

This chapter focuses on the recent evolution and current impasse of the largest and most prominent Lebanese political party: Hezbollah.

First known for its kidnappings of Westerners and military operations against Israeli and Western armed forces in South Lebanon in the 1980s, Hezbollah is today a fully-fledged political organisation constituted by political, social and military branches. The former widespread perception of Hezbollah as a fanatical religious organisation, surrogate of Iran, that sought to impose an Islamic Iranian republic model on Lebanese society has given way to a more complex picture in post-civil war Lebanon, thanks also to the slow political integration of the party in the Lebanese context.

However, the political crisis that started in Lebanon with the Syrian withdrawal under international pressures in 2005 and continued with the Israeli onslaught in 2006, the Nahr al-Bared crisis in 2007 and, in general, the consolidation of two opposing political blocks sustained by rival foreign patrons is increasingly polarising the Lebanese scene, endangering national political reconciliation and Hezbollah's integration into the Lebanese political system.

In what follows, we analyse the different components of Hezbollah's ideology and political strategy hoping to shed light on Hezbollah's possible role and evolution both with respect to the national political arena and to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Hezbollah's emergence as a guerrilla movement was not only due to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and Western, Syrian and Iranian interventions in the country, but also to the general Lebanese Shia community's political mobilisation that started back in the 1960s.

Hezbollah was founded in the early 1980s as a small militia with Iranian training and finance and grew in the following years thanks to a few successful kidnappings of Westerners and military operations mainly against Israeli Defence Forces. The political programme of the new organisation was first presented in the so called 'open letter to the oppressed' of 1985, a statement by the Party Spokesman (al-Sayyed Ibrahim Amine al-Sayyed) which marks the organisation's shift from secret resistance to public political work. The document states openly that the Iranian Revolution is the main source of inspiration for the new political and military organisation, which bases itself on three ideological pillars: (1) Islam is a comprehensive religion and, thus, the ideal political model is the Islamic state (in this case a republic based on the Iranian model); (2) resistance against Israeli occupation is the priority of the party (see below in § 3); (3) the legitimate leadership is bestowed to the Jurist-Theologian who is considered to be the successor to the Prophet and the Imams (following Imam Khomeini's concept of the *wilaya al-Faqih* or the 'ruling of the jurispudent'). The 'open letter' goes on to explain, however, that the Islamic state could not be imposed by one group over the others: "we call for the implementation of the Islamic system based on a direct and free choice of the people and not through forceful imposition as may be assumed by some."¹⁹

This moderate vision rests on the conviction that without appropriate circumstances like those in Iran in the wake of the revolution, any revolutionary activity towards establishing an Islamic state would result in chaos and civil war (*fitna*). The goal of an Islamic state thus remained in the intellectual realm, but was relinquished from the movement's political programme in view of the perceived unfeasibility of establishing an Islamic state in multi-confessional Lebanon.²⁰ The idea was indeed rejected not only by other faith-based communities (Sunnis, Christians, Druzes, etc.) but also by a significant portion of the Shia community itself.²¹

Hezbollah's practice was and still is in line with the party's declarations. During the civil war and before the Taif agreement, Hezbollah could be defined as an "anti-systemic and revolutionary party". In fact, not only Hezbollah believed that Lebanon's system of government was illegitimate, but also that it could only be reformed through external action.²² The party's hostility, however, rested on its opposition to the principle of political sectarianism, the rejection of Maronite sectarian privileges and Shia under-representation and the real or perceived collaboration of Amin Gemayel's government with Israel. Hostility did not rest - as some might assume - on the un-Islamic character of the Lebanese state.²³

With the 1989 Taif agreement, Hezbollah's perception of the state underwent a significant transformation. The new constitution allowed for a more equitable distribution of power among the sects by assigning 50-50 communal quotas to Muslims and Christians in Parliament, and also by reducing the power of the Maronite President of the Republic in

2. Hezbollah in a state of uncertainty

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2.1 Hezbollah 'lebanonisation' or 'opening the door': Accommodating to the Lebanese state

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¹⁹ From a theological point of view this is based on the Quranic verse 'Let there be no compulsion in religion' (Quran, 2:256) quoted in the open letter of 1985. Open letter pp. 19-20 quoted by Naim Qassem (2005), *Hezbollah a Story from within*, London: Saqi Books, p. 31.

²⁰ Naim Qassem, op. cit., pp. pp. 30-34 and Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), *Hizbu'llah. Politics, Religion*, London: Pluto Press, pp. 34-59.

²¹ In an opinion poll carried out at the beginning of the nineties, only 13% of the Lebanese Shia community was in favour of an Islamic state. Judith Harik's 1992 study, quoted by Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), op. cit., p. 35.

²² Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), op. cit., p. 26-27.

²³ Ibid. Amin Pierre Gemayel was the President of Lebanon from 1982 to 1988.

favour of a multi-sectarian cabinet. Taif also foresaw a phased removal of sectarianism from the system, although the recommendation only remained on paper.

Hezbollah continued to reject the ‘sectarian essence’ of the system, but not its institutional structure. The party recognised the post-Taif Lebanese secular state and decided to participate in the first post-civil war national election in 1992, thus transforming itself from a “total refusal anti-systemic party” to a “protest anti-systemic party”.²⁴

A partial explanation of the party’s changing attitude towards a political system hitherto considered illegitimate is the necessity to accommodate the party’s growing constituency in Shia areas. In less than a decade, Hezbollah became a very structured mass-based political organisation extending its activities beyond the political and the military realms to the social and cultural ones as well. Its transformation from a guerrilla movement into a complex and large political party, resembling in its structures and institutions to post-II world war socialist mass parties, inevitably had an impact on the party’s decision-making and ideological base. The party’s constituency is interested not only in fighting Israel, but also in everyday life in Lebanon and being represented in national politics.²⁵

Hezbollah’s political accommodation with the post-Taif Lebanese state is also a strategic choice and a way to ensure the organisation’s survival: only by integrating in the political system could the party claim to represent *Lebanese* resistance against Israel as opposed to being perceived as alien to Lebanese society.

Hezbollah’s transformation continued after the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, when it participated in government for the first time. Hezbollah justified its participation in the executive in 2005-6 as an expression of responsibility towards the country’s need of stability. However, the decision to participate in the government should also be viewed in the context of the party’s sense of vulnerability after losing Syrian protection. Participating in the cabinet was a way to prevent the Lebanese government from succumbing to external pressures regarding Hezbollah disarmament or, more generally, from imposing on the country decisions against Hezbollah’s interests.²⁶

When the party decided to withdraw its ministers from the government in November 2006 and to start a political campaign against the Siniora government, it did so by following constitutional rules through the organisation of demonstrations, a strike and a sit-in in central Beirut.²⁷ Hezbollah accuses the government of being illegitimate and unconstitutional, which is open to dispute of course. However Hezbollah did not and continues not to challenge state institutions or the general rules of the Lebanese political system.

Party officials interviewed by the author in May 2007 claimed that Hezbollah’s long-term goals for the Lebanese political system are a strong sovereign state, with an army capable of defending the national territory and a strong and equitable welfare system. The state should be built on the bases of the Taif constitution, that is, on a system of ‘consensual democracy’. They also made clear that an Islamic state model is not applicable to Lebanon, which is a pluralist and multi-confessional society. A member of Hezbollah’s Politbureau specified also that Israel taught Hezbollah a lesson, demonstrating how dangerous it is to build a state and a society based on a single confession be it Jewish or other.²⁸

Hezbollah does not question the current Lebanese Constitution and does not exclude any future participation in government. It has called many times, both before and after the 2006 war, for a unity government. The party’s current aim, however is not to take the responsibility of government, but only to have ‘veto power’ or the so-called ‘blocking third’ over executive decisions.²⁹ This position could be explained by the party’s priority in resisting Israel. Full government involvement might distract Hezbollah’s energies and also, under present domestic and international conditions, it might oblige the party to make concessions and compromises that would endanger its integrity in the eyes of its constituency.³⁰ Finally, Hezbollah is – as we will see in the next section – very aware of the concerns of other Lebanese communities with respect to its possible political supremacy in the country. This is probably the main reason behind its prudent approach to power.

Thus, so far, Hezbollah has firmly accepted the rules of the game (the Constitution and the Lebanese state) and has chosen political participation as the best strategy to solve the country’s problems and ensure the party’s physical survival in a hostile environment. Yet, this strategy of ‘opening the door’ could also be reversed, and the party might find itself more inclined to revert back to the outsider position it held before Taif. This may be the case especially if Hezbollah finds itself increasingly isolated internationally and rejected by the domestic system of government.

²⁴ Ibid. Quoting Sartori.

²⁵ For the transformation of the party see for instance, Augustus Richard Norton (2007), *Hezbollah. A Short History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

²⁶ Interview with a party member, Beirut 22 May.

²⁷ See Jim Quilty (2007), *A Winter of Lebanon’s Discontents*, MERIP, 26 January.

²⁸ Interviews with party’s officials, Beirut May 2007.

²⁹ Major national decisions should be passed with a two-third majority. For technical details see International Crisis Group (2006), *Lebanon at a Tripwire*, Middle East Briefing N. 20, 21 December.

³⁰ Interviews with party’s officials, Beirut May 2007.

Hezbollah 'Lebanonisation' or *infatih* came with the party's growing emphasis on its Lebanese identity, inspired by its desire of legitimisation across all sectors of Lebanese society.

This policy notwithstanding, the party is widely accused of being dependent on Iran and Syria and of serving a foreign agenda against Lebanese national interests. Hezbollah is well aware that the *Wilaya al-Faqih* concept and its close relationship with Iran could undermine its image as a true Lebanese nationalist movement. Hezbollah recognises the *wilaya* (or political authority) of Ali Khamenei (currently Grand Ayatollah and Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran) as the successor of the Imam Khomeyni, although the former does not have the same standing and charisma of the father of the Islamic revolution. As explained by Shaykh Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary General, Khamenei's authority counts primarily when the party's leadership is confronted "with essential issues or overtures that might affect any of the working principles or requiring knowledge of legislative jurisprudence".³¹ In these cases, "the party would take the initiative of requesting clerical permission that would provide legal *shari'a* grounds for executing or ceasing a certain action".³² There is a certain ambiguity in this relationship, although Nasrallah cleverly compares Hezbollah's relationship with Iran to the relationship that Christian parties have with their church (the Vatican or other) or to the relationship that Communist parties had to the former-Soviet Union.³³ There is some evidence, however, that Hezbollah asks for advice only on crucial matters and only once the Party's upper echelons have already reached a decision. Khamenei's advice is given, at least officially, only on Hezbollah's request and only as a form of legitimisation of the majority decision already taken. That was the case for the party's decision to participate in the 1992 elections. Khamenei's advice was given only after an intense internal debate and a vote which had already opted for participation.³⁴

Besides ideological ties, Iran provides a very important financial contribution to Hezbollah, even if the party could also rely on different sources of domestic funding.³⁵ The exact amount of Iranian funding is unknown, but the financing itself is not kept secret either.³⁶ Walking in the Shia districts of Beirut, it is very common to see street posters mentioning Iranian funding. Clearly, the more the party is isolated from the government and from Western countries, the more it will rely on Iran for sustenance. Regarding Lebanon's post 2006 war reconstruction for example, there is an ongoing polemic between the government and Hezbollah, with the latter claiming to be cut off from Western funding received by the governing coalition.³⁷

By contrast, Hezbollah's relationship with Syria is strategic rather than ideological. During Syria's occupation of Lebanon, relations between the regime and Hezbollah were often strained. Syria protected the movement, ensuring it could retain its arms against Israel, but it also ensured the party would not become too powerful. Syria currently logistically supports Hezbollah by allowing military and financial assistance to cross into Lebanese territory.

These relationships with Iran and Syria however have not impeded Hezbollah to act as a Lebanese organisation both in its strategy and in terms of its political programme. Hezbollah's rank and file and upper echelons are all Lebanese. The party certainly refers to a regional and international environment in its political programme, but does so from a Lebanese perspective and not as an international organisation. As mentioned above, Hezbollah's first priority is its resistance against Israel's occupation of *Lebanon*. The strategic alliance with Iran and Syria is perceived as an alliance against US and Israeli hegemony in the region, which in Hezbollah's view, hampers Lebanon's full sovereignty.³⁸ Of course, as in the case of other Arab parties and regimes, Hezbollah embraces the 'Arab cause' or Arab nationalism,³⁹ but this cannot be read as evidence of Islamic or Arab universalism.

At the same time, Hezbollah is not only Lebanese, it is also a Shia party both ideologically - in its references to Shia revolutionary thoughts - and socially, as its constituency is almost 100% Shia. This is no exception in Lebanese politics where each community and, within each community, each notable (*zaim*) has its own constituency built on sectarian solidarity, a network of social services and security apparatuses, so as to create several states within the state.⁴⁰

Yet contrary to other Lebanese sectarian parties, Hezbollah has a traditionally anti-sectarian programme, its Shia composition notwithstanding.⁴¹ For example, Hezbollah's social activities in the suburb of Beirut, in the South and in the Beqaa Valley are open to all confessions and do not expose any Shia religious symbols. Up until Israel's unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah succeeded in being largely perceived as the 'Lebanese' resistance against Israel and as such it enjoyed widespread cross-sectarian support, further sustained by the party's reputation as a good and honest administrator.⁴²

2.2 Syria or Iran's long hand, sectarian party or national movement?

³¹ Naim Qassem (2005), op. cit., p. 56.

³² Ibid.

³³ Interviews with Party's officials, Beirut, May 2007.

³⁴ See Amal Saad-Ghorayeb (2002), op. cit., cap. 3 and 4.

³⁵ Apparently very important is the contribution of well-off Lebanese abroad.

³⁶ Interviews with Party's officials, Beirut, May 2007.

³⁷ Interviews with Party's officials, Beirut, May 2007.

³⁸ For Hezbollah's perceived need to contain US influence in the region see International Crisis Group (2007), *Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, Middle East Report n° 69, 10 October 2007, pp. 16-22.

³⁹ One of Hezbollah street-posters for the political mobilisation of Spring 2007 portrayed the picture of Chavez, President of Venezuela, Nasser, President of Egypt from 1952-1970 and symbol of Arab nationalism, near Nasrallah, Secretary General of the Hezbollah.

⁴⁰ As introductory readings on Lebanon political system and its contemporary historical trajectory see Elizabeth Picard (2002), *Lebanon. A Shattered Country*, London: Holmes & Meier, or Kamal Salibi (1993), *A house of many mansions. The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, London: I.B. Tauris.

⁴¹ See for instance Hezbollah 1992 Election Programme in Naim Qassem (2005), op. cit., appendix (full English translation).

⁴² Interviews with Farid al-Khazen, Talal Atrissi, Saad Kiwan, Beirut, May 2007.

Recent events have contributed to a gradual change in this perspective. Besides the issue of disarmament (see § 3), the regional chaos ignited by the US occupation of Iraq, the hostility of the US – followed by the EU – to Syria and Iran and the worsening Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has opened a new phase of regional and national confrontation largely based on sectarian politics. The sudden interest of the US (and France) in Lebanon since 2004 is only a chapter in a longer story. Since 2005, and even more so since the 2006 Israeli war, Hezbollah has feared exclusion from the national arena and international isolation. The current difficult situation has brought the party to “clearly fall back on sectarianism [...] utilising the Shia community as an insurance”.⁴³

Hezbollah’s leadership is very aware of the ‘sectarian danger’ both for Lebanon and for the region. They accuse the US and Israel of playing the old colonial card of sectarian divisions in the region.⁴⁴ The political alliance with former General Michel Aoun is important to the party precisely because of its trans-sectarian character.⁴⁵ Aoun, a Maronite who was in exile in France since the early 1990s, returned to the country just in time for the 2005 elections, held after the Syrian final withdrawal. While many Aounists were in the anti-Syrian 14th of March front, Aoun’s Christian rivals had no intention of granting Aoun a place in government, a move that would have cleared his way to the presidency. This induced Aoun’s alliance with the ‘pro-Syria’ 8th of March front.⁴⁶ The alliance was stipulated in February 2006 with a ten-point document⁴⁷ and weathered the summer 2006 war and ensuing events. Beyond its cross sectarian value, the alliance is also based on a common nationalist, anti-corruption and social-justice programme.⁴⁸

To sum up, on the one hand Hezbollah increasingly relies on its Shia constituency due to the worsening political environment, yet on the other hand it is also aware of the danger of an excessively strong sectarian affiliation. Following its political tradition, it attempts to stress a trans-sectarian, issue-based programme, rather than a sectarian one. Hezbollah is also aware of the concerns of other communities – especially Maronites – with respect to the growing ‘Shia power’, especially in view of the ‘Shia Crescent’ idea, which is increasingly used as a geo-political reference point by Western media-analysts and governments. When analysing the 2006-7 political mobilisation against the Siniora government for example, Hezbollah’s moderation and self-restraint with respect to its ‘real’ power comes to the fore. For instance, the party insists on veto power, as other communities would do in similar situation, but does not demand a clear cut majoritarian democracy (‘one man, one vote’), which would probably give Hezbollah and its allies the majority of votes.

2.3 Violence and Resistance to Israeli occupation

As mentioned above, Hezbollah’s *raison d’être* is its *jihad* against the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 to destroy the PLO infrastructure in the country and occupied the South until its unilateral withdrawal in 2000, determined partly by Hezbollah’s efficient military resistance.

Military *jihad* (in contrast with spiritual or moral *jihad*) is defined by Hezbollah as a defensive war against aggression and occupation and is viewed as a duty of every Muslim. It cannot be directed internally, not even against oppressive or illegitimate regimes.⁴⁹

Hezbollah officially claims it is impossible to negotiate with Israel because negotiation would imply the implicit recognition of the ‘Zionist entity’.⁵⁰ However, the argument against negotiations is political and strategic and mainly based on a critique of the Oslo process, which did not halt Israel’s colonial expansion and create a sustainable Palestinian state. There is no mention in Hezbollah’s discourse of a divine prohibition to negotiate. A proof of this is Hezbollah’s willingness to negotiate with Israel on prisoners’ exchange and the ‘rules of the game’ in conducting the conflict.⁵¹

After Israel’s withdrawal in 2000, Hezbollah benefited from a sudden surge in popularity both in Lebanon and the region. This was immediately followed however by the question of the party’s disarmament. The Taif agreement had imposed the disarmament of all militias. Hezbollah was the only Lebanese exception (the other non-Lebanese militias being the Palestinian ones) because of its role in resisting Israel. After the withdrawal of 2000, as an ICG report put it, Hezbollah became ‘a rebel without a cause’.⁵² The party continued to justify its existence as an armed militia by mentioning the ongoing danger posed by Israel to Lebanese sovereignty (i.e., the Israeli violations of Lebanese air and sea spaces, the Palestinian refugee problem, prisoners, the Sheeba Farms, etc.) as well as the Lebanese army’s inability to defend the country. In addition, the deterioration of the situation in the occupied territories and the outbreak of the second intifada did not help the normalisation of relations.

43 Reinoud Leenders, “How the Rebel regained His Cause: Hizbullah & the Sixth Arab-Israeli War”, *The Sixth War. Israel’s Invasion of Lebanon*, Vol. 6, Summer 2006, The Mit Electronic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, pp. 38-56.

44 Interviews with Party’s officials, Beirut, May 2007.

45 Interviews with Party’s officials, Beirut, May 2007.

46 The 14th and 8th of March fronts take their names from the date of their major demonstrations in 2005.

47 Full text of the agreement: http://www.tayyar.org/files/documents/cpl_hezbollah.pdf

48 Interview with Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, Beirut, May 2007.

49 Naim Qassem (2005), op. cit., p. 39-43.

50 Ibid. p. 164; Amal Saad Ghorayeb (2002), op. cit., p. 151.

51 Interviews with Party’s Officials, Beirut, May 2007 and Naim Qassem (2005), op. cit., pp. 164-168.

52 International Crisis Group (2003), *Hizbollah: Rebel without a Cause?*, Middle East Briefing, 30 July

The issue of disarmament reemerged on the Western agenda with UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which - under the initiative of the US and France - called for Syrian withdrawal, but also for the full implementation of the Taif agreement and thus for the disarmament of all militias.⁵³

After Syria's withdrawal, the main Lebanese political actors established a *modus vivendi* notwithstanding the growing polarisation both in the region and in the country. Hezbollah participated in the government and in the 'national dialogue' with the result that the Siniora government agreed to refer to Hezbollah not as a militia, but as a 'national resistance group' thus effectively removing Hezbollah from being subject to UNSC Resolution 1559.

The unexpected Israeli attack of summer 2006 in response to the capture of two Israeli soldiers by a Hezbollah commando changed the cards on the table again. As stated by Olmert himself right after the beginning of the war, the aim of the Israeli military operation in Lebanon was the disarmament or at least the weakening of Hezbollah's militia and the 'removal' of Hezbollah from Lebanon. After 34 days of war with a naval blockade, a ground invasion and air force attacks, leading to the death of approximately 1200 Lebanese, thousands of wounded and almost a million displaced persons, the result was that Hezbollah remained in place and also emerged as politically victorious.

When a ceasefire in conjunction with the UNSC resolution 1701 was imposed on the two contenders, Hezbollah was still permitted to retain its arms. The UNIFIL II mission enjoys good relations with Hezbollah in the South and so far there have been no noteworthy incidents. Hezbollah has welcomed international intervention as long as it does not aim at disarming the resistance. As noted by Reinhud Leenders, Hezbollah has regained its cause,⁵⁴ or better, it has demonstrated that its cause has always been there.

The current situation is not promising. Hezbollah has on various occasions declared that it is willing to disarm in favour of a sovereign Lebanese state with an army capable of defending its territory and citizens. It is impossible to check the sincerity of this statement as the situation is very far from it. After the Syrian withdrawal, Lebanon is a quasi multilateral 'neo-trusteeship' in economic (e.g., foreign debt), political (external alliances of the government and opposition, international tribunal) and military (UNIFIL2, Israeli violations of sovereignty) terms.

Hezbollah reads the spring-summer 2007 crisis in the Palestinian camp of Nahr al-Bared as a possible new attempt at destabilising the country and its militia. The immediate reaction after the Lebanese army's first confrontation with the Jihadist Sunni group of Fatah al-Islam, was that it could be a provoked escalation to raise the question of Palestinian and Hezbollah's disarmament and demonstrate the necessity of a UN Chapter 7 action to handle the security situation.⁵⁵

Also, the series of political assassinations and inflammatory rhetoric continue with the murder in September of Antoine Ghanem, a March 14 member of Parliament and in December of General François al-Hajj. Rumours of rearming militias have become increasingly audible, particularly among the various and rival Christian groups.⁵⁶

Mounting political tensions both in the country and in the region have translated into the presidential election crisis with the two opposing blocks not reaching a compromise despite the various postponement of voting since September 2007. At the moment of writing the two opposing blocks have agreed on a presidential candidate, army chief General Michel Suleiman, but are still divided on the make-up of the new government.

Beyond speculations, recent events do not favour a peaceful disarmament of Hezbollah or a climate of reciprocal trust between different Lebanese fronts. Hezbollah believes that its arms are the only form of Lebanese resistance against Israeli violations and the only way to ensure the party's survival in a hostile environment. Under present circumstances it is highly unlikely to disarm spontaneously.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that Hezbollah could be defined as a large, mass-based, pragmatic political party. This simple statement implies that Hezbollah cannot be 'removed' or that its removal would dangerously imply 'depopulating' large Lebanese areas.⁵⁷

Certain characteristics of Hezbollah pose a problem for other Lebanese political groups and for external – mainly Western – actors. Those characteristics are mainly the party's Islamist ideology, its relationship with Iran and Syria, its Shia constituency, its military wing and its hostile approach to Israel.

2.4 Conclusion: Hezbollah in a state of uncertainty