



**DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EXTERNAL POLICIES**  
**POLICY DEPARTMENT**



# **THE ROLE OF HEZBOLLAH IN POST-CONFLICT LEBANON**

**AFET**



**DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EXTERNAL POLICIES OF THE UNION**

**DIRECTORATE B**

**POLICY DEPARTMENT**

**AD HOC BRIEFING**

## **THE ROLE OF HEZBOLLAH IN POST-CONFLICT LEBANON**

### **Abstract**

The Lebanese Hezbollah is a difficult organisation to grasp; its several identities – be it as an Islamic movement, a political party, and armed resistance group or as a terrorist organisation – are nevertheless all intertwined at the Lebanese level. Born in a Lebanese context, operating from a Lebanese territorial point of view, Hezbollah has integrated the Lebanese political system and has built its existence on the liberation of Lebanon. That notwithstanding, its pan-Islamic outlook and its strong narrative have contributed to its reputation as a fundamentally globally acting jihadi organisation. Although Hezbollah has managed to establish itself as a constant feature on the Lebanese political scene, its weapons' arsenal are now questioned by other Lebanese, and its engagement in Syria fundamentally threaten Lebanese civil peace.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Hezbollah is a strange creature to grasp; attempts to categorise it either as a terrorist organisation or a 'Lebanonised' political party not only reduce its complex nature but are also misleading. Its several identities are interconnected yet distinct, and continuously evolve as Hezbollah adapts to changing political circumstances.

This complexity has evolved in particular since the end of the Lebanese civil war which coincided with three important events: the death of Imam Khomeini in Iran as well as the end of the Iraq-Iran conflict and the Cold War. As Hezbollah is an organisation displaying national, regional as well international dimensions, changes in either contribute to changes in its outlook as well. Since 1990, Hezbollah has therefore undergone a series of metamorphoses which today lend it at least four identities: it is a political party, a resistance group, a group considered a terrorist organisation as well as an Islamic movement. Understanding Hezbollah requires the recognition of these different dimensions and their interconnectness.

The complexity of its nature and outlook are visible in Hezbollah's banner. Its very name (حزب الله pronounced *hezbə'lāi* meaning Party of God), points to its Islamic dimension, since it is based on a Quranic verse promising victory to those who join the party of God. Its political dimension is reflected in the first word, *Hezb* (حزب pronounced *hezb*) meaning party, whereas the text beneath the name refers not only to its resistance character but also to its Lebanese roots. This is also reflected in the images used, namely a rifle standing for militancy, a book which represents the Quran, and a globe which stands for its global ambition.

The present brief focuses only on Hezbollah's role in Lebanon since the end of the country's civil war but takes into account the Lebanese implications of its regional and international dimensions; this is based on the fact that the Taif Agreement, which brought the 15-year conflict to an end in 1990, changed not only Hezbollah's position in the Lebanese landscape but ultimately also altered its self-perception and demeanour.

## 1. HEZBOLLAH, THE ISLAMIC MOVEMENT

Although Hezbollah officially came into being in 1985 with the publication of its first manifesto, its beginnings can be traced back as far as 1978 as a non-violent Islamic struggle movement of social and political protest. In contrast to Lebanon's other important Shia<sup>1</sup> movement *Amal*, which expresses long-standing socio-economic grievances of Lebanese Shiites in a secular way, Hezbollah combines these realities with an ideology inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution, which posits the supremacy of clerical jurisprudence in society. The Shia dimension in this context is two-fold; it serves as a marker for a community in Lebanon traditionally under-privileged in spite of its size, as well as an originally theological and later also political link with Iran. Hezbollah's religious dimension is therefore not purely theological; its political objectives are based on an interpretation of Islam which combines traditional Shia theology with a revolutionary rhetoric. Its original slogan 'the Islamic Revolution in Lebanon' thereby echoed Iran's 1979 evolution and embodied the overarching objective of an Islamic state in Lebanon based on the demographic reality of a Muslim majority in the country.

Since 1992, Hezbollah's Islamic dimension has however evolved; although the establishment of an Islamic state still exists as part of its ideological portfolio *ad abstractum*, in reality Hezbollah has abandoned this goal in the light of most Lebanese citizens objecting to such a system. The party has been careful to reach out to other Lebanese, in particular Christians, and has dropped its goal of the abolishment of Lebanon's sectarian political system, which would be to its advantage but to the disadvantage of Christians who are believed to make up 41% of the population whereas the political system allots them 50%. Similarly, Hezbollah's attitude towards Lebanese Christians has evolved from them being *dhimmis* (non-Muslim residents of an Islamic state with somewhat limited rights) to fellow *muwataneen* (citizens).

Paradoxically, the abandonment of the Islamic state in Lebanon was bolstered by a theological rationale based on the *Vilayat-e Faqih* doctrine. Literally the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists, it is the cornerstone of Imam Khomeini's political vision. It posits that Islamic jurists should exert custodianship over the people in a state; in this context, the jurist has the power to overrule certain Islamic principles in favour of interests which serve Islam better.

In the context of Hezbollah's political participation in a pluralistic state it originally considered apostate, the doctrine was used to overrule the previous attitude and conclude that its interests were deemed better served by it joining the political system and even conclude alliances with other, non-Shia players. Sanctioned by Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, Hezbollah therefore participated, in 1992, in Lebanon's first post-war elections and all subsequent ones.

Since then, its theological room for manoeuvring has significantly increased. Its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah was appointed, along with the head of Hezbollah's religio-judicial council, as Khamenei's religious deputies in Lebanon in 1995, which had implications most notably for the collection of the religious tax. Now directly managed by Hezbollah rather than channelled through Iran, the monies are used to fund a series of NGOs as well as its media outlets and research centres. In 2005, Hezbollah did not seek Iran's theological permission to participate in Lebanon's cabinet but made do with a ruling by a Lebanese cleric. Most importantly, it has dropped its prerogative according to which all laws must be based on *Shari'a*, and has participated in the Lebanese legislative process like the other

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<sup>1</sup> Shiism is one of the two main sects in Islam; 10 -20% of Muslims worldwide are believed to be Shia, but only Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain have Shia majority populations. Long considered apostates by the majority Sunni current, Shia have been discriminated in many Muslim countries.

parties. It is therefore a logical continuation of Hezbollah's evolution that its 2009 manifesto did not include any reference to the establishment of an Islamic state.

In spite of progressive Lebanonisation and independence towards Iran, Hezbollah's Islamic dimension is also where its international aspect comes into play. Pan-Islamism, along with Pan-Arabism, constitutes its global element and explain its strong links with Iran, amongst other elements explained later. That notwithstanding, Hezbollah has not been able to translate this into tangible terms; its revolutionary vision of Islam has been met with suspicion at best and hostility at worst in other Arab states, in particular the Gulf. Although clothed in a Sunni – Shia antagonism, power concerns play a more important role than theological ones. It is worth nothing that Hezbollah considers rifts between Sunni and Shia Muslims as the result of foreign interference more than anything else, and has signed in 2008 an understanding with the Lebanese *Salafi* movement.

## **2. HEZBOLLAH, THE PARTY-CUM-MILITIA**

Although its very name defines Hezbollah as a party, it did not consider political activity within a multi-party system as Lebanon's until 1992; this was chiefly because of its rejection of the rather peculiar sectarian system which does not take into account Lebanon's demographic realities, and its general consideration of the Lebanese state as an apostate one. As the Taif agreement allowed for former militias to transform themselves into political parties, Hezbollah changed its attitude and has since participated in five parliamentary and three municipal elections; more importantly, it has reached out to other communities and thereby abandoned its Shia inward-looking policy of the 1980s. Its election lists have included in all five parliamentary elections both Sunni Muslims and Christians in addition to its own Shia candidates; crucially, the overwhelming majority of its candidates were civilians and not from the clergy. In parliament, Hezbollah is part of the Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc whose members include party- and non-party members.

Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon, following the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005 changed the national political landscape and crucially Hezbollah's position in it. As the event polarised the country into two political blocs, Hezbollah joined the March 8 alliance, and thereby allied itself with then six other Lebanese parties, including secular and Christian ones. In addition, it fielded for the first time two ministers (energy and water as well as labour) for the cabinet, an experience it has repeated since in the following three cabinets with the portfolios of agriculture, labour and administrative reform.

Yet it is its alliance with the predominantly Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) led by former Chief of Staff Michel Aoun, formalised in 2006, which can be considered its real moment of integration into the Lebanese political landscape. With 19 seats in the 2009 parliament, the FPM is the second largest party in parliament after the Future Movement which holds 29 seats and is part of the rival bloc March 14. Hezbollah and the equally Shia-dominated *Amal* Movement both came third with 13 seats each. Since Hezbollah had accepted Lebanon's peculiar political system as it is, it realised that influence within the Lebanese system is yielded by forming alliances and striking deals. This explains its alliance with the FPM.

The 2006 war with Israel (considered a victory by the party) changed Hezbollah's domestic standing yet again, and saw its attempt to translate its demographic and military force into political power within the rather inflexible Lebanese political system which divides posts according to an outdated confessional ratio. In the process, Hezbollah asked not only for a change of the electoral system, but also for a veto minority for itself and its allies in the national unity government after the war. In the following stand-off between government and opposition, Hezbollah forcefully undergirded its demands with supporters

besieging parliament and violently clashing with political opponents. As a result, Lebanon was paralysed for over a year; but Hezbollah's resorting to violence harmed its narrative as the only Lebanese militia never having used its arms against fellow Lebanese. Perhaps not surprisingly, Hezbollah's bloc lost in the following elections, and it gave up the minority veto it had lobbied for.

Although all of Hezbollah's electoral programmes are mostly domestic in outlook (none of which has ever mentioned an Islamic state – including the support of resistance; the establishment of civil peace; the founding of state of law and institutions; the promotion of political participation; political, economic and social reforms; upholding public freedoms; and dialogue among all the Lebanese – it is its regional and international dimensions which continue to hamper its full integration into the Lebanese political system. The indictment of four Hezbollah supporters by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon led to its ministers withdrawing from the cabinet in 2011; its involvement in the Syrian war in contrast to Lebanon's official position of non-involvement, as well as the question of its weapons are all contentious issues which have jeopardised its position in the Lebanese landscape.

### **3. HEZBOLLAH, THE LEBANESE RESISTANCE**

When Hezbollah emerged on the Lebanese scene the civil war had been going on for over a decade already; triggered by violent confrontation between the Christian *Phalangists* and armed Palestinian groups, the war had always included a regional dimension which consequently led to the involvement of other regional players such as Syria and Israel. Following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, designed to expel the Palestinian Liberation Organisation whose headquarters had been based in Beirut since 1971, Hezbollah emerged as a militia whose goal was the liberation of Lebanese lands occupied by Israel. Although Hezbollah's narrative is overwhelmingly Lebanese as well as Islamic, geographic as well as socio-economic dimensions played, and continue to play, an often overlooked role in its mobilisation against Israel.

Lebanon's South, the area Israel has occupied to varying degrees from 1982 to 2000, is overwhelmingly populated by Shiites. These were already traditionally disadvantaged socio-economically within the Lebanese system, and additionally suffered disproportionately from the damages resulting from the invasions of 1978 as well as 1982. Hezbollah's constituency thereby combined a confessional marker with an already dire socio-economic situation as well as a geographic reality. In every violent conflict with Israel, be it Operation Accountability in 1993, Operation Grapes of Wrath in 1996 or the war of 2006, Lebanon's South, and thereby its Shiite community, were hit particularly hard.

Hezbollah's resistance narrative was institutionalised in the Lebanese state framework only with the end of the civil war and the 1990 Taif agreement which put an end to it. While Taif called for the disarmament of all Lebanese militias, Hezbollah was allowed to continue its resistance against Israel which was still occupying 10% of Lebanon's territory. There are several reasons for Hezbollah's continued existence as an armed group largely out of Lebanon's state control: its strategic relationship with Syria which at the time exerted considerable influence in Lebanon and had an interest in keeping Israel's Lebanon front open; its history as a militia with an external rather than internal enemy; and the strategic necessity to regain Lebanese territory. This was supported by and large by Lebanese society, but gained traction after Israel's Operation Grapes of Wrath which killed about 150 Lebanese civilians and displaced at least 350.000. This is reflected also in the rather close cooperation between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Armed Forces, which seem to be complementary rather than antagonistic. Its Lebanese, rather than Shiite resistance to Israel was embodied in the 1997 formation of its Multi-confessional Lebanese Brigades, a sister organisation to its military wing Islamic Resistance.



Like its general outlook, Hezbollah's military nature has evolved over time. Its tactics used during Israel's presence in Lebanon were largely of guerrilla nature such as suicide bombings, hit-and-run attacks and the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers. After Israel's withdrawal in 2000, for which Hezbollah was largely credited, it turned into a hybrid organisation combining methods of conventional and asymmetric warfare, and has not conducted suicide operations since 1999. Its continued launching of rockets into Northern Israel resemble more the former than the latter, and point to state actor support. Yet its strength is not so much in its numbers – notoriously difficult to determine but esteemed to be around 1.000 members and several thousand supporters – as in its organisational capacity, its equipment and its tactics. Since the withdrawal of Israel, Hezbollah has struggled with its resistance rationale which it now bases on Lebanon's claim to the territories of the *Shebaa* farms and *Ghajar* village, which Israel occupies and says belong to Syria. Several political players, especially those of March 14, have called on Hezbollah to surrender its arms and put an end to its resistance rationale – something Hezbollah decidedly refuses. Its resistance identity is a strategic choice which, although focused on Lebanon, is intrinsically tied to Israel and its existence in the Middle East.

Although Hezbollah shares a decidedly anti-Israeli vision with Hamas and Iran, its Lebanese prerogatives take precedence over regional considerations. Examples include the refusal to open the Lebanese-Israeli border during both Israel's 2002 West Bank counterterrorism offensive as well as during its 2009 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, declaring such a move as detrimental to Lebanese national interest. Hezbollah considers Zionism, rather than Judaism, as its enemy, and thereby sees civilian residents of Israel as legitimate targets. This does not apply to Jewish civilians outside of Israel.

#### **4. HEZBOLLAH, THE TERRORIST GROUP**

Even before it officially came into existence, Hezbollah was credited with the organisation of several terrorist attacks on American and French targets in 1983 and 1984, and has featured on the lists of terrorist organisations of the United States, Israel, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Hezbollah's generally strong rhetoric, especially since the second Intifada, supports such views – it regularly describes the United States as the Great Satan and Israel as a cancerous entity, denies the existence of civilians in Israel (hence legitimising its indiscriminate shelling) and generally uses anti-Semitic language.

That notwithstanding, Hezbollah has condemned several terrorist attacks including September 11 and the 1997 Luxor attacks, the 2007 attack on a UNIFIL contingent, and has argued that attacks on American civilians are not justified by resistance or Islam. While it does advocate Palestinian suicide attacks amongst Israeli civilians, Hezbollah itself has conducted suicide operations only against Israeli military targets, and only in Lebanon.

All in all, Hezbollah's attitude towards terrorism – which it generally considers unlawful – seems to be at odds with its own asymmetric techniques and its strong language which at times does resemble al-Qaida's narrative. The seeming antagonism glosses over the consistency which does exist in Hezbollah's ideology which ultimately is a territorial one. In its view, its area of operation is Lebanon only; its enemy is Israel and its goal the liberation of occupied Lebanese territory. Although Hezbollah ideologically subscribes to the liberation of Palestine and does not accept Israel's existence, it has never operated within Israel. Similarly, Hezbollah did not condone the killing of civilians in Iraq, although it generally supported Iraqi resistance against American occupation. In this context, suicide operations are legitimate only as a military tool. Suicide being forbidden in Islam, it is only legitimate when used in a larger jihadi context; the latter has to be however clearly defined. In this rationale, neither of *al-Qaida's*

operation achieved a strategic objective but instead aimed solely at killing innocent civilians. In this context, the operations were considered terrorism by Hezbollah.

In contrast to other organisations such as *al-Qaida*, Hezbollah's global dimension does not imply its area of operation to be global. Fundamentally Lebanese, its ideology and modus operandi do not exist outside its regional context which is intrinsically linked to Israel.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The four identities that define Hezbollah are not only strongly linked to each other but have one common feature, which is its Lebanese dimension. Its Islamic dimension is intertwined with the social stratification of Lebanon, and the under-privileged position of the Lebanese Shia in it. Its existence as a political party proves its acceptance of the rather peculiar Lebanese political system as it is, and therefore embodies the end of its revolutionary ambitions. As a resistance group, its strong territorial identity refers to Lebanon and its liberation and Lebanon only; a fact which its at times strong anti-Israeli and anti-American language often obfuscates. Lastly, its terrorist dimension has to be understood within its regional and therefore Israeli context. Although Hezbollah's techniques and narrative on the surface resemble other Islamist groups, one would be mistaken to confuse them.

This notwithstanding, Hezbollah's existence, and in particular its weapons' arsenal, are no longer a matter of consensus in Lebanon. Its engagement in Syria does not fit any of its four narratives and is likely to jeopardise its position in Lebanon proper.

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