

Warriors of God

Shane Farrell



Nicholas Blanford. (via randomhouse.com)

Nicholas Blanford, the Beirut correspondent for *Time Magazine* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, has spent 17 years covering Hezbollah and is considered an authority in the field. He recently released the book “Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel,” which traces the party’s development from its inception in the early 1980s until the present day, with a particular focus on the military aspect of the party. NOW Lebanon asks him about his latest book and how he envisions the conflict between the two enemies unfolding.

Q *In other interviews you have given, you say that first-hand information is given to you by Hezbollah members with whom you have built personal relations and only give you a fraction of the information they have. What would be the repercussions for them for speaking to a Western journalist?*

Nicholas Blanford: Each Hezbollah member who agrees to chat with me does so based initially on the assurances of mutual acquaintances and his own assessment. After 17 years in Lebanon and focusing my reporting on Hezbollah, it would be strange if I had not cultivated some personal contacts within the organization. At the end of the day, Hezbollah’s rank and file are not robots. They are human beings just like everyone else. They remain disciplined and taciturn on details, but speaking to them and getting to know them a little does allow an insight into their thinking and outlook, which is helpful in shaping one’s knowledge of the organization. I don’t know what repercussions if any they would face, but I’m sure that if they were severe these guys would not talk to me in the first place.

Q *Have you received feedback from Hezbollah members on your book?*

Blanford: Not yet.

Q *You mention a UNIFIL officer who estimated the number of Hezbollah fighters at just 800 to 1,000. Do you think this is an accurate estimate of the current number of Hezbollah fighters?*

Blanford: That was the estimate of frontline combatants during the 2006 war. There were many more fighters

waiting in villages north of the frontline as well as in the Bekaa, Beirut and north of the Litani River who never saw any action. Today, the total number of fighters within Hezbollah's ranks is anybody's guess. There has been a huge recruitment drive since 2006, which makes all previous assessments of their total strength obsolete.

Q *War between Israel and Hezbollah is, you say, inevitable and likely to be of a magnitude not yet seen between the two opponents. You also say Hezbollah fighters may force the Israelis to fight on their own territory. Would the psychological victory for the party really be worth the risk it would be putting its fighters in?*

Blanford: Hezbollah fighters slipping into Israel is only one component of Hezbollah's overall strategy for the next war. It's probably not even the most significant, although it would have a tremendous psychological impact. Depending on how the war shapes up, the bulk of the fighting would probably occur on Lebanese soil, as in the past. Don't envision brigades of Hezbollah fighters marching across the border. We are talking about small squads of fighters engaged in sabotage operations. As for the dangers involved, I don't think that would deter Hezbollah fighters. On the contrary, I think Hezbollah fighters would be queuing up to volunteer for combat operations in Palestine in full knowledge that they might not come back.

Q *There has been widespread speculation about Israel launching a strike at Iran in response to Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions. You touch on this in your book, but could you give us your views on whether you think this would spark the next war between Hezbollah and Israel?*

Blanford: It entirely depends on the extent of the strike against Iran and regional circumstances at the time. All I would say is that it is impossible to predict with 100 percent certainty what Hezbollah would do, and that's part of its deterrence - it keeps those planning a strike on Iran having to second guess Hezbollah's reaction.

Q *The book, which gives a far more military insight into the party than others written on Hezbollah, has been praised by many, but some have also argued that it lacks enough analysis - how do you respond to this?*

Blanford: I'm not really sure I understand this criticism. There's plenty of analysis where analysis is needed. This is not an academic book and was never intended as such. It's a military history that blends analysis with reportage. There are several other good books on Hezbollah written by academics looking at structure, ideology, etc. But what I could bring to the Hezbollah canon was 17 years of reporting the party's military evolution in the field with all the attendant color, drama, tragedy, etc.


Q *Currently, the situation in Syria is undoubtedly posing a challenge to the party. In the event that the Assad regime is ousted and replaced by a government that is opposed to Hezbollah, how significant would this be to the party?*

Blanford: The worst outcome for Hezbollah would be an administration in Damascus that better reflects the Sunni majority in Syria, which is friendly with the West, and realigns away from Iran and toward Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Hezbollah would remain politically and militarily strong in Lebanon, and we might even see a reinforcing of March 8 along the lines of a Shia and Christian [Aounist] front to fend off a resurgent Sunni polity. Next year's parliamentary elections would be critical if this situation was to develop. Mind you, a peaceful transition in Syria looks the least likely scenario for now.

Q *Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's charismatic leader who has been at the helm since 1992, has been in hiding for security reasons for many years. How devastating would it be to the party if he was assassinated?*

Blanford: It would be a huge blow to morale but not a huge blow to the integrity of the organization. Remember, Hezbollah has been through this before when Israel assassinated Nasrallah's predecessor and mentor, Sayyed Abbas Moussawi. Moussawi was the leader of the Islamic Resistance during most of the 1980s and was widely revered by the cadres. Nasrallah has proved to be even more charismatic and capable. But if he was to die, a new secretary-

general would be appointed within a day or two, and life would go on.

 *You mention that you have heard rumblings of discontent from some of the rank-and-file fighters within the party since 2006 as a result of financial investments made by Hezbollah officials. The party has faced other challenges since then, including its decision to stand by the Syrian regime despite accusations that the government is killing its own citizens. As a result of these challenges, do you detect the same levels of commitment to the cause now as they had in 2006?*

Blanford: Yes, among the rank-and-file fighters there is no change in their level of commitment to the party. There were some individual mutterings of unhappiness over the financial issue a couple of years ago, but most fighters look to the bigger picture and remain loyal to Hezbollah and its leadership.