

Hezbollah: An Introduction

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Hezbollah's identity

Lebanon-based Hezbollah is a transnational Shiite Islamist group founded by Iran in 1981, following the ideology of absolute Wilayat al-Faqih, as expounded by Tehran's late Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini. Since its inception, Hezbollah has engaged in terrorist activities, targeting its own and Iran's enemies, both in Lebanon and abroad. Its activities have earned the organization and many of its members terror designations by the United States Departments of State and Treasury, as well as by other countries.

Contrary to the narrative purported by the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah, the group was founded prior to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.¹ The decision to establish Hezbollah was made in Tehran three years prior to the Israeli invasion. Khomeini appointed Ayatollah Ali Akhbar Montazeri to establish Hezbollah, dispatching him to Damascus, Syria, where the group was founded in 1981.

The group runs a vast social services network – including hospitals, schools, vocational institutions, and charities – in predominantly Shiite areas of Lebanon, which has earned it the gratitude and support of a community traditionally neglected by the Lebanese state. Through its “Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc,” Hezbollah also holds parliamentary and ministerial representation in Lebanon's government.

Wilayat al-Faqih and the 1985 Open Letter: Hezbollah's Khomeinist Doctrine

Hezbollah's ideology is modeled on the teachings of Ayatollah Ruhollah Mosavi Khomeini – the founder of the Islamic Republic and its first Supreme Leader – regarding Islamic government.² Hezbollah revealed this ideological orientation in its 1985 Open Letter, the group's foundational document which officially announced its existence. In the Letter, it declared its obedience to “one leader, wise and just,” the Wali al-Faqih, and itself a continuation of the Islamic revolution “made victorious by God in Iran.” The group considered itself a transnational Shiite Islamic entity whose “behavior is dictated” by the Wali al-Faqih, rather than “an organized or closed party in Lebanon.”³ According to its late Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, this meant that the party's “leadership, direction, mandate, decisions of war and peace, and so on, is in the hand of the Wali al-Faqih.”⁴

¹ Shimon Shapira, The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, “The Birth of Hezbollah,” January 19, 2023.

(<https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/the-birth-of-hezbollah/>)

² Khomeini, Ruhollah, *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist (Velayat-e Faqih)*, Translated by: Hamid Algar, 2017, Iran Chamber Society, (http://www.iranchamber.com/history/rkhomeini/books/velayat_faqeeh.pdf.)

³ Qassem Qaseer. *Hezbollah Between 1982 and 2016: the Constant and the Changing*. (Beirut: Dar Saer al-Mashriq, 2017) p. 143-168.

⁴ “Hassan Nasrallah: I am Proud to Be a Member of the Party of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, and *Wilayat al-Faqih* is for us to Say that Our Leadership, Will, Mandate, Decisions of War and Peace is in the Hands of the *Wali al-Faqih*,” *The Lebanese Forces Website*(Lebanon), May 20, 2009.

(<https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2009/05/29/49160/>); Hadi al-Amin, “How Will the Lebanese Believe? Prime Scandals in the Project of Iran,

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In the early 1990s, Hezbollah began a process to update the Open Letter, which culminated in the release of the 2009 Political Document. Throughout, however, Hezbollah's leadership emphasized the permanence of the Letter and its principles, particularly adherence to Wilayat al-Faqih. In a 1994 interview, Hezbollah's late Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah said the update would "account for the changes...that took place in previous years," but would not constitute any "major alteration to our overall doctrines and orientations."⁵ After the party officially decided to approve the Letter's rewording during its Sixth Conclave in 2001, Nasrallah's former deputy Qassem told the Daily Star the next year that while Hezbollah was being flexible, its principles would "remain the same because they are at the heart of our movement."⁶

When Nasrallah finally unveiled the Political Document in 2009, there was no mention of fealty to Iran or Wilayat al-Faqih, unlike in the Open Letter. However, Nasrallah dispelled the notion that Hezbollah had moved away from its earlier ideological orientation in the subsequent "Question and Answer" session. Reiterating what the party had been saying in the years between 1985 and 2009, Nasrallah said the changes in the new document did not affect the group's "creed, ideology or thought" – particularly its adherence to Wilayat al-Faqih – which he said is "not a political stand that can be subjected to revision."⁷ In early 2016, the party's Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem once again reaffirmed this point, calling the Open Letter a "permanent and continuous document," with the 2009 Political Document providing "minor" or "trivial" adjustments with no effect on the group's core ideology.⁸

Military vs. Political Wing?

Several countries and transnational bodies distinguish between the so-called military and political wings of Hezbollah – proscribing only the former. Yet the distinction between these two branches of the same organization is entirely artificial, and is rejected even by Hezbollah's own leadership.⁹ The late Secretary General Nasrallah, for example, has referred to the military vs. political wing distinction as an "innovation [*bid'a*]" and said sanctioning the military wing alone would have no "effects beyond

Hezbollah, and the Sayyed," *Al-Mustaqbal Newspaper* (Lebanon), June 6, 2009 (<http://www.almustaqbal.com/v4/Article.aspx?Type=np&Articleid=350969>)

⁵ Joseph Alagha. *Hiszbollah's Documents: From the 1985 Open Letter to the 2009 Manifesto*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press – Pallas Publications, 2011), p. 25.

⁶ Nicholas Blanford, "Hiszbollah to Issue Updated Version of Manifesto," *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), October 28, 2002. (<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2002/Oct-28/17804-hizbullaha-to-issue-updated-version-of-manifesto.ashx>)

⁷ Halomaster7, "Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah Announces the Political Document of Hezbollah," *YouTube*, November 30, 2009. (https://youtu.be/ip2OR_xtLxM?t=1h42m30s)

⁸ Al Mayadeen Culture, "Islamists...and More | Sheikh Naim Qassem | 05-01-2016," *YouTube*, January 5, 2016. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJwWBqCdUz0&feature=youtu.be&t=33m19s>)

⁹ Justyna Pawlak and Adrian Croft, "EU Adds Hezbollah's Military Wing to Terrorism List," *Reuters*, July 22, 2013 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-hezbollah-idUSBRE96KODA20130722>); Matthew Levitt, "On a Military Wing and a Prayer," *Foreign Policy*, February 12, 2013 (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/02/12/on-a-military-wing-and-a-prayer/>)

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the symbolic and psychological,” because Hezbollah had no such internal divisions.¹⁰

Hezbollah’s deputy Naim Qassem has likewise rejected the military vs. political distinction as a “concoction,” stressing in October 2012 the unity of Hezbollah. Qassem said that, “in Lebanon there is one Hezbollah, named Hezbollah. We don’t have a military wing and a political wing. We don’t have Hezbollah and the Party of Resistance, because Hezbollah is a political party, a resistance party, and the party of striving in the path of God Almighty and service of the human being. This, in short, is Hezbollah.” He added that all of Hezbollah’s resources, “including leadership, members, and different capabilities, is in the service of the resistance and supporting the resistance, and we have nothing but resistance as our priority – from the leadership of Hezbollah down to its last mujahid.”¹¹

The Party of God’s leaders are not grandstanding. A cursory view of Hezbollah’s organizational structure demonstrates that the group’s political and military branches are indeed symbiotic and mutually reinforcing. For example, the Islamic Resistance Support Association (IRSA) is Hezbollah’s official fundraising branch. It is controlled by the Executive, and not the Jihadi, Council. Yet, as its name suggests, all of its funds and activities go towards supporting, arming and supplying Hezbollah’s military activities. The same applies to the Mahdi Scouts, which acts as a gateway to membership in the ranks of the group’s fighters, and to Hezbollah’s vast charity and social services network, which aims to link the hearts and minds of Lebanese Shiites to the group.¹² These “political” organs of the party are instrumental in creating what Hezbollah calls a “Society of Resistance,” a protective environment for its fighting core that extends its influence beyond its own institutions, giving it the veneer and legitimacy of a Lebanese political force, and thus governmental influence. All of these organs – including the Jihadi Council responsible for Hezbollah’s armed activities and the Political Council – which controls its Loyalty to the Resistance parliamentary bloc – answer to the same leadership, that of the Shura Council, headed by the Secretary General.

Hezbollah in Service of Iran

Iran exploited the chaos of Lebanon’s Civil War and the subsequent 1982 Israeli invasion to catalyze the rise of Hezbollah. Iran created mutinies within the Amal Party – a nationalist Lebanese Shiite party founded by Imam Musa al-Sadr – splitting off a faction (known as Islamic Amal) that would later become

¹⁰ Safer Hussain, “Speech of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah at the Annual Central Iftar Ceremony of the Women’s Committee 24-7-2013,” *YouTube*, July 25, 2013 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMG19G-iTxs>).

¹¹ “Sheikh Naim Qassem: We Do not Hide our Martyrs, and Everything We Have in Hezbollah is in Service of the Resistance,” *Al-Ahed News* (<https://www.alahednews.com.lb/66455/7/> - 2012 06, October (Lebanon), المقاومة/حزب (WU8rnujys2x) #

¹² David Daoud, “Joining Hezbollah: an Insider’s Account,” *The National Interest*, March 2, 2016 (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/joining-hezbollah-insiders-account-15370>)

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the nucleus of Hezbollah.¹³ Tehran then united this offshoot with an ideologically similar motley crew of Shiite militias, sending 1000 Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) members and clergy to the Beqaa Valley to provide them with military and ideological training.

In line with Khomeini's imperative to export the Islamic Revolution, Iran viewed the rise of Hezbollah as an opportunity to extend its influence to Lebanon and the Levant.¹⁴ It therefore began providing the group with a steady stream of financial support which has continued to the present day. This state-sponsorship has proven critical to the quality of Hezbollah's fighting capabilities, and to its regional and global reach.

Iran's investment quickly began paying off. Since its inception, Hezbollah has operated as the IRGC's spearhead far beyond Lebanon's borders in order to protect Tehran's interests. In the 1980s, it targeted Shah regime officials in Europe, and attacked France for its support of Saddam Hussein during the Iran- Iraq War.¹⁵

Hezbollah has also incubated Iranian proxies throughout the region. At Tehran's behest, the group created Unit 3800 in 2003 to train and assist Iraqi Shiite militias fighting against US and multinational forces. Using the techniques they learned from Hezbollah, these militias – like Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and Kataeb Hezbollah (KHA) in Iraq – killed hundreds of U.S. servicemen in Iraq.¹⁶ Particularly since the rise of ISIS in 2014, these groups spawned a seemingly endless list of Khomeinist Iraqi militias, most of which have now joined Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces. According to PMF deputy commander and commander of KHA, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis,¹⁷ PMF fighters "benefited greatly" from Hezbollah's support, which continues to play a "central" and "very important role" in the PMF's battle readiness. Al- Muhandis also observed that Hezbollah even "offered martyrs" on the Iraqi battlefield and even claimed Hezbollah's presence in Iraq dated back to the 1980s, when its storied commanders Imad

¹³ Pierre Theroux, *Sandstorm: Days and Nights in Arabia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co Inc. 1991), p. 146; "Amal and Hizballah: The Line Between Politics and Terrorism," *Central Intelligence Agency*, August 16, 1985 (<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T01058R000506780001-0.pdf>)

¹⁴ Ludvigsen, Børre. "Shiism and Politics in Lebanon." Al-Mashriq. (<http://almashriq.hiof.no/lebanon/300/320/324/324.2/hizballah/warn2/shiism.html#khomeinism>)

¹⁵ Stanley Meisler, "Iranian Freed in Paris as Part of Hostage Deal," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 1987 (http://articles.latimes.com/1987-11-30/news/mn-16901_1_iranian-embassy); Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States That Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 87-88,95

¹⁶ "U.S.: Soldiers Abducted in Karbala, Killed Elsewhere," *CNN World*, January 26, 2007. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20070202031215/http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/01/26/iraq.karbala.ap/index.html>); Rod Norland, Sam Dagher, "U.S. Will Release More Members of an Iraqi Militia," *The New York Times*, August 17, 2009. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/18/world/middleeast/18iraq.html>); David Daoud, "Hezbollah Fighters Train Iraqi Shiite Militants Near Mosul," *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 5, 2016. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/11/hezbollah-fighters-train-iraqi-shiite-militants-near-mosul.php>)

¹⁷ "Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim, a.k.a. Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes," *Counter Extremism Project*, last viewed June 20, 2017. (<https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/jamal-jaafar-ibrahimi-aka-abu-mahdi-al-mohandes>)

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Mughniyeh and Mustafa Badreddine came to Iraq to train Shiites to fight Saddam Hussein.¹⁸

Since the Israeli-Hezbollah war in 2006, Hezbollah was rebuilt by the Islamic Republic of Iran as a heavily armed deterrence tool to prevent Israel from attacking Tehran's nuclear program.¹⁹ Overtime Hezbollah has become the preeminent proxy force of Iran with massive fire power capabilities enabling Tehran to maintain a deterrence balance against Israel.

Since 2011, Hezbollah also spearheaded the effort to defend Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime, whose downfall would pose a strategic threat to Tehran, not least of all by severing its land-link to Lebanon. In addition to playing a critical role in battles vital to the regime's survival – particularly the Qusayr, Qalamoun, Aleppo, Badiat al-Sham and Eastern Ghouta campaigns²⁰ – Hezbollah has also recruited Shiite and other fighters to buttress Assad's forces, including the National Defense Forces militia.²¹

Hezbollah's advisers have also travelled to Yemen, to aid and train Houthi rebels in their fight against neighboring Saudi Arabia. The Zaydi Shiite Houthis are not a proper Iranian proxy, and they neither share Hezbollah's religious nor Wilayat al-Faqih orientation. However, Hezbollah is aiding the Houthis because they are fighting Tehran's rival Riyadh, and control of Red Sea shipping and the Bab al-Mandeb straits would weaken the kingdom.²²

Iran's Support for Hezbollah

Hezbollah makes no secret of receiving financial support from Iran. In a mid-2016 speech, Nasrallah boasted that his group's "budget, salaries, expenses, and its good, drink and weapons and missiles [are funded by] the Islamic Republic of Iran. As long as there is money in Iran, then we'll have money."²³ It is difficult to know how much Iran provides Hezbollah annually, with estimates ranging from \$100 to \$200 million per year in cash outlays alone according to U.S. intelligence estimates, to \$700 million annually

¹⁸ David Daoud, "PMF Deputy Commander Muhandis Details Hezbollah Ops in Iraq," *FDD's Long War Journal*, January 9, 2017. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/01/pmf-deputy-commander-muhandis-details-hezbollah-ops-in-iraq.php>)

¹⁹ Bouchnik-Chen, Raphael G. "Hezbollah is an Iranian Strategic Tool." BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,117, August 9, 2021. (<https://besacenter.org/hezbollah-is-an-iranian-strategic-tool/>)

²⁰ David Daoud, "Analysis: Hezbollah Redeploys Forces After Withdrawal From Syrian-Lebanese Border Positions," *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 20, 2017. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/05/analysis-hezbollah-redeploys-forces-after-withdrawal-from-syrian-lebanese-border-positions.php>).

²¹ Christopher Kozak, "The Regime's Military Capabilities: Part 1," *Institute for Study of War*, May 26, 2015. (<http://iswsyria.blogspot.com/2015/05/the-regimes-military-capabilities-part-1.html>).

²² Alexander Corbeil and Amarnath Amarasingam, "The Houthi Hezbollah: Iran's Train-and-Equip Program in Sanaa," *Foreign Affairs*, March 31, 2016. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-31/houthi-hezbollah>)

²³ MEMRI TV. "Hassan Nasrallah: Hizbullah's Money and Missiles Reach Us Directly from Iran, No Law Will Prevent This." June 24, 2016, (<https://www.memri.org/tv/hassan-nasrallah-hizbullahs-money-and-missiles-reach-us-directly-iran-no-law-will-prevent>)

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according to IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkott.²⁴

Iran also provides Hezbollah with weapons – everything from small arms and Katyusha rockets to more advanced platforms, including anti-tank rockets, longer-range surface-to-surface missiles, and anti-ship missiles.²⁵ With Iranian assistance, Hezbollah grew its rocket arsenal from an estimated 12,000 projectiles in 2006 to a current estimate of more than 150,000 rockets. While the vast majority of these are inaccurate, short-range, and low-payload katyushas, in the same time period, Hezbollah's arsenal of mid- and long-range missiles has grown from mere dozens to thousands and hundreds, respectively.²⁶ Additionally, in early 2017, reports emerged that the IRGC had built Hezbollah domestic weapons factories in Lebanon capable of producing surface-to-surface, land-based anti-ship missiles and torpedoes launched from light water craft, and training the group's specialists in producing arms at its Imam Hussein University. However, it remains unclear how Hezbollah is acquiring the materials and domestically producing the sophisticated components necessary to manufacture these advanced missiles, as the Iranians themselves have difficulty in doing so at home.²⁷

Tehran also trains Hezbollah's fighters and commanders at IRGC-run camps in both Lebanon and Iran,²⁸ and has fought alongside the group in multiple engagements – including in the Second Lebanon War against Israel, and in the Syrian Civil War.²⁹ Additionally, Iran has reportedly built up Hezbollah's cyberwarfare capabilities.³⁰

²⁴ Neil MacFarquhar, Hassan M. Fattah, "At Crossroads, Hezbollah Goes on the Attack," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2006.

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/16/world/middleeast/16hezbollah.html>); "Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran," *Fox News*, April 2010. (<http://www.foxnews.com/projects/pdf/IranReportUnclassified.pdf#page=8>); "Country Reports on Terrorism 2015: Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview," *U.S. Department of State*, June 2, 2016.

(https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20161221_R44017_76d05cca2d03383d83e797e0c0f53ec4497688e1.pdf#page=41)

(<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/258249.pdf#page=300>); Herzliya Conference, "Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot, the Chief of Staff, IDF [Hebrew]," *YouTube*, June 20, 2017. (<https://youtu.be/uHKdi9E2xag?t=18m18s>)

²⁵ Mark Mazzetti and Tom Shanker, "Arming of Hezbollah Reveals U.S. and Israeli Blind Spots," *The New York Times*, July 19, 2006

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/19/world/middleeast/19missile.html>); "Anshel Pfeffer, "Israel Seizes Ship in Mediterranean Carrying More than 3,000 Rockets," *Haaretz* (Israel), November 5, 2009. (<http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-seizes-ship-in-mediterranean-carrying-more-than-3-000-rockets-1.4742>)

Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2011), p. 132, 179; Benjamin Lambeth, *Air Operations in Israel's War Against Hezbollah: Learning from Lebanon and Getting it Right in Gaza* (Arlington: Rand Corporation, 2011), p. 92; Anne Barnard and Eric Schmitt, "Hezbollah Moving Long-Range Missiles from Syria to Lebanon, an Analyst Says," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2014

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/03/world/middleeast/hezbollah-is-said-to-transfer-missiles.html>)

²⁶ Amos Harel, Gili Cohen. "Hezbollah: From Terror Group to Army," *Haaretz* (Israel), July 12, 2016.

(<https://www.haaretz.com/st/c/prod/eng/2016/07/lebanon2/>)

²⁷ David Daoud, "Has Hezbollah Developed a Domestic Arms Industry with Iranian Support," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 14, 2017. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/has-hezbollah-developed-a-domestic-arms-industry-with-iranian-support.php>)

²⁸ Nicholas Blanford, "Report Claims Iran Runin Bekaa Training Camp," *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), August 13, 2002.

(<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/Aug/13/Report-claims-Iran-running-Bekaa-training-camp.ashx#axzz2c5SWpGpi>); Benjamin Lambeth, *Air Operations in Israel's War Against Hezbollah: Learning from Lebanon and Getting it Right in Gaza* (Arlington: Rand Corporation, 2011), p. 14.; Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2011), p.472

²⁹ Harry De Quetteville, "Iran Blamed as Lebanon Battle Broadens," *The Telegraph* (UK), July 16, 2006

(<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/lebanon/1524078/Iran-blamed-as-Lebanon-battle-broadens.html>)

³⁰ Ward Carroll, "Hezbollah's Cyber Warfare Program," *DefenseTech*, June 2, 2008 (<https://www.defensetech.org/2008/06/02/hezbollahs-cyber-warfare-program/>); Jeff Moskowitz, "Cyberattack tied to Hezbollah Ups the Ante for Israel's Digital Defenses," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 1, 2015. (<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Passcode/2015/0601/Cyberattack-tied-to-Hezbollah-ups-the-ante-for-Israel-s->

Hezbollah’s “Resistance Economy”

Hezbollah is by no means solely dependent on Iran for its finances. In order to ensure its financial security, the group has established its own shadow economy in Lebanon that is semi-impervious to U.S. financial sanctions. Some of this is done through the innocuous cover of legitimate businesses and religious and social charities, as well as through its Islamic Resistance Support Association (IRSA). The IRSA is Hezbollah’s official domestic and international fundraising arm for its military activities – but is controlled by its so-called “political wing.” Funds go toward everything from purchasing military gear for Hezbollah fighters, to weapons platforms, and providing for the families of fallen fighters.³¹ The group also derives part of its income from tapping into transnational criminal activities, including counterfeiting currencies, documents and goods, credit card fraud, money-laundering, arms smuggling, and drug-trafficking³² – particularly marijuana, cocaine, and captagon.³³

Hezbollah in Lebanon

The developing narrative in certain policy circles and among Israeli officials is that Lebanon and Hezbollah are now the same, and any distinction between them is purely artificial. However, this is a vastly oversimplified view of the complexity of the relationship between Hezbollah and Lebanon.

When Hezbollah first emerged in 1982, it completely rejected the legitimacy of the Lebanese state, and considered it an enemy. Its 1985 Open Letter called the secular republic the “product of an arrogance so unjust that no reform or modification can remedy it.” The group thus refused any cooperation with the Lebanese state that did not cause “fundamental changes in the system’s roots,” replacing it with an Islamic republic on the Iranian model. Former Secretary General Nasrallah explained in a speech during the late 1980s that the group’s goal was “to make Lebanon not a single Islamic republic, but part of the large Islamic republic,” ruled by the Wali al-Faqih.³⁴ As such, Hezbollah does not ultimately desire to coopt the institutions of the Lebanese state, but to replace the secular

[digital-defenses](#); <https://www.defensetech.org/2008/06/02/hezbollahs-cyber-warfare-program/>); Michael Eisenstadt, “Iran’s Lengthening Cyber Shadow,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 2016.

(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote34_Eisenstadt.pdf).

³¹ Yaya Fanusie and David Daoud, “Hezbollah Fundraisin Underscores its Financial Crisis,” *The Cipher Brief*, April 24, 2017.

(<https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/exclusive/middle-east/hezbollah-fundraising-underscores-its-financial-crisis-1089>)

³² Matthew Levitt, “Hezbollah: Party of Fraud,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 27, 2011. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/benin/2011-07-27/hezbollah-party-fraud>)

³³ Roi Kais, “Hezbollah Funding Terror with Fake Medicine,” *Ynet News* (Israel), October 9, 2012.

(<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4279293,00.html>); Jon Henley, “Captagon: the Amphetamine Fuelling Syria’s Civil War,” *The Guardian* (UK), January 13, 2014 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2014/jan/13/captagon-amphetamine-syria-war-middle-east>); Alberto Mucci, “Hezbollah profits from Hash as Syria Goes to Pot,” *The Daily Beast*, July 09, 2014

(<http://www.thedailybeast.com/hezbollah-profits-from-hash-as-syria-goes-to-pot>); “DEA and European Authorities Uncover Massive Hizballah Drug and Money Laundering Scheme,” *Drug Enforcement Administration*, February 1, 2016. (<https://www.dea.gov/divisions/hq/2016/hq020116.shtml>)

³⁴ Never Forget Gaza, “Hassan Nasrallah: My Loyalty is to Iran and Not Lebanon. Old Dangerous Video,” *YouTube*, October 8, 2010 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7USVPyEaMY&index=1&list=RDk7USVPyEaMY>)

republic entirely with a Wilayat al-Faqih-based system.

As Lebanon's Civil War waned, Hezbollah realized this confrontational approach would leave it isolated domestically and at odds with the new dominant power in Lebanon: Syria. It therefore opted to work from within the confines of the existing Lebanese system to achieve its unaltered goals. This principled flexibility arose out of Hezbollah's realization that working from within the system would better serve the attainment of its purposes in Lebanon's new political environment. Lebanese society and state were an impediment to Hezbollah's goals, easier overcome by circumvention and appropriation, rather than through a direct challenge.

Firstly, Hezbollah publicly dropped its rejection of the Lebanese republic, instead running in the 1992 parliamentary elections, Lebanon's first since 1972, and winning 12 seats.³⁵ The party sidelined members and leaders preferring confrontation and rejection of the Lebanese system, replacing them with pragmatists, like Abbas Mousaoui and Hassan Nasrallah.³⁶ Ever since, Hezbollah has been a key player in Lebanese politics, punching above its representational weight by allying with more influential groups.³⁷ Critically, in 2006 it allied with Michel Aoun – Lebanon's former president – and his Free Patriotic Movement (FPM).³⁸ Its alliance with FPM – and the Amal Movement – paid off after Lebanon's May 2018 parliamentary elections. The parties allied with Hezbollah won a majority of the Lebanese legislature's seats for the first time since the Cedar Revolution in 2005, giving the group proxy control over the parliament. Alone, by contrast, Hezbollah would have only been able to claim 12 out of 128 seats – hardly enough to influence that body's decisions.

Hezbollah also downplayed its calls for an Islamic government, but did not abandon it entirely. As far back as the Open Letter, Hezbollah was cognizant of the limits of its own power and did not call for an Islamic Lebanon to be established by force of arms. Instead, it called on the vast majority of Lebanese to willingly and overwhelmingly adopt its theocratic system, modeled on that of Iran. According to Hassan Nasrallah and Naim Qassem in 2016, this grassroots approach to creating an Islamic Lebanon remains the party's approach.³⁹

Another method Hezbollah used was growing its strength within certain areas of Lebanese consensus. Thus, Hezbollah rebranded itself from the "Islamic Revolution in Lebanon" to "Islamic Resistance in Lebanon," and focused its military activities on ending Israel's occupation of south Lebanon.

³⁵ "Lebanon. Parliamentary Chamber: Majlis Al-Nuwwab – Elections Held in 1992." *Inter-Parliamentary Union*. (http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2179_92.htm)

³⁶ Blanford, p. 93-95.

³⁷ David Daoud, "Hezbollah's Latest Conquest: Lebanon's Cabinet," *Newsweek*, January 12, 2017. (<http://www.newsweek.com/hezbollahs-latest-conquest-lebanons-cabinet-541487>)

³⁸ "Paper of Common Understanding Between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement," *Tayyar.Org*, February 6, 2006 (http://static.tayyar.org/Content/uploads/PdfLibrary/150528041932259~fpm_hezbollah2.pdf)

³⁹ vcoderzdotcom, "OTV: Special Interview With Michel Aoun and Hassan Nasrallah | February 6, 2008 | 8/19," *YouTube*, February 7, 2010. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S92pD1n5ens>); Al Mayadeen Culture, "Islamists...and More | Sheikh Naim Qassem | 05-01-2016," *YouTube*, January 5, 2016. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJwWBqCdUz0&feature=youtu.be&t=35m11s>)

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As a result, the Lebanese Army – once Hezbollah’s enemy that killed 13 of its members in the early 1990s⁴⁰ – became the group’s ally against the Israeli occupation.⁴¹ Its “resistance activities” against Israel have been consistently supported by every Lebanese president⁴² and Prime Minister’s cabinet since Taef.⁴³ It also attracted Sunni, Christian, Druze and non-practicing Shiite Lebanese motivated by patriotism to Hezbollah’s Lebanese Resistance Brigades.⁴⁴

Unanimous Lebanese opposition to Israel’s occupation afforded Hezbollah the perfect opportunity to grow its military experience, strength, and arsenal under the guise of liberating south Lebanon. The Lebanese acquiesced to Hezbollah retaining its arms outside of the state’s authority for as long as that occupation lasted. However, by the time Israel withdrew from Lebanon in May 2000, the group had simply become too powerful to disarm or control.

Hezbollah needed what it calls a “host environment,” [*bee’a hadina*] to transform from a mere guerilla group into a more permanent fixture of Lebanese society. Therefore, instead of confronting the Amal Party – which sought to empower Shiites as loyal Lebanese citizens – it chose to coopt its rival-*cum*-ally by stressing their mutual concern for the well-being of Lebanese Shiites. However, with Iranian and Syrian support, it quickly overshadowed and neutralized the group.

Hezbollah, now virtually unrivaled, set about filling the state’s void and neglect in caring for Lebanese Shiites, establishing schools, hospitals and other social institutions for the once-impoverished community. Large parts of the Shiite community repaid this debt by becoming the group’s political constituency, providing it with governmental representation and influence. Equally importantly, they also became Hezbollah’s foot soldiers.

⁴⁰ Joseph Alagha, *The Shifts in Hizbullah’s Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002), p. 286.

⁴¹ “Profile: General Michel Suleiman,” *BBC News* (UK), May 21, 2008. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7412170.stm)

⁴² “Lebanon’s Lahoud: Hezbollah Disarmament Depends on Mideast Peace,” *Haaretz* (Israel), March 19, 2006.

(<http://www.haaretz.com/news/lebanon-s-lahoud-hezbollah-disarmament-depends-on-mideast-peace-1.183084>); Joffe, “Elias Hrawi,” *The Guardian* (UK), July 10, 2006. (<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/jul/10/guardianobituaries.mainsection>); “Lebanon president: We Will Fight Invaders,” *CNN World*, July 22, 2008.

(http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/07/21/cnna.lahoud/index.html?section=cnn_latest); “Spiegel Interview with Lebanese President Emile Lahoud: Hezbollah Freed Our Country,” *Der Spiegel* (Germany), July 25, 2006.

(<http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel-interview-with-lebanese-president-emile-lahoud-hezbollah-freed-our-country-a-428391.html>);

“Lebanese President Gives Full Backing to Hezbollah,” *CBC News* (Canada), July 28, 2006. (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/lebanese-president-gives-full-backing-to-hezbollah-1.618101>); “Lebanon President Praises Hizbollah’s Fight Against Israel,” *The Telegraph* (UK), May 26, 2008. (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/lebanon/2029169/Lebanon-president-praises-Hizbollahs-fight-against-Israel.html>); AP Archive, “Lebanon: President Hrawi Promises Support For Guerilla Campaign,” *YouTube*, July 23, 2015. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7SLewOn0wo>)

⁴³ Republic of Lebanon: The Presidency of the Council of Ministers, “Previous Governments and Ministerial Statements,” accessed June 15, 2017. (<http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/charts.aspx?pageid=266>).

⁴⁴ Chris Zambelis, “Hizb Allah’s Lebanese Resistance Brigades,” *CTC Sentinel*, December 10, 2014. (<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/hizb-allahs-lebanese-resistance-brigades>); Alex Rowell, “Hezbollah Unlikely to Drop Resistance Brigades,” *NOW Lebanon* (Lebanon), February 2, 2015. (<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/564784-hezbollah-unlikely-to-drop-resistance-brigades>)

Hezbollah draws support for its activities by emphasizing the state's inherent weakness and inefficiency, so that the Lebanese will turn to it instead of the government for their needs. For example, its parliamentary head Mohammad Raad noted that the authorities incapable of resolving Lebanon's garbage crisis could not be trusted to make decisions of war and peace.⁴⁵ In the past, Nasrallah also mocked Lebanon's inability to resolve its garbage crisis or hold efficient elections during peacetime, comparing it unfavorably to the system in Iran.⁴⁶

Hezbollah's argument for retaining its arsenal, hinging on the army's alleged inability to defend the country from external threats, has convinced rank-and-file Lebanese of all sects, including the country's former president, Michel Aoun, that Hezbollah is necessary for national defense.⁴⁷

However, Hezbollah and Lebanon still have not become one indistinguishable entity. Proof of this is that the group has never hesitated to harm Lebanon whenever its own interests, or that of Iran, are jeopardized. For instance, Hezbollah was implicated in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who opposed Damascus' hegemony over Beirut, which would have weakened Hezbollah's own position and thus Iranian interests. The Second Lebanon War with Israel – which devastated Lebanon and its civilians – is believed to have been timed by Hezbollah to distract attention from Iran's nuclear weapons program.⁴⁸ In 2008, Hezbollah even turned its weapons on the Lebanese and invaded Beirut when the government attempted to shut down the group's telecommunications network and remove Beirut Airport's pro-Hezbollah security chief.⁴⁹ Hezbollah's subordination of Lebanon's interests is most evident in its entry into the Syrian Civil War, where it has fought to preserve its connection to Iran and Tehran's regional hegemony – in which Syria's president forms a vital link⁵⁰ – despite the damage to Lebanon's standing in the Arab world.⁵¹

⁴⁵ "Raad Surprised by Request of Some Factions to Control Decisions of War: the State is Unable to Solve the Garbage Crisis," *National News Agency* (Lebanon), August 16, 2015. (<http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/174547/>).

⁴⁶ Mohammad Ouadi, "Speech of Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah | Al Manar 01 29 2016," *YouTube*, January 29, 2016. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcaS8mi55C0&feature=youtu.be&t=8m12s>)

⁴⁷ Susannah George, "Lebanese Christians Gun Up Against ISIS," *The Daily Beast*, November 10, 2014.

(<http://www.thedailybeast.com/lebanese-christians-gun-up-against-isis?source=email&via=desktop>); Alexandra Masi, "Christians Threatened by ISIS in Lebanon turn to Hezbollah for Help," *International Business Times*, April 21, 2015

(<http://www.ibtimes.com/christians-threatened-isis-lebanon-turn-hezbollah-help-1889610>); David Daoud, "Hezbollah Has Effectively Won the Lebanese Presidency," *Newsweek*, November 13, 2016. (<http://www.newsweek.com/hezbollah-won-lebanese-presidency-520317>).

⁴⁸ Benjamin Lambeth, *Air Operations in Israel's War Against Hezbollah: Learning From Lebanon and Getting it Right in Gaza*, (Washington D.C.: Rand Corporation, 2001), p. 19-20. (http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG835.pdf#page=56)

⁴⁹ Thanassis Cambanis, *Privilege to Die: Inside Hezbollah's Legions and Their Endless War Against Israel*, New York: Free Press, 2011), p. 149. "Hezbollah Takes Over West Beirut," *BBC News* (UK), May 9, 2008. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7391600.stm).

⁵⁰ David Daoud, "A Donald Trump Anti-ISIS Campaign That Spares Assad Would Only Empower Hezbollah," *Newsweek*, December 06, 2016. (<http://www.newsweek.com/trump-anti-isis-campaign-spare-assad-will-only-empower-hezbollah-528559>); Amir Toumaj, "Why Iran Supported Houthi Attacks Against the US Navy," *FDD's Long War Journal*, October 31, 2016.

(<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/10/why-iran-supported-houthi-attacks-against-the-us-navy.php>); Amir Toumaj, "Qassem Soleimani Reportedly Spotted in Syria's Hama Province," *FDD's Long War Journal*, April 2, 2017. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/04/qassem-soleimani-reportedly-spotted-in-syrias-hama-province.php>)

⁵¹ Nadav Pollack, "The Transformation of Hezbollah by its Involvement in Syria," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 2016. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote35-Pollak-2.pdf#page=10>); "Sheikh Qassem: Hezbollah Won't Withdraw Troops From Syria, Ready to Fight 'Israel,'" *Al-Manar English* (Lebanon), February 8, 2017

Hezbollah ultimately operates as a ‘state within a state’ in Lebanon, exerting control through its extensive political, military, and social service networks. The hybrid nature of Hezbollah is best demonstrated by the legitimacy given to the group for its role in Lebanon’s security infrastructure and social service networks, despite being a foreign-backed actor that operates with a significant degree of autonomy and impunity.⁵² To maintain and extend political power, Hezbollah uses violence and coercion to subdue Lebanese politicians and their population.

Hezbollah’s “Foreign Policy”

Hezbollah’s choice of enemies and allies is dictated by Iranian, rather than Lebanese, enmities and interests. With the exception of Israel, most of Hezbollah’s current or past enemies – including the United States, France, and Saudi Arabia – are Beirut’s partners and allies. By contrast, Hezbollah’s allies include China, Russia and Syria – the latter having militarily occupied Lebanon for 35 years and even violently repressed the group during the 1980s.⁵³

Hezbollah’s Future

Hezbollah is ultimately linked to the Islamic Republic of Iran and is perhaps its most successful creation. It will continue to exist so long as the Khomeinist regime continues to rule in Tehran. In the meantime, Hezbollah will continue to spearhead Iran’s aspirations for regional domination as it has for the past three decades of its existence.

Notions of Hezbollah’s “Lebanonization,” – i.e. a process of moderation transforming the Party of God into a political party owning ultimate loyalty to Lebanon – should be discounted. Neither should its active participation in Lebanon’s politics be taken as an indication that it has accepted the Lebanese electoral system’s legitimacy. As the group has indicated repeatedly, governmental participation is a means to the goal of protecting its weapons. The organization will continue to act pragmatically in this and other ways, but only to avoid conflict or challenges that could hinder or delay the implementation

(<http://english.almanar.com.lb/185568>); “Sheikh Qassem: When We Can Guarantee Syria’s Permanence, Then We Will Withdraw From it,” *Al Ahed News* (Lebanon), February, 22, 2017

Syria, in Remain Will We “Hezbollah: الشيخ قاسم-عندما نضمن-بقاء سوريا-المقاومة-عندها ننسحب:” [منها \(https://www.alahednews.com.lb/fastnews/388384/](https://www.alahednews.com.lb/fastnews/388384/)

Even if the West Disapproves,” *IM Lebanon* (Lebanon), March 1, 2017. (<http://www.imlebanon.org/2017/03/01/daamouch-hezbollah-syria-battle1/>); David Daoud, “Iran’s Power Play in Lebanon,” *The National Interest*, March 19, 2016. (<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/irans-power-play-lebanon-15538>).

⁵² Lina Khatib, “How Hezbollah Holds Sway Over the Lebanese State,” Chatham House, June 30, 2021,

(<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state/07-conclusion-will-hezbollah-take-over>)

⁵³ Itamar Rabinovich, Haim Shaked. *Middle East Contemporary Survey. Volume XI: 1987* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), p. 168.; Liz Sly, “Beirut Shows Signs of Life, Death,” *The Chicago Tribune*, February 26, 1987. (http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-02-26/news/8701160052_1_syrian-troops-syrian-soldiers-hezbollah-fighters); Charles P. Wallace, “Lebanon’s War of the Camps Called ‘Mess’ for Syria,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1986. (http://articles.latimes.com/1986-12-02/news/mn-846_1_palestinian-camps)

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of Iran's orders and interests. Nestling itself in areas of Lebanese consensus, Hezbollah will continue to try and grow its political, military, and social power.

Despite styling itself the "defender of Lebanon," Hezbollah will continue to act from within the Lebanese government to both obstruct and delegitimize the Lebanese republic, and to protect itself against detrimental government initiatives. Meanwhile, the group will continue to expand its already-impressive array of social services, which act as an invitation to its model of government for Shiite and non-Shiite Lebanese alike. Unless this process it stopped, Hezbollah will sap Lebanon's vitality, gradually cementing the country's role as a forward base for Iran on the Mediterranean.

If Hezbollah is allowed to achieve its goal of subsuming Lebanon – either by the West abandoning Beirut, or by allowing the group's gradual expansion to continue unabated – the country will become a genuine regional geo-strategic threat. Bordering both Israel and the Mediterranean, Hezbollah will then be able to project Iranian-inspired terrorism against the United States' allies and interests in the region with impunity. That is, however, contingent on the pressure applied by their adversaries – primarily, Israel and the US. The Israeli-Hamas conflict that began after Hamas' violent ground invasion on October 7, 2023, led to a regional escalation and direct Israeli-Hezbollah confrontation resulting in the deaths of senior Hezbollah members. Throughout 2024, Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon killed a number of high-ranking Hezbollah commanders and political leaders, including Ibrahim Aqil, Fu'ad Shukr and former Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. This has gutted the organization's preexisting command-and-control networks and its Jihad council which was responsible for overseeing military operations.

Hezbollah's ability to recover from the unprecedented blows to its leadership and military infrastructures remains to be seen. The organization has been hesitant to publicly name a successor to Nasrallah for fear of making him a target of Israel. Public reporting suggests the deputy commander of the IRGC Quds Force Mohammadreza is serving as a supervisor of Hezbollah until a firmer structure is put in place following its decapitations.