

# Lebanon

## Where next for Hezbollah: resistance or reform?

Bassel F. Salloukh

Hezbollah has been haunted by questions of legitimacy since its arrival on the Lebanese scene on 16 February 1985 with its “Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World”. Viewed by many domestic Lebanese actors, and also by the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia, as nothing more than a proxy of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the party has struggled to prove its Lebanese credentials. Unlike most other wartime militias demobilised and disarmed after the 1989 Taif Agreement, the party retained its weapons arsenal in the name of liberating Lebanese territory under Israeli occupation.

This article examines the evolution of Hezbollah’s role as a Lebanese political and social actor that maintains significant independent military capability, exploring its legitimacy as it has evolved and responded to internal and external events. It reviews Hezbollah’s origins and stance toward the Lebanese confessional political system, and surveys its domestic and geopolitical mutations as it transformed itself from a fiery revolutionary party to one of Lebanon’s principal domestic actors. The article closes by discussing the internal and external conundrums for Hezbollah after the 2006 war with Israel and its 2013 intervention in the Syrian conflict.

### Hezbollah and the Lebanese confessional system

Hezbollah emerged in the aftermath of Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Party members alienated from Nabih Berri’s Shia Amal Movement joined cadres from other Islamist Shia groups to form Hezbollah under the IRGC’s direct ideological and military supervision. The party embraced the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the jurists), which meant, theoretically at least, that its ultimate allegiance was to Iran’s Supreme Leader. Moreover, the 1985 Open Letter pledged the creation of an Islamic state in Lebanon, a provision that contradicted the country’s confessional political system based on a consociational power-sharing arrangement.

Hezbollah spent the civil war years resisting Israel’s occupation of south Lebanon and battling Iran’s enemies. The party’s relentless attacks against Israeli troops in the south played an instrumental role in forcing Israel’s partial withdrawal south of the Litani River in 1985. Hezbollah was also accused of a number of alleged terrorist operations against Western targets carried out by the shadowy Islamic Jihad Organisation.

“**Damascus granted Hezbollah monopoly over the armed resistance to Israel, and the party accommodated Syria’s use of the resistance to serve its own geopolitical calculations and diplomacy in any prospective Arab-Israeli peace negotiations”**

The end of the war in Lebanon in 1989 coincided with the victory of the moderate camp in Iran and then Hezbollah’s associated leadership change in Beirut, as the pragmatic Abbas al-Musawi replaced the dogmatic Soubhi al-Tufaili



as Hezbollah Secretary-General. Hezbollah acquiesced to Syria's control of post-war Lebanon. Damascus granted Hezbollah monopoly over the armed resistance to Israel, and the party accommodated Syria's use of the resistance to serve its own geopolitical calculations and diplomacy in any prospective Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.

Hezbollah initially rejected the 1989 Taif Agreement, claiming that it simply consecrated the very confessional state that the party had condemned as unjust and sought to replace with an Islamic order. But it later decided to enter

Lebanese politics by contesting the 1992 parliamentary elections. In fact the party demonstrated a high level of political pragmatism in the post-war era, negotiating a number of apparently counterintuitive cross-ideological and cross-sectarian electoral alliances to secure its share of parliamentary seats.

In tandem with its efforts to bolster its domestic political legitimacy, Hezbollah worked assiduously to cultivate its social legitimacy, primarily among its core Shia constituency. The party deployed a complex corporatist

institutional structure that penetrated and mobilised Shia communities in the south, the Ba'albak-Hermel region in the Beqaa, and Beirut's southern suburbs. These institutions offered an array of social welfare provisions that included health care, education, financial assistance, extracurricular activities, the rebuilding of houses destroyed in multiple wars with Israel, and special care to the families of the party's martyrs. They also served to disseminate and consolidate Hezbollah's ideological hegemony among its followers as it cultivated a loyal "resistance society" (*mujtama' al-muqawama*).

## Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon

Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon on 24 May 2000 created a number of domestic and strategic conundrums for Hezbollah. How could it continue to justify the utility of its sophisticated weapons arsenal to the Lebanese public? But equally, how was it supposed to protect itself from Israeli reprisals and continue to serve Syria and Iran's geopolitical interests unarmed?

Hezbollah, supported by then pro-Syrian Lebanese President Emile Lahoud, insisted that Israel had not withdrawn from a strip of occupied land including the Kfar-Shouba Heights and the contested Shebaa Farms – a contention that is not without merit nor documentation. Moreover, Hezbollah now added new provisos to justify its weapons: the release of Lebanese prisoners in Israeli jails, as well as the return of the remains of all dead fighters. Hezbollah could now keep its weapons under the umbrella of the Lebanese government, and its operations in the Shebaa Farms were a convenient reminder of Syria's indispensable role in any negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri on 14 February 2005 was a watershed event for Hezbollah. It unleashed an overlapping domestic and external contest over the post-Syrian Lebanese state between two camps: on the one hand, the anti-Syrian 14 March coalition led by Saad Hariri and his mainly Sunni Future Movement, supported by the US and Saudi Arabia; and, on the other, the 8 March coalition composed principally of Hezbollah, Berri's Amal Movement, and Michel Aoun's Maronite Free Patriotic Movement, supported by Syria and Iran.

Enjoying substantial domestic and regional popularity after Israel's withdrawal, Hezbollah had hitherto maintained a solid parliamentary bloc but had opted to stay outside executive power. After Hariri's assassination it assumed a leadership role in the battle over post-Syria Lebanon. It participated in Fouad Siniora's cabinet formed on 19 July 2005, and was soon engrossed in the quagmire of Lebanon's sectarian politics.

Hezbollah swiftly found itself on a collision course with Siniora's 14 March-dominated government, especially over the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1559 of 2 September 2004, which mandated the "disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias", primarily in reference to Hezbollah's weapons arsenal. The party also resisted all efforts by 14 March to move Lebanon away from the Iranian-Syrian camp toward the US-Saudi one.

The Memorandum of Understanding signed by Hezbollah and Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement on 6 February 2006 sought to break Hezbollah's growing political isolation and shore up its domestic legitimacy outside its core Shia constituency. The party's alliance with Syria's erstwhile nemesis, an uncompromising advocate of Lebanese independence, was aimed at bolstering its national credentials and counterbalancing the Saudi-backed and Sunni-dominated 14 March coalition.

Similar calculations convinced Hezbollah to participate in the National Dialogue sessions inaugurated on 2 March 2006 between Lebanon's principal political factions and aimed primarily at devising a national defence strategy. The participants acknowledged that the Shebaa Farms were Lebanese territory under Israeli occupation, thus sanctioning Hezbollah's continued role as a legitimate armed resistance. However they failed to reach agreement on how best to disarm Hezbollah in the context of a viable national defence strategy. While Hezbollah's opponents argued for bringing the party's military structure under the command of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), Hezbollah reasoned that not only would this invite the destruction of the LAF in any war with Israel, it would also deny the resistance the autonomy to protect its cadres and the agility to engage Israel in asymmetric warfare.

## The 2006 war

The July-August 2006 war with Israel proved the validity of Hezbollah's contention about the LAF, but raised new questions about the party's monopoly over decisions pertaining to war and peace in Lebanon. The party had miscalculated Israel's response to the abduction of soldiers along the Lebanese-Israeli border, leading to much death and destruction, especially for its own core Shia constituency. Hezbollah's military capabilities to resist Israel's attacks stunned its domestic supporters and opponents alike, and its swift mobilisation of a Herculean reconstruction effort demonstrated its commitment to its "resistance society".

Nevertheless the resulting sense of invincibility unleashed some unruly practices inside and outside the southern



Hezbollah supporters work at the group's electoral office in the southern town of Nabatiyah on 5 June 2009. © Mahmud Zayat/AFP/Getty Images

suburbs that sullied the party's hitherto untarnished image. Similarly, growing consumerism and clientelism among some middle-level party cadres exposed Hezbollah to serious criticism even from within the Shia community.

The party would not compromise on its weapons arsenal, however, and snubbed all attempts to limit its operational autonomy after the 2006 war. The 14 March Alliance insisted that UNSCR 1701, adopted in August 2006 to call for an end to hostilities between Hezbollah and Israel, banned Hezbollah's military presence south of the Litani River. However, the party interpreted the resolution as referring only to visible military installations and movements. In fact, Hezbollah went on to replenish and expand its weapons arsenal after the war, further rebranding its strategic utility for Lebanon's defence.

The stand-off between Hezbollah and 14 March peaked when all five Shia ministers resigned from the Siniora government on 11 November 2006, protesting against his unilateral decision to table draft by-laws for a proposed international court to investigate the Hariri assassination. When the Siniora government passed the by-laws on 13 November 2006 despite the absence of all Shia ministers, Hezbollah responded by organising a massive sit-in in Beirut's central district that began on 1 December 2006 and lasted uninterrupted for 18 months. Hezbollah was determined to paralyse the Siniora government and deny it any semblance of domestic legitimacy.

The political deadlock that predated the 2006 war, overlapping with a grander geopolitical regional contest between Tehran and Riyadh, climaxed in May 2008 when Hezbollah, supported by the Amal Movement and other pro-Syrian militias, undertook a lightning military operation to occupy West Beirut and decimate the Future Movement's skeletal military structure.

The trigger for this astonishing offensive was the Siniora government's 5 May 2008 decision to consider Hezbollah's clandestine telecommunications network illegal, a charge akin to declaring the party an outlawed militia. It was the first time in post-war Lebanon that Hezbollah turned its firepower and military expertise inwards, against fellow Lebanese, despite frequent promises by the party's leadership that its weapons were aimed solely at Israel.

The Qatari-negotiated 21 May 2008 Doha Accord temporarily resolved the political stand-off between the 8 and 14 March coalitions, but it was unable to heal the sectarian scar created by Hezbollah's military takeover of West Beirut. For at least half of Lebanon and a substantial cross-section of the country's Sunni community, Hezbollah's weapons were now nothing more than the firepower of an illegitimate militia. In contrast, the other half of the country, and especially most Shia Lebanese, saw Hezbollah's military operation in West Beirut as a tactical pre-emptive strike aimed at eliminating potential military threats in the party's own security environment.

Hezbollah later unfolded its Political Document of 30 November 2009 in part to restore a measure of domestic legitimacy and consent around its military capability. It now formally accepted the confessional political system it had condemned in the 1985 Open Letter, underscoring the post-Taif veto power enjoyed by the three main sectarian communities in government formation and cabinet decision-making. Moreover, Hezbollah insisted that its arms were part of a trinity responsible for deterring any future Israeli attacks that also included the LAF and the Lebanese population – a doctrine labelled *al-jaysh, al-sha'b, al-moqawama* (the army, the people, the resistance). Combined, the consociational proviso and deterrence posture guaranteed the party veto power on future deliberations pertaining to a national defence strategy, Hezbollah's role in it, and the modalities of any prospective demobilisation and disarmament.

### Crossing the Syrian Rubicon

Hezbollah had just engineered the resignation of Saad Hariri's cabinet and formed the 8 March-dominated government of Prime Minister Najib Mikati in 2011 when the popular uprising began in Syria. The uprising's mutation into an overlapping domestic and regional struggle has since jeopardised the party's geopolitical environment.

Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria, most notably in the Qusayr battle in April 2013, damaged the party's domestic legitimacy and reopened the debate over its weapons. The party leadership invested much time and effort explaining the strategic significance of its Syrian intervention, namely pre-empting a Salafi-jihadi attack against its strongholds in the Beqaa and securing its logistic and supply lines through the Syrian hinterland. It also branded the battle as one against the US, Israel and Salafi-jihadi fighters rather than the Syrian people and their democratic aspirations.

Ignoring their own proxy roles in the service of Riyadh's regional objectives in Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah's domestic opponents – especially the Future Movement – argued that the party's military intervention in Syria proved that the main utility of its weapons was to protect Iran's external agenda rather than Lebanon's safety from Israeli aggression. In their efforts to demonise the party, 14 March and Riyadh labelled Hezbollah's intervention in Syria a Shia "invasion" orchestrated by Iran to shore up the beleaguered 'Alawi regime in Damascus and protect Tehran's strategic interests.

The Future Movement, at Saudi Arabia's behest, publicly voiced its opposition to the once magic formula of *al-jaysh, al-sha'b, al-moqawama*. Even some elements from within the Shia community raised concerns over the party's Syrian

adventure, fearing that it would strain sectarian relations in Lebanon and adversely affect the economic fortunes of Lebanese Shia diaspora communities. Riyadh expressed its anger at Hezbollah's Syrian involvement by placing a veto over the party's participation in a future Lebanese government. This has left the country in a state of executive paralysis as Hezbollah has blocked any attempt to form a new cabinet in which it is not represented.

**“ Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria, most notably in the Qusayr battle in April 2013, damaged the party's domestic legitimacy and reopened the debate over its weapons”**

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria underscored the extent to which the conundrum of its weapons arsenal goes beyond the contours of a domestic political and coercive actor searching for legitimacy in a post-war order. It is also part of a larger geopolitical battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran over regional supremacy unleashed in the aftermath of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. From this perspective, Lebanon is simply a site, and Lebanese actors proxy players, in this grand regional confrontation.

Nor is Hezbollah perturbed by the decision of the European Union (and before it the US) to designate the party's military wing a terrorist organisation. In fact, such impositions carry little weight in Hezbollah's calculations, except to harden the party's and its supporters' perception of the international community's double standards and injustice.

The debate over the legitimacy and future of Hezbollah as an independent armed actor is tied to both domestic and exogenous factors. Only a grand bargain involving the main regional and international actors – especially Iran, Saudi Arabia, the US, Russia and Israel – can allow for Hezbollah's consensual disarmament, the integration of its military wing into the LAF and the party's transformation into a non-coercive Lebanese political actor, and thus pave the way for a durable post-war peace in Lebanon.

---

Bassel F. Salloukh is Associate Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences and Associate Professor of Political Science at the Lebanese American University. He is author, co-author, and co-editor of a number of books, chapters, and journal articles on Arab politics, Lebanon, Syria, Hezbollah, and Middle East geopolitics.