

POLICY REPORT

Hezbollah's Ascendancy: Regional Influence, Global Networks, and Implications for Middle East Stability





Hezbollah's Ascendancy

Regional Influence, Global Networks, and Implications for Middle East Stability

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COVER: A drone carries a flag of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement above Aaramta bordering Israel ahead of the anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. (Anwar Amro / AFP via Getty Images)

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Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.





Executive Summary

Hezbollah, recognized as one of the world's most formidable nonstate armed groups, has evolved significantly since its inception during the Lebanese civil war from a small militant faction into a powerful insurgency. Initially equipped with basic weapons, Hezbollah has now amassed a sophisticated arsenal, including a fleet of uncrewed aerial vehicles and a substantial stockpile of missiles and rockets. The group's special forces have honed their skills through prolonged engagements with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), one of the world's most advanced militaries. Furthermore, Hezbollah has expanded its operations into the cyber domain, boasting an "electronic army" capable of both offensive and defensive cyber warfare.

Hezbollah has been equally successful in the economic domain. While the organization has historically relied on significant Iranian support, it has also pursued financial independence, establishing numerous independent networks around the globe in a manner rarely seen by other nonstate armed groups. Hezbollah's economic activities span both legal and illicit domains, reaching global proportions. This extensive financial network not only sustains its operations but also enhances its influence and autonomy.

Hezbollah's threat extends beyond its own capabilities, as it actively transfers its expertise to nonstate armed groups in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria. This support exacerbates regional instability and sectarian conflict, with Hezbollah implicated in training militias involved in sectarian violence, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

Hezbollah poses a multifaceted threat, not only as an insurgent group capable of committing violence against civilians but also as a transmitter of military and strategic know-how

to other non-state actors. The implications of Hezbollah's rise encompass increased threats to regional security and stability, heightened Iranian influence, and challenges to U.S. and European interests. To counter Hezbollah effectively, understanding its strengths and weaknesses is crucial.

Adequately combatting the group requires a multivariate approach in which military action is one of many methods. For instance, within the Shiite community, dissenting voices, including former Hezbollah officials and younger, modernist Shiite figures, must be amplified. Support for these opposition voices should be discreet to avoid discrediting them as Western agents. Additionally, dismantling Hezbollah's global financial network requires a coordinated international approach involving different policies toward countries with dissimilar domestic laws and political systems.

Key regional players must centralize efforts to combat Hezbollah. This coordination can include intelligence-sharing, pressuring the Lebanese government, and dismantling Hezbollah's global economic network. A carrot-and-stick approach should be applied to fragile Middle Eastern states that harbor Hezbollah fighters or support its global financial network, strengthening their governments while preventing the group from benefiting from international support. By addressing Hezbollah's multifaceted influence through comprehensive and coordinated policies, its power and destabilizing impact in the Middle East can be significantly reduced.





Introduction

Hezbollah is considered one of the strongest nonstate armed groups in the world. Born in 1982 during the Lebanese civil war, it steadily expanded from a few militants to an infamous insurgency. It has harnessed a large military stockpile including fleets of uncrewed aerial vehicles and missiles, and its special forces have gained experience through decades of fighting the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), one of the strongest armies in the world. The group has also transferred this fight to the cyber sphere, declaring that it has an “electronic army” with both offensive and defensive capabilities. Not only does Hezbollah utilize social media to promote misinformation, disinformation, and for recruitment purposes, the Advanced, Persistent Threat actor Lebanese Cedar, aka Volatile Cedar, was found to have targeted telecommunications, particularly through a remote access trojan that can collect sensitive data on targeted individuals, such as dissidents or anti-Hezbollah voices.^{1,2}

It has received tremendous support from Iran but also has made efforts to be financially independent with both licit and illicit financial activities across the world. Hezbollah has increased its influence in the region by sharing its expertise with militant organizations in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, contributing to destabilization in those countries. Sectarian conflict has been on an upward trajectory, and Hezbollah is directly implicated in training



some of the militias engaged in the sectarian killings.

Hezbollah’s rise has threatened the U.S. and its allies and helped Iran gain influence in the region, but there are many avenues by which to weaken the group. As an insurgency, it relies on its relationship with the population where it operates, so driving a wedge between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shiite population through sophisticated counter-messaging to combat propaganda and support for a political alternative to the group would be effective. Additionally, Hezbollah’s activities extend beyond the Middle East, requiring an international effort to combat through pressuring governments in which Hezbollah operates and combined efforts to share intelligence and policies.

Hezbollah’s Evolution

The evolution of Hezbollah’s tactics, capabilities, and ability to operate independently of Iran while still

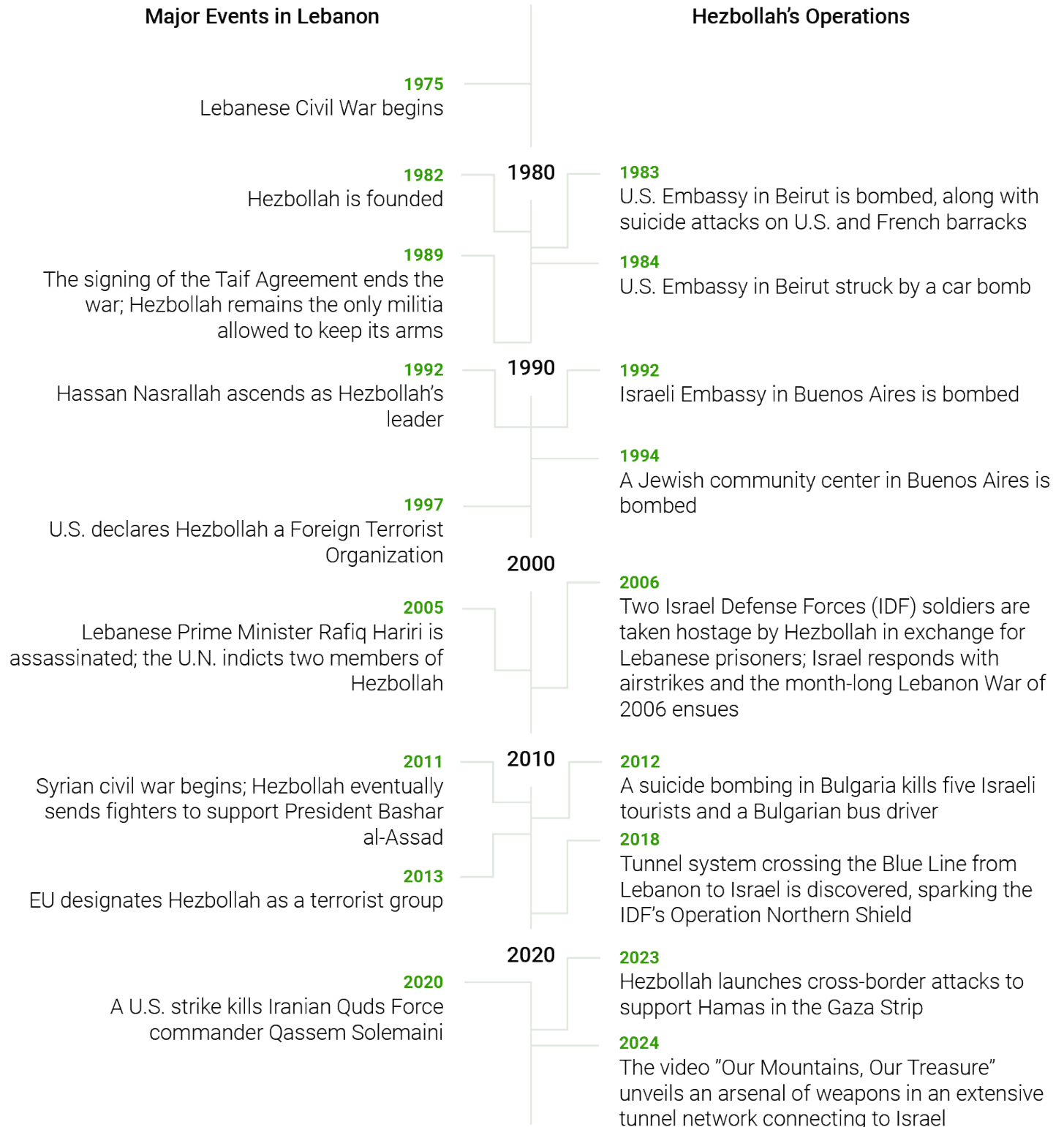
Rockets fired from southern Lebanon are intercepted by Israel’s Iron Dome air defense system over the Upper Galilee region on July 8, 2024. (Jalaa Marey / AFP via Getty Images)

promoting Tehran’s objectives has made efforts to weaken the group more difficult. Terms such as “insurgency,” “guerrilla,” “terrorist organization,” and “Iranian proxy” have been used to describe the group, and the U.S. State Department officially designated it a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 1997. While this can cause confusion, terrorism is a tactic that can be used by insurgents, rebels, and militias while the nonstate armed group can be a proxy, independent, or semi-independent. Hezbollah is an insurgency that uses terrorism as a tactic and shares a similar ideology with Iran that makes it a proxy in some instances, but in other instances it acts independently. Importantly, Iran does not directly control every action that Hezbollah takes, instead relying on an ideological alignment





Timeline of Lebanon and Hezbollah



Source: Council on Foreign Relations

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that manifests in Hezbollah's activities, which benefit the aims of the Iranian regime.

Since its inception, Hezbollah has primarily targeted Israel, and its guerilla attacks paved the way for it to develop a multitude of capabilities. As a nascent nonstate armed group, Hezbollah possessed meager means to attack the IDF when it invaded Lebanon in 1982. The first target was the Israeli military headquarters in Tyre, where Hezbollah conducted a suicide attack that killed 75 members of the Israeli security forces and 16 Lebanese and Palestinian prisoners.³ Then-Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin declared a three-day mourning period, declaring it the worst catastrophe since Israel's creation. Hezbollah, on the other hand, annually celebrates the Nov. 11 as "Martyrdom Day" in the perpetrators' honor. This was the first in a long line of similar attacks. By the mid-1980s, Hezbollah had assembled approximately 7,000 members galvanized by religious zeal.⁴

The group broadened its targets over the next decades. In April 1983, a suicide bomber detonated 2,000 pounds of explosives inside the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 63 people including 17 Americans.⁵ After Israel assassinated Hezbollah Secretary-General Abbas al-Musawi in 1992, the group conducted two attacks in Argentina – bombing the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and a Jewish community center headquarters in the same city in 1994⁶ – the first signs of its emerging global capabilities. Ever since, Hezbollah has been

linked to plots against Israeli targets, including foiled attacks in Azerbaijan in 2012⁷ and Turkey in 2009,⁸ and a deadly bus bombing in Bulgaria in 2012.⁹

Hezbollah has evolved from merely using terrorism and guerilla warfare to an insurgency that possesses precision missiles and cyber capabilities. Its execution of guerilla attacks against the IDF has improved tremendously over the years. A network of tunnels that runs for hundreds of kilometers on the Lebanese-Israeli border helps Hezbollah fighters conduct attacks and maintain operational secrecy.¹⁰ Hezbollah has also nurtured a special force to conduct operations within Israel, the Radwan forces, which according to Israeli sources are customized to conduct military operations similar to Hamas' attack on Oct. 7, 2023.¹¹ These capabilities, among many others, allowed Hezbollah to withstand Israeli military operations that sought its extirpation in 1993, 1996, and 2006.¹²

Hezbollah accomplished its main goal in 2000 when continued attacks forced Israel to withdraw from southern Lebanon, demonstrating the difficulty in eliminating the group using solely a militaristic approach. However, success was a double-edged sword for Hezbollah; its triumph against a formidable adversary deprived it of an enemy that provided a unifying and motivating exigence. As an excuse to continue the fight, the group claimed the Sheba Farms were Lebanese territory that Israel continued to occupy,¹³ a pretext it still uses to justify attacks against Israeli forces.

Hezbollah has invested heavily in an array of tools to inflict heavy damage on its southern neighbor. It has an estimated 150,000 missiles and rockets¹⁴ and the ability to send a barrage toward Israel that can reach most areas of the country, making it impossible for the Iron Dome missile defense system to completely intercept. A report by the Center for International & Security Studies said that in the 2006 war, roughly 25% of the rockets fired by Hezbollah "landed in populated areas, while the rest landed in open spaces and caused minimal damage. In addition to disrupting normal life for hundreds of thousands of people in northern Israel, 53 Israelis were killed, over 2,000 were wounded, and there was extensive damage to homes and infrastructure."¹⁵

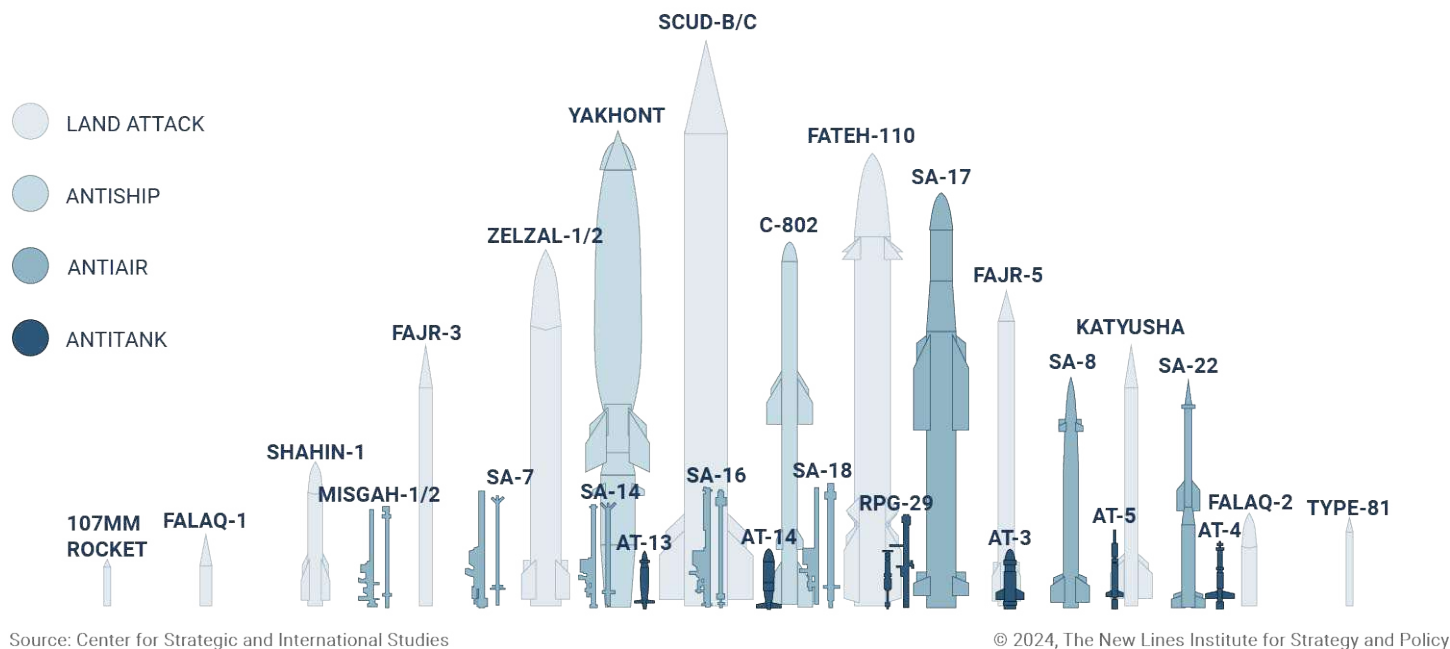
Hezbollah has also laid out plans to go on the offensive and invade Israeli territory. Such an attack would likely mimic the Oct. 7 attack, infiltrating Israel and taking hostages.^{16, 17, 18} Hezbollah also may use terrorism against Israeli targets in other countries,¹⁹ indicating that Hezbollah has sleeper cells capable of striking Israeli targets around the world.

Hezbollah's military prowess has earned it a unique position among nonstate armed groups. It is engaged in a unique status quo in which it has been able to deter Israel. Any large-scale conflict between Hezbollah and Israel is likely to be mutually destructive, so a careful game of calculated, limited attacks and responses has been ongoing for many years. Likewise, the rules of engagement that dictated the





Hezbollah's Arsenal



precepts for a conflict were honed over many years.

Hezbollah's goal is to prevent Israel from attacking Lebanon and Iran on a larger scale, but the ongoing Israel-Hamas war has placed the group in a difficult position. It must refrain from engaging in full-scale conflict with Israel, which entails irreparable political and social damage for the group within Lebanon, but sitting by while Israel aggressively roots out Hamas, another group supported by Iran, undermines its reputation as a powerful, pro-Arab, revolutionary force. As the Israel-Hamas war drags on and Hamas takes significant losses, the pressure on Hezbollah to become more involved mounts. For example, while Khaled Mishaal, a leader in Hamas, thanked Hezbollah for its actions, he added that the battle requires more.²⁰ Ghazi Hamad, another senior figure in Hamas,

has said his group expected more intervention by Hezbollah and the rest of the so-called axis of resistance.²¹ The tendency of other nonstate armed groups in the region to turn to Hezbollah as its primary support network emphasizes the concerning role that the group plays in the axis of resistance and its tremendous capability to export its experience and knowledge to other nonstate armed groups in the region.

A look at Hezbollah's history reveals its unceasing upward trajectory and increasing lethality. Its acts of terrorism have transformed into sophisticated military operations, and its light weapons have given way to a large arsenal. Not only has Hezbollah grown over the years but also a lack of sufficient arrestors to that growth make it reasonable to assume that growth will continue. For now, its danger lies in transferring its accumulated

experience to other nonstate armed forces in the region.

Hezbollah Beyond Borders

Hezbollah has been instrumental in supporting other militant groups in the Middle East, directly harming Western interests, and tearing apart the social fabric in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Hezbollah's role varies from direct involvement to training militias such as the al-Houthi rebels in Yemen and Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq. The CIA indicated as early as 1985 that Hezbollah had trained more than 2,000 Shiite militia members from different countries in Baalbek, Lebanon.²² The extent of this role has only grown over the years, and countries where Hezbollah is known to provide training and assistance to other militant groups should create specific policies to counter the threat.





Iraqi Militias

Given Hezbollah's ideological affinity with Iraqi Shiite militant groups, these relationships have deep roots. In 1983, Hezbollah, along with the Iraqi Dawa Party, attacked a series of targets in Kuwait because of its support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war.²³ Hezbollah's coordination with Iraqi militias during this time was significant and well-known enough for Kuwait to imprison senior Hezbollah commander Mustafa Badreddine and issue a death sentence for his involvement in several bombings within Kuwait.²⁴ Badreddine exploited the tumultuous situation in Kuwait in 1990 to escape imprisonment, but his case highlights that Hezbollah's direct involvement, support for, and coordination with Iraqi militias dates back decades. The cooperation grew after the

2003 invasion of Iraq, when Iran's Quds Force requested Hezbollah's assistance to help train Iraqi militias in 2003. The latter created a unit dedicated solely to the support of Iraqi Shiite militias by training some in Iran and providing more advanced training to other Iraqi militias in Lebanon.²⁵

Hezbollah's role in Iraq lasted beyond the departure of U.S. forces. Upon the rise of the Islamic State, a Sunni militant group, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah sent more trainers to Iraq and pledged to defend Shiite shrines there. In June 2014, Nasrallah said the group is "ready to sacrifice martyrs in Iraq five times more than what we sacrificed in Syria in order to protect shrines," noting that Iraqi holy sites "are much more important" than Shiite shrines in Syria.²⁶ Hezbollah also has been training Iraqi Shiite militias

in cyberwarfare with the aim of creating "electronic armies."²⁷ The training has included manipulating photographs, managing fake social media accounts, avoiding social media censorship, and spreading disinformation online.

Additionally, the role of Hezbollah's representatives in Iraq has been aggrandized, especially after the killing of the former head of the Quds Force, Qassem Suleimani, and the former commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, Abu Mehdi Al-Muhandis.²⁸ Mohammad Al-Kawtharani, the senior leader of Hezbollah's forces in Iraq, resides in Iraq, is married to an Iraqi woman, and speaks Arabic with an Iraqi accent.²⁹ The U.S. Department

A propaganda billboard for the pro-Iran Hezbollah Brigades militia hangs in Baghdad on June 20, 2018. (Ahmad Al-Rubaye / AFP via Getty Images)





of State is offering a reward of up to \$10 million for information about his activities because he is responsible for facilitating the actions of Shiite militias, attacks against foreign diplomatic missions, playing a role in repressing protests, and engaging in other criminal activities.³⁰

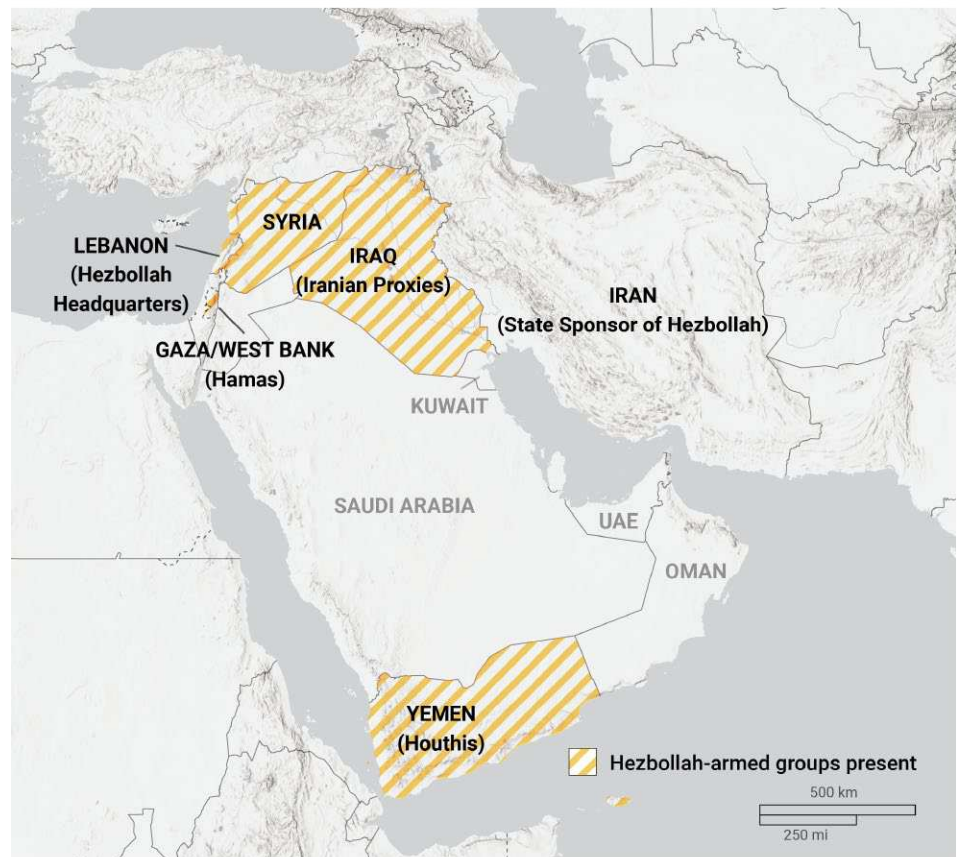
Assad Regime

Hezbollah also played an instrumental role in preserving the autocratic rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The group helped bolster the capabilities of militias aligned with the Syrian regime, particularly in the realms of guerrilla warfare, precision sniping, and deployment of improvised explosive devices. Beyond its operational contributions, Hezbollah has assisted with intelligence gathering and disseminating propaganda through its extensive media network.³¹

The group's strategic imperative encompasses a multifaceted military mandate. This entails training the Syrian regime's armed forces and steadfast loyal militias, coupled with a combat advisory function bestowed upon both regular and irregular forces under the regime's command. It has also provided reinforcements while concurrently orchestrating and directing precision combat operations across the theater.³²

Although the support was covert, in 2013, a watershed moment occurred when Nasrallah publicly acknowledged the organization's involvement in Syria, saying it was doing so to prevent the country from falling into the hands of

Hezbollah's Ties to Armed Groups in the Middle East



Source: Authors

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hostile foreign powers or extremist factions. Nasrallah underscored Syria's strategic significance as a bulwark against regional destabilization, emphasizing Hezbollah's determination to safeguard the regime against existential threats.³³ Nasrallah's declaration encapsulated Hezbollah's resolve to confront the multifaceted challenges facing the Assad regime, illustrating the group's readiness to confront the perilous prospect of regime collapse without assurances from external actors vying for control. It is estimated that Hezbollah put 10,000 of its troops on the ground to defend Assad.³⁴

While its objectives were limited at the beginning of the civil war, Hezbollah eventually expanded its area of operation to include Idlib, Aleppo, and Daraa. Nasrallah admitted as much in one of his interviews when he said, "we do not exist in a place without a place, wherever we need to be, we will be."³⁵ Additionally, Hezbollah became instrumental in helping the regime maintain its control in several areas. Its better-trained, more disciplined, and experienced fighters improved the Syrian army's combat effectiveness and even at times issued orders, such as during fighting in Homs, where exerted control over small units





of Syrian soldiers, including the presidential guard.³⁶

The operation in Syria also affected the operational conduct of the group. While costly in blood, the military challenge in Syria helped Hezbollah develop new tactics. While cooperating with irregular and regular forces and maneuvering in different terrain, it began to use larger formations to operate at company and battalion levels, in marked contrast to the guerilla warfare it waged against Israel.³⁷

Al-Houthi Rebels

Hezbollah also has supported the Houthis in Yemen. The Houthis are a Shiite group – albeit a different denomination from Hezbollah and Iran – that rebelled against the central government after the revolution in Iran. The Houthis needed support in maintaining their insurgency, and Hezbollah became a subsequent mentor. Despite its official denial, there is plenty of evidence of Hezbollah's support for the Houthis. For instance, in 2013 the Treasury Department sanctioned another leader, Khalil Harb, for his involvement “in the movement of large amounts of currency to Yemen, through Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E.”³⁸ and in 2016 the U.S. State Department designated a Hezbollah commander, Haytham Ali Tabataba'i, as a terrorist for providing training in Yemen.³⁹ According to a Houthi official, the relationship between the groups existed well before the vacuum that ensued in Yemen after the 2011 demonstrations.⁴⁰

Hezbollah's support for the Houthis has been pivotal in their fight against the government in Sanaa, Saudi Arabia, and beyond. The Lebanese group mentored the Yemeni rebels in military training, allowing them to strengthen their regular and irregular tactics and improve their missile targeting.⁴¹ According to an official in Hezbollah, both groups trained together in Iran, and Hezbollah also trained the Houthis in Lebanon and Yemen. Another Hezbollah fighter admitted that some of his comrades have died in Yemen.⁴² Hezbollah provided expertise in building tunnels on the borders with Saudi Arabia for both offensive and defensive purposes.⁴³ It also provided advanced weapons such as antiaircraft missiles for the Houthis⁴⁴ and is currently overseeing the targeting of Red Sea shipping.⁴⁵

Hamas

Hezbollah also has provided Hamas with tremendous support. Although the groups had political differences over the Syrian civil war,⁴⁶ they reconciled in 2017 with the ascent of Hamas leader Yehia Sinwar,⁴⁷ and the rapprochement soon translated to more cooperation. The extent of the cooperation was reflected in Israel's appeal to the United Nations in 2018 against Lebanon. It claimed that Hezbollah was training thousands of Hamas fighters in the Biqaa Valley to the east of Lebanon, helping to establish a missile factory to support Hamas' activities.⁴⁸ In other words, Hezbollah was likely instrumental in preparing Hamas for the Oct. 7 attack.

Hezbollah continues to play a significant role in the Gaza conflict. Their connection has grown stronger, as stated by Sinwar, who said that Hamas coordinates with both Hezbollah and Iran.⁴⁹ According to sources close to Hezbollah, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Hezbollah, and Hamas established a joint military operations center in Beirut. These sources also claimed that Hamas was provided with data on Israeli forces' movements.⁵⁰ The groups' coordination and cooperation is more than the ostensible.

Hezbollah's Diverse Financial Frontiers

Primary Income Generation: Iranian Support and Exploiting Lebanon

Hezbollah, as a child of the Iranian revolution, receives tremendous financial support from Tehran, estimated to be between \$50 million and \$200 million annually depending upon the source.⁵¹ Iran's financial backing of Jihād al-Binā, facilitated through its embassy in Syria alone, amounted to an estimated \$220,000 to \$440,000 annually from 1988 to 2001.⁵²

The pivotal role played by other key Iranian funding bodies, notably the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee and the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, alongside Iran's support of the Jihād al-Binā construction company, underscores their indispensability to Hezbollah's operations.⁵³ Jihād al-Binā, established in 1988 and officially registered as a charitable entity,





A woman holds pictures of Iran's late president Ebrahim Raisi (R), Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah (C) and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (L) during a rally in southern Beirut on May 24, 2024. (Anwar Amro / AFP via Getty Images)

was fashioned after its Iranian counterpart, the Construction Jihad movement, and mirrored its functions.⁵⁴ Noteworthy infrastructure endeavors, such as a project in the early 2000s that provided water to 45% of Beirut's southern population, underscored its significance.⁵⁵

Hezbollah also has diversified its revenue streams for decades by investing in domestic and international ventures, aiming to sustain its social programs autonomously.⁵⁶ The group has crafted a financial network spanning the globe, facilitating both income generation and capital movement.

One of Hezbollah's strategies is leveraging charitable organizations for fundraising. Particularly noteworthy was the group's outreach to the Lebanese diaspora in Europe during the early 1990s,

a strategic shift prompted by dwindling support from Iran.⁵⁷ Emphasizing the significance of *zakat*, or "charitable contribution," as one of the fundamental tenets of Islam, Hezbollah strategically tapped into this pillar to bolster its financial resources.⁵⁸ This approach yielded substantial dividends, helping it secure significant financial backing from Lebanese expatriates across Africa, South America, and regions with sizable Shiite populations.⁵⁹ Leveraging this religious mandate, Hezbollah seamlessly facilitates substantial financial transfers from its supporters, a process largely insulated from scrutiny by authorities.

In tandem with these efforts, Hezbollah has diversified its financial portfolio through strategic investments in Lebanon. Investigations into the operations of the now-defunct Lebanese

Canadian Bank unveiled the organization's adeptness at concealing wealth and channeling substantial sums – up to \$240 million – toward real estate acquisitions, including 740 acres overlooking the Mediterranean. This architecture not only shields Hezbollah's assets but also serves as a vehicle for significant capital accumulation.

Moreover, Hezbollah's financial footprint extends to a robust domestic agenda, underscored by extensive social programs. Following the 2006 conflict, the organization's expenditure of \$281 million, primarily for post-war reconstruction, demonstrated its commitment to securing popular support through tangible welfare initiatives.⁶⁰ This stance reflects Hezbollah's readiness to invest substantial resources, even poised to allocate billions, in sustaining its societal appeal, a critical component of its long tenure within Lebanon.⁶¹

Capitalizing on Weak Governance in the Middle East

Hezbollah has also used its financial experience to establish networks in the Middle East, taking advantage of the vacuum created by weak governance. For instance, the group's illicit economic activity increased tremendously in Syria after the onset of the civil war. Hezbollah's involvement in



cross-border smuggling, including narcotics, is an essential source of its revenue, and its engagement in goods smuggling has increased over the past two years amid severe economic crises in Lebanon and Syria.

A 2023 BBC investigation revealed that a senior Hezbollah official, in connection with another official in Syria's 4th Division, was involved in captagon smuggling into Lebanon.^{62, 63, 64} Hezbollah's smuggling activities also include the illicit transport of state-subsidized goods from Lebanon to Syria. The organization also collaborates closely with the 4th Division to facilitate diesel and gasoline across the border⁶⁵ The group generates an estimated \$300 million per month through the trafficking of diesel fuel alone.⁶⁶

This increasing involvement in cross-border smuggling reflects not only Hezbollah's adaptability to shifting economic dynamics but also its deepening entrenchment in illicit trade networks. As the organization continues to exploit vulnerabilities in regional economies, concerted efforts to dismantle these networks and mitigate the destabilizing impact of Hezbollah's illicit activities on the broader Middle East are imperative.

Hezbollah's economic activities extended into Iraq after 2003. Due to sanctions and international scrutiny, Hezbollah sought the transfer of hard currency from Iraq to Lebanon. Hisham al-Hashemi, an Iraqi scholar killed by Shiite militias, estimated that Hezbollah generated \$300 million yearly from Iraq.⁶⁷ In response, the U.S. sanctioned entities in Iraq including Al-Bilad Islamic Bank, claiming Iran's Central Bank used Al-Bilad to funnel millions of dollars to Hezbollah.⁶⁸ The United States also mandated the Central Bank of Iraq to meet additional requirements from the U.S. Federal Reserve, restricting Iraq from accessing U.S. dollars.⁶⁹ Hezbollah circumvented the sanctions by taking advantage of the ability of Iraqi tourists to take dollars with them into Lebanon, then transfer the hard currency to the group. U.S. efforts to prevent the flow of dollars to Hezbollah – and the group's efforts to bypass these measures – are ongoing.

Legitimate and Illicit Networks in Africa

In a parallel vein, Hezbollah has cultivated intricate networks across the African continent. Lebanese expatriates in Africa served as conduits, fostering robust connections with Hezbollah that have only deepened over

time. The deaths of Hezbollah's foreign relations official for the African branch and two aides in a 2003 plane crash departing from Benin shed light on the depth of these ties. The revelation that they were transporting \$2 million as a routine contribution underscores the scale and regularity of financial transactions between Hezbollah and its African affiliates.⁷⁰

In 2004, a U.S. diplomat sounded the alarm about Hezbollah's involvement in the West African diamond trade, amplifying concerns over the organization's illicit economic activities.⁷¹ Subsequent intelligence reports from U.S. sources unveiled the existence of numerous front companies established by Hezbollah across sub-Saharan Africa.⁷² In 2009, the U.S. Treasury Department identified a Lebanese businessman as a significant financial contributor to Hezbollah, citing donations totaling tens of millions of dollars, labeling him as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist.⁷³

Hezbollah's financial operations in Africa extend beyond mere transactions, as evidenced by many investigations conducted by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration over the last two decades.⁷⁴ Hezbollah operatives were found to be orchestrating the

“ As the organization continues to exploit vulnerabilities in regional economies, concerted efforts to dismantle these networks and mitigate the destabilizing impact of Hezbollah's illicit activities on the broader Middle East are imperative. ”





movement of millions of dollars from West Africa to Lebanon through a clandestine network of couriers, underscoring the organization's global reach and financial dexterity.⁷⁵

Hezbollah merges its involvement in the illegal diamond trade with legitimate business ventures. Its established front companies in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, and Gambia give Hezbollah the ability to both conceal its illicit operations and provide cover for employment opportunities abroad, further entrenching its influence within local communities. Hezbollah's footprint in Africa epitomizes its ability to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes and leverage diasporic ties, illicit enterprises, and legitimate business ventures to bolster its global reach and consolidate power beyond its traditional strongholds.⁷⁶ This multifaceted approach underscores the organization's adaptability and resourcefulness in pursuing its strategic objectives on the international stage.

Latin America

Hezbollah's presence extends to Latin America, where its operational activities have come under increasing scrutiny by regional authorities.

Chilean officials, vigilant to the threat posed by illicit networks, have uncovered a slew of import-export entities suspected to serve as fronts for Hezbollah's clandestine operations at least between 1994 and 2004.⁷⁷ In 2001, Paraguayan law enforcement raided the residence of a known

Hezbollah operative, unearthing a receipt from the Martyrs Foundation amounting to \$3.5 million. This revelation shed light on the magnitude of financial transactions orchestrated by the operative, who had channeled over \$50 million since 1995.⁷⁸ In Colombia, a joint operation between local security forces and U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents dealt a significant blow to Hezbollah's activities with the dismantling of a large-scale network and the seizure of assets totaling \$23 million.⁷⁹ Hezbollah's financial ties have remained in Latin and South America, with the U.S. State Department designating individuals residing in the region as supporting Hezbollah's financial networks as recently as 2023.⁸⁰ In Ecuador, a drug bust uncovered that up to 70 percent of the profits derived from the narcotics trade were found to be funneled directly to Hezbollah.⁸¹

These incidents underscore Hezbollah's adeptness at leveraging global networks and exploiting vulnerabilities in the international financial system to sustain its operations. As Latin American authorities continue to confront the threat posed by the organization, concerted efforts are needed to disrupt its illicit activities and stem the flow of funds that fuel its destabilizing agenda.

Policy Recommendations

Hezbollah's growth not only has had negative implications for Lebanon but also has had a spillover effect on other countries. The social fabric in many Middle Eastern countries is being torn

apart because of the rampant influence of nonstate armed organizations such as the "Party of God," calling for a sophisticated policy response to roll back the power of these actors.

Undermine popular support in Lebanon by amplifying dissenting Shiite voices

Like many other insurgent groups, Hezbollah relies heavily on its support base and would not garner much power without legitimacy among its main constituency: Lebanese Shiites. Despite Hezbollah's aim to protect the Shiites of Lebanon, it only serves to enable Shiite armed groups at the expense of the average Lebanese Shiite. The first step in undermining Hezbollah's popular support in Lebanon is further exposing Hezbollah as a proxy that prioritizes Iran's interest above Lebanon's.

Social media can be a valuable tool in that regard, given the interconnectivity of the Lebanese on the global web. Of Lebanon's 5.3 million population, 4.8 million are internet users. There are also 4.5 million social media users who are mostly active on Facebook, YouTube, and X, formerly known as Twitter.⁸² Hezbollah's adversaries have primarily focused their energy on the traditional media. Social media can provide another platform through which Hezbollah's rhetoric is counterargued in a more formalized manner, rather than mere verbal attacks by individuals. A renewed counternarrative approach that incorporates a significant social media arm is critical to extend the diminished credibility of Hezbollah among older





Lebanese people to the younger generation, which primarily receives news through social media and alternative platforms.

Despite its popularity, Hezbollah tries to suppress many dissenting voices within the Shiite community. These forces represent different political trends including popular clerics and modernist figures who are alluring to youths. The main objective should be to empower Shiite alternatives to Hezbollah that are not necessarily pro-Western entities. The precise alternative voices that should be supported through unofficial and indirect means need only be movements, entities, or individuals that promote nonviolent alternatives

that aim to create a stronger, more stable Lebanon.

For solutions that involve the internet, social media, and alternative narratives, there are a few considerations that must be addressed. The most critical are the message and the messenger: The messages conveyed should not be limited to those perfectly in line with the aims of the West. The critical component should be messaging discrediting Hezbollah and demonstrating how the group has directly contributed to the deterioration of Lebanon and the struggle of the Lebanese people.

To ensure the success of this approach, it is critical that the

The flags of Lebanon and Hezbollah wave at the Baalbek Tourist Museum.
(Scott Peterson / Getty Images)

individuals presenting an alternative Shiite voice come from within the community and are not labeled as pro-Western operators. The individual or organization's view of the West does not necessarily need to be antagonistic as long as they seek to undermine Hezbollah's standing within the Shiite community and prioritize the well-being of Shiites above all else. The opposition to Hezbollah within the Shiite community is divided and has different ideological backgrounds as well as aspirations. These alternative voices must appeal to both pro-Western and





anti-Western Shia constituencies and successfully unite all Shiites within Lebanon against Hezbollah.

Country- and region-specific approaches must be taken to dismantle Hezbollah's global network

The United States must spearhead an international approach to dismantling Hezbollah's global network and thwarting its attempts to attain more funds, and this approach must be tailored to the specific countries and regions in which the group operates. Each country needs to monitor the source and the destination of suspicious financial transfers and pass stronger laws punishing individuals who provide financial support to Hezbollah.

Each EU member must closely monitor attempts by Hezbollah to spread propaganda and garner sympathy. In Germany, for instance, the authorities, after giving much leeway to extremist Islamists, raided 54 sites related to Iran and Hezbollah in 2023.⁸³ Such actions must be more frequent and surgical to extirpate Hezbollah's rooted abilities to muster funding.

In some African countries, the policy prescription is different. The intelligence communities in these countries often are geared toward protecting the government and facing local threats, allowing Hezbollah to fly under the radar.⁸⁴ It established businesses and networks of politicians and businessmen that ultimately served Hezbollah's goal of attaining more financial clout. Each country must realize that

granting Hezbollah the ability to conduct business is a red line. They need to recognize the gravity of the matter and be assisted through intelligence cooperation, providing them with the capabilities to limit Hezbollah's activities.

In Latin America, Hezbollah found many sympathizers because of the Lebanese communities that have long resided on the continent, anti-American sentiment, and the perceived shared cause with the Lebanese organization. The approach, naturally, needs to be different to limit Hezbollah's influence. For example, rapprochement with countries such as Venezuela must include preconditions to dismantle Hezbollah's networks and provide intelligence on its operations and intentions in Latin America. Simultaneously, there needs to be a soft campaign differentiating Hezbollah and Iran on the one hand and the leftist goals on the other. While they share anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment, the Islamist ideology advocated by the former runs counter to many of the political desires of the latter.

Establish coordination among key regional players

Hezbollah's adversaries are in desperate need of a center for coordination. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates have a mutual interest in reducing Hezbollah's power and influence, but each does it from a different standpoint and applies a single effort to that endeavor. Centralizing this effort would create common goals, allow for coordination

among governments, and facilitate learning from the other countries' experiences. Coordination can be undertaken on many levels that vary from sharing intelligence to pressuring the Lebanese government and dismantling Hezbollah's economic network on a global scale.

Revisit implementing more aggressive sanctions on fragile states providing safe haven for Hezbollah through official capacities

Policymakers should apply a carrot-and-stick policy toward fragile states in the Middle East that are giving haven to Hezbollah. Similar to many other insurgencies, Hezbollah preys upon vacuums in fragile countries. When the central government is unable to control its territory, such organizations fill the void and enrich and strengthen themselves. It is therefore imperative to strengthen these weak governments in order to prevent Hezbollah and its cohorts from utilizing the weakness of the governments in the Middle East. However, this approach should not entail strengthening the government while allowing Hezbollah and similar organizations to benefit from this support because they are part of the government.

Hezbollah is one of the leading causes of Lebanon's deterioration and inability to reform. The United States needs to decide between strengthening moderates in Lebanon or applying strict measures against the country. The argument that there are moderates within the government





has prevented the U.S. from taking measures against Lebanon that would restrict Hezbollah's influence and simultaneously allowed the organization to take advantage of that disparity. However, the moderates in Lebanon have not been a counterbalance of Hezbollah but became a gateway for the organization to take advantage of the government's weakness. If the U.S. cannot strengthen Lebanon's moderates without enabling Hezbollah, it must treat the state as a haven for a terrorist organization that should be under economic sanctions.

A similar approach can be undertaken regarding Iraq. The U.S. and its allies need to address the

fact that Iraq is becoming a haven for Hezbollah, Iran, and others to get hard currency and strengthen themselves. The U.S. cannot allow the conduct of illicit activities in Iraq that would support terrorist groups and benefit its main adversary in the Middle East, namely Iran. Additionally, the Iraqi government is dominated by political parties that are fronts for militias allied with Hezbollah. Iraq must be given a stark choice between limiting the influence of Hezbollah or suffer from the decreased inflow of hard currency that finds its way to U.S. antagonists.

This more aggressive approach can be taken alongside softer approaches such as bolstering

anti-Hezbollah voices and Shiite alternatives. Following serious consideration by relevant governments, sanctions can be imposed by states through their official capacities while other efforts can be taken in less official capacities. Taking steps to improve content moderation in Arabic on social media platforms will indirectly support the aim of lessening the detrimental impact that Hezbollah has on Lebanon and the region, while sanctions and official actions can increase the pressure on regional governmental bodies to make necessary structural changes.



Dr. Massaab Al-Aloosy is a seasoned researcher and academic who brings a wealth of expertise in Middle Eastern affairs, security studies, and conflict resolution. His book, "The Changing Ideology of Hezbollah," discusses how the group evolved over the past four decades from a small terrorist organization to a formidable insurgency. He also has published many academic papers, including "Deterrence by Insurgents: Hezbollah's military doctrine and capability vis-à-vis Israel," "Hezbollah in Syria: An Insurgent's Ideology, Interest, and Survival," and "Insurgency, Proxy, and Dependence: How Hezbollah's Ideology Prevails Over its Interest in its Relationship with Iran." He earned his Ph.D. and MALD from The Fletcher School at Tufts University, and his BA from Michigan State University. He is also fluent in Arabic and proficient in Persian.

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