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The Defeat of Turkish Hizballah as a Model for Counter-Terrorism

Strategy

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This article analyzes the Turkish security forces' highly successful counter-terrorism operation against the radical Islamist group Turkish Hizballah (THB). Taking advantage of the cease-fire declared by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the security forces focused their increased resources on an initial round of raids that netted significant pieces of information about the THB and its activities. The security forces then diligently took advantage of this new intelligence to conduct raids on a wider scale, thus creating a snowball effect of gathering more intelligence followed by conducting wider and more devastating raids.

Since the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) declared a cease-fire in 2001, Turkey has experienced a relatively calm period, a brief respite from the near-constant terrorist attacks of the previous decades. Since the capture and trial of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in 2000, PKK operations experienced a severe drop off. As the Turkish security forces brought more and more of Southeastern Anatolia under control, other groups like Turkish Hizballah (THB) were forced out of their convenient hiding places and forced to move their base of operations to the major cities of Western Turkey, especially Istanbul and Izmir, well before they were ready to do so successfully. The remission of PKK attacks allowed Turkish security forces to concentrate more efforts on THB's brand of Islamist terrorism. A series of highly lucrative raids against THB cracked the shell of secrecy that protected THB members so well. Through information gathered in these raids and tireless efforts by the National Police (NP) and the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (*Milli Istihbarat Teskilati*—MIT), thousands of terrorist suspects were arrested and THB operations dwindled. By late 2002, THB had been effectively neutralized as a serious threat to Turkey.

On November 15, 2003, this relative calm ended with the massive truck bomb explosions at two Istanbul synagogues. Just as efforts began to find and capture those responsible for the synagogue bombings, on November 20, two more simultaneous explosions, this time targeting the British Consulate and the British HSBC Bank building in Istanbul, killed dozens more. Claims of responsibility for the bombings have come from people representing al-Qa'ida, IBDA-C (Islamic Great Eastern Raiders Front), and several others. Turkey's main political opposition party leader has placed the blame for the attacks squarely on Turkish Hizballah, which has grown in strength under the Erdogan government. Although the exact identity of the all the attackers and planners is not yet known, nor is it known whether they had direct support or were merely "inspired" by al-Qa'ida, the attackers and their backers should take note of (and fear) the effectiveness and efficiency with which the Turkish security forces dealt with THB. Indeed, Turkey's experience with THB can serve as a valuable model for other countries involved in similar counter-terrorism operations.

The History of Turkish Hizballah

Reports differ concerning the origins of Turkish Hizballah, but most accounts agree the organization was formed around the time of the Iranian Islamic revolution by a small group of Sunni Kurd Islamists in

southeast Turkey. Their ideology sought a strict Islamic government brought about through a multi-phased process, including the use of violence, as happened in Iran.(1) The group soon split into the *Ilîm* (Science) faction, which advocated using violence now to achieve their goals; and *Menzil* (Ranger), which advocated religious education and a more peaceful movement toward an Islamic state. The *Ilîm* group became the terrorist group later called THB. Led by Huseyin Velioglu, who was a student in the late 1970s at the same university as PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, THB sought to be the only voice for Kurds, Islamists, and eventually Turkey. In the 1980s, the PKK was also active in southeast Turkey, using harsh tactics and a dogmatic ideology to gather support for its fight against the Turkish government.(2) Some of those whom the PKK alienated, especially traditional and religious Kurds, became involved in THB.(3)

The organization developed like a cult, shrouded in secrecy, using mosques as gathering places. The structure and practices of THB have only come to light after years of successful operations by Turkish security and intelligence organizations. THB has been described as an organization in which every member is an intelligence agent with a code name, several identities, and a strict adherence to secrecy.(4) If there is any hint that a member has revealed secrets, risked operations, or is a spy, that member is punished, often severely.(5) Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit admitted that the MIT could not infiltrate Hizballah.(6)

The split in the organization grew into outright battle. *Ilîm* members attacked *Menzil* to become the sole voice of Islamism in the southeast. Approximately 300 members of the *Menzil* group, the most important of whom were Fidan Gungor and Ubeydullah Dalar, were killed in clashes with *Ilîm*.(7) After the *Menzil* group was largely silenced, attacks against the PKK intensified. *Ilîm* fought against the PKK because its nationalist/Marxist ideology and separatist motives were anathema to the unified Islamic state it sought to create.(8) Professor Michael M. Gunter, a scholar of Kurdish issues, reported, "At the time many believed the killings were being perpetrated by a group associated with the Islamic Hizballah (Party of God) to protect the unity of the Muslim Turkish state the PKK was threatening to divide."

In the early 1990s, pro-PKK political groups, publications, intellectuals, and political figures were the primary targets of THB as they were the vanguard of the popular movement.(9) THB did not attack the state because its goals in the early phases of the movement were to dominate religious and Kurdish groups in the southeast, then build mass support across the country before finally taking on the state.(10) As long as THB did not attack the state, they seemed to not incur any of the state's wrath.

Some have claimed in the past that the Turkish government allowed Hizballah to operate because their primary targets were members and supporters of the PKK. In reality, the Turkish government had to primarily contend with the PKK, an organization responsible for approximately 30,000 deaths in Turkey. With limited resources, a choice had to be made in how to spend scarce resources: whether to pursue PKK terrorists or to pursue the murderers of PKK terrorists.(11) As Interior Minister Mehmet Agar once said, "the PKK seemed the most intensive and most powerful of organizations, so if the security forces had five units, they sent four of them to tackle the PKK and one to tackle the Hizballah."(12) With the capture of Ocalan in February 1999 and the subsequent ceasefire, Turkish security components were more able to focus their attention against Turkish Hizballah.

At some point in the mid-1990s, Velioglu changed his focus away from dominating groups in the southeast to working against the Turkish state. In March 1993, the PKK and THB signed a "cooperation protocol" to cease attacking each other's members and jointly "struggle against the Turkish state."(13) According to a report in the popular Turkish press, on 13 November 1998, Velioglu and PKK member

Nizamettin Tas signed a peace agreement in Keleresh, Iran under auspices of SAVAMA, the Iranian intelligence service.(14) This was just a few weeks after Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the PKK, was ejected from Syria. There were no clashes between the two groups after this date.(15)

Without Syria as a base of operations, the PKK was on its way to being defeated by the Turkish government. With greater Turkish government influence in the southeast, THB would quickly run out of places to hide and ways to illicitly raise funds.(16) Velioglu also wanted to start the next phase of his struggle by moving westward in order to develop a mass movement and national organization before taking on the state itself.(17) Targets in the West were primarily businessmen with Islamic dealings that THB ransomed or robbed to raise funds.(18) It was because of this activity that the security forces would launch an anti-THB operation in the Beykoz district of Istanbul, an operation which would not only end with the death of THB leader Huseyin Velioglu, but would also give security forces enough information to find and destroy the remaining THB elements.

The Fall of Turkish Hizballah

After the government headed by Tansu Ciller folded under the weight of multiple scandals, Necmettin Erbakan's Islamist Welfare Party (RP) formed a new coalition with Ciller's True Path Party (DYP). This government ended with the resignation of Erbakan under pressure from the military in 1997. Mesut Yilmaz and the Motherland Party (ANAP) controlled the government for approximately 18 months, followed by Bulent Ecevit of the Democratic Left Party (DSP) in January 1999. The Yilmaz and Ecevit governments instituted a number of policies designed to redeem the state after years of public corruption and a series of scandals during the Ciller/Erbakan governments. The military was given more power to deal with PKK terrorism, and people with Islamist or reactionary leanings were removed from power. Significantly, in late 1997, the National Security Council (MGK) declared Islamism as the greatest domestic threat, replacing Kurdish separatism.(19)

Operations against THB had been going on since 1994, but were slow-going due to the secrecy and sophistication of THB cells. Terrorist activities by all Islamic groups in Turkey declined in 1994 and 1995 compared with 1993.(20) After the MGK made their announcement, efforts to dismantle THB increased. Operations in 1997 and 1998 increased the amount of intelligence available to the MIT and NP. A crackdown on THB was initiated in Diyarbakir, Sirnak, and Batman directly after the pronouncement.(21) The operations to capture "hit-men" of THB increased the amount of intelligence the MIT and NP had to work with on this very secret organization.

In 1999, a serious intelligence coup set the stage for the Beykoz operation and the beginning of the end of THB. In March 1999, operations carried out in Diyarbakir, Mardin, and Batman resulted in the seizure of 20,000 pages of secret Hizballah documents.(22) This operation was followed up in June 1999 by an operation that garnered computer discs containing a great deal more of intelligence on THB.(23) This information begat more operations against THB safe houses and members, which in turn gave the police and intelligence services more information with which to use against the terrorists. In the fall of 1999, larger operations against THB began, including one that resulted in the capture of 90 terrorists.(24) Interrogations of captured THB members and operatives, combined with seized documentary and computer evidence, led to further arrests and seizures, creating a snowball effect that ultimately led to the dismantlement of THB during 2000 and 2001.

On December 20, 1999, a “Hizballah Summit” was held by police and gendarme representatives, ostensibly to discuss the abundance of intelligence gathered on the organization.(25) In less than a month, authorities in Istanbul and across the country would be poised to launch a massive series of operations against the leadership, safe houses, and nerve centers of THB.

Turkish police had been investigating the disappearance of several prominent Istanbul businessmen and tracked the illegal use of one of the men’s credit cards to a small house in the Beykoz district.(26) On January 17, 2000, a small, lightly armed contingent of police arrived at the unassuming house.(27) During the five-hour stand-off, shots rang out from the house, injuring a policeman; return fire killed one of the three terrorists holed up inside.(28) After it was finished, the police still had no idea just what they had come upon. It took several days to realize the dead terrorist was Huseyin Velioglu, leader of THB and the two captured men were Edip Gumus and Cemal Tutar, key lieutenants of the organization.(29)

The Beykoz house was a treasure trove of documentary, computer, video, and forensic evidence. Tortured and mutilated bodies of Hizballah victims were taken out of the basement as well as identification cards, photographs, and videotapes of their torturous interrogations.(30) Upwards of 600,000 pages of secret Hizballah documents were found, detailing the operations, safe houses, and the hierarchy of the organization.(31) THB also used computers extensively in their operations, some of which were also seized at the Beykoz house.(32) The two lieutenants captured soon confessed to their roles in THB and revealed extensive details about the locations of similar safe houses across Turkey.(33) In fact, these lieutenants provided nearly as much information to the police as the seized files.

The most immediate information was culled from the overall cache, developed and analyzed by the MIT in close cooperation with NP agencies across the country, and put into immediate action in massive nationwide operations which resulted in the detention of over 1,000 suspected THB militants and operatives in less than a month.(34) Police also uncovered dozens of corpses of missing Kurds and Islamists and more videotaped interrogations of THB victims in several additional safe houses.

With each new arrest and interrogation, Turkish intelligence and security agencies added extensively to their knowledge of THB. Each arrest led to several more discoveries and arrests, systematically dismantling the organization that relied so heavily on secrecy. A few days after the Beykoz operation, information from the captured terrorists led police and intelligence officials to the capture of Mehmet Emin Ekici, Hizballah’s director for the Mediterranean region.(35) Ekici provided police with information on the location of other bodies across Turkey.(36)

Days later, Hizballah’s military leader, Mahmut Demir, was arrested and interrogated in Ankara. After two days of refusing to cooperate, he began talking with police and intelligence officials, which led the police to conduct several operations in Konya and Mersin.(37) An operation in Mardin province, based on statements from captured terrorists, produced the main archive of THB, another intelligence coup for the government.(38)

Chart I: Number of Government Operations against THB, 1992-2002(39)

In September of that year, Suleyman Ekizer, Counterterrorism and Operations Department head, reported 67 bodies had been found and 294 Hizballah incidents had been solved as a result of the

operations conducted until that point.(40) From January 1992 to January 2000, prior to the Beykoz operation, Turkish police and security agencies conducted 2,038 operations resulting in the detention and questioning of 7,138 suspects.(41) A total of 505 Hizballah members were being held in Turkish prisons as of January 17, 2000.(42) After Beykoz and through November 2002, roughly 1,763 operations resulted in the detention of 4,957 people.(43) The number of terrorist incidents by THB dropped significantly from 1,282 in 1999, which resulted in the deaths of 975 THB terrorists and 185 security personnel (SP); to 221 incidents in 2000, with 362 THB terrorists killed and 26 security personnel killed; then from Jan-Nov 2001, 185 incidents were reported with 113 THB terrorists killed and 22 security personnel killed.(44) The snowball effect of these intelligence coups is truly revealed by these numbers.

Chart II

CONCLUSION

Examination of state agency successes between 1998 and 2001 reveals a string of intelligence coups that opened up this most secretive and clandestine organization. Secrecy was Hizballah's greatest asset, and once those secrets became known to the MIT and NP, the organization unraveled. When the full record of the operations that dismantled THB are finally known, a final analysis of the state's role in the disintegration of THB can be made. Many of those fighting the al-Qa'ida threat in Turkey do have access to this knowledge, and al-Qa'ida has a great deal to fear from the power and efficacy of the Turkish government in the fight against terrorism.

The dismantlement of THB also holds some valuable lessons for the world community in the global War on Terror. Interagency coordination and cooperation, rapid analysis of intelligence, and the nearly immediate use of that intelligence to capture more terrorists are just a few of the valuable insights the THB story has to offer. Al-Qa'ida and its affiliate terrorist organizations continue to rely heavily on secrecy while using modern information technology tools, much like THB did in the late-1990s. The Turkish government used intelligence gathered in both minor and major operations to swiftly execute new operations. Those agencies struggling with global terrorism today need more rapid analysis, dissemination, and utilization of new intelligence.

The Turkish government has had decades of intense first-hand experience in fighting terrorism and has been able to adapt its security structure to more effectively work against terrorism. After sizeable caches of THB-related intelligence were discovered in March and June of 1999, the December 1999 "Hizballah Summit" was established to get Turkey's various security agencies working together. After the Beykoz operation, key pieces of intelligence were found, analyzed, and rapidly put to use in operations just days later. These new operations built upon one another and fed new intelligence back into the process. In this way, the Turkish government was able to act against hidden cells faster than those cells could react to the Turkish operations. Interagency cooperation and rapid intelligence work were at the foundation of Turkey's successful efforts to neutralize Turkish Hizballah, and these concepts can also be applied to the global War on Terror.

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