(TS//SI//REL) The Israel-Hizballah Crisis -- Perspectives from an Acting SLO Tel Aviv (part 1)

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FAD's MENA/Asia Office (DP12)
Run Date: 10/12/2006

(TS//SI//REL) CDOs (Country Desk Officers) have sometimes been called upon to fill the temporary vacancy -- be it vacation, training, or other out-of-country commitments -- that takes the regional SIGINT Liaison Officer (SLO) away from his or her duties for an extended period. I had the unique experience to fill in for SLO Tel Aviv, ▒▒▒▒▒▒▒ from early July through early August 2006 while she took a well deserved vacation.

(TS//SI//REL) The Israeli SIGINT National Unit (ISNU) is a sophisticated and technically advanced partner and like most SIGINT relationships, the NSA-ISNU partnership is not without its intricate technical problems and sensitive political issues. SLO and I had engaged in much pre-arrival planning aimed at facilitating, for me, an easier transition into supporting the Chief of Station (COS) and other Station personnel in a time of relative calm. Neither of us realized that the events in the coming days -- the killings and kidnappings by Hizballah in the north of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers -- would test NSA's ability to manage the SIGINT relationship with ISNU under wartime-like conditions.

(TS//SI//REL) The Israeli objective toward confronting Hizballah in the north was two-fold and was very clear from day one of that campaign: obliterate, through military means, Hizballah's capability to conduct cross-border rocket strikes against northern Israel, and effect the return of the two kidnapped IDF soldiers. The Israeli methods were to confront Hizballah directly and, in parallel, to inflict enough damage against the Lebanese infrastructure so as to turn Lebanese popular support away from Hizballah. This was no easy task, as the IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon some six years earlier had afforded Hizballah time to gain strength and fortify its positions -- some, as the world media has shown, were within the local population centers.

(U) Smoke rises after Israeli jets fired a missile on the village of Rachaya Al-Fokah near Chibaa in southern Lebanon (Reuters)

(TS//SI//REL) Israeli Prime Minister Olmert had country-wide support to achieve these objectives, especially from northern Israeli residents who firmly believed that military action against Hizballah was long overdue. At first, the IDF artillery, Israeli Air Force (IAF) airstrikes, and IDF incursions into Lebanon were generally limited to seek-and-destroy missions against suspected Hizballah strongholds. The IDF estimated that actual Hizballah fighters were somewhere within the 3,000-4,000 range, and early on believed that Israeli goals could be achieved in seven to ten days. What the IDF found was that Hizballah was well dug-in, extremely motivated, and much better equipped and prepared to withstand that type of limited military operation. The Hizballah logistical apparatus was difficult to identify and their ability to blend into the civilian population was even more problematic. To drive home that point, ISNU Washington Liaison provided Israeli gunship photographs of Hizballah launch points located near populated civilian areas, including the widely publicized location in Qana.

(TS//SI//REL) ISNU was pushed to the technical and resource limits to support the IDF campaign. During an address to ISNU personnel, **ISNU Commander BG Harari characterized the fighting as a type of war that Israel had never seen before** and cautioned ISNU to prepare for a long engagement. Several hundred reservists were called up to man positions at ISNU HQ or were forward-deployed to military operations in the north. Many ISNU conscripts and officers had families in the north who had been directly affected by the Katusha attacks. The war took a more somber turn for ISNU when several members of the ISNU ELINT Center were killed during the missile strike on the Israeli warship "HANIT." As tragic as that attack was, the big-picture question for ISNU and the Israeli intelligence services was whether Hizballah

possessed, and if so, would fire, longer-range rockets against Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. The Israeli view, should either of those cities be struck, was that Hizballah would be acting as the "firing pin" while Iran would be pulling the trigger.

(TS//SI//REL) ISNU's reliance on NSA was equally demanding and centered on requests for time-sensitive tasking, threat warning, including tactical ELINT, and receipt of geolocational information on Hizballah elements. The latter request was particularly problematic and I had several late-night, sometimes tense, discussions with ISNU detailing NSA's legal prohibition on providing information that could be used in targeted killings. Even with his full understanding of the US statutes, BG Harari sought assistance from NSA for an exemption to this legal policy. To ISNU, this prohibition was contrary not only to supporting Israel in its fight against Hizballah but overall, to support the US Global War on Terrorism. In the end, a framework was decided upon by ODNI that defined the parameters and methods of what could and could not be shared with the Israelis. Other times I would be called to the Unit to explain the policy behind a particular issue or better define the wording they had received in a tech message. I had expected ISNU to be at fever pitch and more aggressive than usual. That was the case and throughout all of my discussions -- no matter what the tone or subject -- ISNU stressed their deep gratitude for the cooperation and support they received from NSA.

(U) Editor's note: read the conclusion of this article tomorrow.