rounds at their feet and RPGs above their heads. “On my first session, we were lined up in rows and the instructors planted blocks of C-4 explosive among us attached to fuses. We could hear the sizz of the fuse but we had to stand still,” Khodr says.

He recalls one occasion when he and some fifty other recruits had marched for several hours and were passing through a narrow valley when they were ambushed by a group of instructors hidden in the rocks above. “They set off a roadside bomb close to us. Some of the recruits were in shock. The guys in the middle of the column ducked down while the guys at either end charged up the hillside to flank the instructors who were shooting past us with live ammunition.”

In addition to fitness and stamina, the recruits are taught how to use the basic weaponry standard to the Hezbollah fighter—the AK-47 and M-16 assault rifles, the PKC 7.62 mm light machine gun, the .50 caliber heavy machine gun, the RPG-7—until they can strip, reassemble, and load each weapon blindfolded. They practice firing during the day and at night using tracer rounds. Each recruit is handed a limited amount of ammunition and told the importance of conserving rounds. Fire aimed single rounds, they are told, and avoid switching the rifle to automatic: you lose accuracy and waste ammunition.

The recruits learn how to plant roadside bombs and land mines. They study the different types of armored vehicles used by the Israeli army and how to fire RPGs at their more vulnerable spots.

The instructors ram home the need to maintain constant vigilance no matter how tired the recruits. Rifles must be kept in hand at all times, including when sleeping, eating, or praying. Recruits are taught to be fully awake and combat ready within five seconds of being woken in the middle of the night. Radio communications must be answered at once. Failure to comply with these basic rules results in punishment, such as being forced into stress positions for a prolonged period.

They learn the art of camouflage and stealth, various kinds of crawl, and the ability to lie in position on observation duty without moving for hours on end. The recruits are taught navigation using map and compass and GPS instruments before embarking upon five-day orienteering treks across the mountains. They learn how to find their direction from a simple sundial consisting of a stick planted in the ground, or determining north using a wristwatch. Occasionally, one group of recruits will be ordered to launch a sneak raid against another group camped a few miles away in the mountains or to keep them under observation without being spotted.

“The Rebellion Against Fear”

Military training is obligatory for every Hezbollah recruit even if he does not intend to serve in the ranks of the Islamic Resistance afterward. Still, not all recruits aspiring to become combatants pass the military training program. Those who cannot cope with the punishing schedule but still believe in the cause can drop out and are allotted jobs in Hezbollah’s administrative apparatus.

Every Hezbollah fighter is trained in medical support and carries a first aid pack into combat. In an average-sized combat unit of five fighters, two will be medics. Hezbollah places great importance on battlefield medical treatment, partly to ensure that months of training are not wasted and that combatants live to fight another day, and partly for purposes of morale—a Hezbollah fighter may ultimately seek martyrdom in battle, but no one welcomes a lingering death in the mud of some frontline valley because his comrades lack either the kit or the knowledge to cope with wounds. Furthermore, any corpse left on the battlefield could be retrieved by Israeli troops and become a card in Israel’s hands during any future prisoner swap negotiations.

Hezbollah even provides a nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare training course, in which fighters learn how to cope with the difficulties of combat in thick protective suits, boots, and gloves and with vision obscured by gas masks.

Nor is it all physical work; the recruits undertake written and practical exams in the field under the watchful eyes of their trainers.

Although the training areas are located in dense undergrowth and under cover of trees, “sky watchers” constantly look out for approaching Israeli jets or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Each training area is protected by air defense units armed with anti-aircraft guns and shoulder-fired missiles.

The initial training phase is only the first of many in the course of a combatant’s career. As a university student—Hezbollah pays some of the tuition fees—Khodr can choose when to attend fitness training sessions and refresher courses in the Bekaa Valley even after opting for specialized training in anti-armor weapons.

By the time the recruit has completed the initial stages of religious instruction and military training to the satisfaction of his superiors, he will have earned a greater level of trust and can then join specific units or pursue certain advanced military disciplines such as sniping, antitank missiles, communications, or explosives. While there is flexibility in allowing recruits to select their area of specialization, Hezbollah commanders will sometimes steer them toward units that are experiencing a manpower shortage, or will encourage them to follow certain disciplines in keeping with the recruit’s education and character.

“We have a gradual training course. It’s variegated according to specialization,” says Maher, the sector commander in the Islamic Resistance. “We study each of the

recruits' strengths, physically and mentally. If he's good at physics, then he will study trajectories [for artillery]. If he's good at chemistry, then he will study explosives. In line with their basic training, they also receive training in their skills."

The military training program undertaken by each recruit in the Islamic Resistance not only prepares them for future combat operations but also helps build esprit de corps, an important asset on the battlefield aside from deep commitment to the Islamic faith. Hezbollah's military successes, especially during the 1990s, helped convey among the cadres a sense of fraternal and communal pride, achievement, and empowerment, sentiments that also inspire new generations of volunteers to join the party.

Specialized training usually takes place in Iran, or sometimes Syria. The Bekaa Valley is too small and too easily accessed by Israeli reconnaissance aircraft for training on larger-scale weapons systems such as artillery rockets and air defense systems. Those undergoing training in Iran usually travel to Damascus, then board flights to Tehran before being bused to one of several training camps run by the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards near Kuraj, Isfahan, Qoms, or Tehran. Fighters can attend multiple courses in Iran lasting several weeks each. The trainers are full-time Hezbollah instructors, veterans who have proven themselves in combat in south Lebanon and share the same cultural background and Arabic language as the recruits.

Recruits into Hezbollah's Special Forces unit, the top combat element in the Islamic Resistance, endure an intensive three-month course split into two forty-five-day programs with a five-day break in between. While most Hezbollah combatants are part-timers holding down day jobs or attending college and university, the special forces cadres are full-time combatants who train relentlessly. Not only are they highly motivated combat fighters, they are also the embodiment of the religious and cultural values that make up the way of Hezbollah. Even within the generally homogeneous ranks of the Islamic Resistance, Special Forces fighters tend to stand out. In person, they are usually polite and modest with a quiet sense of humor while maintaining a level of reserve and distance before strangers.

Hezbollah believes that the unremitting religious and ideological instruction creates a combatant far superior to his opposite number in the Israeli army and helps overcome the organization's material shortcomings in technology, weapons, and funds compared to Israel. Never mind that Israel has Merkava tanks, F-16 fighter-bombers, and Apache helicopter gunships; the Islamic Resistance fighter is taught that God is on his side, an unrivaled affirmation of the sanctity of the cause and the supreme guarantor of eventual triumph over one's enemy. Furthermore, Hezbollah believes that its culture of martyrdom—this "rebellion against fear," as Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah once put it—bestows upon the individual fighter an unmatched level of bravery, at least in the secular sense of the word. After all, how

can you defeat an army of fighters who believe their struggle is sanctioned by God and none of whom are afraid of dying in battle?

Hezbollah's leaders maintain that it is the psychological dimension of the individual fighter, rather than the equipment and arms at his disposal, that lies at the heart of the party's battlefield triumphs. "This group of fighters does not go to war in order to flex their military muscles, score a publicity coup or to achieve material advantages; they fight and do jihad with serious intent and a deep conviction that the only way to regain their usurped territory is by waging war on the enemy," Nasrallah explained.

While other Islamist militant organizations operating around the world also draw direction from the Koran and pursue jihad, Sheikh Naim Qassem insists that it is the quality of the resistance fighter's faith that is the foundation for Hezbollah's "exceptional particularity."

"First, [it is] faith in Islam and what this means in connection with God, the exalted, and attaining a moral state that gives one self-confidence, strength, hope for the future, readiness to sacrifice [oneself] . . . development, and self-improvement. This is something essential that we have," he told me.

The second component, Qassem continues, is "readiness for martyrdom" and an understanding that "martyrdom neither shortens nor prolongs life because the timing of death is predestined by God. . . . Since the outcome of this martyrdom is a divine reward in Heaven, this is something quite important when it comes to mobilization, especially that we have historic leaders who have presented this example, such as the Prophet Mohammed, Imam Ali, and Imam Hussein and others."

The third advantage is the quality and integrity of Hezbollah's leadership, Qassem adds, citing the martyrdom of Sayyed Abbas Mussawi in 1992 and of Nasrallah's eldest son, Hadi, in combat in 1997 as examples of the leadership's willingness to stand in the same trench as the rank-and-file fighter.

The combination of these three assets—faith in Islam, readiness for martyrdom, and "honest, confident . . . enlightened" leadership—ensures that the "limited [material] capabilities or potentials [of a nonstate actor] become of value."

"Imagine the single machine gun with a faith in God and readiness for martyrdom and a faith in, and interaction with, the leadership, and then you have a person of great power who does not fear death," Qassem explains. "This differs from the enemy on the other side that does many calculations [to protect itself]. Then our machine gun becomes more powerful than their artillery. This moral issue is quite essential."

This article is an extract from Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel, by Nicholas Blanford, published in October 2011 by Random House.