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Middle East

# Hezbollah's Dilemma

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**Lebanon's Hezbollah is a unique phenomenon, and any attempt to reduce it to one of its facets would be either unfair or excessive in sanctification. The party's complex and intricate nature is evident in the very circumstances of its birth. It started as a Khomeinist splinter group coming out of the Amal movement, seeking to establish an ideologically committed "Islamic resistance" against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982 as an alternative to the "Lebanese resistance" that Amal upheld (the latter's name itself is the Arab acronym of "Lebanese Resistance Brigades"). The motive for the rift that led to the party's foundation was twofold: on the one hand, ideological loyalty to the regime instituted by the 1979 "Islamic Revolution" in Iran, but also, on the other hand, an aspiration to a resolute and radical position against the Zionist occupation, unlike the ambiguous position that Amal had taken towards it, especially in southern Lebanon.**

In building a resistance movement affiliated with it in Lebanon, Iran's Khomeinist regime saw a major ideological weapon in its war against the Iraqi Baathist regime that invaded its territory in 1980. Sponsoring an actual resistance against the Zionist state enabled Tehran to expose the falsehood of Saddam Hussein's anti-Persian Arab-Islamic claims and to bridge the nationalist gulf between Arabs and Persians, by way of which Baghdad tried to shield Iraq's Shiites from Khomeinist contagion, and which Gulf Arab states with a large Shiite population exploited for the same purpose. Likewise, outbidding all Arab regimes on the issue of Palestine, especially the Saudi kingdom, allowed Tehran to break the Sunni cordon that Riyadh sought to build around it to shield the Sunnis in general from the influence of the "Islamic Revolution".

Thus, Hezbollah was born at the same time as an embodiment of Lebanese resistance against the Zionist occupier and an arm of Tehran, part of the ideological-military network that Iran sought to build in the Arab East and which would later expand significantly, taking advantage of the US overthrow of Iraq's Baathist regime and Washington's empowerment of Tehran's supporters in Baghdad, followed by the Syrian Baathist regime's resort to Iran to save it from the popular revolution that rose up against it (it is sufficient to point out this historical paradox to show the hollowness of what remained of the Baathist ideology following the despotic degeneration of the regimes in Baghdad and Damascus, but also Tehran's prioritising of sectarian considerations over its own pan-Islamic ideology).

Hezbollah naturally imitated what the Khomeinist regime had done in Iran where it crushed all other groups that had been involved in the struggle against the Shah's rule, the Iranian left in particular. The party imposed by force its monopoly on the resistance against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon, dealing painful blows to the "Lebanese Resistance Front" spearheaded by the Communists. It then ended up accepting a tense coexistence with what remained of its competitors in the areas where Lebanon's Shiites are concentrated, from Amal to the Lebanese Communist Party, adapting to the specificity of a country where sectarian pluralism is mixed with political pluralism. This path led to the party's involvement, under the leadership of Hassan Nasrallah, its Secretary-General since 1992, in the Lebanese political and institutional system in a very hybrid combination.

On the one hand, Hezbollah formed a state of its own with all its components, including an army, a security apparatus, and various civil institutions, within the Lebanese state, thus considerably increasing the latter's fragility. Hezbollah's substate is completely dependent on Iran, ideologically, financially, and militarily, and openly declares its allegiance through its professed adoption of the principle of "Guardianship of the Jurist" specific to the Khomeinist doctrine, which legitimizes the autocratic-theocratic rule that characterizes the mullahs' regime. On the other hand, Hezbollah is a Lebanese faction that has become a key part of the country's patchwork, although it imported customs imitating the Iranian patron. Hassan Nasrallah embodied this duality very well: he was the man who once boasted in a speech that his party is the "Party of the Guardianship of the Jurist" and he was also a Lebanese leader at heart,

addressing his party's popular base as well as all Lebanese in the dialect they are familiar with.

Nasrallah was keen to preserve this duality, by strengthening its Lebanese facet through odd alliances of a type that is unique to Lebanese politics, especially his alliance with Michel Aoun, the Maronite leader who, until 2006, was outbidding everybody in hostility to the Syrian regime and boasting of his role in producing UN Security Council Resolution 1559 of 2004 that called for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon and the disarmament of Hezbollah. Hassan Nasrallah also showed a special concern for his party's popular base and for Lebanon in general, particularly when he expressed his regret over the consequences of the Israeli aggression in 2006, which followed an operation carried out by his party across Lebanon's southern border. However, Hezbollah did not hesitate to respond to Tehran's invitation to throw its forces into the battle to save the Syrian Assad regime, contradicting its main argument up until then, which was that it had to keep its weapons independently of the Lebanese state for the sole purpose of defending Lebanon.

Hezbollah has sustained this last narrative over the years by combining a keenness to avoid exposing Lebanon to the Zionist machine of destruction and killing through a reckless adventure, such as a new crossing of the southern border, along with strengthening its image as a shield for the country in the face of that machine. The party played the main role in driving the Israeli troops out of Lebanon in 2000 and proved again in 2006 its ability to resist their aggression by imposing a high price on them. Iran then considerably reinforced its arsenal of missiles and rockets until Hezbollah believed that it had achieved some degree of "balance of terror" between it and the Zionist state. It portrayed its intervention in Syria as part of its battle against Israel, aimed at preserving the "axis of resistance". Yet, since last month, the Zionist state has managed to settle the "mutual, but unequal, deterrence" between it and Hezbollah, by means of an "asymmetric war" in which it employed its intelligence and technological superiority in addition to its greater military power (see [Lebanon and the Israeli Strategy of Intimidation](#)).

Hezbollah is now facing the dilemma of its dual loyalty, in a way that affects its vital interests. Evidence indicates that part of its leaders, especially among the political leadership involved in Lebanese state institutions, are inclined to accept a ceasefire, along with a withdrawal north of the Litani River in conformity with the 2006 UN Security Council resolution in this regard, and to facilitate the election of a consensual president of the Lebanese Republic, other than the man loyal to Damascus the party has insisted on so far. Tehran, however, firmly opposed this tendency, forcing the party to adhere to the principle of making a ceasefire in Lebanon dependent on a ceasefire in Gaza, despite the fact that it has become absurd since the main thrust of the Zionist aggression has moved from Gaza to Lebanon. It would be now more rational for Hamas to insist on continuing the fighting in the Strip until a ceasefire in Lebanon is reached in support of Hezbollah, than for the latter to insist on continuing the fighting in Lebanon in support of Hamas in Gaza, where the movement is no longer capable of more than waging a guerrilla war that will certainly carry on as long as the occupation remains, that is, until a time of which there is no glimmer at all in the darkness of the foreseeable future.

The fact is that Tehran's insistence on keeping the Lebanese front active has nothing to do with concern for the people of Gaza and even for the people of Lebanon themselves, including the Shiites who have suffered and are suffering most of the damage resulting from the ongoing Zionist aggression. Rather, its goal is to keep Hezbollah's deterrent role active as long as Iran faces the possibility that the Netanyahu government ignites a large-scale war against Iran. This is the reason why Hezbollah has not used the strongest weapons of its military arsenal so far, as they are mainly intended for the defence of Iran, not for the defence of Lebanon or even of the party itself.

The dilemma and paradox become more complicated as the Israeli killing and destruction that targets Hezbollah's popular base increase, since it is in the party's obvious interest to cease fire and retreat, as any force facing aggression by a much stronger force should, especially when the enemy has been able to eliminate a major part of its leadership. This is without mentioning the fact that Hezbollah operates in a social and political environment – the extremely fragile Lebanese fabric – that threatens to explode in its face. Under such circumstances, it would be logical to implement a partial withdrawal to limit losses and damage and avoid the risk of turning the setback into a

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defeat. However, another obvious interest conflicts with the previous and is governed by dependence on Tehran, in that without Iran the party would be unable to financially compensate its social base and environment in order to maintain its popularity, and without Iran it cannot rebuild its military strength, as it did on both counts in 2006.

[Gilbert Achcar's blog](#)

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