



Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism  
اسلام کے تقابلیاتی اور کوانٹریٹوریزم

# Hezbollah's Evolution: From Lebanese Militia to Regional Player

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## Summary:

Starting as a revolutionary Shiite militia, the Hezbollah of today dominates the political and military landscape of Lebanon, and possesses tens of thousands of trained fighters as well as an array of sophisticated armaments. Its intervention in Syria on the side of Bashar al-Assad has expanded its influence and reach in the region. As the war in Syria comes to a close, the risk of conflict between Hezbollah and Israel could increase, particularly over the future of the Golan Heights. But the mutual deterrence between the two foes remains strong for the time being. The United States is searching for strategies to limit the power of Iran's Lebanese proxy, but given the group's deep immersion within Lebanon's political, economic, and social milieu, the number of realistic options for external powers to weaken Hezbollah or persuade it to forsake its armed wing are minimal.

## Key Findings:

- Hezbollah is driven by a three-pronged ideology: establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon (which remains an aspiration but not a current practical policy goal), opposing the existence of Israel, and following the Islamic Republic's doctrine of wilayat al-faqih.
- In the past decade, Hezbollah has expanded its role in Lebanon and the region, asserting its "resistance priority" against Israel and the West. After building experience and capacity in Syria, Hezbollah now poses a significant threat to Israel.
- The future role of Hezbollah in Syria remains to be seen: Hezbollah will likely remain a fighting force in the ongoing conflict, but afterwards could shift to helping train Syrian forces, or pull out entirely to focus on its Lebanese base.
- Despite its military prowess and influence in Lebanon, Hezbollah faces domestic challenges, including a potential financial shortage, and growing internal corruption.
- Hezbollah is deeply embedded within the socio-political structures of Lebanon. External attempts to weaken Hezbollah could trigger dangerous destabilization of the Lebanese state.

## PART 1: Drivers, Dynamics and Impacts

### External Influences

Hezbollah's primary external patron is the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and Israel's invasion of Lebanon three years later, paved the way for collaboration between Tehran and Lebanese Shiite activists who followed the teachings of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (I.R.G.C.) deployed to Lebanon and helped build an anti-Israel resistance movement that became Hezbollah. Iran provides financing and weapons to Hezbollah as well as strategic guidance while often leaving tactical implementation to its Lebanese ally.

A second external influence on Hezbollah is Syria, although the dynamics of that relationship have changed significantly in the past 17 years. Al-Asad, the former president of Syria viewed Hezbollah little more than a useful means to pressure in south Lebanon during the non-off Middle East peace negotiations in the 1990s. Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father in July 2000, had a warmer relationship with Hezbollah, allowing

the party to gain more influence in Lebanon. Syria also for the first time became an important source of armaments for Hezbollah. Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria from 2012 to assist the Assad regime against the armed opposition has placed the Lebanese party on a partnership footing with Damascus, a significant shift from the subordinate role it played under the rule of Hafez al-Assad.

## Ideology

Hezbollah is a militant jihadist Islamist organization and follows three fundamental visions. The first is the establishment of an Islamic state in Lebanon, as called for in Hezbollah's "Open Letter" manifesto released in February 1985. However, Hezbollah's leaders have acknowledged that Lebanon's pluralistic nature weighs against this occurring in the near future and they have consistently said the party will not impose such a system of governance on the country. The second is the pursuit of jihad. This includes the "greater jihad," which is the daily spiritual struggle within the carnal soul to overcome the vices and temptations of the human condition to achieve divine knowledge, spiritual harmony, and love. Adhering to the "greater jihad" then paves the way for pursuing the "lesser jihad," which is split into "offensive" and "defensive" jihads. The former permits Muslims to invade other countries and subjugate their citizens with the justification that Islam is the one true religion.

"Defensive jihad," as the name suggests, obliges Muslims to defend their homeland and people from external aggression. Hezbollah's resistance campaign in the 1980s and 1990s against the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon and its current posture toward the Jewish state are justified under the rubric of "defensive jihad." The third basic vision is submission to the *wilayat al-faqih*, or rule of the jurisprudent, a model of governance for an Islamic state that was articulated by Khomeini. In Shiism, senior clerics, known as *marjaa e-taqleed*, or sources of guidance and imitation, advise Muslims on how to accurately follow Islamic teachings, but they eschew roles in politics and governance. The concept of the *wilayat al-faqih*, however, maintains that a chosen ultimate source of religious learning should be responsible not only for administering Islamic behavior, but also for defining the general politics of a nation.

According to Khomeini, "If you were able to understand the essence of religion in this Islamic culture of ours, you would clearly see no distinction between religious and political leadership and moreover it would become apparent that political strife is an integral part of religious duty. Leading such political strife and steering it in the right direction is thus an element of a religious leader's functional responsibilities."<sup>1</sup>

Although the *wali al-faqih*, currently embodied by Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, is the supreme leader of Iran, his authority extends to all Muslims that adhere to the *wilayat al-faqih*, which includes Hezbollah. For Hezbollah, the *wali al-faqih* is the party's overseer whose knowledge of Islam is unsurpassed and whose rulings must be obeyed. In practical terms, the *wali al-faqih* will set the strategy (e.g. resisting Israel's occupation of south Lebanon) while leaving Hezbollah to determine the tactics to achieve the strategic goal.

## Financing

Iran is the principle external financial backer of Hezbollah, a long-understood fact that was confirmed for the first time by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in June 2016. "We are open about the fact that Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, are from the Islamic Republic of Iran," he said in a speech. Estimates of Iranian funding of Hezbollah vary widely from \$50 million a year,<sup>2</sup> to \$100 million a year,<sup>3</sup> to \$200 million a year,<sup>4</sup> to \$60 million a month (with an additional \$40 million a month coming from Hezbollah's own global sources of revenue.<sup>5</sup>) Given the downturn in oil prices since 2014 and Hezbollah's own extensive sources of income, Tehran's contribution to Hezbollah's treasury could be at the lower end of the estimates.

Hezbollah long ago diversified its streams so as not to be revenue wholly reliant on Tehran. It takes advantage of the Lebanese diaspora, particularly in and South America, to build both legitimate and illegitimate commercial supporters. Hezbollah's reliance on its own global financial resources has steadily grown, particularly in recent years with a downturn in oil prices and a sanctions regime on Iran that has had a negative impact on the Iranian economy and led to a decrease in annual funding. Despite the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (J.C.P.O.A.) agreed upon in 2015, there does not appear to have been a significant increase in funding from Iran to enterprises as well as to receive Islamic charitable donations of *zakat* and *khoms* from its Hezbollah. Furthermore, in recent years the United States has tightened the financial screws on Hezbollah by sanctioning individuals or entities that have any financial dealings with the party.

## Recruitment and Training

Hezbollah aspires to be more than just a political party or a military organization. Since its inception in the early 1980s, Hezbollah has sought to build a "culture of resistance" within Lebanon's Shiite community a self-sustaining, generational mode of thought and behavior that embraces the notion of resistance and steadfastness against a predatory Israel and Western ambitions in the Middle East.

Young Shiites are raised in environments that venerate Hezbollah and are surrounded by the party's motifs of flags, banners and pictures of martyrs on neighborhood walls. Youths of five- or six-years-old are encouraged to join martial parades to commemorate the annual al-Yom al-Quds (Jerusalem Day) and join Hezbollah's Mahdi Scouts where they receive elementary religious lessons and an introduction to light military training at summer camps in south Lebanon. Having been raised in such an atmosphere, fully joining the party at 18 years old the traditionally required age to engage in combat is often a natural progression. Hezbollah's recruitment process is an arduous and thorough undertaking often lasting months, blending religious education and military training along with an initial detailed security assessment of each recruit.

The first phase of recruitment involves extensive religious and doctrinal lessons known as *tahdirat* or "preparation," where candidates learn the ideological foundations of Hezbollah. They are taught the concept of the *wilayat al-faqih* and the importance of the "greater" and "lesser" jihads, and how they are channeled into enmity toward Israel. The students also learn the culture of martyrdom and its importance within Shiite doctrine. They are taught that advances in understanding the "greater jihad" will bring the mujahid, or holy struggler, closer to God and remove the human fear of death. Martyrdom is considered by Hezbollah as the ultimate expression of self-sacrifice and demonstration of faith in God.

The basic military training usually takes place in camps in the Bekaa Valley in east Lebanon. Basic training includes improving fitness and endurance through forced marches across mountains with heavy backpacks, and often sleeping out in the open regardless of weather conditions. They learn navigation with compass, maps, G.P.S. systems, and reconnaissance and surveillance. The recruits are taught basic weapons drills with automatic rifles, light machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades, as well as small unit tactics in keeping with traditional doctrine against the Israel Defense Force (I.D.F.). In the past decade, Hezbollah has also introduced urban warfare training. There are several small-scale urban warfare training facilities at camps in the Bekaa Valley, most of them consisting of two parallel rows of roofless single-story cinder block buildings emulating an Israeli-style street. The urban warfare training and at least one propaganda video from 2014 suggest that the facilities are intended to train combatants to stage cross-border raids into Israel in the event of another war.<sup>6</sup>

There is also at least one urban warfare site that features a collection of multi-floor buildings clustered around a “mosque” and a “water tower” that resembles an Arab-style village, and may be used with the Syrian theater in mind. Once basic training is complete, fighters can elect (or are sometimes encouraged) to pursue a specialized skill, such as artillery rockets, sniping, or anti-tank missiles. Iran is the main venue for advanced training, such as the 90- day course for recruits into Hezbollah special forces units, as well as training in amphibious warfare techniques and handling more sophisticated and larger weapons systems such as anti-tank missiles, air defense systems, and sub-ballistic artillery missiles.

### **Role and Dynamics in Lebanon**

Hezbollah’s core goal is to preserve the military component of the organization, which it calls its “resistance priority.” All other facets of the organization the socio-economic welfare programs, the parliamentary presence, the role in government are designed to buttress and protect the “resistance priority.” Prior to 2005, Hezbollah’s armed status was guaranteed under Syrian fiat. While Hezbollah maintained a small presence in parliament, it had not sought nor was it asked to join any of the post-Lebanese civil war governments. However, since Syria withdrew its troops in the wake of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005, Hezbollah has had to play a more engaged role in domestic politics to safeguard its core interests. From 2005, the fate of Hezbollah’s weapons lay at the heart of the schism between the Western- and Saudi-backed March 14 parliamentary coalition and the Syria- and Iran-backed March 8 coalition.

The climactic moment came in May 2008 when Hezbollah deployed its armed forces into the western half of Beirut in response to the then government’s decision to shut down Hezbollah’s private telecommunications network. Several days of fighting ended with Qatari intervention, which mediated a political agreement among the feuding parties. The lesson of the May 2008 crisis was that Hezbollah indubitably holds the balance of political and military power in the country, and is prepared to use force if sufficiently threatened. The Lebanese Armed Forces (L.A.F.) stood on the sidelines as Hezbollah men and their allies overran west Beirut, unwilling to risk enflaming the situation further by tackling the powerful militia head on. And the government, humiliatingly, was forced to rescind its earlier decisions that had triggered Hezbollah’s armed response in the first place.

The domestic political process since 2008 has been beset by successive waves of paralysis and stalemate. Hezbollah’s opponents have come to accept that they have little leverage against a party that carries with it an implicit threat of violence if its interests are challenged. Hezbollah’s grip on Lebanon is unlikely to change significantly for the foreseeable future, especially with Christian ally Michel Aoun as president and the effective collapse of the March 14-March 8 paradigm that shaped post-2005 politics.

However, the biggest evolution undergone by Hezbollah in recent years is in the military realm. Since the 2006 war, Hezbollah has grown enormously in terms of manpower, weaponry and equipment. It has an army numbering in excess of 20,000 fully-trained combatants, many of them hardened by battle in Syria, along with tens of thousands more part-time reservists. It reportedly possesses more than 100,000 rockets and missiles, including sub-ballistic guided missiles fitted with 1,100-pound warheads, as well as advanced air defense systems, anti-ship missiles and a fleet of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (U.A.V.s), some of them possibly combat-capable. Hezbollah’s military includes a large special forces unit, a signals intelligence (SIGINT) unit, and an amphibious warfare unit, potentially equipped with Swimmer Dispersal Vehicles and semi-submersible craft. In Syria, it operates an armored “brigade” consisting of armored personnel carriers, tanks, and mobile anti-aircraft systems used in a ground support role.

Many of the lessons Hezbollah has learned in Syria will not be relevant in the context of a future war with Israel. Hezbollah will not be fielding armored vehicles against the I.D.F. nor calling in airstrikes. But Hezbollah has benefitted from combat experience in a multitude of geographical environments, and it has also learned improved fire and maneuver tactics as well as how to utilize reconnaissance and intelligence data to develop more complex operations. Hezbollah's lessons learned in Syria sit uncomfortably with Israel. The Syria experience, as well as the acquisition of advanced weaponry over the past 10 years, has turned Hezbollah into "currently the gravest military threat facing Israel," according to Israel's influential Institute for National Security Studies in its annual strategic assessment for 2017.<sup>7</sup>

## **New Role and Future in Syria**

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria is its greatest military undertaking, larger in scale than even its resistance campaign against Israeli troops occupying south Lebanon in the 1990s. An estimated average of 8,000 fighters serve in Syria at any one time with the numbers fluctuating according to operational needs. The party has played a key role in preserving the Assad regime. In general, Hezbollah is employed as the spearhead in new offensives because of its advanced training, cohesion, and discipline compared to other pro-regime forces in Syria. Beyond a direct combat role, Hezbollah engages in corseting operations with other units to stiffen their backbone and deploys non-commissioned officer (N.C.O.) equivalents to command other militia units such as those belonging to Liwa Fatemiyoun, the Afghani volunteer force, and Liwa Zeinabiyoun, the Pakistani volunteer force. Hezbollah also plays an important force-multiplier role by training new trainers as well as regular recruits. At a command level, Hezbollah officers work alongside senior I.R.G.C. and Syrian army staff to devise operational planning.

Hezbollah justifies its intervention on two basic levels. The first, according to Nasrallah, is that the war in Syria was a "political project" of the United States for the interests of Israel. Syria under Assad represents the "backbone of the resistance" and its fall would weaken the anti-Israel front and mark the loss of the Palestinian cause. "The resistance cannot remain idly by while its back is exposed or its support broken," Nasrallah said on May 25, 2013, in which he first confirmed Hezbollah's presence in Syria.

The second reason is the threat posed by the rise of Sunni extremist groups in Syria such as ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to whom Hezbollah ascribes the term "*takfiri*," meaning radicals who view as apostates all those that do not share their austere interpretation of Islam. As of mid-2017, with the war in Syria having entered its seventh year, the Assad regime appears to be gaining the upper hand in a conflict that has left more than 400,000 dead and much of the country in ruins. The seizure of eastern Aleppo from rebel hands in late 2016, and successive cease-fire arrangements between the regime and rebels has pacified much of western Syria, the main battleground for most of the war. Attention has turned to regaining eastern Syria from ISIS and denying U.S.-supported militia elements a toehold. As of October 2017, Hezbollah is playing a major role in the push to retake the Deir Ezzor region and the Euphrates River valley to Abu Kamal on the Syria-Iraq border. With these fierce battles ahead, there is little prospect of Hezbollah its forces from withdrawing anytime soon. In Syria, even if there is a resolution to the conflict. Iran and Hezbollah have a strategic interest in maintaining a presence in the Golan Heights opposite Israeli lines. In 2014, Hezbollah began work on a defensive infrastructure in the northern Golan that had little to do with the current conflict against the anti-Assad opposition, and more to do with potential future operations against Israel.

On January 18, 2015, a team of Hezbollah operatives and an I.R.G.C. general were touring the completed facilities, according to a source close to Hezbollah, when they were attacked by a pair of missile-firing Israeli U.A.V.s just north of Quneitra. The I.R.G.C. general and six Hezbollah men, including two senior cadres, were killed in the attack.

Israel is aware of Iranian and Hezbollah ambitions for the Golan and has their presence on the strategic heights as “Red Line”. Presently, Iranian and Hezbollah forces are said to be observing a 10-15-kilometer buffer zone in the Golan, but Russia has rejected Israeli demands that the zone be expanded to 40 kilometers.<sup>8</sup> However, in the longer term, it is unclear whether Russia will or can persuade or pressure Iran to back away from its Golan agenda. If the conflict in Syria begins to fade, the Golan could become the next theater of confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel.

A second potential role for Hezbollah in a future Syria is to use its training skills to help rebuild the Syrian army and security forces in the post-war era. The Syrian army traditionally was schooled in Soviet military doctrine with an emphasis on swift mass armored assaults. Given that Israel remains Syria’s greatest external enemy, Damascus lacks the resources to build a conventional army that poses a serious threat to the I.D.F. Furthermore, the Syrian army proved ill-suited to confront the challenge posed by rebel groups when the street protests morphed into armed conflict in late 2011. What may transpire instead in Syria is a leaner and more mobile army that adopts some of Hezbollah’s hybrid-warfare doctrine with more emphasis on anti-tank missiles, air defense systems, and surface-to-surface rockets than on tanks and aircraft. Such a development could potentially pose more of a challenge to the I.D.F. than would a restored conventional force. The level of influence Russia would bring to bear in the creation of a new Syrian military is unclear, although Moscow’s main priority could be ensuring it secures lucrative deals to arm and equip the new force. If Syria chooses to adopt this path, Hezbollah will be well-placed to help train the new Syrian army.

## **Roles in Iraq and Yemen**

While Syria remains Hezbollah’s largest battlefield deployment outside the traditional theater with Israel, it also fields cadres in two other conflicts roiling the region—Iraq and Yemen. Hezbollah dispatched some 250 specialist cadres to Iraq in June 2014 in the wake of the seizure of Mosul by ISIS and subsequent advance toward Baghdad. The original team was composed of seasoned veterans and was responsible for advising, training and coordinating the Hashd Shaabi, the 130,000-strong coalition of government-sanctioned, Iran-backed Shiite militias. Hezbollah continues to maintain a limited presence in Iraq of perhaps no more than 500 personnel and its operational activity does not appear to have changed significantly since 2014 and is focused on the anti-ISIS campaign.

In Yemen, Hezbollah runs a covert training and support mission to assist Houthi militiamen battling a Saudi-led military coalition. Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015 in an attempt to restore to office the deposed Yemeni president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, and to defeat the Houthi forces that had overrun Sanaa six months earlier. The scale of Iranian (and therefore Hezbollah) support for the Houthis is disputed, although it is evident that there is some military assistance. Hezbollah’s presence in Yemen has not been publicly acknowledged by the party leadership, although the relationship between the organization and Ansarallah, the Houthi militia, is well known and dates from long before the current conflict. Ansarallah officials live and work in Beirut’s southern suburbs where Hezbollah is headquartered. Ansarallah fighters have received training at Hezbollah camps in the Bekaa Valley and Yemeni casualties are treated at Hezbollah-run hospitals in Beirut, according to several sources close to Hezbollah and Ansarallah officials.

## **Risk of Confrontation with Israel**

The new U.S. administration of resident Donald Trump has signaled a tougher stance against Iran and a determination to roll back the Islamic Republic’s influence across the Middle East. On October 13, Trump refused to re-certify Iranian compliance with the J.C.P.O.A agreement handing Congress a 60-day window

to decide whether to maintain or abandon the 2015 deal. Two weeks later, Congress voted for a new sanction on Iran's ballistic missile program. On October 10, slapped ransom totaling \$12 million on two Hezbollah commanders and Congress is widely expected before the end of the year to tighten existing restrictions on fundraising for Hezbollah.

The heightened moves against Iran and Hezbollah, coupled with repeated threats from Israel, have sent jitters running through Lebanon that a new war between Hezbollah and Israel could be imminent. In February, shortly after Trump took office, Nasrallah sought to bolster his party's deterrence posture by warning Israel that there would be no "red lines" in the next war, and threatened to strike Israel's nuclear reactor in Dimona and the ammonia plants in Haifa if Israel attacks Lebanon. On June 23, Nasrallah additionally warned that a war with Israel could "open the way for thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of fighters from all over the Arab and Islamic world to participate— from Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan."

The choice of countries used to illustrate his warning was deliberate. Shiite volunteers from all five countries are fighting, or have fought, in Syria under the aegis of the I.R.G.C. to uphold the Assad regime. The inconclusive end to the 2006 war has long fueled expectations of a "second round." However, the "balance of terror" that exists between Hezbollah and Israel is still fundamentally strong. Both parties know that the next war will be of an order of magnitude that will completely dwarf the 2006 conflict, a grim reality that has helped ensure a mutual deterrence. Both sides repeatedly say that they do not want a war and the deterrence factor remains strong, but there remains the risk of miscalculation by one side or the other. Israel has been the more assertive party in recent years, staging assassinations of Hezbollah personnel and airstrikes against the group's suspected arms depots or convoys located in Syria.

When Hezbollah has left compelled to respond to an Israeli action, it been carefully to tailor had reprisal to deliver a slap to Israel but not so hard as to upset "the balance of terror". Until recently, Israel's airstrikes against Hezbollah armaments in Syria have either been protested verbally by Damascus or ignored. But on March 16, when Israeli jets targeted a Hezbollah arms convoy near Palmyra in central Syria, several SA-5 anti-aircraft missiles were fired at the departing aircraft. It was the first time that Syria has reacted militarily to the airstrikes. Israel promises it will continue to attack "game-changing" weapons when it identifies them, while a Syrian official said that the March 16 attack had "changed the rules of the game" and that Israel would "think a million times from now on" before staging more airstrikes.<sup>9</sup> Syria fired another SA-5 missile at Israeli aircraft flying over Lebanon in October. The missile missed its target and Israel bombed the air defense facility in reprisal. If another war does break out, it is likely to be the result of a miscalculation that quickly spirals out of control faster than either side can dial it back, rather than a planned unilateral and unprovoked attack by one side against the other.

### **Impacting State Stability in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yamen**

With the exception of Lebanon, Hezbollah is participating to a greater or lesser degree in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, where stability is practically non-existent. In these conflicts, Hezbollah is simply one of many moving parts and its impact on stability in each of these countries is negligible.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah's armed status lies at the root of the political divide of the past decade. Hezbollah's determination to maintain its armed status and its opponents' once equally determined efforts to see it disarmed have caused multiple political disputes that have stifled the legislative process, undermined the economy, aggravated sectarian tensions, and provoked sporadic violence. Lebanon also continues to live under the shadow of a devastating war with Israel due in part to Hezbollah's military strength, and the threat it poses to the Jewish state. However, Hezbollah has emerged from this struggle as the victor, having



witnessed the gradual dissolution of the March 14 parliamentary coalition, secured the election of its ally, Michel Aoun, as president, and compelled its chief opponent, Saad Hariri, into a compromise that saw him return as prime minister. From a domestic political perspective, Hezbollah faces little threat in the near-to-medium-term that could alter the status quo.

### **Impact on Regional Security**

The multiple conflicts in the Middle East in which Iran has influence have allowed Hezbollah to expand from the relatively limited purview of the Arab-Israeli conflict to become a regional actor. Its military assistance missions in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen present another component of Hezbollah's utility beyond direct combat, demonstrating its value as a force multiplier for Iran-backed or -allied groups across the region in service of Tehran's regional ambitions. For Hezbollah, the struggle against Israel remains paramount and at the heart of its "resistance" narrative and priority. But the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their respective allies, which has only intensified in the past decade, has created a new expanded regional role for the organization as an enabler of Iranian power projection across the Middle East.

### **Impact on the Rise of other Armed Non-State Actors**

Hezbollah's existence in itself has not triggered the emergence of other radical groups either supportive of Hezbollah, such as some Palestinian factions and Iraqi Shiite militias, or opposed to Hezbollah, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. However, as a powerful Shiite organization that is deeply engaged in Lebanese politics, the war in Syria, and conflicts in Iraq and Yemen, Hezbollah is considered an implacable enemy of radical Sunni Islamist groups.

In Lebanon, there have been few serious efforts among domestic Sunni Islamist actors to form militant cells or groups to directly tackle Hezbollah. Even the short-lived movement of Sheikh Ahmad Assir, a firebrand Salafist cleric from Sidon, posed no real threat to Hezbollah. Assir's movement was crushed in a two-day battle with Lebanese troops and local Hezbollah elements at his mosque complex in Abra, on the eastern outskirts of Sidon, in June 2013.<sup>10</sup> The fighting resulted in the deaths of 18 soldiers and between 25 and 40 of Assir's followers. Sunni reticence in Lebanon to tackle Hezbollah militarily is in part due to Hezbollah's military and political dominance, which serves as a deterrent, and in part due to the pervasive nature of Lebanon's intelligence and security services that have acted effectively to monitor and arrest radical Sunni individuals. Furthermore, Lebanon's Sunni community is generally passive in nature with a mercantile, rather than militant, tradition. Where Hezbollah has played a more direct role in the emergence of armed groups across the region is through the training of Iran-backed militias in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

### **Impact on Fueling Shiite- Sunni Sectarianism and Violent Extremism**

Lebanon's sectarian schism historically was between Christians and Muslims, but in the past decade it has shifted to an intra-Muslim split between Sunnis and Shiites with Christians navigating a path between the two.

Hezbollah's intervention in Syria has only enflamed those sectarian tensions further, alienating not just Lebanese Sunnis, but Sunnis across the region. The intervention triggered a backlash in Lebanon with dozens of rockets fired by Syrian militant groups into the Bekaa Valley from early 2013 and a wave of Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (V.B.I.E.D.) attacks and Suicide V.B.I.E.D.s between July 2013 and the end of June 2014, which left nearly 100 people dead and nearly 900 wounded. A twin suicide bomb blast in the Shiite-populated Bourj Barajneh neighborhood of southern Beirut in November 2015 killed 43 people and wounded 239, the largest loss of life in a single domestic bomb attack since the end of the

Lebanese civil war in 1990.

Most of the Suicide V.B.I.E.D's were claimed by extremist factions such as the then al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al- Nusra and the Lebanon based Abdullah al-Azaam Brigades. They made it clear in their statements that the attacks were a response to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria.

## **Part 2: Countering the Violent Transnational Movement**

(Responses and Scenarios)

*How can the external influence exerted by Iran on Hezbollah be weakened or influenced in a less destructive direction?*

There are no simple solutions in breaking the tight ideological, financial, and material links between Hezbollah and Iran. Hezbollah is Iran's greatest success in exporting the Islamic Revolution, and the Lebanese organization has proven itself a dependable and efficient partner in helping Tehran exert influence into the Middle East. There are few realistic options that can be pursued by the United States in the short- to mid-term that will break that partnership without risking destabilization that could impact U.S. interests and those of its allies in the region.

Options include resorting to force to effect regime change in Iran. But that would plunge the Middle East into even greater turmoil with few guarantees of a successful outcome.

Washington could choose to abandon the J.C.P.O.A. agreement and re-impose crippling sanctions to compel Iran to break ties with Hezbollah and reverse its reach into the region. But the other parties to the J.C.P.O.A. deal have sent clear signals that they will continue to honor the agreement, which would leave the US isolated among leading world powers in its anti-Iran stance. Furthermore, it could provoke a punishing backlash by Iran against U.S. interests in the Gulf and beyond.

*What can be done to moderate or confront Hezbollah's messaging and appeal in Lebanon and outside the country's borders?*

The extent of Hezbollah's popularity currently is being shaped by its own actions in Lebanon and elsewhere, and any external influence on the organization's messaging and appeal is unlikely to have much impact. In Lebanon, few citizens have indifferent feelings toward Hezbollah the Lebanese are split between supporters and opponents and their views are generally not susceptible to change.

Hezbollah's determination to maintain its "resistance priority" alienated a large segment of the Lebanese population from 2000 when Israel withdrew from south Lebanon. Across the Arab world, Hezbollah's popularity remained high, peaking in 2006 during the war with Israel, until its armed intervention in Syria was revealed in 2013. Since then, Hezbollah's popular standing in the MENA region has tumbled significantly and it is today reviled by most of the region's Sunnis. Even another war with Israel is unlikely to change that perception.

*What steps can be taken to impact the group's financial inflows and resources, as well as the inflow of arms and weapons?*

In December 2015, the United States passed the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act (HIFPA), which targets financial institutions found to knowingly facilitate a significant transaction on behalf of Hezbollah or anyone affiliated with or acting on its behalf.<sup>11</sup> HIFPA requires Lebanese banks to freeze the accounts of individuals and organizations named by the U.S. Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control. Failure to follow the order risks banks being sanctioned and cut off from accessing the U.S. financial

system, not only in Lebanon but internationally.

Hezbollah has denied using the Lebanese banking system. But it is concerned that an overly aggressive enforcement of HIFPA by Lebanese banks could backfire on the party's popularity if its supporters, perhaps people with only marginal associations with the party, have their bank accounts frozen.

In June 2016, a small bomb exploded beside the head office of BLOM Bank, one of Lebanon's leading banks that reportedly had been among the most diligent in adhering to HIFPA. There was no claim of responsibility although it was widely believed to have been a message from Hezbollah to the banking sector.

As of October, Congress is debating expanding HIFPA's reach to impede Hezbollah's fundraising capabilities with high expectations that new legislation will be passed before the end of the year. There is even speculation that Hezbollah-controlled regions of Lebanon could be designated under Section 311 of the Patriot Act as areas of "primary money laundering concern."<sup>12</sup> The targeted areas would presumably include the southern suburbs of Beirut, south Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley.

However, any tightening of financial measures against Hezbollah should be implemented in a manner that does not undermine Lebanon's fragile economy and the banking sector, which is the mainstay of Lebanon's financial stability. Hezbollah is deeply immersed within Lebanese political and commercial society, which greatly complicates creating a sanctions campaign that targets in isolation associations, companies, and individuals that may have dealings with the organization. For example, the Rassoul al-Azzam hospital in southern Beirut is a Hezbollah-run institution that provides health services, often discounted, to the local community. But the hospital, like any other in Lebanon, has dealings with non-Hezbollah entities, including the Lebanese government through the ministries of health and social affairs.

Hezbollah's social-welfare services are vast and include hospitals, schools, clinics, social centers, and charitable institutions, all of which could potentially be threatened by a reinforced HIFPA or separate legislation, with consequent repercussions on employees and beneficiaries. Additional anti-Hezbollah financing legislation, if intensely enforced, could induce a lack of confidence in the Lebanese banking sector, precipitating both capital flight from banks and a reduction in overseas remittances which amount to more than \$7 billion a year from expatriate Lebanese. Furthermore, correspondent banks overseas may come to view the Lebanese banking sector as too exposed and vulnerable to warrant the risk of maintaining a fiscal relationship. If correspondent banks choose to de-risk by ending their relationships with Lebanese financial institutions, the banking sector could find itself shut off from international money markets.

Lebanon's mountainous and porous eastern border traditionally has been the main conduit for Hezbollah to receive its armaments from neighboring Syria via smuggling trails. In theory, the L.A.F. has the capacity to block the smuggling routes with physical obstacles and to monitor any breaches of the border. However, in reality no Lebanese government would take such a decision and risk a repetition of the May 2008 events. Another suspected route for the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah is by sea. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which patrols the southern border with Israel, has had a maritime component since 2006 tasked with supporting the Lebanese navy in securing the Lebanese coastline. Part of the Maritime Task Force's (M.T.F.) duties are to prevent the smuggling of weapons or related materials into Lebanon. To that end, between October 2006 when the M.T.F. first deployed and June 2017, more than 77,000 vessels have been hailed by the peacekeepers and over 10,500 referred to the Lebanese navy for inspection.<sup>13</sup> So far, no weapons destined for Hezbollah have been discovered.

### *What are the weak links in Hezbollah's recruitment pipeline and what can be done to impede recruitment?*

Hezbollah's massive manpower expansion in the past decade and the war in Syria has resulted in the emergence of two tiers of new recruits. The first and most significant tier is the traditional recruit who subscribes to the *wilayat al-faqih*, passes through the extensive religious and military training programs, and is a loyal and committed cadre. The second, and smaller, tier has emerged in the past year or two and consists of young Shiite conscripts whose adherence to the party's ideology initially is minimal, but have been drawn to join mainly for financial reward as well as benefitting from Hezbollah's social welfare services. This second tier is recruited specifically with the Syrian theater in mind. They receive basic training lasting a month at camps in the Bekaa Valley before being deployed to various battlefronts in Syria. Despite being motivated primarily by money, these new recruits are also given intensive religious lessons in order that, in time, they can assimilate more fully into Hezbollah's ideological core, which many of them do.

A monthly salary of \$600 is not an inconsiderable sum in Lebanon, especially for unemployed youths. Many of them live in poor regions of the country, such as the central and northern Bekaa Valley, where there are few job opportunities. One means of diminishing the attraction of joining Hezbollah is to improve the economic health of Hezbollah's recruitment catchment areas. In the rural Bekaa, investments in the agro-industrial sector could provide livelihoods for local residents, reducing the attraction of fighting with Hezbollah.

### *Scenarios: What are the scenarios in which Hezbollah can walk-back from deployments in Syria, and involvements in Iraq and Yemen?*

The Lebanese and Arab media have speculated that Hezbollah is on the verge of withdrawing its forces from Syria for almost as long as the cadres have been there. However, there never has been any real indication that Hezbollah would return to Lebanon before either victory or defeat against the anti-Assad rebels. Sheikh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general, said at the end of October that a withdrawal of Hezbollah personnel "is linked to the political solution in Syria and to the eradication of terrorism."<sup>14</sup> Although the tide of the war is turning in favor of the Assad regime, the fighting continues and given the chronic manpower shortage within the ranks of the Syrian army, Hezbollah's battle-hardened fighters are still required. Iran has invested billions of dollars in propping up the Assad regime and is unlikely to weaken its investment by allowing Hezbollah to return to Lebanon prematurely. As discussed above, there is a likelihood of a post-war role for Hezbollah in Syria even if most of the expeditionary force eventually return home.

While fighting continues, Russia and Iran continue to have a shared interest in cooperation with each other, even if those interests could begin to diverge in the post-conflict era. Russia needs Iranian-supported forces on the ground as President Vladimir Putin is unwilling to commit sizeable ground forces of his own. Iran also requires Russian air support, which has been so critical in swinging the conflict in Assad's favor. Therefore, Russia has little leverage at this time against Iran, even if Moscow views with unease a prolonged presence of Hezbollah in Syria and the implications it could have in terms of a future war with Israel over the Golan Heights.

Hezbollah's presence in Iraq and Yemen is more tactical than strategic. Once ISIS is defeated in Iraq, Hezbollah is likely to withdraw its forces back to Lebanon, possibly leaving a few personnel for liaison and training.

Similarly, if the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen either abandons its offensive or succeeds in defeating its Houthi opponents, Hezbollah may pull out.

### *What are the scenarios in which Hezbollah's deployments widen in the region?*

Setbacks in Syria, Iraq, or Yemen or the emergence of new theaters of conflict in which Iran has a key stake could lead to an expansion of Hezbollah's regional presence. In the unlikely event that Syrian rebel groups are able to reverse Assad's gains over the past 18 months and once again threaten the durability of the regime, it is possible that Hezbollah would increase its manpower commitment in Syria.

Hezbollah's regional role is more closely linked to Iran's ambitions than to the organization's parochial interests. Therefore, a key requirement to keep Hezbollah confined to Lebanon is to reduce the number of conflicts involving Iran in the region. De-confliction between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners would lessen the need for the Islamic Republic to seek the martial expertise of its Lebanese proxy.

### *What are the scenarios for Hezbollah's future in Lebanon?*

The shape of Hezbollah's immediate future will be guided very much by developments in Syria. If, in the next year, the Assad regime regains sufficient control of the country so that the armed threat it faces is reduced to a low-level insurgency that indigenous forces can handle, Hezbollah could withdraw the bulk of its forces back to Lebanon. The party leadership would declare victory and note that Hezbollah's sacrifices had spared Lebanon the possibility of Sunni radicals taking over Damascus, and the horrors of a potential invasion by ISIS. An end to hostilities in Syria could revive Hezbollah's popularity among its support base, especially if party funds that had been spent on the war effort are diverted to the constituency in terms of higher salaries and benefits. Success in Syria would allow Hezbollah to refocus efforts on the Israel front, and with it a possible military deployment on the Golan Heights which in turn would raise the risk of a fresh confrontation with a Jewish state alarmed by an Assad-Iran- Hezbollah victory in Syria.

If, on the other hand, the war drags on in Syria with Syrian government forces and their allies unable to decisively defeat the armed opposition, and no progress is made on a negotiated settlement, it could negatively impact Hezbollah's popularity within its Shiite constituency. While Hezbollah still retains the overwhelming support of Lebanon's Shiite population, the war in Syria has caused cracks in that consensus. War fatigue has set in among some cadres and supporters alike. In the past two years, numerous anecdotal examples have emerged of fighters refusing to serve further tours in Syria with some even quitting the party altogether. While most supporters accept the rationale given by the party leadership for the Syria intervention, the justifications are challenged each day by the return of brothers, sons, husbands, and fathers killed in Syria's far flung battlefields.

Hezbollah seems ill-prepared to handle the growing restlessness of its supporters who are beginning to chafe at the party's omnipresence and heavy-handed interference in people's daily lives. While victories in Syria such as the seizure of eastern Aleppo in December 2016 help revive flagging spirits, the long-term trend among Hezbollah's support base is one of growing impatience and unhappiness with the war in Syria. In the years following Israel's troops withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000, opponents to Hezbollah's armed status grew more vocal, one of the more persistent ideas of reaching a solution was to weave the Islamic Resistance into the L.A.F., perhaps as a southern border force, thus bringing Hezbollah's arms under state control.

The idea never went beyond public debate because Hezbollah rejected such a move, and was backed in its opposition by Damascus, which then controlled the political process in Lebanon. Blending the Islamic Resistance with the L.A.F. would be tantamount to the end of Hezbollah as a military force. It is also

difficult to see how the Islamic Resistance, which has its own military doctrine, let alone strict religio-ideological purview, could operate within the de-confessionalized L.A.F, even as an adjunct force. Israeli withdrawals from the Shebaa Farms area on Lebanon's south east border with the Golan Heights, and from the northern end of the village of Ghajar would go some way toward undermining Hezbollah's rationale for maintaining its arms to liberate occupied Lebanese territory, but it would not be enough. Hezbollah long ago moved beyond predicating the future of its armed status on the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanese territory. In June 2006, Ali Ammar, a Hezbollah parliamentarian, said that "the extent of the resistance is not the Shebaa Farms... nor the return of the prisoners [from Israel], but its extent is when it becomes impossible for Israel to violate Lebanon's sovereignty even with a paper kite."

## **Challenges Ahead**

Twenty years ago, Hezbollah was a relatively small organization that carried little political weight in Lebanon, and was committed fully to the resistance campaign to oust Israeli forces from south Lebanon. It generally eschewed daily parochial politics beyond a parliamentary presence, and won broad consensus across the sectarian divide for its military prowess in south Lebanon. The range of its largest rocket was a mere 12 miles, and its military wing numbered no more than 3,000 fighters, both full- and part-time. It maintained air-tight internal secrecy, and had a laudable reputation for financial integrity.

The Hezbollah of today, however, is very different. It dominates the political and military landscape of Lebanon, has tens of thousands of trained fighters at its disposal, and an array of sophisticated armaments and technical equipment. It has reached into almost every facet of Lebanon's political, administrative, military, and social structure, and has a de facto veto on any government decision and appointments covering all sectors.

But for all its weight and influence in Lebanon, Hezbollah also faces a series of stresses and strains that threaten its long-term cohesion, and are in some respect's symptoms of its own success.

Corruption has taken root within Hezbollah in the past few years in marked contrast to its earlier reputation for financial probity. When the phenomenon began to appear in 2008, the party's leadership tried to stamp it out. But Hezbollah today in some respects resembles a massive bureaucracy and once corruption emerges it is difficult to eradicate. Corruption is eroding Hezbollah's internal moral fabric, breeding resentment and disrespect from cadres and supporters alike, which weakens the party's strong sense of discipline and obedience, the glue that binds its constituent parts into an effective whole.

It is also suffering from an internal cash flow problem. The Iran nuclear deal in 2015 and subsequent lifting of sanctions was expected to revive Hezbollah's flagging financial fortunes. Although there appeared to be an initial uptick in the revenue flow from Iran, it has since either dwindled or remains insufficient to cover the party's operating costs, along with Hezbollah's other revenue sources. In early 2017, there were indications that Hezbollah appeared to have ceased paying monthly salaries to new recruits joining specifically to serve in Syria. Instead, they now receive only the social welfare benefits the organization offers, such as discounted medical treatment and school fees, according to numerous sources close to Hezbollah. Given the fact that the incentive of most of these second-tier recruits to join Hezbollah is to win monthly salaries, the cessation of income payments underlines the seriousness of the financial squeeze. Furthermore, the organization has also launched a fundraising drive entitled "Equip a Mujahid campaign" for public donations to arm, equip and train Hezbollah fighters.

Hezbollah also faces a challenge in keeping its support base on its side, especially given the casualty toll of the war in Syria. As mentioned above, if the war in Syria drags on, Hezbollah may face difficulties in

maintaining morale within its constituency which could undermine its popular standing. Retaining the support of Lebanon's Shiite community is absolutely fundamental to Hezbollah's existence. Without popular support, Hezbollah's leverage in Lebanon declines. Without influence in Lebanon, Hezbollah cannot act as Iran's most reliable regional enabler to project influence across the region.

Given the party's deep immersion within Lebanon's political, economic, and social milieu, the number of realistic options for external powers to weaken Hezbollah or persuade it to forsake its military role for one solely limited to domestic politics are minimal without creating spin-off effects that could destabilize Lebanon. The military option will merely invite massive destruction on Lebanon and Israel with no guarantees that Hezbollah would be decisively defeated. Imposing tighter sanctions might help further choke Hezbollah's revenue flows but could have unwanted consequences for Lebanon's already fragile economy and fiscal stability, which in turn could create civil strife and political unrest.

Ultimately, change may come from the gradual unraveling of the social contract between Hezbollah and its support base rather than from initiatives. Hezbollah has worked hard since the Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000 to reconcile its Lebanon resistance priority with the needs and interests of its supporters. But Hezbollah's determination to maintain its resistance narrative and its newfound role as an enabler of Iranian power across the region increasingly lie at odds with its other role as protector and champion of Lebanon's Shiite community. Those conflicting agendas are growing more pronounced and it is unclear if Hezbollah will or can reconcile the two in the long-term.

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# ABOUT ITCT

ITCT is UK based organisation and founded in 2018. It is a non-political and non-profitable organisation and is a unique think tank in itself. There is not a single organisation around that specifically counters the narratives of Islamist terrorism by using the tools of Islamic Theology. ITCT exposes the root causes of Political Islam and works hard to eliminate it through introducing the actual concept of Islamic Theology.

ITCT conducts a comprehensive research to find out the key elements that draw the most vulnerable people of the society into the fire of religious extremism. ITCT works on three main factors in order to educate the Muslim community:

- That Islamist Terrorism is wrongly associated with Islam
- And is committed by misguided Muslims
- By manipulating religious texts to brainwash Muslims

## ITCT has three pillars to stand on:

- **MISSION**

Countering Islamist Terrorism

- **VISION**

Educating Muslim Community

- **OBJECTIVE**

Providing the Solution of Islamist Terrorism

ITCT is an independent organisation that generates funds through donations. ITCT warmly welcomes talented writers, researchers and experts and would like to publish their work.