Hezbollah’s Influence in Lebanon

July 2021
Executive Summary

Hezbollah has evolved significantly from its origins as a guerilla group in the early 1980s into a major political and military force. In defiance of U.N. resolutions and international agreements demanding its disarmament, Hezbollah has used its military strength, political power, and grassroots popularity to integrate itself into Lebanese society. Hezbollah has also created its own educational and social institutions that run parallel to the Lebanese state. As a result of these efforts, Hezbollah today wields significant influence across Lebanon’s various sectors.

As head of Lebanon’s pro-Syrian parliamentary bloc, Hezbollah wields tremendous sway over the direction and stability of the government. The Hezbollah-led parliamentary coalition—referred to as March 8—has held 57 of Lebanon’s 128 parliamentary seats since the 2009 elections. After Lebanon elected Hezbollah ally Michel Aoun to the presidency in October 2016, March 8 received 17 of 30 cabinet positions, thus cementing Hezbollah’s continued influence in the country.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah’s military entanglements in Syria and with Israel risk drawing all of Lebanon into regional conflicts. Although the United Nations has tasked Lebanon’s military with supervising Hezbollah’s disarmament, Hezbollah has managed to build up its military capabilities and presence in Lebanon under the watchful gaze of the Lebanese army. Hezbollah and the Lebanese military have also coordinated against Syrian rebel groups.

Hezbollah has also created its own parallel institutions within Lebanon’s educational, social, and economic sectors. Hezbollah-run schools indoctrinate Shiite youth while its network of social
services provide Shiite citizens with health care, utilities, groceries, and construction services. But because of international sanctions, Hezbollah-linked hospitals, charities, and other businesses risk inviting devastating economic sanctions. International aid organizations wary of inviting sanctions must also navigate around Hezbollah when partnering with local Lebanese organizations. International sanctions targeting Hezbollah have also complicated the Lebanese economy due to Hezbollah’s involvement in the Lebanese business sector.

In this report, CEP tracks the history of Hezbollah’s entrenchment into Lebanese society and highlights the widespread influence Hezbollah has accrued in virtually every major Lebanese sector. Hezbollah’s integration into Lebanon threatens the country’s stability and regional and international security.

**Lebanon: A Divided Country**

Lebanon is a deeply sectarian country with 18 distinct religious groups. Hezbollah has exploited these sectarian fault lines to bolster its own standing, primarily through outreach to Lebanon’s Shiite population.

According to 2017 CIA demographic data, Shiites made up approximately 27 percent of Lebanon’s approximately 6.2 million population. Sunnis made up another 27 percent, while Christians comprised 40.5 percent. Shiites are concentrated in Beirut’s southern suburbs, the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, and southern Lebanon beneath the Litani River. Hezbollah itself is also concentrated in these areas. According to June 2017 Israeli military estimates, Hezbollah has a military presence in 240 villages in southern Lebanon.

Lebanon’s government requires a division of power between its main religious streams. The roles of president, prime minister, and parliamentary speaker are, respectively, guaranteed to a Maronite Christian, Sunni Muslim, and Shiite Muslim. The extent of Syria’s influence in Lebanon further divides the country. Syria occupied Lebanon in 1976 at the beginning of the country’s civil war. Mass protests for and against Syria preceded the country’s 2005 disengagement, giving rise to dueling political factions in Lebanon’s parliament. Hezbollah’s political party heads a largely pro-Syrian parliamentary bloc, the March 8 movement, whose main opposition is the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition.

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Lebanese opinions on Hezbollah are largely divided along sectarian lines. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center poll, 86 percent of Lebanese Shiites held favorable views of Hezbollah, compared with 31 percent of Lebanese Christians and only 9 percent of Lebanese Sunnis.6 Nonetheless, a 2014 Beirut Center for Research and Information survey found that approximately two-thirds of Lebanon’s Christians believe Hezbollah is protecting the country from ISIS. The survey also found that 66 percent of Christians supported Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria, compared with only 39 percent in June 2013.7

Some Lebanese Sunni militants, such as Sheikh Ahmad Assir, have accused Hezbollah of using its weapons to “subjugate Lebanon to its will.”8 Through 2012 and 2013, Assir-led protests against Hezbollah drew thousands of Lebanese Sunnis. Assir’s followers have violently clashed with both Hezbollah and the Lebanese military, accused by Assir of protecting the terrorist group.9 Assir was arrested in 2015 and faces the death penalty on terrorism charges.10 Notwithstanding Assir’s supporters and poll numbers, Hezbollah Executive Council chief Sheikh Nabil Qaouk believes that many Lebanese Sunnis will willingly join Hezbollah in its next conflict with Israel.11

Hezbollah has wide support in the Shiite community, but some dissent does exist. Sheikh Ali al-Amine, the Shiite mufti of the Jabal Amel district of south Lebanon and a former teacher of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, criticized Hezbollah after its 2006 war with Israel for seeking to “capture all the Shiite sect and push it into the unknown.”12 Subhi al-Tufayli, Hezbollah’s first secretary-general, has routinely criticized the group he once led for exploiting Lebanese sectarianism at Iran’s behest. Hezbollah and Iran have promoted the message that

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Shiites are an endangered minority outside of Iran, Tufayli said in a 2016 interview. He has further accused Iran of “only investing in Lebanon’s Shia to serve its own interests.”

Hezbollah: A Dangerous and Destabilizing Force

With financial, material, and moral support from the Iranian regime, Hezbollah has carried out deadly terrorist attacks and criminal activities in the Middle East and around the world. As a result, Hezbollah has been designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and several other countries and intergovernmental organizations, including the Arab League.

Lebanon

Hezbollah has been implicated in several political assassinations in Lebanon. On February 14, 2005, a bombing in Beirut killed anti-Syrian former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and 21 other Lebanese citizens and wounded 226. On August 18, 2020, the U.N.-backed Special

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15 For a full list, see the Designations section of CEP’s Hezbollah report, https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/hezbollah#designations.

Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) convicted Hezbollah member Salim Ayyash in absentia of leading the assassination team that orchestrated the bombing. The STL sentenced Ayyash in absentia to five consecutive life sentences on December 11, 2020. The STL had initially indicted a second Hezbollah member, senior commander Mustafa Badreddine, but chose not to pursue the case against Badreddine after his May 2016 death in Syria. On October 19, 2012, a car bomb killed senior Lebanese intelligence official General Wissam al-Hassan, who had investigated Hezbollah’s role in the 2005 Hariri assassination and reportedly supported rebel forces in the Syrian civil war. On December 27, 2013, former Lebanese finance minister and ambassador to the United States Mohamad Chatah died in a Beirut car bombing. Chatah had prominently voiced opposition to Hezbollah. Hours before the bombing, Chatah had tweeted that Hezbollah had been “pressing hard to be granted similar powers in security & foreign policy matters that Syria exercised in Lebanon for 15 yrs.” There were no claims of responsibility, but former Prime Minister Saad Hariri blamed Hezbollah for Chatah’s murder.

In announcing its conviction-in-absentia of Ayyash, the STL specifically acknowledged it did not find direct evidence that Hezbollah’s leadership played a role in the 2005 bombing, but the STL acknowledged Hezbollah did have a motive to eliminate Hariri. While Hezbollah’s direct involvement in the Hariri, Hassan, or Chatah political assassinations has not been conclusively proven, Hezbollah has been documented using violence to further its political goals in Lebanon. In May 2008, Hezbollah launched bloody street battles against Lebanese forces after a government decision to dismantle the group’s private telephone network, which Hezbollah called a declaration of war. Hezbollah fighters captured sections of western Beirut and attacked media offices affiliated with the governing Future Movement in clashes that killed 62 people across the country. The Lebanese government called Hezbollah’s actions “an armed and bloody coup.”

while international media reported the worst sectarian fighting in Lebanon since the end of the civil war.\textsuperscript{26} The fighting ended with a Qatari-negotiated agreement that brought Hezbollah into a national-unity government and gave its political minority veto power in a new cabinet.\textsuperscript{27}

Hezbollah has directly engaged in violence against Lebanese citizens on a smaller scale as well. Hezbollah reportedly maintains non-sectarian military units in Sunni and Christian areas to maintain security, particularly in southern Lebanon where government security forces are not as active.\textsuperscript{28} These security patrols and Hezbollah fighters have, however, at times turned their weapons on Lebanese citizens and government forces. In June 2013, Hezbollah fighters clashed with followers of the radical Sunni cleric Ahmad al-Assir in the city of Sidon, leaving more than a dozen wounded and at least one person dead.\textsuperscript{29} In October 2016, a Lebanese Internal Security Forces patrol in Sidon suspected two Hezbollah members sitting in a car of preparing a suicide attack. Hezbollah members attacked the patrol after it confronted the two men.\textsuperscript{30}

Hezbollah has also endangered the Lebanese population by using Lebanese population centers, particularly in Beirut, for storing weapons storage and conducting other illegal activities. On August 4, 2020, an explosion in Beirut’s port killed at least 200 people, wounded more than 6,000 others, and destroyed much of the port. Lebanese officials suspect the explosion was caused by negligence in the storage of the explosive fertilizer chemical ammonium nitrate.\textsuperscript{31} Hezbollah allegedly used multiple buildings in the port for illegal drug smuggling and other criminal activities, including the storage of weapons, which led to some suspicions that a fire at one of the Hezbollah warehouses may have sparked the explosions.\textsuperscript{32} In 2013, Iran reportedly supplied Hezbollah with hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate.\textsuperscript{33} Hezbollah has also reportedly sought to use Lebanon’s agricultural ministry to import ammonium nitrate into Lebanon from

Syria. Hezbollah has also stored ammonium nitrate at depots throughout Europe. On September 22, 2020, a Hezbollah arms depot exploded in the village of Ain Qana in south Lebanon. Reuters reported there were multiple people wounded in the blast. Hezbollah blamed the explosion on a “technical error” at the depot and denied any casualties.

In May 2021, Israeli television station Kan reported Hezbollah had dug a series of tunnels hundreds of kilometers long from Beirut to southern Lebanon. According to the report, Hezbollah dug the tunnels to quickly move its forces to southern Lebanon for a confrontation with Israel. Hezbollah reportedly built the tunnels at the same time it built six tunnels into Israel, which Israel destroyed in 2018.

With Iranian training and financing, Hezbollah regularly attacked Israeli forces during Israel’s 18-year occupation from 1982 through 2000. Notable confrontations include the Grapes of Wrath operation, a 16-day conflict with Hezbollah in April 1996 in response to a wave of deadly attacks on Israeli soldiers in Lebanon and rockets into Israeli territory. Israel withdrew from

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Lebanon in May 2000, for which Hezbollah claimed credit. Nonetheless, Hezbollah continued to attack Israeli positions across the blue line, the U.N.-recognized border between Israel and Lebanon. In July 2006, Hezbollah killed eight Israeli soldiers and captured two others in a cross-border raid that sparked a 34-day war. During the course of the war, Hezbollah fired approximately 4,300 rockets at Israeli population centers, killing 39 civilians and 120 soldiers.

The war devastated Lebanon, leaving 130,000 Lebanese homes destroyed and tens of thousands of people homeless. More than 1,100 Lebanese people—the majority of whom were civilians—died in the conflict. An American Jewish Congress report blamed the disproportionately high casualty count on Hezbollah’s use of civilians as human shields. Human Rights Watch also reported a “handful of instances” of Hezbollah using Lebanese civilians as human shields. U.N. humanitarian relief coordinator Jan Egeland accused Hezbollah of “cowardly blending” among Lebanese civilians and of being “proud because they lost very few fighters and that it was the civilians bearing the brunt of this.”

Although Israel and Hezbollah have declared their desire to avoid a new war, Hezbollah has repeatedly issued several statements threatening a new conflict. In February 2016, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah threatened to strike Israel’s ammonia storage facility in Haifa, which would have the effect of a nuclear blast, according to Israeli experts. A year later, Nasrallah threatened Israel’s nuclear reactor and warned that his group would observe “no red lines” in its

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next battle with Israel.\textsuperscript{46} Israeli leaders have threatened to hold the Lebanese government responsible for Hezbollah’s actions and strike a broad range of Lebanese targets in the next conflict.\textsuperscript{47} That May, the Israeli military began building replicas of Lebanese villages in order to train for urban warfare against Hezbollah.\textsuperscript{48} On July 26, 2021, Hossein Salami, commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), warned Hezbollah is ready to confront Israel at any moment: “Lebanon and Hezbollah are standing strong against the Zionists, and whenever the enemy wants to move, Hezbollah suffocates them from the very beginning.”\textsuperscript{49}

A new regional war would have devastating consequences for both Lebanese and Israelis. In 2017, Israeli military officials spoke publicly about plans to evacuate northern Israeli communities during the next confrontation with Hezbollah. One former IDF officer expressed hope that the Lebanese government was making the same contingency plans, predicting that the “next war will be pretty bloody for both sides.”\textsuperscript{50} On July 22, 2021, Israeli Ambassador to the U.N. Gilad Erdan sent a letter to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and to all members of the Security Council calling on them to condemn Hezbollah for continued violations of international resolutions restricting Hezbollah’s activities in southern Lebanon. Israel called on UNIFIL to launch a full investigation. Erdan warned that Hezbollah could drag the entire region to war if it is not restricted.\textsuperscript{51}

\textit{Syria}


Syria is part of what Hezbollah and Iranian leaders refer to as the “resistance axis” against the United States and Israel. The Syrian regime has acted as a throughway for Iranian support to Hezbollah. Hezbollah joined Syria’s civil war on behalf of the government in 2012. By January 2016, Hezbollah reportedly had an estimated 7,000 to 9,000 fighters in Syria. In November 2016, Hezbollah held a public parade in the Syrian city of Qusair, during which the terror group showcased U.S. and Russian armored personnel carriers and tanks. At least 2,000 Hezbollah fighters have reportedly been killed in the war, and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has tied the group’s survival to the political fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In September 2018, Nasrallah declared that Hezbollah would remain in Syria indefinitely with the Syrian government’s permission.

Hezbollah has used the Syrian war to transform into what regional military analysts consider a full-fledged army, increasing its stockpiles of rockets, guns, drones, anti-tank weaponry, and anti-aircraft weaponry. Hezbollah has also successfully captured and held territory, elevating the group beyond the capabilities of a local militia. In June 2017, for example, Hezbollah


claimed it and the Syrian army jointly controlled approximately 70 miles along the Syrian-Lebanese border.\(^5^9\) In June 2013, Hezbollah and the Syrian army jointly captured the Syrian city of Qusayr from rebel forces, which reportedly said “the blatant intervention of Hezbollah” forced their retreat.\(^6^0\) In November 2016, Hezbollah deputy leader Naim Qassem declared Hezbollah had become a “highly-trained, heavily-armed standing army.”\(^6^1\)

Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria has renewed sectarian divisions in Lebanon, where Shiites have largely supported Hezbollah and Sunnis have supported Syrian rebels. Retired Lebanese general-turned-university-professor Elias Hanna told the BBC in 2013 that Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria risked reigniting Lebanon’s own civil war.\(^6^2\) In April 2013, two extremist Lebanese Sunni clerics urged their followers to go to Syria to fight Hezbollah on behalf of Sunni rebels.\(^6^3\)

Foreign terror groups such as al-Qaeda, the Nusra Front, and ISIS have directly targeted Lebanese civilians in Hezbollah strongholds in retaliation against the group.\(^6^4\) For example, in November 2015, twin ISIS suicide bombings in the Shiite-majority Beirut district of Burj al-Barajneh killed more than 40 people.\(^6^5\) The al-Qaeda-linked Abdullah Azzam Brigades has also killed dozens in multiple bombings in Lebanon, including a November 2013 bombing of the Iranian embassy and twin bombings in Beirut in February 2014. The group claimed that it would end its campaign against Lebanon only when Hezbollah withdraws from Syria.\(^6^6\) Also that month, a Nusra Front suicide bomber killed four people in Hermel, a Hezbollah stronghold in

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eastern Lebanon. In the course of one day in June 2016, eight suicide bombers killed five people in the Lebanese Christian village of Qaa near the Syrian border.

Hezbollah deputy leader Naim Qassem has defended Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria as necessary to protect Lebanon from the chaos of a collapsed Syrian state. But Hezbollah’s losses have begun to foster dissent even among its fighters. In 2015, a group of some 60 Hezbollah reserve fighters refused to return to the Syrian battlefield. The fighters subsequently lost Hezbollah financial benefits to their families. In a 2017 interview with the Nation, a Hezbollah commander called Abu Hussein said that Lebanese families are questioning why Lebanese people are dying for Syria. A Hezbollah fighter identified only as “Jaafar” told the newspaper that fighters “feel like we are puppets of the international community.”

Hezbollah and Lebanon’s Government

The Lebanese Parliament in Beirut. (Source: Flickr)

Hezbollah has used Lebanon’s democracy to insert itself into the country’s government. Because Lebanon’s parliamentary system often requires opposing parties to join in political coalitions, Hezbollah has been a staple in Lebanese coalitions since 2008, giving the group influence over the stability, direction, and makeup of Lebanon’s government. In 2008, former CIA analyst Daniel L. Byman called Hezbollah “the most powerful single political movement in Lebanon.”

Despite serving in Lebanon’s parliament, Hezbollah’s members pledge their allegiance to the Iranian regime and place that loyalty above the welfare of Lebanon. Hezbollah adheres to vilayet-e faqih, the Khomeinist doctrine that a single Islamic jurist should lead the state’s political and religious spheres. In 1985, Hezbollah pledged its allegiance to Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini as its faqih, or supreme Islamic jurist. More than 30 years later, Hezbollah and its parliamentarians maintain their loyalty to the Iranian supreme leader’s successor, Ali Khamenei, above that of the Lebanese government in which they serve.

As such, Hezbollah has on multiple occasions thrust Lebanon into political crisis. Hezbollah is suspected of assassinating former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. In 2011, the terror group’s politicians quit the governing coalition, causing it to collapse. In November 2017, anti-Hezbollah and anti-Syrian Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned and fled to Saudi Arabia, alleging that Hezbollah had attempted to assassinate him. Hariri returned to Lebanon later that month and rescinded his resignation.

Elected in October 2016, Michel Aoun is the first Lebanese president to openly align himself with Hezbollah, but other Lebanese presidents have also praised the terror group. Ten days into 2006’s 34-day war between Hezbollah and Israel, then-President Emile Lahoud praised Hezbollah as Lebanon’s “main liberator” from Israel’s 18-year occupation. Similarly, when Michel Suleiman took office in 2008, he praised Hezbollah’s anti-Israel stance while calling for dialogue about the group’s disarmament.

A key point of contention between Hezbollah’s supporters and detractors in the Lebanese government is the party’s continued possession of weaponry in defiance of international resolutions. Aoun argued in 2009 that “Hezbollah’s weapons will no longer be a problem when the causes behind its existence disappear.”80 That November, the Lebanese parliament voted to allow Hezbollah to keep its weapons and enter a new coalition government led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri. A cabinet policy statement the following month affirmed the right of “Lebanon, its government, its people, its army and its resistance”—a direct reference to Hezbollah—to liberate all Lebanese territory.81 At the same time, Hezbollah released an updated political manifesto, which declared the necessity of its arms.82 Nonetheless, Hariri has reaffirmed Lebanon’s commitment to international resolutions calling for Hezbollah’s disarmament.83

Sunni Arab leaders have also begun to sanction Lebanon in retaliation against Hezbollah. In February 2017, Saudi Arabia’s King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud canceled an upcoming trip to Lebanon after Aoun made a series of pro-Hezbollah statements.84 After Hezbollah condemned a May 2017 Bahraini domestic counterterrorism raid, Bahraini Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa warned that the Lebanese government would be held “responsible for statements made by its partner Hezbollah and its aggressive terrorist leader that insults the Kingdom of Bahrain.”85 Later that month, Saudi Arabia blocked the website of Aoun’s FPM.86

Despite their disagreements, Hezbollah’s domestic political opponents find common ground with the terror group on the subject of Israel. In April 2017, Hariri lambasted Israeli strikes against Hezbollah in Syria and described quarrels with Hezbollah as a “political dispute” that “doesn’t affect the management of the country.”87 Hariri’s ascension to the premiership in exchange for supporting a Hezbollah ally as president is proof to the contrary.

Milestones of Hezbollah’s Rising Political Influence

Hezbollah flags line the streets of Baalbek, Lebanon. (Source: Aotearoa at Polish Wikipedia via Wikicommons Media)

Hezbollah has for years been a fixture in Lebanese governing coalitions, first entering Lebanon’s parliament in 1992, when it won eight of 128 seats in the country’s first elections since 1972. Hezbollah has since managed to exert its influence over the direction, makeup, and stability of the Lebanese government.

2005: The Cedar Revolution

Lebanon’s Cedar Revolution was a series of protests that ended Syria’s 29-year occupation, while also leading to the creation of a Hezbollah-led pro-Syrian faction in the government. On February 14, 2005, Hezbollah members allegedly assassinated former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, known for his anti-Syrian positions. In response, Lebanese protesters demanded the end of Syria’s occupation of the country. Hezbollah organized a massive pro-Syrian counter-protest in Beirut on March 8, 2005. On March 14, a larger anti-Syrian protest took place to demand an end to the Syrian occupation.

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Dubbed the Cedar Revolution, the competing protests resulted in Syria’s withdrawal that April and the formation of pro- and anti-Syrian parliamentary factions named for the dates of the protests. Hezbollah now leads the pro-Syrian March 8 alliance, while the Future Movement leads the anti-Syrian March 14 alliance.  

In February 2006, Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) signed a memorandum of understanding, forming a political alliance and adding FPM’s parliamentary seats to March 8’s.

2008: Hezbollah’s Attempted Coup

In May 2008, Hezbollah waged violent street battles against the Lebanese government until a Qatar-negotiated agreement ended the fighting. Hezbollah launched the conflict after Prime Minister Fouad Siniora banned its private telecommunications network.  

As a result of the Doha Agreement, Hezbollah entered a coalition government with the Future Movement. Hezbollah and its political allies received 11 seats in the 30-seat cabinet and Hezbollah received veto power. Lebanese international law researcher Yara Saab described the conflict as a “prime indication” of Hezbollah’s “readiness to use violence in order to achieve political gains.”

2009: Parliamentary Elections

Hezbollah won 10 parliamentary seats in 2009, while the Hezbollah-led March 8 opposition bloc increased its number of seats by one, from 56 to 57. The March 14 movement won 71 seats in the election, but political disagreements forced the creation of a coalition government that

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allowed Hezbollah to retain power in a March 14-dominated government.\textsuperscript{97} Parliamentarians are elected to four-year terms, but political disputes delayed new elections until May 2018.\textsuperscript{98}

**2011-2013: The “Hezbollah Government”**

In January 2011, while Prime Minister Saad Hariri met with U.S. President Barack Obama in Washington, D.C., 11 government ministers from Hezbollah and its allied parties resigned en masse, collapsing the government.\textsuperscript{99} The resignations came shortly before the U.N.-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) announced its indictment of Hezbollah-affiliated suspects in the 2005 assassination of Hariri’s father, Rafik. Hezbollah had threatened retaliation if any of its members were indicted. The U.S. government condemned Hezbollah for trying to “subvert justice” by causing the Lebanese political crisis.\textsuperscript{100}

Later that month, Hezbollah nominated businessman Najib Mikati as the new prime minister. Then-President Michel Suleiman appointed Mikati to the position.\textsuperscript{101} Hezbollah received two portfolios in the new 30-member government, while its political allies received 14 portfolios. Hariri labeled the new cabinet a “Hezbollah government.”\textsuperscript{102} In November 2011, Mikati threatened to resign when Hezbollah and its political allies in the cabinet threatened to block Lebanon’s €30 million allocation for the U.N.-backed STL, though he later pushed through the funding.\textsuperscript{103} Mikati resigned in March 2013 after a dispute with Hezbollah over delayed

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parliamentary elections and Hezbollah’s refusal to extend the tenure of Lebanon’s Sunni national police chief. Hezbollah alleged that external pressures caused Mikati’s resignation.

2014: The Rise and Fall of the Unity Government

In April 2013, the Lebanese parliament elected parliamentarian Tammam Salam as the new prime minister. After a 10-month delay, Salam formed a new 24-minister unity government in February 2014, awarding eight portfolios each to the March 8 and March 14 blocs. The remaining eight portfolios went to parties unaligned with either bloc. The agreement was meant to ensure that neither side could veto the other. Among other roles, Hezbollah controlled the foreign and industry ministries.

After Lebanese President Michel Suleiman’s term ended in May 2014, Hezbollah admittedly blocked the appointment of a new president for more than two years because it wanted FPM founder Michel Aoun to fill the role. Justice Minister Ashraf Rifi resigned in February 2016, blaming Hezbollah for Lebanon’s political impasse. That August, Hezbollah and the FPM announced they would boycott cabinet meetings, claiming the government had made decisions without their consultation. By September, the unity cabinet had deadlocked.

2016: Election of Michel Aoun

Hezbollah stalled the election of a new president until it could ascertain the election of a political ally. In June 2015, Qassem told Lebanese media that the only option other than Aoun was continuous political vacuum. In October 2016, Lebanon’s political parties acceded to Hezbollah’s demands in a power-sharing agreement that led to Aoun’s election and the appointment of Saad Hariri as prime minister. Aoun publicly thanked Nasrallah and Hezbollah for aiding his election. Qassem declared that Aoun’s ascendency signaled that the Lebanese government was “working toward achievements for the benefit of the country … including us.” Iranian President Hassan Rouhani issued a statement expressing his certainty that “the resistance movement will be strengthened” as a result of Aoun’s election.

2018: Lebanese Parliamentary Elections

In May 2018, Lebanon held parliamentary elections for the first time since 2009. Hezbollah’s parliamentary representation remained steady at 13 seats, but Hezbollah and its allies altogether won a total of 70 of the parliament’s 128 seats. The anti-Hezbollah ruling Future Movement saw a decrease from 33 to 21 seats, though its leader, Hariri, maintained his role as prime minister. Hezbollah leaders spoke of a larger influence in an as-yet-to-be-formed government coalition. Nasrallah called the results “a political and moral victory” for Hezbollah that would guarantee the protection of “the resistance.”

2020: A New Hezbollah Government Rises and Falls

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Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned in October 2019 after two weeks of nationwide protests against government corruption. Hassan Diab as the new prime minister in December 2019. On January 22, 2020, Diab announced the formation of a government that included two Hezbollah ministers and members of Hezbollah-allied parties. Hezbollah received the portfolios for the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Industry. Hariri’s Future Movement and other pro-Western parties remained outside of the cabinet, drawing international concern that Hezbollah’s agenda would dominate Lebanon’s new cabinet.

Diab dissolved the government on August 10, 2020, after two days of anti-government protests following an August 4 explosion at Beirut’s port that killed at least 200 and wounded more than 6,000. Later that month, the Lebanese parliament nominated Lebanon’s ambassador to Germany, Mustapha Adib, to be the new prime minister. Though Adib had wide support from the Lebanese parliament and the endorsement of French President Emmanuel Macron, he was unable to form a new government. Adib wanted to build a government of technocrats, which Hezbollah and its Shiite parliamentary ally, the Amal party, reportedly blocked to gain more influence for themselves. Adib resigned on September 26, just days after Aoun noted the urgency to form a new government to prevent Lebanon from descending “to hell.”

2020-2021: Lebanon’s Financial and Governmental Crises

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The Beirut Port explosion led to widespread protests against government corruption, which continued following Adib’s resignation as the government remained paralyzed. Lebanon’s political parties appointed Saad Hariri as prime minister-designate on October 22, 2020, though he was not supported by Hezbollah.

Lebanon had still yet to form a government by the end of July 2021. Hezbollah denied it was intentionally delaying the process and claimed it would cooperate with any proposed government. In February 2021, FPM head Gebran Bassil called for a review of his party’s 2006 agreement with Hezbollah. According to FPM’s political council, while the agreement had protected Lebanon from outside attacks and deterred Israel, it had not succeeded in reinforcing rule of law or building Lebanon. After almost nine months of failing to form a government, Hariri resigned as prime minister on July 15, 2021. Later that month, Hezbollah supported the parliamentary nomination of former prime minister Najib Mikati to be the new prime minister. Mikati pledged to form a government of technocrats, while Hezbollah claimed it would not stand in his way. As Lebanon continued to suffer food, fuel, and medical shortages, the World Bank blamed Lebanon’s economic collapse on the country’s political stalemate. Despite Lebanon’s economic and political crises, a video emerged of former Hezbollah parliamentarian Nawar...

Sahili throwing a lavish wedding party for his daughter on July 24, 2021, implying that Hezbollah’s members continued to live lavishly while the Lebanese general population suffered economically.132

Hezbollah and Lebanon’s Military

According to Lebanese Hezbollah media reports, there is “almost daily” coordination between the LAF and Hezbollah against Syrian rebel groups.133 In the June 2013 Battle of Abra, for example, Hezbollah and the LAF cooperated during two days of fighting against followers of Sunni cleric Sheikh Ahmad Assir in Sidon, Lebanon, which killed more than 50 people. In June 2017, Hezbollah praised the LAF, which it says “integrates with the resistance [Hezbollah] operations at the eastern borders to prevent terrorism from infiltrating Lebanon.”134

The Lebanese government has appointed Hezbollah allies to oversee the LAF. Lebanon’s defense minister, Yaacoub Sarraf, belongs to the Hezbollah-aligned Free Patriotic Movement of Lebanese President Michel Aoun.135 In March 2017, the Lebanese cabinet appointed Staff Brigadier General Joseph Aoun as the new head of the LAF. Tony Badran of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies has accused Aoun of having a history of coordinating with Hezbollah during his previous assignment maintaining security in southern Lebanon.136

According to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah and the LAF form a multilateral defense of Lebanon.137 This cooperation has been particularly noticeable during skirmishes along the Lebanese-Syrian border. In July 2017, for example, Hezbollah and the Syrian army fought against the Nusra Front in the border area, eventually expelling the group from the mountainous Lebanese territory of Jund Arsal. Though the Lebanese army did not officially participate in the fighting, the army did shell Syrian rebel forces across the border. One Hezbollah fighter declared that the group had protected “the Lebanese army’s back.”138 Nasrallah praised the army for

disarming suicide bombs in the area and announced that Hezbollah would turn over captured Lebanese territory to the army. The Hezbollah leader also called the LAF’s contributions “key” to Hezbollah’s victory.

The U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) has charged the LAF with ensuring that southern Lebanon is free of all unauthorized weapons, but Hezbollah has relied on either the support or willful ignorance of the Lebanese military to facilitate its rearmament. In February 2017, UNIFIL monitors reported that they had not witnessed the “entry of weapons” into southern Lebanon since 2006. Nonetheless, according to April 2017 Israeli estimates, Hezbollah possessed approximately 130,000 rockets and missiles and the capability to launch 1,000 projectiles per day in a war with Israel. In contrast, Hezbollah possessed approximately 15,000 rockets and fired approximately 130 per day during the 2006 war.

An LAF-chaperoned press tour of Hezbollah’s military positions in April 2017 highlighted the LAF’s abrogation of its responsibility. International media photographed Hezbollah fighters carrying rocket-propelled grenades and other artillery, in violation of U.N. resolutions and Lebanon’s own agreements. When an Italian UNIFIL officer reportedly tried to clear the group from a restricted area near an Israeli listening post, an LAF officer instead escorted the UNIFIL officer away. Hezbollah clarified afterward that it had coordinated the event with the LAF, which alerted UNIFIL shortly beforehand.

Lebanon’s leadership has at times openly acknowledged the bond between the LAF and Hezbollah. In February 2016, eight months before assuming Lebanon’s presidency, Michel Aoun described Hezbollah as a necessary component of Lebanon’s border defense because the LAF

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“does not have the equipment or numbers to defend the border.”147 As president in February 2017, Aoun reaffirmed that Hezbollah is “a major part of Lebanon’s defense” that “complements” the Lebanese army.148 That June, Lebanon’s interior minister, Nouhad Machnouk, told Egyptian TV that Lebanon’s “defense strategy should determine how to benefit from Hezbollah’s arms, to fend off any [future] Israeli aggression.”149

*The Threat of Hezbollah-LAF Complicity*

In February 2017, former deputy national security adviser under U.S. President George W. Bush and CEP Advisory Board Member Elliott Abrams warned against Aoun’s continued legitimization of “Hezbollah’s military role.”150 By allowing Hezbollah to continue building its military presence in Lebanon, the Lebanese army is complicit in Hezbollah’s military operations, and acting in violation of international agreements.151 This behavior endangers the LAF’s reputation and its operational capabilities.

The 1989 Taif Agreement ending Lebanon’s civil war stipulated the disarmament of all militias in the country, including Hezbollah.152 The U.N. Security Council has issued multiple resolutions reaffirming the need for disarmament. Its 2006 Resolution 1701 specifically called for the LAF to “take steps toward” the removal of all militant weapons south of Lebanon’s Litani River.153

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151 See Appendix B.


The U.N. Security Council has mandated the Lebanese Armed Forces to enforce a weapons-free zone south of Lebanon’s Litani River. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

LAF-Hezbollah cooperation endangers the LAF’s supply of international military aid, as demonstrated when Saudi Arabia halted a $3 billion aid package to the Lebanese army in 2016 because of Hezbollah’s influence on the government. Lebanon is the fifth largest recipient of U.S. military aid, which totaled more than $220 million in 2016 and more than $1 billion since 2006. In August 2016 alone, the United States provided the LAF with 50 armored vehicles and 50 grenade launchers in order to counter Syrian militant groups.

During a November 2016 Hezbollah military parade in Syria, the group showcased U.S.-made M113 armored personnel carriers (APCs), the same type that the U.S. military supplied to the LAF. The following month, the U.S. Department of Defense denied that the LAF had supplied the vehicles to Hezbollah. But Aoun’s February 2017 declaration that Hezbollah

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“complements” the Lebanese army further elevates the prospect that Hezbollah could employ U.S. weaponry against a U.S. ally.\textsuperscript{158}

The U.S. government has traditionally viewed aid to the LAF as a bulwark against extremist groups.\textsuperscript{159} But some U.S. officials have questioned the value of continued aid in light of apparent cooperation between Hezbollah and the LAF. In April 2016, U.S. Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen denounced Hezbollah’s increased “presence within and partnership with the Lebanese Armed Forces.”\textsuperscript{160} That December, U.S. Representative Ed Royce called for Congress to reevaluate military assistance to Lebanon.\textsuperscript{161} In early 2017, the House began discussing a draft amendment to the 2015 Hezbollah sanctions act that targets any “agency or instrumentality of a foreign state” that “has acted or purported to act on behalf” of Hezbollah, which could theoretically target the LAF.\textsuperscript{162}

**Hezbollah and Lebanon’s Economy**

Hezbollah members invested in the Lebanese banking sector and Lebanese businesses have exposed those institutions to damaging financial sanctions.\textsuperscript{163} The U.S. government continues to issue new financial sanction bills against Hezbollah, such as the December 2015 Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act (HIFPA), which targeted Lebanese banks.\textsuperscript{164} Lebanese businesses that have not been sanctioned have still felt Hezbollah’s negative effect on Lebanon’s foreign relations, particularly through the tourism industry. U.S. officials insist sanctions target Hezbollah’s global financial activities, not Lebanon or the Shiite community.\textsuperscript{165} Yet, Hezbollah’s ties to a range of Lebanese businesses exposes all of Lebanon to the risk of financial sanctions.


Sanctions

After HIFPA’s passage, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah defiantly responded that Hezbollah’s members were not invested in Lebanese financial systems.¹⁶⁶ But Hezbollah parliamentary leaders simultaneously warned that sanctions could push Lebanon toward bankruptcy and cause a “wide rift” in the country if Lebanese citizens stop patronizing Lebanese banks out of fear of sanctions.¹⁶⁷ One member of a Lebanese parliamentary delegation that met with U.S. officials after HIFPA’s passage warned that sanctions on Lebanon’s banking sector could cause “a total collapse of the Lebanese state.”¹⁶⁸ In April 2017, Lebanese President Michel Aoun warned that sanctioning Hezbollah and Lebanese institutions “will greatly harm Lebanon and its people.”¹⁶⁹

The U.S. government alone has designated more than 100 Lebanese financial institutions, commercial entities, and individuals linked to Hezbollah since 2001.¹⁷⁰ For example, in February 2011, the Treasury designated Lebanese Canadian Bank for facilitating money laundering on behalf of Hezbollah. The bank subsequently closed.¹⁷¹ In March 2017, U.S. authorities arrested Lebanese businessman Kassim Tajideen in Morocco for allegedly contributing tens of millions of dollars to Hezbollah through Lebanese and African business networks.¹⁷² In February 2016, Saudi Arabia barred four Lebanese businesses, which the United States had previously designated as “procurement agents” to purchase drone technology, engines, and other electronics from global vendors on behalf of Hezbollah.¹⁷³

government but pledged that they would not affect the government’s work. The United States has also continued to levy sanctions against Hezbollah-linked companies throughout Lebanon. In February 2020, for example, the Treasury Department imposed financial sanctions on three Lebanese individuals and 12 entities affiliated with or controlled by the Iran-based Martyrs Foundation. The designated companies included Atlas Holding for being owned or controlled by the Martyrs Foundation. Atlas and its subsidiaries had conducted financial transactions for Hezbollah through the previously designated Jammal Trust Bank, which the United States accused of facilitating hundreds of millions of dollars in transactions through the Lebanese financial system and aiding Hezbollah officials in evading scrutiny from Lebanese financial authorities. In July 2020, U.S. Department of State spokesperson Morgan Ortagus declared the United States would continue to apply “severe economic pressure” on Hezbollah.

Foreign Investment and Tourism

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has sought to limit Iranian influence in the Middle East in part by targeting Hezbollah. Economic ties between Lebanon and the Gulf countries—as well as businesses unrelated to Hezbollah—have accordingly suffered, as Hezbollah continues to entrench itself in the country. In February 2016, Saudi Arabia warned its citizens against visiting Lebanon. The United Arab Emirates then barred travel to Lebanon completely. Tourism in Lebanon from the Gulf had reportedly frozen by August 2016.

In 2016, Gulf countries represented 25 percent of Lebanon’s exports, which made up 1.5 percent of the country’s gross domestic product. In 2015, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were Lebanon’s two largest trading partners in the Gulf. In May 2015, the Syrian war severed on-the-ground routes for Lebanese exports to the Gulf. New GCC actions against Lebanon further have threatened to destabilize Lebanon’s export industry as well as its foreign-exchange reserves.

In December 2014, international investment service Moody’s downgraded Lebanon’s international credit rating and affirmed a negative outlook for the country. Moody’s cited Lebanon’s frozen presidential and parliamentary elections, both of which have been attributed—at least partially—to Hezbollah.\(^{190}\) In a demonstration of the importance of the Gulf relations to Lebanon in March 2017, financial analysis company Standard & Poor Global projected a 3 percent growth in Lebanon’s economy between 2017 and 2020 based on reports of reconciliation with the Gulf countries.\(^{191}\)

**Hezbollah and Lebanon’s Non-Profit/Social Services Sector**

Hezbollah operates its own network of charitable groups and non-governmental organizations, often as an alternative to state-provided services.\(^{192}\) In this way, Hezbollah has ingratiated itself with Lebanon’s Shiite population and increased its grassroots popularity. For example, during the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah provided emergency relief services and distributed water, food, and medicine to Lebanese Shiites and Christians. One Lebanese Shiite told CNN, “Hezbollah is doing all the things for the people. I don’t know where the government is.”\(^{193}\) The provision of essential services such as garbage collection and health care has set Hezbollah apart as a viable alternative to the Lebanese state, boosting the group’s domestic popularity.

**Misuse of Lebanese Charitable Services**

Hezbollah has created a network of charities in Lebanon and abroad that act to fundraise and recruit for the organization under the guise of charitable work. A prime example of this is the Martyrs Foundation, a network of Iranian-sponsored charities created to support the families of deceased fighters from Iran’s terrorist proxies. Iran created the Lebanese branch of the charity in 2006 to compensate the families of Hezbollah fighters killed during that year’s war with Israel.\(^{194}\) In 2007, the U.S. Treasury designated the Martyrs Foundation in Lebanon, accusing it of raising funds for Hezbollah by establishing global charitable fronts such as the Michigan-based Goodwill Charitable Organization.\(^{195}\) In April 2014, Germany outlawed the charity

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Lebanon Orphan Children Project, accusing it of transferring money to the Martyrs Foundation in Lebanon.  

Hezbollah has also allegedly used NGOs and their causes to disguise its own militant activities. In June 2017, the Israeli army revealed video of Hezbollah surveillance outposts along the Lebanese-Israeli border. The outposts were disguised as field offices of a purported environmental NGO called Green Without Borders. Hezbollah had been flying the NGO’s banner over the outposts since at least April 2017, according to the army.¹⁹⁷ UNIFIL inspectors were reportedly turned away from one of the outposts that April.¹⁹⁸ A Lebanese NGO called Green Without Borders has been active in the country since at least 2014.¹⁹⁹

Hezbollah has appropriated environmental causes in the past, particularly tree planting. In October 2010, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah encouraged Lebanese to plant more trees as a matter of national security. He claimed that Hezbollah’s U.S.-designated construction arm, Jihad al-Binah, had planted one million tree saplings.²⁰⁰ Green Without Borders participated with other Lebanese NGOs in a 2014 campaign called “A Tree for Every Citizen” to plant one million new

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cedar trees in Lebanon. Among other Lebanese politicians, Hezbollah parliamentarians Mohammad Raad and Hassan Fadlallah attended the campaign’s inaugural event.201

Hezbollah has also used its financial arm, Al-Qard al-Hasan Association (“The Good Loan”), to help Lebanese citizens access U.S. dollars while avoiding sanctions. Al-Qard al-Hasan (AQAH) is a registered Lebanese non-profit that provides interest-free loans and operates savings accounts. Lebanese fearful of the impact of U.S. sanctions on Lebanese banks have sought out AQAH as an alternative. AQAH officials noted a significant increase in depositions through 2020.202 Created in 1982, the association reportedly has approximately 300,000 accounts, all held by Hezbollah members or supporters. In November 2018, an account reportedly opened at the bank to transfer payments to the Houthi rebels in Yemen.203 The United States sanctioned AQAH in 2007 for being part of Hezbollah’s support network.204 In April 2021, Lebanese judge Ghada Aoun announced an investigation into AQAH based on complaints AQAH had violated Lebanon’s Monetary and Credit Law.205

Success at the Polls

Hezbollah’s outreach efforts have helped it build support among Lebanon’s Shiite population, resulting in success at the polls. A 2001 Lebanese survey found that more than 50 percent of Lebanese citizens prioritized candidates’ provision of social services.206 Hezbollah has effectively leveraged its provision of social services into political and popular support among Lebanese Shiites. A November 2006 Gallup poll found that 64 percent of Lebanese believed Hezbollah to be stronger politically following its war with Israel earlier that year, though the war largely devastated Lebanon.207 Hezbollah claimed it spent $300 million for its construction arm, Jihad al-Bina, to repair damaged or destroyed homes.208 The U.S. Treasury sanction-designated

Jihad al-Bina in 2007, accusing it of fundraising for Hezbollah by bidding for international projects otherwise off limits to the terror group. In the 2009 parliamentary election, 93.1 percent of Shiites voted for Hezbollah.

Hezbollah’s outreach is primarily targeted to the Shiite community, though it has made inroads with Lebanese Christians in recent years as well. Ahead of the 2009 election, pundits believed that Hezbollah could win a majority in the Lebanese parliament with the help of Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement, the only Christian party aligned with Hezbollah. Aoun argued against disarming the group, stating that “Hezbollah’s weapons will no longer be a problem when the causes behind its existence disappear, including the borders’ issues.”

**Hezbollah’s Subversion of Lebanese NGOs**

Following the 2006 war, several international NGOs reportedly had difficulty avoiding Hezbollah, which had links with NGO partners in Lebanon. One Lebanese man told the *New York Times* in 2006 that “everything coming in, Hezbollah puts an eye on it, makes sure it is all given out in the proper way. It is all in the hands of Hezbollah.”

Hospitals and other Hezbollah-linked non-profits directly risk U.S. sanctions, endangering the flow of vital services to the Lebanese people. Fearful Lebanese banks have also preemptively punished charities that have not been directly designated by the U.S. government. In June 2016, Lebanese banks reportedly closed the accounts of Al-Rasoul al-Aazam Hospital in the Burj al-Barajneh suburb south of Beirut, known as “the resistance hospital” because of its treatment of Hezbollah fighters returning from Syria. The banks also targeted Baalbek Hospital, West Bekaa Hospital, and other institutions linked to Hezbollah.


in Beirut. The hospital works directly with the Lebanese Ministry of Health and the Social Security Fund, as well as private insurance companies and medical equipment companies. Citing the hospital’s ties to the government and private sector in a May 2016 interview with Al-Monitor, Fares Soueid of the March 14 alliance’s General Secretariat unit said that Hezbollah’s infiltration of Lebanon’s charitable networks puts all of Lebanese society at risk.

**Hezbollah and Lebanon’s Education Sector/Youth Services**

By targeting Lebanon’s youth, Hezbollah attracts new recruits and builds domestic support responsible for its electoral successes. To facilitate this, Hezbollah has infiltrated all levels of Lebanon’s educational system, as well as its youth camps and religious programming.

**Education**

Hezbollah has employed a two-pronged strategy to control Lebanon’s educational sector. Its schools offer well-funded educational opportunities that, like Hezbollah’s provision of social services, offer services to the Lebanese Shiite population that state-affiliated schools cannot match. The second prong of Hezbollah’s strategy is to use its influence across Lebanon’s political, cultural, and media spheres to exert its influence over non-Hezbollah schools. The result is the infusion of a Hezbollah-approved narrative across Lebanon’s educational system.

Hezbollah has created its own schooling system as an alternative to state-provided public schooling, and its members are present throughout the university level. “It’s like a complete system, from primary school to university,” Lebanese University analyst Talal Atrissi told the *New York Times* in 2008. This system enables Hezbollah to inculcate its propaganda among the Lebanese population, but it also risks attracting international sanctions against Lebanese educational institutions.

In March 2017, U.S. government alleged that the American University of Beirut used U.S. aid money to provide support to Hezbollah. Representatives from Hezbollah’s Al-Nour radio and Al-Manar TV allegedly attended U.S.-funded training workshops at the university between 2007 and 2009. According to U.S. attorneys, the university accepted grant money from USAID for years without ensuring against the provision of material support to U.S.-designated entities.

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Prosecutors also accused the university of linking its website to Hezbollah’s U.S.-designated construction arm. In that same month, the university settled the claims for $700 million.\(^{219}\)

Hezbollah is also represented in Lebanese university student councils. Student council elections have at times erupted in violence between Hezbollah’s supporters and others. In 2012, for example, students supporting Hezbollah and the Christian party Kataeb began a fistfight at the University of St. Joseph (USJ) in Beirut.\(^{220}\) In November 2013, student supporters of Hezbollah at USJ again violently clashed with student supporters of the March 14 movement. Some 150 Hezbollah members reportedly surrounded the university in response to the student confrontation.\(^{221}\) In January 2007, riots by opposing student-supporters of Hezbollah and the Lebanese government resulted in arson, attacks by stone- and club-wielding students, and the deaths of four people. A cafeteria fight between pro-Hezbollah Shiites and pro-government Sunnis reportedly sparked the riots.\(^{222}\)

On the primary school level, Hezbollah’s Islamic Institution for Education oversees the Mahdi schools, a network of private schools that teach the core subjects of math, history, and science while also inculcating Hezbollah’s ideology. Hezbollah first opened the schools in 1993 in southern Lebanon. By 1997, 1,000 Shiite students attended six Mahdi schools across southern Lebanon.\(^{223}\) By 2006, approximately 14,000 students attended Hezbollah’s schools.\(^{224}\) And by 2013, the schools were present throughout the country as well as in the Iranian city of Qom.\(^{225}\)

Approximately two-thirds of Lebanese students reportedly attend private schools.\(^{226}\) Hezbollah attracts students by offering funding and expedited services with which the state cannot compete.


The schools offer modern facilities such as computer labs and swimming pools, while Hezbollah members quickly carry out repairs that might take days or weeks in state-affiliated schools. Hezbollah also offers tuition assistance, further drawing pupils away from less sectarian private schools.227

Each of Hezbollah’s schools reportedly features pictures of the late Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and instills allegiance to both.228 During Israel’s occupation of Lebanon, charity boxes in the schools collected money to support Hezbollah’s militant activities.229 Since Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah has continued to use the schools to promote its terrorist agenda. For example, a senior Hezbollah official announced during a 2013 school function that the terror group had recently acquired missiles that could strike the southern Israeli city of Eilat.230 Girls are taught to marry Hezbollah fighters and support the party.231 Many male graduates go on to university and careers, but also stand ready to fight in Hezbollah’s reserve army.232

Lebanese schools generally avoid teaching modern Lebanese history because of the potential for inflaming sectarian divisions. Hezbollah has capitalized on this and used its position in the Lebanese government to impose its own values on Lebanon’s state educational system.233 In 2009, Lebanese Labor Minister Mohammed Fneish—a Hezbollah party member—reportedly pressured Beirut secondary school International College to censor a U.S. textbook called “Modern World History” because it classified Hezbollah as a terrorist group. Though the school had used the book for seven years, it removed the offending pages after being pressured by the education ministry.234 A month later, Hezbollah launched a media campaign against a private English-language school in Beirut. The school, which was not publicly identified, used a textbook called “The InterActive Reader Plus,” which included excerpts of “The Diary of Anne

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Hezbollah accused the textbook of promoting Zionism by focusing on the persecution of the Jews. As a result, the school reportedly removed the book from its curriculum.\textsuperscript{235}

**Hezbollah Youth Programs**

In 1985, Hezbollah created a central part of its youth wing called the Mahdi Scouts. The Lebanese education ministry licensed the movement in 1992, and the Mahdi Scouts later joined the Lebanese Scout Federation.\textsuperscript{236} The scouts offer outdoor recreational and educational programs such as fishing, camping, and environmental lessons. But the movement also provides religious and ideological instruction, inculcating devotion to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Hezbollah.\textsuperscript{237}

Some 60,000 youths and leaders participate in the Mahdi Scouts. At age 16, Mahdi Scouts typically join training programs to become Hezbollah fighters, according to scout leaders.\textsuperscript{238} Hezbollah fighters as young as 16 have reportedly been killed in the Syrian conflict.\textsuperscript{239} The movement has since spread to Syria as well.\textsuperscript{240} Scouts display pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei, and pledge their allegiance to Hezbollah and the Iranian supreme leader. Guest speakers at the camps have included armed Hezbollah fighters and then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.\textsuperscript{241} Like other scouting programs, activities include computer programming, weight lifting, and homework help. But the Mahdi Scouts also teach what they call “Islamic values,” such as “jihad against Israel” and martyrdom. In 2009, one 14-year-old scout told Al Jazeera that the group “told us to be martyrs defending our land from all the countries that attack us.”\textsuperscript{242}

Lebanese Shiite girls are also included in Mahdi Scout programming and are similarly indoctrinated to Hezbollah vision of how Shiite Islamic women should behave. Scout leaders hold the *Takeef Shara’ee* ceremony for 8- to 9-year-old girls to mark the first time they put on hijabs, Islamic headscarves. The ceremonies are marked by religious speeches by Hezbollah leaders.

\textsuperscript{235} Agence France-Presse, “Anne Frank diary offends Hezbollah,” YNet, November 6, 2009, [http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3801302,00.html](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3801302,00.html).


Female Mahdi Scouts have paraded throughout Lebanon with banners declaring support for Hezbollah’s actions in Syria. Like their male cohorts, the female Mahdi Scouts are instilled with Shiite and Hezbollah ideology.

In 2003, Hezbollah launched *Mahdi* magazine, a colorful monthly publication targeting Lebanese youth. It includes cartoon depictions of deceased Hezbollah fighters and stories of suicide bombings and other attacks against Israel. The magazine emphasizes Shiite identity, building a connection to Iran and instilling further division in Lebanon’s already sectarian society. According to general manager Abbas Charar, the magazine seeks to “teach children the values of the resistance.”

Charar’s defense of *Mahdi* to Agence France-Presse seemed to summarize the entirety of Hezbollah’s youth strategy: “We tell them: ‘Just as these great people resisted and were victorious, so too can you resist and be victorious, and that starts with your education’.”

**Conclusion**

Hezbollah has used its political leverage and military capabilities to subvert Lebanon’s sovereignty, incorporating itself into virtually every major sector of Lebanese society through its political wing and the creation of its own parallel institutions. The group’s interference in Syria, including the devastation wrought by foreign terror groups retaliating against Hezbollah, have further endangered the Lebanese people. Lebanon’s Gulf neighbors have in recent years recognized Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, while Saudi Arabia has already twice punished Lebanon’s government over Hezbollah’s influence. Lebanon faces further political and economic isolation if the Lebanese people cannot extricate themselves from Hezbollah’s influence.

Some Lebanese have begun to recognize the threat Hezbollah poses to their country. In March 2017, Lebanese journalist Maria Maalouf used Twitter to call on Israel to assassinate Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and “rid us of him.…” A month later, Lebanese journalist Baria Alamuddin lamented the Lebanese people’s acceptance of Hezbollah in the 1980s and ’90s, which has now translated into Hezbollah’s domination of Lebanon. “In our naivety, I and other Lebanese supported Hezbollah’s endeavors to push Israel out of Lebanon. We believed their platitudes about putting Lebanese interests first — until it was far too late,” she wrote.

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Despite the political and physical damage Hezbollah has inflicted on Lebanon, Hezbollah’s leaders openly boast of the group’s influence and ability to subvert Lebanese sovereignty. During a Quds Day speech in June 2017, Nasrallah threatened to bring “hundreds of thousands of fighters from all around the Arab and Islamic world” to fight alongside Hezbollah if Israel attacked either Lebanon or Syria.249 Hezbollah deputy leader Naim Qassem told the New Yorker in 2016, “In the eyes of the people, the political powers, the countries—whether friends or foes—we are an actual regional power because our positions have regional consequences.”250 For the Lebanese people, however, these consequences have been disastrous.

Appendix A:

Memorandum of Understanding between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement: February 2006 agreement that politically aligned Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement of Lebanese President Michel Aoun.

Appendix B: International Agreements and Resolutions Calling for Hezbollah’s Disarmament


Baabda Declaration (2012): Agreement by Lebanon’s National Dialogue Committee to enforce and respect the Taif Agreement and Res. 1701.