

The Hezbollah Paradox

NICHOLAS BLANFORD

On July 12, the Iran-backed militia-cum-political party Hezbollah released a combat video to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the outbreak of a monthlong war with Israel. The video was an extended version of footage originally aired in 2016 of the operation to abduct Israeli soldiers in a cross-border ambush. Two soldiers were kidnapped in the operation, and another eight soldiers were killed in the ambush and subsequent clashes, the highest fatality toll for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in a single day at the hands of Hezbollah since 1997 and one that triggered the Israeli government's decision to go to war. Hezbollah released the video to highlight its martial prowess in successfully crossing the border and snatching the soldiers, a reminder to the party faithful of past glories on the battlefield.

But it was another video featuring Hezbollah fighters that emerged less than a month later, on August 6, that captured national attention and spread like wildfire on social media. The footage showed furious residents of the Druze-populated village of Shwayya in southeast Lebanon blocking two Hezbollah vehicles from passing through. One of the vehicles, a blue Isuzu flatbed truck, was mounted with a 122mm Grad multibarrel rocket launcher. The crowd beat the plainclothes Hezbollah men—one of them, visibly frightened, was pushed into the back seat of the lead four-wheel-drive vehicle. A little earlier, the Hezbollah men had launched a barrage of twenty Grad rockets from near Shwayya toward the Shebaa Farms, a remote Israeli-occupied mountain strip seized in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war but claimed by Beirut as Lebanese territory.

Hezbollah scrambled to contain the embarrassing and unprecedented images. It quickly released footage of the actual rocket launch, showing the Isuzu truck in a dense thicket of bushes and olive trees, saying that the vehicle had been nowhere near a populated area. Hezbollah's veteran secretary-general, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, expounded on the incident at length in a subsequent speech, explaining why the party had launched the rockets in the first place and berating those who had intercepted the vehicles afterwards in Shwayya. "The incident was one thing, filming it and circulating it was disgraceful, sad, and very bad," Nasrallah said.¹

Nevertheless, the incident in Shwayya was a bold reminder that the national consensus over Hezbollah's "resistance" against Israel long ago ended, with a large segment of the Lebanese population resenting an organization that is ideologically beholden to another country—Iran—and that unilaterally determines matters of war and peace with Israel.



Hezbollah finds itself in this position because of its determination to preserve what it calls its “resistance priority,” the ability to maintain a military force independent of the Lebanese state and to deploy it according to its own calculations (and those of Iran). Almost all other activities pursued by Hezbollah—its extensive social welfare apparatus, its parliamentary presence, its political alliances and participation in Lebanese governments—are not ends in themselves but are intended to better preserve the resistance priority.

This single-minded protection of the resistance priority has resulted in a paradoxical situation. Hezbollah has risen from obscure roots in the early 1980s to become the most powerful political and military force in Lebanon. It is essentially the kingmaker in Lebanese politics because, despite its broad political alliances and unlike other political parties, it wields the implicit threat of violence to achieve its ends. It is not only a domestic power; it has become a regional military power. In the past decade, Hezbollah has fought in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen on a scale that completely dwarfs its forty-year struggle against Israel.

Yet, at the same time, Hezbollah has never faced such an array of challenges, some perhaps inevitable with the passage of time, others particularly grave, potentially threatening to undermine the organization from within. They include the increasingly difficult task of maintaining the “resistance” narrative with a new generation of Lebanese Shias born after the end of the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon in May 2000. Hezbollah also must expend considerable energy in maintaining its fragile alliances with fickle and often venal politicians. Even within the Shia community, there are tensions and strains, with many chafing under the weight of Hezbollah. Financial issues also have been a burden for Hezbollah, especially since 2006, when the organization grew massively in terms of manpower. Perhaps most insidiously, corruption has finally taken root in Hezbollah, a concept that was considered anathema twenty-five years ago, when it had a reputation for financial probity.

In looking at how Hezbollah has reached this paradoxical state of affairs, it is perhaps useful to explore the party’s evolution over the past forty years. Its life span can be broken down into four distinct chapters: the 1980s; the 1990s; 2000 to 2006; and the post-2006 era. An analysis of these four phases in Hezbollah’s evolution demonstrates that the party’s dominance in Lebanon today was not the outcome of a preplanned and implemented program but the result of the organization’s reactive behavior aimed at safeguarding its resistance priority in the face of unfolding, and previously unforeseen, developments. Indeed, Hezbollah’s dominance of Lebanese politics may at times sit uncomfortably with the party’s senior leadership, because, despite the benefits it brings, such primacy also confers responsibilities and headaches that Hezbollah would perhaps rather avoid. While Hezbollah retains considerable tactical autonomy,

especially in dealing with Lebanese issues, it ultimately remains subservient to the demands of the Iranian leadership. Strategically, Hezbollah is Iran's greatest force enabler, helping Tehran exert influence in all corners of the Middle East and serving as a deterrent against any country contemplating a potential attack on Iran. That is why Hezbollah has spent the past four decades building and then safeguarding its resistance priority. Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general, articulated the fundamental importance of the resistance priority in 2012, saying that all the party's assets, "including leadership, members and different capabilities, are in the service of the resistance and supporting the resistance, and we have nothing but resistance as our priority, from the leadership down to the last fighter."²

The 1980s: The Zealous Years

Hezbollah began to coalesce as an entity in the wake of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June 1982. However, its ideological genesis was rooted in the religious seminaries of Najaf in southern Iraq, where from the early 1960s Lebanese theological students took inspiration from radical Shia ideologues such as Mohammed Baqr al-Sadr and Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini articulated the concept of the Wilayat al-Faqih, or Guardianship of the Jurist, a model of governance for an Islamic state that was later adopted and followed by Hezbollah. For Hezbollah, the Wali (Guardian) al-Faqih, currently embodied by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, is the leader whose knowledge of Islam is unsurpassed and whose rulings must be obeyed.

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, discussions were held between the country's new rulers and Khomeini's followers in Lebanon about forming an Islamic resistance to fight Israel in south Lebanon. Israel had staged a partial invasion of south Lebanon in 1978 before withdrawing and leaving a Lebanese militia ally to patrol a strip of territory to keep the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) away from the Israeli border. The resistance plans only began to take shape after Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and reached Beirut in a second, more ambitious attempt to drive the PLO out of Lebanon.

In the wake of the invasion, a contingent of Iranian Revolutionary Guards set up a base in Zabadani, a town in Syria close to Lebanon's eastern border. From there, they infiltrated Lebanon and began a process of mobilization and recruitment in the dusty Shia villages of the northern Bekaa Valley. From the Bekaa, the new Iranian influence moved west into the Shia-populated southern suburbs of Beirut, commonly known as Dahiye, then gradually, as the Israelis retreated toward the border, into the south.

These were Hezbollah's zealous years, when it could do pretty much as it—and its Iranian overseers—wanted, taking advantage of the chaos and lawlessness of



Lebanon's civil war. It was the era of the mass suicide bombing spectacles: the US Marines barracks at Beirut airport, the French paratroop headquarters, the US embassy (twice), the IDF headquarters in Tyre (twice). Passenger planes were hijacked and Westerners kidnapped and held for years, shuffled between Dahiye and the Bekaa Valley. Hezbollah operated under a roster of pseudonyms, such as Islamic Jihad and the Organization of the Oppressed on Earth, helping it earn the epithet "shadowy" when written about in the Western media.

In February 1985, Hezbollah stepped out of the shadows to deliver its manifesto, known as the "Open Letter," a document that explained who Hezbollah was and what it wanted.³ It explained the party's main goals, which can be boiled down to ending the Israeli occupation of Lebanon as a precursor to the liberation of Palestine and Jerusalem from "the talons of occupation"; the departure of the United States, France, and their allies from Lebanon; placing the (Christian and at one time Israel-allied) Phalange Party on trial "for the crimes they have committed against both Muslims and Christians"; and a commitment to Islamic rule in Lebanon. Some of those goals have come to pass or are no longer relevant, but the struggle against Israel and the aspiration to live in a state run under Sharia law remain fundamental ideological pillars.

The Open Letter was released as Israel was retreating southward toward the border, where it maintained an occupation zone for the next fifteen years. Resistance at the time was mainly conducted by the National Resistance Movement, a coalition of nationalist and leftist groups based north of the Israeli front line, and the Amal Movement, a Shia organization and rival to Hezbollah that was founded in 1974 by the Iranian-born cleric Imam Musa Sadr. The Amal resistance was waged from 1982 inside the Israeli-occupied area, mainly in the villages around Tyre. It was led by Mohammed Saad, a disciple of Sadr who, with limited resources and under daily threat of arrest or worse, led a potent resistance movement that in large part led to Israel's decision in early 1985 to retreat to a border strip. The Israelis killed Saad and some of his top lieutenants with a bomb in March 1985, during the Israeli withdrawal to the border area. His death left a vacuum that was quickly filled by Hezbollah. In 1986 Hezbollah was responsible for assassinating several key members of the Communist Party to undermine the National Resistance Movement as part of a process of monopolizing resistance against Israel.

Between 1988 and 1990, Hezbollah fought a series of brutal turf wars with the Amal Movement in Dahiye and south Lebanon, a conflict that continues to rankle within the Shia community today. The end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990 left Syria as the dominant power broker in Lebanon, which necessitated a change of behavior from Hezbollah in order to ensure the continuation of its resistance priority.

The 1990s: The Golden Years

For Hafez al-Assad, then president of Syria, Hezbollah represented a useful tool with which to pressure Israel during the on-and-off peace negotiations of the 1990s that began in 1991 following the Madrid peace conference. While other Lebanese militias were disbanded, Hezbollah was permitted to retain its arms with Syria's blessing under the rubric of national resistance against the Israeli occupation.

During the 1990s, Hezbollah steadily grew more adept at bleeding the IDF in south Lebanon. The Islamic Resistance was given greater autonomy to wage its campaign as it saw fit. Its leaders understood that a guerrilla army, like Hezbollah's, wins by not losing, while a conventional army, like Israel's, loses by not winning. They understood the need to develop flexible tactics to fulfill a fixed strategy. The strategy was to expel the IDF from south Lebanon through force of arms—no negotiated settlement, no compromises, no conditions. Hezbollah's small mobile units, no more than a few hundred fighters in total, picked weapons suited to their hit-and-run tactics. Russian wire-guided antitank missiles emerged on the battlefield in 1993, and four years later Hezbollah was firing US TOW missiles at IDF armor.⁴ The roadside bomb, the main source of IDF casualties, went through a rapid evolution from command wire-detonated Claymore-style devices packed with steel balls to remote radio control detonation and, later, cell phone detonation. By the end of the decade, Hezbollah had developed explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) detonated by infrared beams and shooting slugs of molten copper at seven miles per second, capable of cutting through 120mm of armor.

Hezbollah filmed some of its attacks against the IDF and broadcast them on its Al-Manar TV channel, which began broadcasting in 1994. Some of the videos made for dramatic viewing, bringing the simmering guerrilla war into the homes of Lebanese and Arabs across the region.

Hezbollah's ever intensifying battle against the IDF saw a significant narrowing of the Hezbollah-IDF fatality ratio during the decade. In 1990, five Hezbollah fighters were killed for every IDF fatality. By the mid-1990s, the ratio had dropped to 1.5 Hezbollah deaths for each IDF soldier and remained roughly the same until 2000.

While the Islamic Resistance concentrated on fighting the IDF in south Lebanon, Hezbollah was opening itself up. After internal debate, it decided that it would put forward candidates in the 1992 parliamentary election, irrespective of its ideological opposition to Lebanon's confessional political system. It fared well, winning eight seats in the 128-seat parliament, and formed a small but potent opposition bloc to the lavish borrow-and-spend postwar reconstruction policies of Rafik Hariri, who served as prime minister from 1992 to 1998. Unlike other political parties contending for



representation in government, Hezbollah was content with its parliamentary presence. Basking under the Syrian protective umbrella, it had no need to join the government and was unwilling to wade deeper into the quid pro quos and horse-trading of daily political life in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's social welfare apparatus expanded, providing schools, hospitals, and clinics to win the hearts and minds of the Shia community, at the expense of its Amal rival. It developed relations with the patriarch of the Maronite community and opened up to the international media. Suddenly, it was possible for Western journalists to sit down with senior Hezbollah officials and discuss the topics du jour over cups of coffee and glasses of fruit juice. Hezbollah took journalists to the front lines in the south to meet the fighters and see their weapons.

Gradually, a cross-confessional consensus began to emerge that supported, or at least tolerated, Hezbollah's resistance work. Even those Lebanese who were naturally suspicious of Hezbollah's ideology would concede respect for its martial activities in the south. In April 1996, when Israel mounted a punishing two-week air and artillery blitz against Lebanon, Hezbollah was able to drive into middle-class Christian neighborhoods, like Ashrafiyah in Beirut, with donation buckets attached to the car's hood and receive fistfuls of cash from residents.

Political scientists began to refer to the "Lebanonization" of Hezbollah, a potential model for how an Islamist jihadist organization could find accommodation within a pluralistic multi-confessional society. But Hezbollah's shift in the 1990s, compared to its uncompromising actions in the previous decade, was a behavioral decision to better preserve the resistance priority during the post-civil war era of Pax Syriana. It was not a conceptual change in identity and belief. This was well illustrated years later in 2009 when Hezbollah released an update to its original 1985 Open Letter. The update was a lengthy but pragmatic political treatise that tailored Hezbollah's views to the prevailing political realities at the time. Nasrallah read out the entire document at a press conference. At the end of his oration, a reporter asked why there was no reference to the Wilayat al-Faqih or the party's preference for an Islamic state in Lebanon. Nasrallah explained that these ideological pillars, originally articulated in 1985, still applied, and therefore there was no need to repeat them in the new document. In 2002, when Sheikh Naim Qassem told me in an interview that the party was mulling an update to the Open Letter, he explained that Hezbollah had to be "flexible" in politics, but "the resistance against Israel has been our core belief and that has never changed."⁵

By the end of the 1990s, Israeli public opinion had swung against the continued occupation of south Lebanon. Ehud Barak was elected prime minister of Israel in

May 1999 on the pledge of bringing the troops home within a year of taking office. He proposed to achieve his promise by first striking a peace deal with Syria, which would then allow for an orderly withdrawal from Lebanon. The peace deal never emerged, however, and in a few chaotic days in May 2000, the last IDF soldiers pulled out of Lebanese territory, ending an occupation that had begun twenty-two years earlier.

2000–2006: The Consensus Cracks

For Hezbollah, the Israeli withdrawal was a moment of triumph. Never before had an Arab military force compelled Israel to retreat unconditionally from occupied territory. But in many respects, the Israeli withdrawal was something of a Pyrrhic victory for Hezbollah. It left the party to explain how it could continue justifying resistance when there was no occupation left to resist. Nevertheless, the Israeli military presence in the Shebaa Farms and the continued detention of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails were cited as reasons why it would be premature for Hezbollah to disarm. More importantly, Hezbollah continued to enjoy the protection of Syria, which in June 2000 saw a new president in place, Bashar al-Assad, son of Hafez. Still, the consensus that supported Hezbollah’s resistance activities in the 1990s was beginning to falter. Some politicians began offering creative solutions in which Hezbollah would turn into a southern border protection force under the Lebanese army’s chain of command. But such suggestions would go nowhere while Damascus still held the balance of power. For its part, Hezbollah continued low-level warfare against Israel, launching a sporadic campaign against the IDF in the Shebaa Farms, what it dubbed “reminder operations,” letting the Israelis know that they were still occupying Lebanese soil (as far as Lebanon was concerned) and that Hezbollah was still around.

The ground began to shift, however, as the younger Assad flexed his muscles. In February 2005, Rafik Hariri was killed in a massive truck bomb explosion in central Beirut. His death came as opposition was mounting to Syrian hegemony over Lebanon. Instead of cowing the nascent anti-Syrian opposition as the perpetrators of Hariri’s demise may have anticipated, the murder galvanized it into action. Mass anti-Syrian demonstrations in Beirut, combined with international pressure, forced Assad to pull his troops out of Lebanon in April 2005.

The rapid pace of developments following Hariri’s assassination caught Hezbollah by surprise. With Syria having disengaged from Lebanon, Hezbollah could no longer rely on the cover of Damascus and had to become more proactive to defend its resistance priority. Ahead of parliamentary elections in June 2005, Hezbollah reached a formal alliance with its erstwhile rival Amal. From now on, calls for disarming Hezbollah would be tantamount to disarming—thus weakening—the Shia community. The anti-Syrian, Western-backed March 14 coalition triumphed in the elections and dominated the next government, headed by a former Hariri lieutenant, Fouad Siniora.



But for the first time, Hezbollah had a position in the government, taking up the energy portfolio. Hezbollah recognized that with Syria gone it needed a seat at the table when vital decisions were to be taken.

Hezbollah consolidated its political alliances in February 2006 by signing a memorandum of understanding with a major Christian party, the Free Patriotic Movement, headed by Michel Aoun, a former commander of the Lebanese army. Aoun had fled to France in 1990 when his quixotic and costly “war of liberation” against Syria ended with his troops killed or captured, leaving Damascus to reign supreme over Lebanon. In his Parisian exile, Aoun had railed against Hezbollah and Syria’s domination of Lebanon. He even boasted of being an architect of the 2004 UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for Hezbollah’s disarming and the removal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. That Aoun was now allied to Hezbollah underlined the fluid and unpredictable nature of Lebanese politics. The unspoken quid pro quo was that in exchange for bringing a large segment of the Christian community in alliance with Hezbollah, the party would use its growing heft to ensure that Aoun would be able to fulfill his lifelong dream of becoming president.

With the March 14 coalition in the ascendancy, the armed status of Hezbollah inevitably came to dominate political discourse. In the early months of 2006, several roundtable dialogue sessions were held in which the country’s top leadership debated weighty issues of national interest, chief of which was the fate of Hezbollah’s weapons. Hezbollah argued that its arms were necessary to defend Lebanon, because the Lebanese army alone, as a weaker conventional force, was no match for the IDF. Only Hezbollah’s hybrid style of warfare—a nonstate actor employing irregular and conventional tactics and weapons in a single battlespace—could stand up to the threat posed by Israel. Hezbollah had carefully crafted its public defense of the Islamic Resistance, but it failed to convince its critics. However, the stark reality was that the Lebanese government and army were in no position to forcibly disarm Hezbollah.

While the debate over Hezbollah’s arms was under way, the party was not resting on the laurels of its May 2000 ousting of the IDF from Lebanon. Amid great secrecy, Hezbollah had built a Maginot Line in the hills and valleys of south Lebanon, a network of underground tunnels, bunkers, ambush sites, arms storage facilities, and observation posts in readiness for what was considered an inevitable future conflict with Israel. It acquired new weapons systems, including advanced Russian antitank missiles, antiship cruise missiles, air defense systems, and longer-range surface-to-surface rockets.

On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah ambushed an IDF patrol along the border, snatching two soldiers to use as bargaining chips to secure the release of a Lebanese militant who had been languishing in an Israeli jail since 1978. Hezbollah expected a brief flare-up

in south Lebanon as a result of the abduction before things would settle down and negotiations would begin for a prisoner swap. Instead, the government of Ehud Olmert chose to go to war.

The Israelis anticipated that Hezbollah could be cowed through the use of air power alone and that there would be no need for a ground assault into south Lebanon. But the Israelis failed to recognize that the Hezbollah of 2006 was not the Hezbollah of 2000. Despite heavy air strikes, the flow of Hezbollah-launched rockets battering northern Israel intensified and steadily inched further south as larger systems were deployed. Eventually, the IDF sent troops across the border in a somewhat scattershot manner only for them to be confronted by well-entrenched and determined Hezbollah fighters. IDF soldiers spoke of Hezbollah fighters popping out of the ground, firing rocket-propelled grenades, and disappearing again. Hezbollah even disabled an Israeli naval vessel with its antiship cruise missiles, an event that Al-Manar broadcast live during a speech by Nasrallah.

The war ended after thirty-four days with Hezbollah declaring a “divine victory,” leaving the Israelis humiliated and stunned in the aftermath. Hezbollah’s opponents in Lebanon had bitten their lips during the conflict, but once it was over, calls for Hezbollah’s disarming began to increase. Hezbollah may have proclaimed a divine victory, but it was one that cost the lives of some 1,200 Lebanese civilians and caused billions of dollars of damage.

Post 2006: Clawing Its Way to the Top of the Pile

Lebanese politics was further riven by the UN investigation into the Hariri assassination. It was widely assumed that Syria was responsible for Hariri’s death, as he had been shifting toward the anti-Damascus opposition in the last months of his life. The formation of an international tribunal to investigate the crime and try those indicted required the consent of the Lebanese government. But Hezbollah deeply opposed the investigation and tribunal, accusing it of being a Western tool to weaken its ally, the Assad regime. In November 2006, all five Shia ministers in the government resigned on the eve of a vote to endorse a draft agreement with the UN on the Hariri tribunal. Despite the resignations, the vote went ahead as planned. A month later, Hezbollah and its allies launched a mass sit-in in downtown Beirut in an attempt to collapse the Siniora government. Hezbollah thought that Siniora would cave within days, but the former finance minister proved more resilient than expected. As the months of stalemate ticked by, the tent city protest in central Beirut became increasingly banal and was a stark example of how Hezbollah—still a novice at playing the political game—had miscalculated. The sit-in, which lasted eighteen months, led to the closure of shops, cafes, and restaurants, ruining the economy of central Beirut, a state from which it has never recovered.



In May 2008, the Siniora government itself overreached by issuing a set of decisions that crossed a Hezbollah red line, including launching an investigation into the party's private telecommunications network and firing the pro-Hezbollah head of security at Beirut airport. In response, Hezbollah dispatched its fighters along with allies into west Beirut to besiege the homes and offices of leading March 14 politicians. The unprecedented action triggered a week of fighting that left more than one hundred people dead and brought the country to the brink of civil war.

An agreement brokered by Qatar saw an end to the fighting and the election of a new president, Michel Suleiman, a former commander of the Lebanese army. But Lebanon remained bitterly divided between the pro- and anti-Hezbollah factions.

Then, in early 2009, reports began to emerge that the UN investigation into Hariri's death had shifted direction from Syria toward Hezbollah. As it transpired, an analysis of cell phone calls had teased out several networks linked to Hariri's assassination. One of the networks led directly to Hezbollah. The Lebanese police captain who had almost single-handedly conducted the analysis and discovered the networks was killed in a car bomb explosion in January 2008. That the Shia Hezbollah could have been responsible for the death of an iconic Sunni leader was a staggering development and further poisoned the already strained relations between Lebanon's Sunni and Shia communities. It also raised ominous questions about the identity of the perpetrators of a host of assassinations and attempted assassinations of politicians, security officials, and journalists that plagued Lebanon after Hariri's murder in 2005. Could Hezbollah have been behind them as well? In 2012, two potential Christian rivals to Aoun for the presidency were targeted for assassination. In one attempt, involving a booby-trapped elevator in the intended victim's building, a Hezbollah man was identified on camera when he scuffled with the politician's bodyguards. He was never arrested. The other assassination attempt involved a team of at least three snipers armed with 12.7mm rifles firing simultaneously at the targeted individual, walking in his garden, from a hilltop nine hundred yards away. The bullets missed the Christian leader by inches, but for many Lebanese, including the politician, the *modus operandi* clearly pointed in only one direction. The sheen of noble resistance against Israel was becoming increasingly tarnished.

As for the speculation that Hezbollah was behind the Hariri assassination, such was the seriousness of the claim that it was treated as a taboo subject in the Lebanese media for almost a year until Nasrallah finally addressed the accusations in an interview in March 2010. In subsequent months, Nasrallah expounded upon the accusations repeatedly, declaring that it was part of a plot against Hezbollah, that the Israelis were responsible for Hariri's death and warning, "Mistaken is he who believes that we will allow the arrest or detention of any of our mujahideen. The hand that attempts to reach them will be cut off."⁶ In June 2011, the Special Tribunal for

Lebanon, headquartered in the Netherlands, issued four indictments against Hezbollah members, including Mustafa Badreddine, a top Hezbollah security officer.

Foreign Interventions

The indictments were issued just as unrest against the Assad regime in Syria was turning into open rebellion. The conflict in Syria, which had morphed into civil war by the end of 2011, presented a new challenge for Hezbollah. The Assad regime was the critical geostrategic linchpin connecting Hezbollah to its patron Iran on the other side of the Middle East. Syria provided strategic depth for Hezbollah and was the main conduit for the transfer of weapons and military equipment. If the Alawite-dominated Assad regime was toppled and replaced by an entity better reflecting the majority Sunni demographic, it could entail the end of the Syria-Iran alliance of three decades, leaving Hezbollah isolated from Iran and potentially facing a newly emboldened Sunni community in Lebanon. By early 2012, Assad was clearly in trouble as rebel forces began encroaching on the outskirts of Damascus amid mass defections from the Syrian army.

Gradually, reports began to emerge in Lebanon about secret funerals being held in Shia villages in south Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. Speculation mounted that Hezbollah was dispatching fighters to assist the Assad regime in its existential struggle. Hezbollah leaders initially rejected such claims outright.

“This is absolutely untrue. There are no thousands or a thousand or even half a soldier [in Syria],” Nasrallah said in an interview on Al-Manar in November 2011. “In this issue we do not interfere at all.”⁷

The rumors persisted, however. In October 2012, a senior Hezbollah commander was killed just across the border inside Syria in clashes with rebel groups. He was given a lavish military funeral in his village. Nasrallah admitted that the commander had been helping defend villages populated by Lebanese that lay inside Syria. By December 2012, videos were emerging of Hezbollah fighters in Damascus. Nasrallah later justified the deployment by saying that they were protecting the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, the Prophet Mohammed’s granddaughter, from being demolished by “Takfiris,” a term used to describe extremist Sunnis.

By early 2013, it was common knowledge that Hezbollah had deployed sizable numbers of fighters in Syria. In May 2013, the group’s militia led an assault on the rebel-held town of Qusayr, lying five miles north of the border with Lebanon. During the battle, Nasrallah finally admitted that Hezbollah was aiding the Assad regime. He justified it essentially on two grounds. First, the Assad regime was the backbone of resistance against Israel. If Assad was to fall, it would mean the end of the Palestinian cause.



The second reason was that the rebel forces in Syria were largely composed of Takfiris who viewed anyone that did not share their austere interpretation of Islam as a heretic. It is better that we fight them in Syria than have to face them in Lebanon, Nasrallah explained.

In general, the Hezbollah support base accepted that rationale, while the rest of the country opposed it. Hezbollah's intervention in Syria contradicted the Baabda Declaration of 2012 in which President Suleiman had persuaded political leaders to agree that Lebanon would not interfere in the war raging next door. Also, the sight of Hezbollah fighters battling fellow Muslims—albeit Sunnis—who were trying to overthrow a brutal regime flew in the face of the party's original credo of championing the oppressed and subjugated. Even its original Open Letter of 1985 was addressed to "free downtrodden men." More practically, Hezbollah turned its Shia constituency into a target of revenge from Sunni extremist groups. Between July 2013 and June 2014, suicide bombers struck multiple times in Dahiye and parts of the northern Bekaa, killing more than one hundred people and wounding more than a thousand. As the conflict dragged on, Hezbollah's fatality rate increased in tandem with doubts and contention within the party's support base, which was tiring of seeing sons, brothers, husbands, and fathers returning in body bags. Brightly colored portraits of new "martyrs" smothered the walls of Shia villages alongside the sun-bleached pictures of earlier generations of fallen fighters. Some fighters returning from the horrors of the Syria war suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Petty crime and drug use increased in the cramped streets of Dahiye. Other fighters returned with booty captured on the battlefield, an act strictly forbidden by the Hezbollah leadership, but it occurred nonetheless. The black-market price of an AK-47 assault rifle plummeted as so many were brought back from Syria.

But Syria was not the only foreign intervention. After the Islamic State swept across northern Iraq and a swath of eastern Syria in 2014, Hezbollah dispatched some four hundred fighters to Iraq to help provide advice, training, and intelligence to the Shia-dominated Hashd al-Shaabi volunteer force. Nasrallah was able to justify that intervention on the basis that Hezbollah was assisting the anti-Islamic State coalition, which included US forces. But Hezbollah has remained silent on its third foreign excursion. Following the Saudi-led coalition's offensive in 2015 against the Houthis of Yemen, Hezbollah sent specialists to Yemen to assist their ally with rocket launches, intelligence gathering, communications, and training. The closest Nasrallah has come to admitting a Hezbollah presence in Yemen was in June 2018, when he coyly denied reports from Saudi Arabia that eight Hezbollah fighters had been killed there.

"It is true that one day I clearly said that we did not send fighters to Yemen because our brothers in Yemen do not need fighters. Is there something else—counselors, military aid . . . ? We do not confirm it nor deny it due to a number of interests," he said.⁸

Hezbollah could justify its roles in Syria and Iraq as being in the interests of Lebanon, arguments that one either accepted or rejected. But Hezbollah's reticence over the Yemen engagement owes to the fact that there is no Lebanon-centric reason why it should be there essentially helping the Houthis fight a country, Saudi Arabia, that has long been a close ally and supporter of Lebanon. Small wonder, perhaps, that in recent years the Saudi Arabia of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has washed its hands of Lebanon, considering it having turned into a Persian satrapy.

In May 2014, President Suleiman's six-year term in office came to an end. In honor of its 2006 agreement, Hezbollah backed its ally Aoun to be the next head of state while the March 14 coalition—by now greatly weakened—offered alternative names. In Lebanon, presidents are elected by the 128 members of parliament rather than a popular vote. However, a stalemate soon arose, because Hezbollah and its allies refused to attend parliamentary sessions to vote for the president unless they could guarantee that Aoun would win. Without quorum being achieved, each session was canceled. The deadlock persisted for two and a half years, leaving the government in a caretaker capacity, unable to fully enact legislation. The economy declined significantly during this period. Eventually, the last browbeaten holdouts in the March 14 block caved to the inevitable and accepted Aoun as president. The vote was held in November 2016, and Aoun was installed in Baabda Presidential Palace.

In October 2019, mass protests erupted across the country in response to a government decision to impose a tax on the use of WhatsApp messaging service in a crass attempt to raise desperately needed state revenues. By now Lebanon was essentially bankrupt, the result of three decades of mismanagement, corruption, and outright theft by a cabal of political bosses, most of whom had headed militias during the civil war and swapped military fatigues for suits in 1990. The banks imposed capital controls on US dollar-denominated accounts and the Lebanese lira, pegged since 1997 at LL1,500 to the dollar, began to tank.

The "thawra" (Arabic for revolution) spread across the country, even into areas where Hezbollah had influence, such as south Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. But while the sentiment of outrage against the political elite (including Hezbollah) remained undiminished, public opposition in these areas shrank because of the intimidation tactics of Hezbollah and Amal. Even the huge protests in central Beirut were disrupted when Amal and Hezbollah supporters attacked demonstrators with sticks and stones and claimed that the thawra was engineered by the United States. It was the ultimate irony: Hezbollah, a party that originally claimed to represent the oppressed and openly rejected Lebanon's confessional political system, had become, by the end of 2019, the greatest defender of the corrupt and sclerotic status quo.



Multiple Challenges

Of all the challenges facing Hezbollah today, corruption is arguably the greatest threat. It began to take root during Hezbollah's massive post-2006 expansion in manpower. The party leadership attempted to stamp it out at first, but corruption is like a cancer that is hard to fully excise. It eats away at the moral fabric of an organization and causes internal resentment and jealousies. Corruption breeds disrespect from the cadres and supporters alike, weakening Hezbollah's traditionally strong sense of discipline and obedience, the glue that binds the constituent parts of the organization into an effective whole. Fighters grew disillusioned at the sight of mid-ranking party functionaries building apartment blocks and buying Range Rovers for their children while they have been sacrificing themselves on Syria's bloody battlefields. There are many anecdotes of veteran combatants leaving the party, claiming that the Hezbollah of today is not the Hezbollah they originally joined.

Hezbollah's long-term survival is less dependent on the financial and material largesse of Iran and its own revenue-generating activities than on maintaining the support of Lebanon's Shia community. Without that support, Hezbollah cannot survive. That is why it has expended so much energy and money into providing social welfare support for the community since its first days in the early 1980s. Hezbollah still retains the support of the majority of Lebanese Shias, but cracks have emerged in that consensus. The intensity of support is not what it was, waning even further amid the gravity of Lebanon's economic depression.

Since the 1980s, Hezbollah has cultivated what it calls a "society of resistance" in which all members of the community in one way or another contribute to the cause. This could mean joining the Islamic Resistance as a fighter, donating funds to Hezbollah, attending rallies, or even stoically enduring Israeli air and artillery strikes at times of war. The process begins at a young age when a toddler is dressed up in military fatigues, is handed a toy gun, and participates in the annual Jerusalem Day parades. As a teenager, he may attend one of Hezbollah's Mustafa schools and during the holidays join the Islamic Scouts for summer camps where they study Islam and engage in some pseudomilitary training. By the age of eighteen and eligible for recruitment into the Islamic Resistance, he is firmly committed to the cause. It is a cyclical process running from generation to generation.

But that process is growing harder with each passing year as memories of the conflict with Israel fade. Israel withdrew from Lebanon more than two decades ago. For many young Shias, the only experience they have of the Israeli threat is observing the contrails of Israeli jets flying reconnaissance patrols high above the Bekaa Valley. The fervor of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution is but a distant memory for aging Hezbollah warriors and has no resonance nor allure for young Lebanese Shias. Hezbollah has not

fought a sustained battle against Israel for fifteen years. In that time, it has only staged eight claimed attacks against Israel, all of them retaliations for Israeli actions.

Hezbollah also has to deal with the differing dynamics of the three main Shia population centers in Lebanon: the south, the Bekaa Valley and Dahiye. The Shia community in Lebanon is not homogenous. The south remains generally supportive of Hezbollah because of its proximity to Israel and stronger memories of Israeli occupation. But anecdotally, support is declining, turning from heartfelt emotion to paying lip service to a powerful party. That is especially true as the harsh realities of Lebanon's economic collapse bite ever deeper. The notion of resistance against Israel seems almost a luxury when a father has seen his salary depreciate by 90 percent in the past two years and he struggles to provide food for his family.

The Bekaa Valley is dominated by powerful tribes and clans that have always resented the presence of Hezbollah, which they view as a rival, even though the area provides the greatest source of recruitment into Hezbollah's ranks. A commonly heard refrain in the Bekaa is that Hezbollah and the Amal Movement deliberately keep the area starved of government funds in order to make residents dependent on the largesse of the two parties.

Dahiye is a melting pot of Shias drawn to Beirut from the south, and the Bekaa and has its own unruly urban dynamic. The economic crisis in Lebanon has seen crime soar in the district, with shootings commonplace.

Even the caliber of Hezbollah's fighters is more varied than a quarter century ago. In the mid-1990s, the average Hezbollah fighter underwent an extensive process of ideological and military training to become a disciplined combatant and a committed adherent to the Wilayat al-Faqih. Those fighters still exist as a majority in the Islamic Resistance today, but there are secondary and tertiary tiers as well. In the wake of the 2006 war, Hezbollah underwent a massive recruitment drive, in part to strengthen its ranks in the event of another round with Israel but also to bind more Shias to the party at a time of confrontation with the March 14 parliamentary coalition. The rapid pace of recruitment continued during the Syria intervention. Theoretically, Hezbollah accepts only carefully vetted modest young men motivated by Islam and believers in the cause against Israel. But many of today's new recruits are drawn by the promise of a monthly salary of some six hundred dollars, as well as the social welfare perks of membership. For the new recruits about to go to Syria, the rigors and thoroughness of the usual religious and military training process have been often abandoned. The recruits are given a month of basic military training in the Bekaa Valley before being deployed to Syria, where they undergo a Darwinian process in which the unlucky or inept are killed off while the luckier and more skillful survive. Hezbollah attempts to inculcate the new recruits with the party's religious credo while they serve as



combatants. Traditionally, the religious lessons come first, long before a recruit handles a weapon for the first time. These second- and third-tier fighters lack the religious and moral discipline of earlier generations of Hezbollah combatants, leaving them more susceptible to corrupt practices and indiscipline.

Navigating the Paradox

Since 2005, Hezbollah, out of the necessity of defending its resistance priority, has clawed its way to dominance in Lebanon. While its power is unrivaled and its resistance priority faces no realistic domestic challenge, Hezbollah's rise to the top has come at a cost. Twenty-five years ago, Hezbollah was a lean, sufficiently financed, internally secure organization sharply focused on the confrontation with Israel in south Lebanon and aloof from the fickle complexities of Lebanese politics. It had earned a general consensus of support from Lebanese of all confessions, and it had a reputation for financial integrity; any donor could be assured that his or her funds would go toward supporting a school or clinic or purchasing arms but would not end up in someone's back pocket.

Today, certainly, Hezbollah has proven to be part of the greatest success Iran has had in exporting the Islamic Revolution. It has evolved into arguably the most formidable nonstate military force in the world. Hezbollah fields in excess of 30,000 trained fighters, many of whom will have gained invaluable combat experience on the bloody battlefields of Syria. Israel estimates Hezbollah's arsenal includes up to 150,000 rockets and missiles. Some of these guided missiles carry 1,100-pound warheads and reportedly are capable of striking within ten yards of their target. Hezbollah has advanced antiaircraft capabilities as well as an air wing of reconnaissance and combat drones, and an amphibious warfare unit for potential seaborne infiltrations of Israeli territory. Small wonder, perhaps, that in recent years Israel has classified Hezbollah as its number one threat.

Yet at the same time, Hezbollah has become a bloated behemoth, fielding a cash-swallowing army along with a vast supporting bureaucracy, saddled with corruption, linked to unreliable political allies, pressured by US sanctions, treated with outright hostility by many Lebanese, facing questionable long-term support from Lebanese Shias, and vilified by Sunnis in Lebanon and the broader region. This is the paradox Hezbollah faces.

How Hezbollah navigates its multiple challenges amid Lebanon's economic collapse remains to be seen. But for as long as Iran has a use for its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah's leaders will do what it takes to preserve the resistance priority, regardless of the consequences for Lebanon. Such is the single-minded obligation of fealty to the Wali al-Faqih.

NOTES

1 “The Speech of Hezbollah’s Secretary-General His Eminence Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah on the 15th Anniversary of the Great Victory in the July 2006 War,” *Alahed News*, August 7, 2021, <https://english.alahednews.com.lb/61792/602>. The rockets were launched a day after Israel staged air strikes in south Lebanon, the first to hit the area since the 2006 war. The air strikes were a follow-up response to the launching of rockets on August 4 from south Lebanon into Israel. Two rockets landed in northern Galilee without causing casualties or damage. Israel initially responded with artillery fire, but the subsequent air strikes marked a small retaliatory escalation, although the Israelis were careful to note that the air-to-surface missiles struck open, unpopulated areas. Hezbollah felt compelled to respond to the air strikes but also made sure to note in its statement that the rockets struck “open areas.”

2 Sheikh Naim Qassem, “We Do Not Hide Our Martyrs, and All We Do in Hezbollah Is to Serve the Resistance,” *Alahed News*, October 6, 2012, <https://archive.alahednews.com.lb/details.php?id=66455#.WU8rnujys2x>.

3 For a full English-language translation, see Augustus Richard Norton, *Amal and the Shia: Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 167.

4 Ironically, the TOW (Tube-launched, Optically tracked, Wire-guided) missiles were originally sold to Iran by Israel in the 1980s as part of what became the arms-for-hostages scandal. Iran shipped the TOWs to Hezbollah from 1997 to use against the IDF in south Lebanon.

5 See Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011), 480.

6 “Sayyed Nasrallah Full Speech on Martyr’s Day November 11 2010,” retrieved October 18, 2021, *Alahed News*, <https://english.alahednews.com.lb/12621/451>.

7 “Full Script of Sayyed Nasrallah’s Interview with Al-Manar TV on 24-10-2011,” *Alahed News*, retrieved October 18, 2021, <https://english.alahednews.com.lb/15821/513>.

8 Sayed Hasan, “Hassan Nasrallah: Hezbollah Is Ready to Fight Saudi-US Coalition in Yemen,” Dailymotion, retrieved October 18, 2021, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6o4ac4>.





The publisher has made this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivs 4.0 International license. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0>.

The views expressed in this essay are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff, officers, or Board of Overseers of the Hoover Institution.

hoover.org

Copyright © 2021 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University

27 26 25 24 23 22 21 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



About the Author



NICHOLAS BLANFORD

Nicholas Blanford is a Beirut-based consultant, author, and nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Middle East Programs. He is the author of *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle against Israel* (Random House, 2011) and *Killing Mr. Lebanon: The Assassination of Rafik Hariri and Its Impact on the Middle East* (IB Tauris, 2006).

About The Caravan Notebook

The Caravan Notebook is a platform for essays and podcasts that offer commentary on a variety of subjects, ranging from current events to cultural trends, and including topics that are too local or too specific from the larger questions addressed quarterly in *The Caravan*.

We draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman chairs the project from which this effort originates.

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World studies a range of political, social, and cultural problems in the region with the goal of informing American foreign policy choices and the wider public discussion. The working group draws on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad to foster the pursuit of modernity, to combat Islamist radicalism, to promote human flourishing, and to spread the rule of law, human rights, and democratic governance in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellow Russell Berman.

For more information about this Hoover Institution Working Group, visit us online at www.hoover.org/research-teams/middle-east-and-islamic-world-working-group.