

Lebanon Unraveling *the Hezbollah Factor*

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Abstract: Hezbollah is a Lebanese, Shi'a Islamist organization formed in the 1980's with the overarching goal of ousting foreign presence and influence in Lebanon, opposing Israel's presence and role in Lebanon, and laying the foundation to eventually establish an Islamic republic in the country. Iran has provided financing, training, and political support to Hezbollah since its inception in the 1980's, helping the group expand its reach throughout Lebanese society and beyond. Today this "state within a state" wields enormous power both inside Lebanon, in foreign countries, and in geopolitical politics. Foreign imposed sanctions on Iran, particularly from the United States, are an effort to reign in Iran's political and nuclear ambitions from afar. Additional sanctions on Hezbollah's members of Parliament are designed to contain Hezbollah and stabilize Lebanon, preventing further conflict across the region and protecting US allies and interests. That effort has increased as Hezbollah power continues to expand.

Keywords: Hezbollah, Lebanon, Iran, sanctions, Syria, Shi'a, proxy, Islamic.

I. INTRODUCTION

Following a horrific civil war that began in 1975 and dragged on an interminable fifteen years, Lebanon evolved into a stabilizing presence in an otherwise unstable neighborhood. Its pluralistic nature kept it relatively even keeled as the country recovered from the conflagration, and the end of the war brought a resurgence in nearly every area; the economy rebounded, the press flourished, culture, tourism, and architecture began to thrive. The rebuilding even brought environmental improvements. Elegance returned to the capital city of Beirut, which began to re-earn its reputation as "Paris of the Middle East." The return of peace, surging prosperity, and a growing appetite for tolerance and inclusivity among the disparate population attracted new investment and the return of nearly one million citizens who for years had sought refuge from Buenos Aires to Boston to Berlin.

Despite the optimism and resurgence of that post war era of the 1990's, destabilizing movements were never tamed for long. They led, in fact, to a long and painful decline in Lebanon's trajectory towards becoming a secure, stable, and peaceful anchor in the region. Fears expressed in the region and internationally increasingly characterize Lebanon as a failing state. But who or what is to blame?

Fingers point in many directions and to many events, yet many of those coalesce around Hezbollah, a Shia Muslim group that evolved into a terrorist organization and ultimately gained control of power in government. The group has steadfastly created havoc since its inception. There is one reason why this group has remained strong, resilient, and destructive to Lebanon's health—that singular reason is Iran. Iran has supported every Hezbollah every step of the way with resources and inspiration.

As the "party of God"—the literal translation of 'Hezbollah', this paramilitary and political organization is made up primarily almost exclusively of Shia Muslims. Like its sponsor, Iran, the organization's number one goal is the establishment of an Islamic state as part of a larger plan to create a caliphate across the entire Middle East. In order to create this Islamic society, Hezbollah is determined to eradicate all forms and perceived remnants of Western colonialism inside Lebanon.

A. Creating a State within a State

Far from its early days as a ragtag group of militias, Hezbollah has consistently grown in power since its inception. Having since grown in scope and power, they now control the presidency, a majority number of seats in the Lebanese parliament (with their allies) ;operate a military of 25,000-40,000 troops with advanced military weapons (the most powerful non-state military force in existence); receive a billion dollar budget; opened a satellite television station, and operate multiple radio stations. Additionally, they run a security division which is entirely separate from the Lebanese government. It is unrealistic to characterize Hezbollah as anything other than a state within a state.

In 2008, a discovery of Hezbollah's utilization of a highly advanced fiber-optic telephone network with the capability of reaching all corners of Lebanon, shocked the Lebanese population. According to a report by the Chicago Tribune in May 2008: "In the past six months they [Hezbollah] have developed a huge, octopus-sized network covering the whole of Lebanon, entering areas where no Shiite headquarters exist, in what appears to be the creation of a parallel Iranian network in Lebanon." [1]

To fully understand how the situation on the ground in Lebanon became favorable to the foreign infiltration that ultimately helped undermine it, one must consider the precariousness of the nation given the fact that Lebanon only gained independence from France in 1944. It was just four years later, in 1948, when war erupted south of Lebanon's southern border in the land then known as Palestine. Jews and Arabs battled for the land before Jews emerged victorious, and the state of Israel was born. As a result, over one hundred thousand Palestinians became refugees in Lebanon almost overnight and were never allowed to return home. The vast majority of those Palestinians were Sunni Muslims, and their arrival in Lebanon disturbed the delicate balance of Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Shia Muslims that existed at the time. This disruption in a Lebanese population of under one million proved to be incredibly destabilizing.

However, widening religious divides weren't the only element that led to growing civil unrest. The Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon became heavily armed and began fighting with Shia Muslims in Lebanon, creating havoc for decades. Various groups in Lebanon began taking sides, some supporting the Palestinians among them and some opposing. Feeling vulnerable and marginalized already, primarily by Lebanon's more educated Christian population, a group of Lebanese Shia Muslims were open to the encouragement of dynamic Shia leaders from Iran who had begun to move among them. One imam in particular, Musa al-Sadr, was particularly powerful in his ability to bring a sense of agency to the disenfranchised Shia population, particularly those in south Lebanon who had long lived at the margins of Lebanese society.

While Shia Muslims were organically forming a variety of militias to protect themselves from the armed Palestinians among them as well as from Sunni Muslims and Christians as they engaged in civil war, Hezbollah as an organization did not emerge until well into the civil war in the late seventies and early eighties. The ragged and disorganized Shi'a resistance groups found inspiration in Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini, also Shia Muslim, who in 1979 overthrew the Shah of Iran and founded the Islamic Republic of Iran. For Shi'a resistance groups in Lebanon, this was a massive development and turning point, particularly when the new Islamic Republic of Iran began to provide them with power, training, money, and the very ability to resist and eventually wield power over the country of Lebanon.

During Lebanon's civil war and for the following fifteen years, neighboring Syrian troops moved in and occupied the country. Syrian leaders then allowed or encouraged Iran to send 1500 of its notorious Revolutionary Guards into Lebanon to train Hezbollah members with the goal of expelling "all Western colonial influences" from Lebanon. Thus began an extremely violent era in which Hezbollah fighters attacked the American Embassy in Beirut, and the American and French Multinational Force headquarters in Beirut, killing over 300 individuals, nearly all service members. After reportedly hijacking a TWA flight in 1985 (this is denied by Hezbollah) and killing one American passenger, Hezbollah operatives kidnapped 104 American and European hostages over the decade between 1982 and 1992. Of those abducted, at least eight were killed or died due to insufficiently treated illnesses.

In addition to killing and kidnapping Americans, Europeans, and others, Hezbollah actively waged war against Israeli forces who had invaded and occupied southern Lebanon in an effort to oust the Palestine Liberation Organization who had made southern Lebanon their base. Hezbollah not only fought the Israelis in Lebanon, they began firing rockets directly

into Israel. Even though much of Lebanese society rejected the presence of Israel in Lebanon, they simultaneously feared members of Hezbollah who were acting in aggressive and violent manners within Lebanon and pressuring young Shi'a men to join their ranks. Despite their violent bullying tactics used on much of the Lebanese population, when Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon, the country embraced Hezbollah as heroes, albeit reluctantly.

The conflict between Israel and Hezbollah continues to this day, fluctuating between periods of outright war and stretches of relative quiet.

B. Government Pattern of Instability Contributes to Hezbollah's Rise

Over the past several decades, Lebanon's numerous attempts to establish a stable government followed a cyclical pattern characterized by the inability of elected officials to build the coalitions necessary to create a viable, working ministry. Hezbollah has been the beneficiary of such disarray.

The most glaring example emerged in 2014 amidst growing concerns about the civil war in neighboring Syria, and the ideological split the Syrian civil war produced in Lebanon. Due to this growing division, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman was forced to vacate his term in 2014. The government, then headed by Prime Minister Tammam Salam, was unable to establish a consensus on electing a new president. For nearly two years Lebanon endured a stalemate with no acting president. In the autumn of 2016 a breakthrough came when Michel Aoun, the founder of the Free Patriotic Movement, was elected President, becoming the first head of state since May 2014. Unnerving to many Lebanese, however, was the fact that Aoun was an ally of Hezbollah, and his swearing in was a shot in the arm of Hezbollah.

Having experienced grave losses at the hands of Hezbollah extremists, United States viewed Hezbollah's control of the Lebanese presidency and their growing influence in the parliament as an utter disaster. An opinion in the New York Times delineated US fears in an editorial, writing: *As the Lebanese government recovers from its paralysis, Hezbollah is seizing the state's institutions one by one. First it cemented the presidency, and then the cabinet—now its eyes are set on Parliament. At the same time, the March 14 Alliance's constituent parties continue to accede to Hezbollah's demands, speeding along the alliance's de facto dissolution, and with it any credible opposition to the group shaping the country on its own terms. Slowly but surely, the Party of God is clearing its own path towards full control of Lebanon's government.* [2]

The United States has kept Hezbollah on its designated terrorist list for decades despite the group's growing presence in Lebanon's Parliament, shunning the notion that their legitimized government roles are indeed, fully legitimate. Thus American action reflects ongoing rejection of Hezbollah's power. US leaders are extremely wary that Lebanon could evolve into what Hezbollah has stated itself that it desires—an Islamic republic similar to Iran's; one that rejects Western thought and democracy. If such an event should unfold it is very likely to further destabilize the entire Middle East, potentially bringing serious, existential harm to its neighbors (Israel in particular) and beyond. In the meantime, Lebanon continues its path toward implosion.

C. Hezbollah's Ideological Evolution

Since its inception during Hezbollah's ideology and goals have transformed to a degree. Partly this is due to the changes they fostered; no American, French, or Israeli troops remain in Lebanon (see the exception, below), at least not publicly; therefore, they attained the first of their primary goals, using extreme violence to do so.

What remains today is a 3-part ideology: establish an Islamic state in the country, adhere to Walyat-al Faqih, [3] the core of contemporary Shi'a political thought, and oppose the state of Israel's existence. We'll look at each of these a bit more closely.

Due to Lebanon's religiously pluralistic society, which sharply contrasts with Iran's nearly uniform Shia Muslim population, Hezbollah's leaders accept for the present time the difficulty of implementing an Islamic state in Lebanon. As a result, leadership has stated publicly that they will not attempt to impose such a system of governance in the near term. What 'near term' will mean in practice is a question of great concern to other countries.

The second part, adherence to Wilayat al-Faqih, advocates a guardianship-based political system. This system relies upon a "just and capable jurist (faqih) to assume the leadership of the government in the absence of an infallible Imam." [3] However, while the guardianship of a high-ranking religious scholar is universally accepted amongst all Shi'a theories of

governance, there is often disagreement regarding the finer details of this governance, such as the role of the jurist and the scope of his authority. This, too, is closely monitored by world powers.

The third part of Hezbollah's ideology is of greatest interest and greatest concern to most world powers, as it concerns Hezbollah's consistently stated opposition to the state of Israel. Like Iran, Hezbollah is not only opposed to Israeli encroachment into Lebanon; they oppose Israel's right to exist. Opposition to Israel's presence of troops in Lebanon was, as stated earlier, one of the most galvanizing incentives for Lebanese militias to band together into one group. When Israel first occupied Southern Lebanon in 1978, and again in 1982, they did so for the purposes of expelling the PLO—Palestinian Liberation Organization, headquartered in the area. The PLO waged guerrilla warfare into Israel from that location—hence Israel's drive to move them out at all costs. Israeli forces would advance all the way north to Beirut.

The PLO was pushed out and relocated to Tunisia in 1982, and in 1985 Israel withdrew from Beirut, but not from southern Lebanon. After a full 15 years, Hezbollah pressure and other factors caused Israel to withdraw their troops from southern Lebanon as well. However, to this day Israeli troops remain in Sheb'a Farms, a 10-mile area located at the southern edge of the Lebanese/Syrian border. The area was originally captured by Israel in 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Golan Heights. When Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon, they remained in Sheb'a Farms, angering many in Lebanon. The UN has ruled that Sheb'a Farms belongs to Syria, and Israel says it will negotiate only with Syria. However, many in Lebanon, Syria, and Iran believe Israel's presence in Sheb'a Farms is a stake in the ground from which Israel will try to attain more land in the future.



Fig. N. Map of Sheb'a Farms Area

Israel's ongoing presence in Sheb'a Farms has sparked military battles between the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and Hezbollah's strong military wing, which today eclipses the strength of the official Lebanese Army. In 2006, the IDF and Hezbollah clashed over the region, igniting a 33-day war in which 1200 Lebanese, primarily citizens, and 160 Israelis, mostly soldiers, were killed. Since then, Israel has begun and completed sections of a nine-meter tall (30 ft) security wall along the so-called 'Blue Line' that separates Lebanon and Israel. The wall solidifies in a tangible way Israel's claim to the Sheb'a Farms.

Given these and many more developments, Hezbollah's ideological prong of opposition to Israel has proven to be its enduring and strongest of the three, likely to continue unabated for decades to come.

D. Impact of Hezbollah's Hold on Lebanon

Considering its humble beginnings as a marginalized and oppositional band of militias, and the astonishing power the group holds today in government, military prowess, and social services, it is difficult to overstate Hezbollah's growth inside Lebanon or the impact it has on Lebanese society, both positive and negative.

Different segments of Lebanese society view Hezbollah through different lenses, and those lenses have shifted for many over the decades. In the beginning, many Lebanese Shia were supportive of the group that was fighting a guerrilla-style war against the Israelis, whose very existence the majority of Lebanese rejected due to their victory of the Israeli-Arab war and the expulsion of Palestinians to Lebanon. As fellow Arabs, the Palestinian loss of its land to Israel was a wound in the heart of the Lebanese that for many has never healed. For them, Hezbollah acting as a 'band of heroes' attacking this common enemy was welcomed.

In addition, like quasi-government, quasi-militias in other countries, Hezbollah won the hearts and minds of many Lebanese through its social programs that help those in need and improve societal health and education. Hezbollah currently operates multiple hospitals and health clinics, schools and other educational programs and facilities, provide much needed infrastructure, run agricultural centers that support farmers with training and assistance, and provide a variety social service programs. Hezbollah also set up Al-Shahid Social Association, a martyr's institute that provides and guarantees living and education expenses for the families of fighters who die in battle. [4]

However, regardless of the benevolence Hezbollah has demonstrated to many in Lebanon, in particular the poor and disenfranchised Shia's, their violent actions have not been limited to Israeli soldiers or citizens. Many Lebanese, be they Christian, Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, Druze, or other group fear the often brutish tactics Hezbollah uses on its fellow citizens. Some of those who have suffered most have been fellow Shia Muslims who did not wish to fight Israelis or anyone else. Hezbollah raided and terrorized a number of villages in Lebanon with the hope of garnering support and increasing their ranks. The neighborhoods of Achrafieh and Hamra (which were both destroyed by Hezbollah in 2007) were not issued building permits for reconstruction for years. During the attack, several factories and businesses along with countless homes were destroyed. A similar devastation occurred in Dahiye, where in 2010 reconstruction funds finally were acquired by a Hezbollah foundation that dictated how the Beirut suburb would be controlled. [2]

Hezbollah also displays its muscle at the Hariri International airport in Beirut, threatening the safety of anyone perceived to be aligned against them, such as the incident in which two Turkish pilots were kidnapped by Hezbollah operatives at that airport. [5] The issue is that the kidnapping took place less than fifty meters away from a Lebanese army checkpoint, which raises concerns regarding the ability of state institutions to secure the safety of Lebanese nationals and foreign visitors on Lebanese soil. Following the incident, a general atmosphere of fear pervaded travellers arriving and departing from the Beirut-Rafic Hariri International. *Canada Free Press* opined the following: *Hezbollah has been holding the airport, as well as the whole country, hostage since 2005. In this terrorism context dozens of Lebanese nationals from Diaspora who support the sovereignty, freedom and independence of their homeland and oppose Hezbollah's hegemony and occupation were either unlawfully banned from entering Lebanon via the airport, or humiliated, threatened, detained arbitrarily, and wrongfully and falsely accused of treason. Many of them were flagrantly harassed and badly intimidated before they could return to their Diaspora countries. Hezbollah freely uses the airport for importing all kinds of weapons and for all other illegal trafficking. Jihadists enter and leave through the airport freely as well as Iranian militant personal and officials. In this realm two Lebanese MP'S who opposed Hezbollah and Syria were assassinated only a few hours after they disguisedly and secretly returned to Lebanon via the airport. Hezbollah's Camera's taped their entrance and assailants took care of them.* [6, 6]

In essence, since 2008 and in some cases earlier, Hezbollah has acted with impunity throughout the country. One of the more recent features of Hezbollah's ability to act freely is its increasing adeptness in the drugs and arms smuggling trade (see next section). The group has been active in the global narcotics trafficking industry since 2012. [7]

E. Hezbollah's Reach Extends Worldwide

Lebanon is further weakened when Hezbollah's reach extends beyond the borders of Lebanon. The resulting problems are extreme and debilitating for the country, creating worldwide enmity, destroying tourism and investment, inviting war and other attacks, derailing resources from people and infrastructure, causing fear and confusion, and breaking cohesion among the population.

Hezbollah's illegal international actions take several forms including recruitment, terrorist activities, illegal activities to raise funds, and engaging in outright military operations, such as in Syria's civil war. The group is active, if largely invisible, across the globe, including inside the United States. Hezbollah agents operate complex interstate criminal enterprises. These activities, which include money-laundering services to Latin American cocaine cartels, cigarette smuggling, human smuggling, drug trafficking, counterfeiting and so-called "charitable work" have resulted in the accumulations of millions of dollars or more, enabling Hezbollah leaders to purchase high-tech weaponry and materials to be sent to the group's Lebanese headquarters. [8]

Hezbollah has played a key role in the Syrian conflict for multiple reasons, not least of which is the fact that the country serves as a key transshipment point for Iranian weapons. Since the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah has been active in rebuilding its weapons cache with Iranian help, which at the very least has been tolerated, if not helped, by Syrian

President Assad's regime. It is also in Hezbollah's interest to do what it can to support President Assad, despite their vast religious and ideological differences. Essentially Hezbollah is working to prevent other powers, especially Saudi Arabia and other Sunni-dominant countries in the region, from gaining or wielding any power in Syria.

According to US government reports, [9] Hezbollah helped suppress the Syrian uprising by training Syrian soldiers how to prosecute a counter insurgency. Their role evolved from an initial advisory role to an operational one, with up to 8000 troops fighting alongside Syrian troops. This is clearly more evidence of Hezbollah's prowess in behaving as a state within a state. [10] In addition to activities in Syria and the United States, Hezbollah operatives have been active, and often violently so, in a number of locations such as Bulgaria, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Nigeria, Thailand, and Cyprus. Many of these activities included attacks on Israeli or Jewish targets.

Whether considering the situation today or looking to the future, Hezbollah's growing power continues to be a source of great concern for many Lebanese citizens and refugees, for regional players such as Israel, for quasi-allies such as Syria, for predominantly Sunni Muslim countries in the Middle East who oppose Iran and Hezbollah based on ideological reasons, and for foreign countries including the US, where Hezbollah operatives are active in either terrorist attacks or illegal fund-raising activities. Even many Shi'a Muslim inside Lebanon have questioned Hezbollah decisions, especially when the group decided to send forces to Syria, leaving southern Lebanon potentially exposed to Israel. That action left many Lebanese Shi'a worried that Hezbollah overreached and abandoned its commitment to Lebanon in favor of its larger alliance with Iran, and to a degree, Syria.

F. Concerns for the Future

As Hezbollah continues its international activities, many believe it may be Hezbollah's undoing. While Lebanon has not been successful at controlling the group and continues to fall prey to their power grabs, international actors are taking direct action.

For example, while the pivot to fight in Syria did help Hezbollah gain access to weapons as well as experience in fighting, many believe it has weakened them in some ways. They are now far more directly in the crosshairs of the US and its allies, who have placed sanctions directly on individual Hezbollah officials whom they accuse of supporting Iran. [2]

Then there is the question of Hezbollah's solvency, or lack thereof. With the US imposing greater and greater sanctions on Iran, many believe the shortfalls are affecting payments to its proxy, Hezbollah. Of Hezbollah's estimated annual budget of \$1 billion, Tehran contributes \$700 million. [3]

Hezbollah has felt the pinch of cutbacks from Iran before. But the US did not sanction Hezbollah directly until the US Treasury Department began sanctioning dozens of Hezbollah's leaders and operatives starting in January of 2017. Congress then passed sanctions in October of 2018 that gave the Trump Administration more leeway in going after Hezbollah's financial facilitators. Their investigations into the Latin America connection, including Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay and Venezuela, and its impact on the US, are yielding results. Closer to home, the US has discovered Hezbollah has been laundering money through US based used-car dealerships and has taken action to suspend those activities and apprehend those involved. The Biden administration continued these tactics, sanctioning Lebanese politicians allied with Hezbollah. Though progress is slow, it is also consistent between American administrations who seek to undermine the organization until it changes behavior or collapses.

As a border-sharing neighbor, Israel has more direct concerns about Hezbollah, who claim to have enough weapon power to cause high casualties far inside Israel in high population centers. Since another war with Israel in 2006, Hezbollah has more than doubled its fighters from 20,000 to over 45,000, and possible up to 55,000 with reservists. It has also increased its weapon stash, from 13,000 rockets and missiles in 2006 to 120,000 in 2018. [4] Additionally, Israel has been working to destroy a massive subterranean network; a series of tunnels that sews fear among Israelis living in the north near the border with Lebanon. [11]

Nevertheless, no one believes Hezbollah fighters want a war. They can certainly cause massive harm to Israel and its populace, but without the direct help of Iran they are far from able to secure land or win concessions. The devastation to Lebanon would be massive and serves as a true deterrent. The greater threat to Israel would come if a war broke out between Iran and Israel, and Hezbollah was but one force out of many.

As an individual fighting army, Hezbollah is strong, but limited. The greatest threat to world peace relates more to their leverage than their prowess. As members of the parliament, who along with their allies hold a majority and charge of key ministries, they threaten the very stability of Lebanon, and in turn, the region.

This remains particularly true as the war in Syria drags on. So it remains especially difficult for the US, Britain, Canada, other Western allies and Middle East Sunni allies to punish and restrain Hezbollah without also destabilizing Lebanon, and again, the region. [12]

The US, Israel and their allies have long supported the Lebanese Army, who remain weaker than Hezbollah's military wing. While the Lebanese Army has long been a secure ally, helping prevent the country from collapsing from political unrest, their positions and allegiances, too, are coming into question. Since Israel began constructing a wall between the two countries, Israeli soldiers have spotted soldiers from Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army working together, riding in the same vehicles. A senior Israeli officer noted that Israel Defense Forces has seen increased cooperation between the Iran-backed Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces.

II. CONCLUSION

Instability and violence across the Middle East has long been a concern to those living there as well as those observing from a distance. The last decade, however, has demonstrated a growing schism between Sunni and Shia branches of Islam that threatens to escalate dramatically to a point it may threaten world stability. Though Hezbollah began as a rag-tag group of militias, their ascendancy into political leadership in Lebanon, their deep involvement in Syria, their growing military power, and their successful global crime network in South America, North America, and Europe, should garner the attention of leaders worldwide. When the world has witnessed the enormous pain and suffering that ISIS, a militia group without no land base was capable of inflicting on the world, it cannot underestimate the potential of this Iran-backed group to morph into something far more destabilizing.

As Lebanon continues to sink under economic calamity while Hezbollah remains strong, the danger persists that a political failure could occur. Such a collapse of government at a time when Hezbollah is strong could portend the beginning of a battle to turn Lebanon into an Islamic state. Given Iran's interest in such an undertaking, such an event could quickly ensnare the entire Middle East region and beyond.

It is therefore of utmost important for international powers to use tools available to contain Hezbollah with every financial stick it can bring to bear. If they can simultaneously provide carrots to keep Hezbollah's power relative to their population size in the country, it will go far to keeping a lid on this volatile region of the world.

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