

# The Role of Hezbollah in Lebanese Domestic Politics

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Hezbollah is the product of a quarter century of history.<sup>1</sup> The organisation began as a cat's paw of Iran, a righteous, violently militant collection of young revolutionaries who had no time for mundane politics. With time's passage, and the generosity of its Iranian patron, it has built an array of institutions, some military, mostly to provide for the quotidian needs of a growing number of constituents. Its ideology has evolved and adapted to the realities of Lebanon, but it remains virulently anti-Israel and hostile to the American hegemony which it sees as a fundamental threat to the future of the Middle East and its cultural integrity. Hezbollah espouses a model of modernity and empowerment that has attracted a broad following in Lebanon's large Shia community, which accounts for about 1.4 million of the country's 4 million citizens. Many other Lebanese see it as an existential threat and no doubt hoped for its defeat in the 2006 war. Although it was infamous for blatant acts of terrorism in the 1980s and

This article offers an overview of Hezbollah's emergence, political evolution, calculations in instigating the 2006 war, and its place in postwar Lebanon.

### The crucible of invasion

In 1982, mid-way through Lebanon's civil war, Israel invaded Lebanon with the intention of destroying the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO),<sup>2</sup> and installing a friendly government in Beirut that would be ready to make peace with Israel.<sup>3</sup> Utterly preoccupied with the PLO when it invaded, Israel paid little attention to the Lebanese Shia community, which predominates in southern Lebanon, the northern Biqa valley and Beirut's southern suburbs. Hezbollah (the "Party of God"), did not even exist before 1982. The group that was gaining in popularity in the early eighties was Amal (literally meaning "Hope," but also an acronym for the "Lebanese Resistance Detachments"). Amal was the progeny of a dynamic reform movement created in 1974 by al-Sayyid Musa al-Sadr, an Iranian cleric of Lebanese descent, who devoted two decades to raising the political and religious consciousness and the quality of life of Lebanon's long under-privileged Shia community.<sup>4</sup> Although al-Sadr had presumably been murdered in Libya in 1978, Amal was enjoying a resurgence in 1982 when it battled several Palestinian guerrilla groups and insisted that Palestinian fighters stop their brutish treatment of Lebanese civilians. Amal supporters had tired of living in the Israeli-Palestinian crossfire, and tended to direct their blame at the Palestinians for provoking Israeli attacks that victimised Lebanese civilians. Amal enjoyed substantial support from Damascus, where the movement was seen as a check on the PLO, but after Syria's defeat by Israel in 1982 Amal momentarily embraced a *pax americana* and the notion that Lebanon's civil war had ended.

But the Israeli invasion only opened a new chapter in the civil war. As the Israeli army streamed northward in 1982 to lay siege to Beirut, they ran into stiff resistance not only around the Palestinian camps, but also on the southern approaches to the capital where Lebanese Shia fighters put up stiff resistance. Many of these fighters, inspired by the Iranian revolution that had toppled the Shah three years before, would migrate away from Amal and eventually join Hezbollah. The Israeli army would remain in Lebanon for eighteen more years, although it withdrew to a border occupation "security" zone – accounting for more than ten percent of Lebanese territory – in 1985. Israel finally withdrew unilaterally

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<sup>2</sup> After challenging the regime in Jordan in 1970, the PLO lost its footing in that country and established itself as the dominant militia force in southern Lebanon where it found ready support, especially in the Palestinian refugee camps that stemmed from the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948–49. Brynen's *Sanctuary and Survival* provides rich and informed detail on the PLO's role in Lebanon.

<sup>3</sup> The seminal account is by Schiff and Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War*.

<sup>4</sup> The primary reference on Amal is Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a*.

in May 2000, but by then its occupation had had a profound impact on Lebanese politics.

### **Hezbollah emerges**

While the formation of Hezbollah began in 1982, it would be two more years before it came into shape as a coherent organisation. For Iran, the creation of Hezbollah represented the realisation of the revolutionary state's zealous campaign to spread the message of the self-styled "Islamic revolution", whereas for Syria the Shia party was a fortuitous instrument for preserving its interests: Syria's alliance with Iran presented it with the means to strike indirectly at both Israel and the United States, as well to keep Lebanese allies, including the Amal movement, in

of public services, such as clinics and construction companies, while Amal offered

## **The Shebaa farms file**

Though Israel's withdrawal was certified by the United Nations, Syria was not at all enchanted with losing Hezbollah's role as a willing device to pressure Israel. A few months before the Israeli withdrawal, pro-Syrian figures led by Amal's Nabih Berri began talking about the Shebaa farms.<sup>9</sup> The farms are a 25 square kilometre patch of land owned by Lebanese but located in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights (there are, in fact, about two dozen anomalies along the Lebanese-Syrian border – areas in which the border is either ambiguous or unsettled). While the prevailing international view has been that all of the Golan Heights are occupied Syrian territory, Lebanon – with Syrian support – now underlined its claim that the farms were, in fact, Lebanese territory. Unless Israel withdrew from the farms as well, its withdrawal from Lebanon woul

and its accumulating military arsenal provided by Iran and Syria, was successfully deterring Israel from invading Lebanon again. In July 2006, this would be revealed as wishful thinking.

### **Playing politics**

Lebanon has a curious electoral system that is intended to accommodate its mélange of confessional spirits, diverse regional interests and personal rivalries.

would be co-opted and thereby desert its principles and its Islamic vision. In the end, ten of the twelve men embraced competing in elections.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, the decision to play Lebanese politics was widely popular in the Shia community where there is a deep-seated sense of political disenfranchisement. Winning seats in parliament also offers greater access to government resources (literally, allocations), which are typically distributed confessionally in Lebanon. There were also strategic benefits to winning elected office. Hezbollah would gain both official recognition as a political institution in Lebanon as well as a place at the table to be able to head off problematic initiatives.

In 1992, Hezbollah and its non-Shia electoral allies captured twelve seats, including eight Shia seats. With some modest variation from one election to another, it has maintained that pattern, thereby holding around ten percent of all parliamentary seats. As a result of local elections, Hezbollah controls about two-thirds of predominantly Shia municipalities, including the massive Beirut suburbs of Bourj al-Barajnah and Ghobeirre.<sup>14</sup>

In each election, the Hezbollah leadership has declared that its members are legally required, as though commanded by Allah (taklif al-shari), to support the party, leading its opponents to blast the party for exploiting religion. Lebanese Ayatollah Fadlallah has levelled his own criticism at the party for a “perverse practice” that might lead to the cheapening of religious principles, as the Lebanese scholar Joseph Alagha reports.<sup>15</sup> Despite this problematic use of

to compete. The ceiling reflected Syria's usual balancing game in Lebanese politics with the result that in 2000 an Amal-Hezbollah alliance – the Resistance and



between the Shia and the most popular Christian politician, retired General Michel Aoun, who had returned to Lebanon from exile in France to compete in the elections.<sup>18</sup> Hezbollah gained two ministerial posts in the new government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, a long-time confidante of Rafic Hariri, and in return received the government's acknowledgement of its role as a national resistance force.

### The 2006 war

A "National Dialogue" bringing together top Shia, Sunni, Druze and Maronite political leaders, including Nasrallah, Aoun, Berri, Geagea, Siniora, Saad al-Din Hariri, the son of Rafic, and former president Amine Gemayel, began in March 2006 to address three issues, the UN-led enquiry into the assassination of Rafic Hariri, Lebanon's relations with Syria, and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which calls for the disarming of militias.<sup>19</sup> The dialogue continued into June but it skirted the issue of disarming Hezbollah as increasing numbers of Lebanese were demanding. Hezbollah's argument continued to be that in the absence of any other credible instrument for defending Lebanon from Israel it would continue to protect the country. Moreover, there was the unfinished business of the still-occupied Shebaa farms. Nasrallah had pointedly secured Siniora's agreement, when it joined the cabinet following the May 2005 elections, that the group was a resistance movement (not a militia).

Finally, on 12 July 2006, despite Hezbollah's public and repeated insistence that it would do nothing to jeopardise the upcoming summer tourist season, it was to deliver on *al-wad al-sadiq* ("the faithful promise") to secure the release of the three or four remaining Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails that Hezbollah launched its operation<sup>20</sup> – presumably to demonstrate its tenacity and ability to strike and deter Israel. Hezbollah probably reckoned that Lebanese proponents of disarming the militia would be silenced by a dramatic success. These calculations were premised on measured and limited Israeli retaliation. As events would show, and as Nasrallah and others would later admit, Hezbollah had made a major miscalculation.

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<sup>18</sup> Despite the defective electoral law, Aoun won 21 seats (the total would have been substantially larger had it not been for the temporary alliance of convenience between the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Hezbollah), but was pointedly excluded from the government to deny him a platform for winning the presidency in 2007. The Maronite militia leader and presidential aspirant Samir Geagea, whose Lebanese Forces militia had fought bloody battles with the Aoun-led army in the late 1980s, was particularly vehement in demanding Aoun's exclusion. Nevertheless, the attempt to ostracize Aoun backfired and he later became Hezbollah's partner in the opposition.

<sup>19</sup> See Karam, "Internal and External Determinants of a Crisis", 51–2.

<sup>20</sup> A motorised Israeli patrol was ambushed in an unpopulated area of Israel bordering with Lebanon, three Israeli soldiers were killed on the spot, and two others were initially captured. By the afternoon five Israeli soldiers fell, and a top-of-the-line Merkava tank was destroyed on Lebanese soil as the IDF attempted to pursue the captors.

Vowing to crush Hezbollah as a military force and to free its two captured soldiers, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert confounded Hezbollah's calculations and responded massively to the incident. Israel and its US ally viewed the conflict as a proxy war with Iran, and both countries were intent to see Hezbollah crushed. Israel enjoyed broad international support, including widespread condemnation of Hezbollah for violating Israel's border and snatching the soldiers, especially since Israel had unilaterally withdrawn from the country six years before. Key Arab states were quick to voice their disapproval of Hezbollah's action, including Saudi Arabia, which within a day criticised "uncalculated adventures". Jordan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates followed suit.<sup>21</sup>

If Israel enjoyed international license for a relentless attack, which its Chief of Staff General Dan Halutz vowed would set the Lebanese recovery back by two decades,<sup>22</sup> the license expired after a few weeks of mutual pummeling, and particularly as civilian losses mounted. By the time a ceasefire was finally in place by mid-August, Israel and the United States were forced to scale back their demands dramatically. Indeed, a "7 point plan" promulgated by the Lebanese government, and preserving the sovereign prerogatives of Lebanon would decisively shape the ceasefire. The centrepiece for the ending of the war was Security Council Resolution 1701 which provides for the enhancement of UNIFIL, deployed in Lebanon since 1978. Especially with heavy European involvement, the UN force would become stronger, or so it was hoped. In practice, the force would avoid taking any action to disarm Hezbollah without (unlikely) government approval. For its part, Hezbollah would avoid brandishing weapons in UNIFIL's area of operations.<sup>23</sup>

No doubt, the presence of 15,000 soldiers and sailors exhibiting impressive levels of professionalism, and equipped with modern war machinery, such as main battle tanks, not to mention a naval component, poses a complication for any belligerent contemplating war. Nonetheless, even on steroids, UNIFIL is – like all UN peace-keeping forces – a collection of national contingents, each under UN command but also guided by the instructions of home governments. This characteristic was illustrated after a roadside bomb killed four Spanish and two Columbian soldiers in late June 2007. The perpetrators were linked with Fatah al-Islam, the al-Qaeda

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<sup>21</sup> Amidst the furies of war, Hasan Nasrallah was interviewed on al-Jazeera television on 21 July and referred to Arab disapproval as a "surprise". In addition to implying his failure to anticipate the immensity of the Israeli response, he said, "The Israeli reaction to the capture could have been harsh, but limited, if it were not for the international and Arab cover."

<sup>22</sup> Halutz is quoted as saying, "If the soldiers are not returned, we will turn Lebanon's clock back 20 years." CNN.com (online) "Israel Authorizes 'Severe' Response to Abductions", 12 July 2006 <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/07/12/mideast/>

<sup>23</sup> See Norton, "The Peacekeeping Challenge"; Norton, "Misión Complicada"; and Go

linked Salafi group that battled the Lebanese army in northern Lebanon throughout the summer of 2007.<sup>24</sup> The attack, which was encouraged and then applauded by al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri, prompted national contingents to seek the cooperation of Hezbollah to help deter and detect further attacks despite the fact that such contacts contradicted the orders of General Claudio Graziano, the UNIFIL commander, and the intentions of the Security Council. Much like its predecessors in UNIFIL, which was first deployed in 1978, many of the contingents have also developed valuable ties with the local population, which can be an important source of mission and security-related intelligence. So long as UNIFIL sustains its neutral stance it will find a lot of support in the local population, but that suggests that UNIFIL will function as a buffer not the assertive force envisaged in some quarters in 2006.

### **Postwar Lebanon**

Notwithstanding the celebration of Hezbollah's "victory" in the war in the wider Arab world, closer to home there was more questioning of the party's motives and the consequences, which included a reconstruction bill estimated at \$4–5 billion and a heavy toll in lives and personal property: 1,109 dead civilians, and 15,000 family homes destroyed. Much of the cross-confession solidarity that developed in the final weeks of the war, as Lebanon was being pounded by Israel, quickly faded. Just to facilitate internal transportation, 78 bridges would have to be rebuilt. The

the organisation of being an agent of Syria and Iran with the ultimate aim of installing a theocratic Islamic Republic on the shores of the Mediterranean.

The second Lebanon is also a coalition, consisting mostly of the southern Lebanese Shia community (mainly Hezbollah and Amal) and large elements of the Christian community – especially the many followers of the magnetic Maronite politician and former General Michel Aoun. This group is somewhat confusingly called the March 8 group, in commemoration of the large demonstration mounted by Hezbollah and Amal on 8 March 2005 ostensibly to respect Hariri's memory but also to thank Syria for its supposed role in maintaining peace in the country.<sup>25</sup> The "Aounists" and Shia share a profound sense of victimisation in the face of what they see as a corrupt and unresponsive political system. The slow pace of government payments to those who lost their homes thanks to Israel's relentless bombing is widely viewed as an example of the latter, much in contrast to Hezbollah's speedy distribution of \$12,000 payments to each family made homeless by the war. The opposition alliance, formally sealed in a written compact on February 2006, has proven remarkably durable.<sup>26</sup> Most basically, the opposition is trying to expand its share of power in significant measure especially at the expense of the traditional Christian elite and the Sunni Muslims. It is the threat of a decline in Sunni prerogatives and power in Lebanon that has prompted Saudi Arabia to become key backers of the g -1.272o

In Western circles and in the March 14 group, Hezbollah and the Aounists are perceived as trying to protect Syria by stifling efforts to authorise an international tribunal to try those accused of responsibility for the killing of Hariri and his associates (the Syrian regime is widely suspected of having directed the assassination). There is some truth in the charge, since a weakening of Syria would no doubt weaken its friends in Lebanon.

Yet, there are other games at play. The presidential term of the unpopular Emile



Command, a group aligned with Syria, allegedly did provide it with limited help.<sup>29</sup> The Lebanese stared into the abyss, and across the confessional and ideological spectrum voiced support for the army. Arguably, the army is the only national institution that is functioning well in Lebanon today.

The urgency of the crisis was demonstrated in June when, as mentioned earlier,





ended. Lebanon will remain a lightning rod for regional tensions and rivalries, and that ensures that internal differences will not soon be reconciled.

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