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Political sociology. What is Hezbollah?

*Daniel Meier**

While Hezbollah—the “Party of God”—is now well known in Europe, various exaggerated representations of the organization have continued to circulate in the media, particularly since the European Union designated its military wing as a terrorist organization. Its name is closely associated with its opaque ties with Iran and with anti-Western operations (such as kidnappings and suicide bombings) during the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990. Hezbollah thus has a serious history, and it has endured as an organization despite the wars that have been waged against it, the most recent of which was instigated by Israel in 2006 and which Hezbollah claims ended in a “divine victory.” How did the movement emerge, and how did it manage to establish its authority over a large number of Lebanese Shi‘is? Who is the group’s leader, and what are its ties with Iran and Syria? Is it a “state within a state,” as its critics claim? And finally, in the context of the war in Syria and Sunni–Shi‘i tensions, how ought we decipher its actions?

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Origins and the influence of Shi'ism

Hezbollah was created by the merger of three Lebanese Shi'i politico-religious organizations in 1982. The local and regional context thus played a decisive role in the group's emergence. Since the late 1960s, the Lebanese Shi'i community had mobilized around the figure of the cleric Musa al-Sadr, who founded the "Movement of the Disinherited" before plunging into the violence of the civil war as the head of the Amal militia.¹ Sadr's disappearance in 1978, followed by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, resulted in a split within Amal. This division was also rooted in differing views on Palestinian resistance: while Amal had become strongly opposed to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which it held responsible for the destruction in southern Lebanon caused by Israeli reprisals, the movement's Islamic wing, which included several individuals who would go on to become senior figures within Hezbollah, including Hassan Nasrallah,² understood both the symbolic importance of the Palestinian question and the pivotal role of armed resistance against Israel. Islamic mobilization in the region was strengthened by the support committees set up in solidarity with the Iranian Revolution in mosques and *husayniyya*, and by the decisive role played by activists from the Dawa party, whose spiritual guide, the *sayyid* Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, advocated armed struggle after Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982.³

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran had seen the triumph of a novel project with revolutionary designs—the Islamic state, led by an important religious figure in Shi'i Islam: Ayatollah Khomeini. His political theory of "the guidance of the juriconsult" (*wilāyat al-faqih*⁴) inspired emulation, notably among

1. *Amal* (Arabic for "hope") is an acronym of "*Afwaj al mouqawama al loubnaniyya*" (Lebanese Resistance Detachments) (editor's note).

2. Daher 2008.

3. Harb 2010.

4. Or "*velayet e faqih*," in Persian: the idea that the most senior Shi'i religious dignitary can assume the functions of both religious and political "supreme leader."

Lebanese Shi'is, via the influence of renowned clerics. In 1982, the latter asked Iran to help them resist the Israeli invasion. Although unable to send troops to Lebanon because of its ongoing war with Iraq, Iran dispatched a contingent of 1,500 Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran) to train the first battalions of the Islamic resistance in Lebanon.⁵ In addition to weapons and military training, Iran provided Lebanese Shi'i militants with education in political Shi'ism, and thus in the Khomeinist concept of the *wilāyat al-faqih*.

To understand what this means, we need to go back to the “Major Occultation” or disappearance of the *Mahdi*, the twelfth Shi'i Imam, in 878 CE, which began a debate among the clerics about who could lead the community in the Imam's absence. In the nineteenth century, a decision was finally taken to establish a system of reference to religious scholars, producing the religious institution of the *marja'iyya* and consultation of the *marja'* (or *marja' al-taqlid*, literally “source of imitation”), the cleric who is considered most learned by his peers, and able to attract followers who heed his advice and pay him a religious tax. Khomeini, who was exiled to Najaf in Iraq in the 1960s, developed a theory that coupled this religious guidance with his conception of Islamic government, the basis of the Islamic state. In this view, the *faqih* (jurisconsult), in the absence of the Imam, can legitimately rule on his behalf on religious, material, and political matters. In short, the *marja'* with the greatest recognition from his peers possesses the *wilāya* (guidance). While Khomeini was widely recognized as representing such a figure, the same cannot be said of the current *wali* in Iran, Ali Khamenei, who was appointed by Khomeini to succeed him on his death in 1989. Ali Khamenei is not an authoritative *marja'* in Iran, where some have challenged his right to bear this title. Outside Iran, however, he has followers who recognize him as a *marja'*, and one of his local deputies (*wakil*) is Hassan Nasrallah, secretary-general of Hezbollah. Khamenei's influence over the movement is thus

5. Mervin 2008, 79.

limited to principles of general policy and as an authority on key questions (such as the definition of friends and enemies and the necessity of *jihād*), leaving Hezbollah with broad scope for making decisions about its domestic agenda in Lebanon.⁶

Politico-military development

The “Party of God” did not declare its existence until 1985, when it published an open letter setting out its two objectives: armed resistance against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, following its 1982 invasion, and the establishment of an Islamic state. Although the anti-Israeli struggle, known as “resistance,” had become Hezbollah’s defining objective, the movement increased its popular legitimacy in Shi‘i circles by developing social programs to serve a population abandoned by a state that had all but disappeared. During this period, it gradually established its presence in southern Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut by providing social services and by mobilizing Shi‘i regions around local politico-religious figures (including by promoting Hassan Nasrallah, a native of southern Lebanon, to a senior leadership role in Beirut), as well as by disseminating a culture of resistance and symbols of martyrdom (such as Ragheb Harb⁷). It was during this period that the party developed a Leninist organizational structure dominated by a “Shura” or Supreme Council made up of seventeen members—at the time, all clerics—with a nine-member executive committee reporting to a secretary-general, and a fifteen-member “politburo” overseeing the various party committees in three key areas: recruitment and propaganda, reconstruction, and security.⁸ A fourth body, the military wing, reported directly to the Supreme Council.⁹

6. Mervin 2008.

7. Imam Ragheb Harb, who came from southern Lebanon and was one of the founders of Hezbollah, was killed by the Israeli army in 1984.

8. Abu Khalil 1991.

9. Hamzeh 1993.

In the 1980s, Hezbollah rose to power by taking advantage of the collapse of Palestinian resistance—squeezed between the Israeli war machine and Syria’s partition strategy—to seize a leading role in Lebanese political and military affairs. This involved fierce fighting against the Damascus-supported Shi’i Amal militia (1988–1990), and against left-wing anti-Israeli resistance groups such as the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), which formed the basis of the National Resistance Front created in September 1982. A major strategic turning point in the rise of Hezbollah came in 1985, when the Israeli army withdrew behind the “security zone” it had built up in southern Lebanon through its backing of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), a local Christian militia. A war of attrition and guerrilla tactics ensued against this Israeli-occupied strip, which consisted of a territory of 850 to 1,100 km² along the southern Lebanese border, marked out by a series of outposts and minefields.

Khomeini’s death in 1989, and the signing of the Taif Agreement later that year, which had been mediated by Syria and Saudi Arabia and brought an end to the Lebanese Civil War, prompted Hezbollah to undertake an *aggiornamento* of its program. Its survival in the new post-war climate in Lebanon, as agreed between Iran and Syria, required it to shelve its project of establishing an Islamic state and its specialized focus on resistance as a politico-military movement. Under the leadership of Abbas al-Musawi and then, after his assassination by Israel in 1992, Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah embarked on a process of “normalization,” or “Lebanonization,”¹⁰ which involved entering the Lebanese political sphere (sending elected representatives to the Lebanese Parliament) and accepting the pluralistic nature of Lebanese politics. This process was accompanied by the legitimization of its armed struggle in southern Lebanon, which was encouraged by the state under the label of a struggle against the Israeli occupation. The Iranian-Syrian alliance

10. Alagha 2006.

was designed to serve the interests of both countries by enabling Syria to put pressure on Israel, and increasing Iran's influence over Arab-Israeli affairs. The effect of handing hegemony over the anti-Israeli armed struggle to Hezbollah was to open the door to the latter's definition as the defender of national sovereignty, from which it reaped various benefits, and to weaken the Lebanese state (notably by surrendering its monopoly on the exercise of legitimate force).

During the 1990s, Hezbollah developed a capacity for social mobilization through its widespread, effective social programs, which enveloped the inhabitants of Beirut's southern suburbs with a multi-pronged support network that included health, educational, religious, and occupational components. This system, described by its developers as an "Islamic sphere" (*hāla islāmiyya*), was bolstered by the creation of media outlets (television and radio) broadcasting programs focusing on armed resistance and knowledge of the enemy—namely Israel and the United States—that provided a mirror for the political resistance community.¹¹ This social influence was made possible by the economic development of the global Shi'i community and the voluntary levying of religious taxes, but also by a substantial influx of funding from Iran. The influential role of religion in the moralization of individual and social life through ways of acting and thinking must also not be overlooked. Hezbollah thus embarked on a project to create a counter-society, building a society of resistance¹² by holding sway over the education system and a movement of dozens of schools, taking advantage of the failings of the state in order to disseminate a culture of *iltizām* (religious engagement) consistent with the codes and values of the *hāla islāmiyya*.

Hezbollah's political power continued to grow over the course of the 1990s as it waged its war of attrition against Israel, ultimately forcing the latter to sign a memorandum of

11. Lamloum 2009.

12. Harb 2010.

understanding in April 1996 ending its Operation Grapes of Wrath, which had culminated in the shelling of a United Nations compound, killing around a hundred civilians. This agreement appeared to represent a diplomatic and military victory for Hezbollah, since while restricting the latter's freedom of action to Lebanese territory, it recognized its right to fight Israel's auxiliary troops, the SLA, in the "security zone" and established an international Monitoring Committee clearly designed to deter Israel from bombing southern Lebanon.¹³ Through its construction of the enemy on the basis of almost daily clashes, this occupation of the border zone gave Hezbollah an opportunity to strengthen its politico-military identity as a national resistance group, making it more than simply a Shi'i community militia.¹⁴ For Israel, the disastrous human toll of its unpopular occupation of part of Lebanon—in which an estimated twenty-five Israeli soldiers were killed every year—led Ehud Barak's government to withdraw unilaterally from the territory on May 22, 2000. This withdrawal was broadly seen, both regionally and nationally, as a victory for Hezbollah over Israel, a kind of "proof" that armed resistance was the only possible path. At the same time, Hezbollah used the fact that Israel had not evacuated from the Shebaa Farms area, on the southern Lebanese border with Syria and Israel, as a pretext for continuing its armed resistance, even though the status of this territory is the subject of a dispute between Lebanon, Israel, and the United Nations.¹⁵

The effects of the Israeli withdrawal within Lebanon slowly emerged in the form of a gradual remobilization of political groups critical of the Syrian military presence. The term "state within a state" was thus (re)used to describe not the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, but the armed existence of Hezbollah. Such criticism became even more acute in the aftermath of the assassination in February 2005 of the strongman of Lebanese

13. Hollis and Shehadi 1996.

14. Meier 2009.

15. See Franck Mermier and Élisabeth Picard (eds.), *Liban, une guerre de 33 jours* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006) (editor's note).

political Sunnism, former prime minister Rafic Hariri, who, as a result of political differences, had decided to stop dancing to Syria's tune and attempted to form a cross-community Druze/Sunni/Christian political coalition to resist the dominance of pro-Syrian actors in Lebanese politics. The shockwaves generated by the death of this symbolic figure produced an unprecedented popular mobilization and a strong rise in anti-Syrian sentiment. Under international pressure—including United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559, jointly sponsored by the United States and France, which called, among other things, for the disarmament of all militias, and thus implicitly of Hezbollah—Damascus announced the withdrawal of its troops in early March 2005, provoking a show of force on March 8 by pro-Syrian groups, including Hezbollah, in a mass demonstration “of gratitude to Syria.” Six days later, on March 14, 2005, the anti-Syrian coalition brought together by Hariri mobilized a million people to demand the complete withdrawal of Syrian troops. These demonstrations brought to the surface the political polarization between two visions of Lebanon that had been latent for several years, and which has structured Lebanese politics ever since.

In this context, Hezbollah had to make a significant pivot to secure its interests, notably at the government level. Following the parliamentary elections in summer 2005, it thus entered the executive for the first time in its history, with two government ministers representing the party. Since the collapse of Saad Hariri's government in January 2011,¹⁶ a new development has been seen in this strategy of working from within the state apparatus, with the pro-Syrian March 8 coalition gaining a grip on power under prime minister Najib Mikati. Now that it is no longer protected by Syria, Hezbollah appears to believe that exercising control over the government has become a necessity, at least to guarantee the continuity of its strategic interests (in the security, military, and political spheres). This was

16. Saad Hariri is the son of former prime minister Rafic Hariri (editor's note).

the background to the events of spring 2008, when Hezbollah staged a military coup in western Beirut on the pretext that its security was threatened by decisions made by the Council of Ministers, then led by Fouad Siniora with a majority from the March 14 alliance. By imposing a parallel military balance of power on the ground—at the cost of sixty-five dead, and nearly two hundred wounded—Hezbollah sought to force its opponents to grant it veto rights within the executive that would enable it to block any government decisions contrary to its interests. The Doha Agreement, signed on May 21, 2008, between the March 8 and March 14 alliances, gave Hezbollah and the March 8 alliance this right of veto.¹⁷ But this strategic victory was a pyrrhic one, since by using its weapons for domestic and political ends, Hezbollah threw away all of the recognition and legitimacy it had gained from the July 2006 war against Israel.

American involvement in the Middle East meant that security considerations were also a concern for the “Party of God,” since US doctrine called for the region to be reshaped through successive regime change. The regimes in Afghanistan and then Iraq had been overthrown by the US military machine, and Lebanon could be seen as a link in the strategy to bring down the Syrian regime by eliminating its strategic ally, Hezbollah. The Israeli invasion in 2006—presented as retaliation for Hezbollah’s abduction of two Israeli soldiers near the “Blue Line”—came up against an extremely well-prepared military operation that defeated the Israeli army, and was a catastrophe for Lebanon’s infrastructure and population (with over a thousand civilians killed, and over a million displaced). For Hezbollah, it was a clear military success, celebrated as a “divine victory,” which even gave it an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of its social programs and reconstruction work on the many buildings that had been destroyed in the southern suburbs of Beirut. But the war merely served to further polarize the March 8 and

17. More broadly, the agreement led to the lifting of other institutional blockages, including on the appointment of the President of the Republic and the return to a basic consensus between the parties. See Berthelot (2011).

March 14 political alliances, to the point of bringing the executive to a standstill due to major differences on sensitive issues such as the creation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) to investigate Rafic Hariri's assassination.¹⁸

Hezbollah's vision and weapons

In December 2009, Hezbollah published a new political manifesto¹⁹ following a conclave that involved several thousand senior figures and members of the party and lasted for over four months. While the document continued to present a view of the world as divided along the lines of the Khomeinist dichotomy of "oppressed versus oppressors" (*mustad'afin* versus *mustakbirin*), Hezbollah also adopted a discourse reminiscent of liberation theology in calling for the union of all the oppressed and declaring its opposition to an ultraliberal economy. Its view of Israel, which it described as a "Zionist entity," its support for the Palestinian cause, and its condemnation of US global hegemony were unchanged. The manifesto did mark a shift, however, in Hezbollah's relations with the European Union, calling on the Europeans to adopt an objective approach to its affairs, independent of that of the United States. The party recognized Lebanon as the definitive homeland within its current borders, but advocated political reform to abolish political confessionalism. It was also in favor of consensual democracy and called for a national defense strategy to combat the threat from Israel. Its vision of the Lebanese state was as a strong, fair, and honorable one playing a role on the regional scene and truly representing the will of the people; one with special relations with Syria and friendly relations with Iran, which it described as the main supporter of the cause of the *ummah*. The manifesto concluded with a call for unity among Muslims and Arab countries to confront dangers and plots, notably discord (*fitna*) between Sunnis and Shi'is.

18. In the summer of 2011, the STL also indicted four members of Hezbollah.

19. I refer here to the translation and analysis in Alagha (2011).

This document therefore identifies a state—Lebanon—as the necessary focus of Hezbollah’s efforts and involvement. In an earlier speech, Hassan Nasrallah also called for the creation of a “state of resistance,” some of whose characteristics are reflected in the manifesto. It says nothing, however, about the incorporation of Hezbollah militia fighters into this state, or the political effects of its arsenal of weapons. Within Lebanon, however, there is no doubt that these weapons have led to tensions that have increasingly polarized Sunnis and Shi’is and produced a widespread feeling of insecurity and wounded pride in the Sunni community, particularly following the conflict of May 2008 and attacks that claimed the lives of pro-March 14 Sunni officers in the security apparatus. One particularly significant development has been the emergence of armed Sunni actors expressing a desire to take revenge on Hezbollah, in Tripoli and in particular in Saida, with the movement led by Sheikh Ahmed al-Assir. For many years, Assir’s provocations were covered up by the Future Movement—the party of the Hariri family—until he took military action against the Lebanese army, which he accused of siding with Hezbollah.²⁰ Outside Lebanon, Hezbollah’s arsenal is perceived by the major global powers as a threat to regional security (as demonstrated, for example, in United Nations Security Council Resolution 1559 and the 2006 war).

In the context of Hezbollah’s collaboration with the Ba’athist regime in Syria, this arsenal has taken on a strongly polarizing new dimension as a major asset for Bashar al-Assad in his fight against insurgents, as apparently demonstrated when the Syrian army took back the town of Qusayr in late May 2013 with support from Hezbollah militia fighters, followed by Homs in late July 2013. Hezbollah’s position had been a tricky one since the start of the war in Syria due to its unconditional verbal support for the Syrian president, but following its admission of military involvement in support of the Ba’athist regime—seen

20. Clashes broke out in Saida as a result of violent retaliation by the army, which had been deployed to dismantle Sheikh Assir’s militia. See *The Daily Star*, June 25, 2013.

as crossing a strategic red line because it involves its regional hegemony—it has come under fire from the accusations of the March 14 alliance and the military operations of Syrian insurgents in Lebanese territory, with several attacks on its stronghold in the southern suburbs of Beirut. This dangerous escalation for Lebanon could give Hezbollah an opportunity to close ranks and condemn those who are stoking violence, such as Sheikh Assir, by presenting itself as the guardian of national stability alongside the army.

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While Hezbollah's image as a heroic resistance movement fighting the forces of oppression has been severely tarnished by its support for a regime prepared to massacre its own population in order to maintain its grip on power, its position within Lebanese politics is secured by the fact that the organization represents far more than a simple partisan or military structure. As we have discussed, it constitutes a society of resistance that is being built on a daily basis, and one whose identity and moral standing may in fact be strengthened when it is attacked. Hezbollah's holistic, all-encompassing dimension, deep ideological roots in Shi'i culture, and strong social influence over its members and supporters form an extremely powerful shield that gives the group far greater influence than a simple militia group dominating a population. The party has thus embodied itself, both spiritually and morally, in a society that today represents half a million people.

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Abstract

The use of tools from political science, sociology, and history may allow us to venture beyond preconceived ideas about Hezbollah, even as the European Union has just placed the “Party of God” on its list of terrorist organizations. We explore the influence of Shi’i Islam in the politico-religious ideology of the movement, its relationship with Iran, its social base, its capacity for military resistance, and its views on the Lebanese state

Résumé

Les outils de la science politique, de la sociologie et de l’histoire permettent de sortir des idées préconçues, alors que l’Union européenne vient d’inscrire le « parti de Dieu » sur la liste des organisations terroristes. Quel sont le poids de l’islam chiite dans l’idéologie politico-religieuse du mouvement, son rapport avec l’Iran, son assise sociale, sa capacité de résistance militaire et ses vues sur l’État libanais ?

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