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Middle East

# Hezbollah is increasingly isolated in the Middle East

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**Many are worried the Israel-Hamas war could draw in Hezbollah. But the party lacks the widespread support it once enjoyed because of its collaboration with Assad in Syria and its close ties with business interests.**

Israel's war on the population of Gaza — which has thus far claimed the lives of more than 3,500 people and destroyed crucial infrastructure, including schools and hospitals — has now raged for over two weeks. Since the start of Israel's bombing campaign, launched after a Hamas military operation killed 1,400 Israelis, many of whom were civilians, on October 7, observers have feared that the conflict could bring in regional actors such as the Lebanon-based Hezbollah, supported by its main financial backer Iran.

This, in part, explains Israel's reluctance to launch a ground invasion of the Gaza strip, despite having promised to do so since the start of the conflict. Hezbollah, which has under its control over fifty thousand troops, is a significant military force, and the prospect of it opening up a northern front in the ongoing war has tempered the more hawkish elements within the Israeli security state and forced the United States to warn outside parties against intervention.

However, the barriers to Hezbollah's involvement in the war are more complicated than its members, and Iranian assertions of its readiness for a new military confrontation, would suggest. There remain multiple conflicting interests both within the Lebanese party and across the region that make it impossible to speak confidently about the prospects for an escalation of the war.

Their roots lie in the history of Hezbollah and the evolution of the party's base of support, the latter of which has been shaped by Israel's ongoing occupation of Palestine and its suppression of the Palestinian populations in Gaza and the West Bank. Regional conflict is, nevertheless, more likely now than it has been for decades.

## Class Dealignment

Hezbollah was officially established in 1985, although it began organizing in 1982. Since then the so-called Party of God has been politically, militarily, socially, and financially supported by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Islamic Republic has provided Hezbollah with its main source of funding, although the Lebanese party also developed additional revenue streams in the past decade in Lebanon, as well as in Syria, where it has raised funds through its involvement in the smuggling and the drug trade.

Since the 1990s, Hezbollah has become the most prominent voice for the Shi'a population within Lebanon, surpassing the other main Shi'a party Amal in the process. It has reached this position of prominence by providing welfare and services to the Shi'a population through its own organizations and institutions, and as the main actor in the military resistance against Israel. Both efforts were made possible by the financial support of Iran.

Since its founding, Hezbollah's base has widened and evolved. It has since become a party whose membership and cadres are increasingly dominated by a fraction of the Shi'a bourgeoisie and upper middle class, particularly in Beirut. This is a significant departure from the party's roots among religious clerics and the popular classes. In the capital's southern suburbs, many wealthy families and most of the merchants have become reliable supporters of Hezbollah. As the party grew, it helped give rise to a new segment of the bourgeoisie connected to it through Iranian capital. Meanwhile, the rest of the Shi'a portion of the bourgeoisie, whether in Lebanon or in the diaspora, has come

increasingly under the umbrella of Hezbollah.

The party has also obtained growing weight in professional associations, and in some private companies, especially in real estate, tourism, and trade. Under Hezbollah's direct influence, these interests have gained power in the Lebanese business community. Consequently, Hezbollah has become an important economic actor in Lebanon by fostering relations with multiple business interests that provide employment to tens of thousands of people. This, in addition to the party's networks within civil society organizations and its armed branch, has ensured its popularity.

At the same time, Hezbollah has managed to achieve a position of hegemony among Lebanon's Shi'a population through a combination of consent and coercion: the former based on the party's provision of much-needed services to large sections of the Shi'a population, and the latter through repressive measures directed against those who challenge the party's claim to a monopoly on resistance against Israel in Lebanon. Following the outbreak of the Lebanese uprising of October 2019, Hezbollah did not hesitate to mobilize. Initially it rallied its supporters and members to intimidate the demonstrators in different localities and to attack them in downtown Beirut or in the city of Nabatiyeh, in southern Lebanon.

The embourgeoisement of Hezbollah has had other consequences, in addition to motivating the party's turn against popular protests. It has also changed the party's political orientation towards the Lebanese sectarian and neoliberal political system. Hezbollah has evolved from a voice of radical opposition to this system to one in favor of compromise and participation within Lebanon's existing political structures. Moreover, it has become one of Lebanon's political system's main protectors, alongside the rest of the country's ruling class.

## Hezbollah's Roots

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was in part motivated by the development of Hezbollah. The first military operations carried out by Hezbollah prior its official establishment in 1985 were suicide attacks on Western embassies and targets, as well as kidnappings of Westerners in the 1980s. But since then, and up until the 2000s, the development of Hezbollah's armed apparatus has been closely connected to the organization's resistance activities against Israel.

In 2000, Hezbollah routed Israel from the south of Lebanon, ending an occupation that began in 1978. Despite rocket exchanges from both sides of the border, the Party of God has retained this area ever since. Israel launched a new war against Lebanon and Hezbollah in 2006, during which Lebanon suffered over 1500 casualties, 1200 of which were civilians; Israel lost 160 of its citizens, including 120 soldiers.

Despite the asymmetry of casualties, Israel was unable to achieve its objectives in the war against Lebanon, which Hezbollah considered to be a success. The Party of God would go on to use this victory to reinforce its popularity in Lebanon, and in the wider Middle East. The southern areas of Lebanon suffered the most from Israeli attacks, invasions, and occupation, and Hezbollah's resistance enabled it to widen its social base in the Shi'a population.

However, since the 2006 war, Hezbollah's resistance against Israel, which had been at the core of its identity, has increasingly been subordinated to the other political objectives of the party and its sponsor Iran. This has been particularly reflected in Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria, which considerably strengthened it from a military standpoint by increasing recruitment for party's military arm. Allied with the despotic regime of Bashar Al-Assad as well as Russia and Iran, Hezbollah was also able to benefit by learning new strategies and gaining battle experience.

But from the perspective of Hezbollah's involvement in Palestine, the Syria campaign marked a significant reorientation away from its struggle against Israel. This does not mean that the party's military component did not and does not still play a role in its dealings with Israel, but after the 2006 war, Hezbollah increasingly came to deploy its forces for other purposes.

## Growing Power, Weakening Support

Hezbollah's military capacities and numbers have increased significantly since the war in 2006. It has notably expanded its arsenal and now has vast numbers of rockets and missiles under its control. Yet this increase in military might has not coincided with a growth in popular support. On the national level, Hezbollah has become increasingly isolated, both politically and socially outside the Shia population.

The party has been involved in a number of sectarian conflicts within Lebanon, one example of which is the Khalde incident that took place in August 2021 in a town just south of Beirut. There, fighting broke out between Hezbollah and local Arab Sunni tribes that led to three deaths. During the same month, in the majority Druze village of Chouaya, angry youths intercepted a van carrying Hezbollah militiamen equipped with a rocket launcher. The militiamen's plan was to target Israel from the locality. However, molested by the Druze youths, who snatched the rocket launcher from them, the Hezbollah fighters were forced to retreat.

Two months later, in October 2021, another major incident took place. Following a protest by members from Hezbollah and its ally Amal against Judge Tarek Bitar, who was in charge of the investigation into the explosion at the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020, street fighting broke out in the neighboring Tayouné district of southern Beirut. The clashes pitted Shi'a fighters from Hezbollah and Amal against other minorities stationed in Christian neighborhoods, most probably members of the Lebanese Forces, a Christian far-right movement. This street battle left seven people dead and thirty-two wounded, raising fears of a new civil war.

Within Lebanon, sectarian political parties opposed to Hezbollah, but also wider sectors of the population, view Hezbollah as the main obstacle to achieving justice for the Beirut port explosion. The head of Hezbollah's Liaison and Coordination Unit, Wafic Safa, threatened that he would "get rid of" Judge Bitar, for example. Even the party's former political allies, such as the Free Patriotic Movement, have been increasingly critical of it.

Lebanon's main political actors, such as the Progressive Socialist Party and its longtime leader Walid Jumblatt, continue to voice their support for the Palestinian struggle in the Gaza Strip. They have, however, done so while insisting they oppose getting their country involved in a new war with Israel. In addition, the country is facing a deep socioeconomic crisis, which has been ongoing since October 2019. During this period, the rate of poverty increased dramatically from 25 percent in 2019 to over 80 percent. For large sectors of the population, the country can't sustain a new war.

All of this means that the broad-based popular support that Hezbollah enjoyed in 2006 is absent today. Beyond the Lebanese national scene, Hezbollah's military intervention to support the despotic Syrian regime to crush the country's popular uprising undermined its popularity on a regional level.

Hezbollah has, since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, moved away from a strategy primarily predicated on armed confrontation with Israel. Part of the motivation for this is that Iran, its main sponsor, does not want Hezbollah weakened significantly in a new war with Israel in Lebanon. While Hezbollah is based in Lebanon and has some relative political autonomy, the party is largely bound by the interests of the Islamic Republic.

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The role that Hezbollah has played within the region has been to consolidate and expand Iran's network of regional allies, including state and nonstate actors. After the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, the part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps primarily responsible for extraterritorial and clandestine activity, the importance of Hezbollah for the Iranian state has only increased. Hezbollah has therefore become the main guardian of Lebanon's sectarian neoliberal system and the chief enforcer of Iran's geopolitical interests.

Despite Hezbollah's reservations, which it shares with Teheran, about starting a new war with Israel, whatever calculations it makes must also take into account the party's need to preserve to some degree its relationship with its political ally Hamas and what it sees as the political gains made by October 7 attacks. The latter have strengthened the hand of Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas within the region.

Hamas has been able to position itself once again as the leading actor on the Palestinian political scene, further marginalizing the already weak Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian issue and the need to deal with it politically are now back both on the Israeli and regional agendas. Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, and Israel's response to it, have had the effect of undermining the process of normalization initiated by Donald Trump and carried over by Joe Biden, ensuring that the occupation cannot be ignored on the road to smoothing out formerly hostile relations within the region. Soon after war erupted, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia responded by halting all progress on bilateral agreements between itself and Israel.

As the war develops, it is now clear that there can be no path towards stability in the Middle East that ignores the occupation and colonization of Palestine. The main task for the Left and progressive actors in the region must be to build a strategy based on a regional solidarity from below. This requires opposing the coalition of Western powers and Israel on one side, and regional authoritarian powers as well as the political forces linked to them on the other. This strategy, based on class struggle from below, is the only way to win liberation for the popular classes of the Middle East from regimes held up by the imperial power of the United States, Russia, and China.

[Jacobin](#)

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