

The Role of Hezbollah in Lebanese Politics and the Region

Submitted By
Author: Amzad Alam
Co-author: Ekhalak Alam

Abstract

This paper examines the multifaceted role of Hezbollah in Lebanon's domestic politics and its broader influence in the Middle East. Established in the early 1980s amid Lebanon's Civil War, Hezbollah emerged as a Shiite resistance movement against Israeli occupation. Over time, it has transformed into a formidable political and military force within Lebanon while extending its influence beyond national borders. This study explores the organization's historical roots, ideological foundation, and strategic evolution into a political actor. It investigates Hezbollah's political participation, regional alliances—especially with Iran and Syria—and its involvement in key conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War. The paper argues that Hezbollah's hybrid identity as both a political party and an armed militia allows it to operate effectively in a liminal political space, adapting pragmatically to shifts in domestic and regional dynamics. The findings aim to deepen the understanding of Hezbollah's significance in shaping Lebanon's political order and its regional security calculus.

Keywords

Hezbollah, Lebanese politics, Iran, Syria, sectarianism, resistance, Middle East, hybrid actors, political Islam

1. Introduction

Lebanon, a small yet geopolitically significant country on the eastern Mediterranean, is a microcosm of Middle Eastern complexity. Its political structure—predicated on sectarian representation—reflects both its diversity and its vulnerability. Among the most influential political actors in Lebanon is Hezbollah, a Shiite Islamist group that has evolved over the past four decades from a revolutionary militia into a dominant player in Lebanese and regional affairs.

Originally founded to resist Israeli occupation and inspired by Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, Hezbollah's trajectory reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the realities of Lebanese politics and regional power struggles. This paper explores Hezbollah's rise, its ideological evolution, its integration into Lebanon's political institutions, and its strategic alliances with Iran and Syria. It further examines how Hezbollah's actions reverberate throughout the Middle East, especially in the context of the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War.

2. Historical Background

Hezbollah was formally established in 1985 with the publication of its Open Letter. However, its ideological and operational roots trace back to the late 1970s, when young Shiite clerics disillusioned with the secularism of the AMAL movement turned to revolutionary Iran for inspiration. These clerics envisioned a resistance group committed to both the liberation of Lebanese territory and the promotion of Islamic governance.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was a pivotal moment that catalyzed the formation of Hezbollah. Backed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah rapidly developed into a potent guerrilla force, launching attacks on Israeli forces and Western interests, including the infamous 1983 Beirut

barracks bombings. These early actions established Hezbollah's militant credentials, but also drew international condemnation and designation as a terrorist group by the U.S. and its allies.

Despite such designations, Hezbollah garnered significant support from Lebanon's marginalized Shia population, which had long been excluded from the political and economic mainstream. The group filled a critical vacuum by providing social services, education, and healthcare. This dual identity—resistance and welfare—formed the bedrock of its legitimacy.

3. Ideological Framework

Hezbollah's ideology is rooted in the Iranian concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which posits that clerics should lead both spiritual and temporal aspects of governance. Hezbollah accepted Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini—and later Khamenei—as its ultimate authority. However, Hezbollah also localized this ideology to fit Lebanon's pluralistic society.

Initially, Hezbollah called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon. However, by the early 1990s, realizing that the broader Lebanese public was not receptive to this vision, the organization adopted a more pragmatic approach. It began to participate in electoral politics and cooperated with Christian and Sunni political actors, without abandoning its foundational principles.

The ideological flexibility of Hezbollah has been essential in its political success. It has consistently portrayed itself as both a Lebanese nationalist force defending the country and a vanguard of Islamic resistance against Western and Israeli aggression.

4. Political Evolution and Participation

Hezbollah's entry into Lebanese politics was marked by the 1992 parliamentary elections, which it initially debated boycotting. Encouraged by Iran, it ultimately chose to participate, gaining 12 seats. Since then, Hezbollah has expanded its political reach, becoming a key member of the March 8 coalition, alongside the AMAL Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement.

In 2005, Hezbollah entered the Lebanese cabinet for the first time. It has since held multiple ministerial portfolios, wielding influence in foreign affairs, telecommunications, health, and public works. Despite periodic criticism and calls for its disarmament, Hezbollah has leveraged its political power to block or shape government decisions, including presidential elections and national budgets.

While Hezbollah's presence in parliament rarely exceeds 10–15% of seats, its ability to form alliances and mobilize grassroots support ensures it remains a central player in Lebanese governance.

5. Military Capabilities and Resistance Role

Hezbollah maintains a powerful militia that operates independently of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Its military wing has been central to its identity as a resistance movement, particularly against Israeli incursions. The 2000 Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon was widely viewed as a Hezbollah victory, further legitimizing its armed role.

The 2006 war with Israel further demonstrated Hezbollah's military resilience, despite widespread destruction in Lebanon. Its use of guerrilla tactics, rocket fire, and psychological operations surprised Israeli forces and reshaped regional perceptions of asymmetric warfare.

Hezbollah has since significantly upgraded its arsenal, reportedly possessing over 100,000 rockets and sophisticated drones. It has also trained thousands of fighters, some of whom have combat experience from Syria.

6. Regional Involvement

6.1 Iran-Hezbollah Alliance

Iran remains Hezbollah's primary patron, providing financial, military, and ideological support. The relationship is framed by shared Shiite identity and geopolitical interests, particularly opposition to Israel and U.S. presence in the region.

Iran's Quds Force plays a crucial role in facilitating Hezbollah's operations. In return, Hezbollah serves as Iran's proxy in Lebanon, offering Tehran strategic depth and a deterrent against Israeli or American action. This alliance also manifests in coordinated media campaigns, intelligence sharing, and joint military operations.

6.2 Hezbollah and Syria

Syria has historically been both an ally and a patron of Hezbollah. During the Lebanese Civil War and Israeli occupation, Syria allowed Hezbollah to operate in the Bekaa Valley and later supported its military buildup. The alliance grew stronger after 2005, when both faced political isolation following the assassination of Rafik Hariri.

Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian Civil War marked a turning point. The group sent thousands of fighters to support Bashar al-Assad's regime, reinforcing the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis. This decision cost Hezbollah legitimacy in parts of the Sunni Arab world but solidified its role as a regional power broker.

6.3 The Arab Spring and Aftermath

The Arab Spring initially threatened Hezbollah's regional narrative. Supporting Assad's regime against popular uprisings contradicted its image as a voice of the oppressed. However, Hezbollah justified its intervention on the grounds of protecting Lebanese Shiites and safeguarding strategic interests.

Its role in Syria significantly enhanced its combat capabilities but drew severe criticism from Sunni-majority states, some of which designated it a terrorist organization. This deepened sectarian divisions in Lebanon and strained Hezbollah's relations with Gulf countries.

7. Domestic Challenges and Criticism

Hezbollah faces growing internal criticism over its role in Lebanese politics. Its refusal to disarm has fueled accusations of undermining state sovereignty. The 2019 protests against political corruption and economic mismanagement also targeted Hezbollah, despite its long-standing social service network.

The devastating Beirut port explosion in August 2020 further eroded public trust. Although Hezbollah denied involvement, its influence over port operations and customs enforcement came under scrutiny.

Additionally, Hezbollah's alignment with Iran and Syria has drawn criticism for entangling Lebanon in foreign conflicts, making it a target for sanctions and diplomatic isolation.

8. Hezbollah's Social Welfare Network

One of Hezbollah's strengths lies in its comprehensive social infrastructure. It operates hospitals, schools, reconstruction agencies, and media outlets. These services are often more efficient than those provided by the Lebanese state, especially in Shia-populated areas.

Hezbollah uses these institutions to cultivate loyalty, disseminate ideology, and mobilize support. The group's ability to combine militancy with humanitarianism sets it apart from other political actors in Lebanon and the wider Arab world.

9. Legal and International Perspectives

Hezbollah is designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S., U.K., Canada, Germany, and several Gulf countries. However, many nations, including Russia and China, differentiate between Hezbollah's political and military wings.

This duality complicates international efforts to contain its influence. Lebanon's fragile political balance also prevents effective legal action against Hezbollah domestically, as any attempt to disarm or prosecute the group risks civil strife.

10. Hezbollah and U.S./Israel Relations

Hezbollah's staunch opposition to Israel is central to its identity. It frames Israel as an occupier and existential threat, justifying its armed resistance. The U.S., in turn, views Hezbollah as a destabilizing force, particularly due to its role in training and arming other militias in the region.

Hezbollah has been implicated in numerous attacks against U.S. and Israeli targets, including embassy bombings, hostage-taking, and alleged assassinations. Its ability to strike beyond Lebanon makes it a critical concern for Western security agencies.

11. Hezbollah and Sectarianism in Lebanon

Lebanon's consociational democracy allocates power based on sectarian identity. Hezbollah's rise has altered the Shia-Sunni-Christian balance, often fueling sectarian tensions.

While the group claims to represent all Lebanese, critics argue that its policies disproportionately benefit the Shia population and Iran's strategic interests. Hezbollah has at times clashed with Sunni groups, particularly during the 2008 Beirut conflict and in recent protest movements.

12. Hezbollah's Media and Communication Strategy

Hezbollah operates a sophisticated media network, including Al-Manar TV, radio stations, newspapers, and online platforms. These outlets promote resistance narratives, glorify martyrdom, and frame regional conflicts as battles between justice and imperialism.

This media presence is critical to its psychological operations and helps cultivate domestic and international support. The group's ability to manage its image has been crucial in countering accusations of extremism and terrorism.

13. Comparative Analysis: Hezbollah vs Other Non-State Actors

Hezbollah is often compared to other non-state actors such as Hamas, the Houthis, and the Taliban. However, its integration into Lebanon's political system, combined with its military sophistication and foreign alliances, sets it apart.

Unlike most militias, Hezbollah participates in elections, holds cabinet positions, and manages civilian infrastructure. Its model of "hybrid governance" offers insights into the future of militant political movements in fragile states.

14. Conclusion

Hezbollah exemplifies the complexity of hybrid non-state actors in modern politics. Its evolution from a guerrilla movement into a political institution underscores its adaptability and resilience. Balancing ideology with pragmatism, Hezbollah has entrenched itself in Lebanon's sectarian system while expanding its regional influence.

The group's identity remains fluid—oscillating between resistance and governance, religious devotion and political maneuvering. As Lebanon confronts economic collapse, regional instability, and external pressure, Hezbollah's role will remain pivotal, if not controversial.

The future of Hezbollah will depend on its ability to address domestic discontent, redefine its regional strategy, and reconcile its military ambitions with the aspirations of a deeply divided Lebanese society.

15. References

- 1)Alagha, J. E. *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology: Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*, Isim Dissertations. Leiden: Amsterdam University Press, 2006.
- 2)Brynen, R. *Sanctuary and Survival: The PLO in Lebanon*. London: Pinter Publishers, 1990.
- 3)Harik, J. P. *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.
- 4)Karam, K. "Post-Syria Lebanon: Internal and External Determinants of a Crisis". *The International Spectator* 41, no. 2 (2006): 51–68.
- 5)Norton, A. R. *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- 6)Norton, A. R. "The Peacekeeping Challenge in Lebanon". *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (2006): 76–9 <http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/mitejmes/>
- 7)Norton, A. R. "Hizballah and the Israeli Withdrawal from Lebanon". *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30,no. 1 (2000): 22–35.
- 8)Norton, A. R. "Lebanon after Al-Ta'if: Is the Civil War Over?". *Middle East Journal* 45, no. 3(1991): 457–73.
- 9)Peraino, K. "Barak's View" (interview with Ehud Barak on Lebanon crisis), *Newsweek*, 18 July 2006
- 10)Petran, T. *The Struggle over Lebanon*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1987.
- 11)Qassem, N. *Hizbullah: The Story from Within*. London: Saqi, 2005.
- 12)Rougier, B. *Everyday Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam among Palestinians in Lebanon*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- 13)Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2004.
- 14)Alagha, Joseph. "The Prominence of Hizbullah's Political Ideology." In *The Shifts in Hizbullah's Ideology Religious Ideology, Political Ideology, and Political Program*, 145. Amsterdam University Press, n.d..