

■ «... **Chinese Fear Post-Castro Breakdown.** Beijing stands to lose a lot if the Cuban regime collapses completely after Fidel Castro's demise... » p.3

■ «... **Abdallah Forms Anti-Iran Bloc.** The Saudi Arabian king wants to enlist Turkey and others to stop Iran's Shi'ite expansionism... » p.4

■ «... **Are Equity Funds Losing Clout?** Now that their prestigious mentors have vanished, buy-out firms are reduced to using consultants... » p.5

IN THIS ISSUE

P. 2-4 Political Intelligence

Paris: Solution in Sight for Gendarmes

Washington: Europeans Make U.S. Passports

Paris: Settling Scores at Veolia

Tokyo: Good Marks for IAS Boss

Washington: Bank of America Recruits FBI Staff

Washington: The Border Bonanzas

Decision-Makers

Washington: Joel F. Brenner

Baghdad: Jawad al-Bulani

Looking Ahead

Denver: Simultaneous Translation

Washington: Judicial Warfare

Hildesheim: Passport Piracy

P. 5-7 Business Intelligence

Washington: Brain Drain at Diligence

London: Amateus Touts Security on VoIP

Berlin: Back Door Diplomacy for Arms Sales

London: An Investigator's Two Hats

Decision-Makers

Paris: Cyril Bouyeure

Washington: Joanne Isham

Organizations

London: ArmorGroup's Pendant for Hiring Spies

Paris: Geos Sets Up Business Intelligence Subsidiary

New York: A Dozen Down for KPMG Forensi

Looking Ahead

Lyon: Still Showing the Flag

Washington: Triple Canopy Set to Expand Abroad

Moscow: A Foot in Defense, Another in Oil

P. 8 Networks & Organizations

DNI Brings Private Firms Into Intelligence-Sharing Effort

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LEBANON

► Hezbollah a North Korea-Type Guerilla Force

The Israeli military's setback in its fight against Hezbollah in south Lebanon in recent weeks was primarily a failure of its intelligence agencies. And it was also the victory of a defensive guerilla force organized along North Korean lines. The operation could offer the United States some hints about what it would face if it one day decided to attack Kim Jong-il's regime.

Failure of HUMINT. *The Israel air force's massive strikes and poor results in military terms - Hezbollah's missiles and rockets continued to rain on Israel for the duration of the conflict - showed that the country's military intelligence agency Aman and Mossad were out of the picture. Their dismal performance contrasted sharply with the retaliatory measures Israel has employed for years in the Palestinian territories to hit at sites and persons who have been carefully identified and targeted.*

But just as Mossad and Shin Bet have constantly infiltrated Palestinian movements so has Hezbollah become a totally secret movement to them since 2000 when Ehoud Barak's government decided to suddenly withdraw its troops from southern Lebanon. The pullout triggered the collapse of the South Lebanese Army headed by general Antoine Lahad and particularly its Unit 504. Composed of Christians, Druzes and also numerous Shi'ites, the intelligence unit in question was particularly well informed about the activities of Hezbollah, including in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Most of the Israeli military's current intelligence dates from that period. But in the meantime, the head of Hezbollah's security and intelligence service, Ibrahim Akil, alias Tashin, carried out several overhauls and even built up a spy network in Israel by recruiting Palestinians and Israeli Arabs.

Breakdown in Technical Intelligence. *Although the Israelis were let down by their human intelligence, their technical resources were probably just as responsible for the fiasco. Neither the Israelis nor the Americans who operate a lot of surveillance satellites in the region were apparently able to assess the scale of deliveries of Iranian missiles, their firing systems and launching equipment to Hezbollah. The operations were supervised directly by the deputy chief-of-staff of the Iranian armed forces, general Hussein Firuzabadi. He did so particularly by stationing around 100 Iranian officers in Syria (the Zabadani camp) and in Lebanon's Bekaa valley (the towns of Mashqara and Iqlim al Tufah).*

Commanded in Lebanon by Nour Chalhoub, the Iranians supervised the arrival of missiles, the training of Hezbollah fighters, the identification of targets and also assisted in firing the weapons. But the analysts who pour permanently over satellite imagery failed to detect the construction of a sophisticated network of bunkers and defensive positions that Hezbollah put in place patiently over the years under the guise of road and infrastructure work.

Discipline and Cult of Secrecy. *But if Hezbollah's military, logistic and financial resources are essentially supplied by Iran and Syria, its leaders learned all about organizing themselves militarily and forging intelligence networks from the North Koreans over the past 15 years. At the behest of Tehran, Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, and its counter-espionage chief Mustapha Badreddine - who didn't hold their current positions at the time - spent several months following courses in Pyongyang at the end of the 1980s. Akil, for his part, was sent to North Korea shortly afterwards, in the early 1990s.*

During their stay, the Hezbollah leaders acquired a strong dose of discipline and developed a cult of secrecy. Broken down into autonomous, closed-off groups of 20 or so fighters operating in their own villages, Hezbollah's special forces, headed by Sajed al Doueir (who was killed in a bomb attack on Tyr on Aug. 9) proved to be tough guerillas who excel in the art of operating clandestinely. All of the movement's underground facilities, including arms dumps, food stocks, dispensaries for the wounded, were put in place primarily in 2003-2004 under the supervision of North Korean instructors. On Hezbollah's side, the work was overseen by Fouad Shakar, alias Mohsen, with backing from an Iranian Revolutionary Guard general, Mir Faysal Baqer Zadah.