

Hezbollah within and beyond Lebanon

I. Introduction

The Lebanese Hezbollah is arguably the armed political party that best exemplifies the increasingly blurred boundaries between internal and external affairs and the interconnectedness of conflicts in the Middle East. Nurtured by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) since 1982, its genesis was prompted by several factors, including the disintegration of the Lebanese state and the rise of local militias (since the early 1970s) against the backdrop of the Arab-Israeli conflict; the marginalisation of the Lebanese Amal Shia movement by the new revolutionary regime in Iran (starting from 1981) due to its rejection of the *wilāyat al-faqīh* doctrine¹ and its perceived reluctance to support the Palestinian insurgency in South Lebanon;² as well as the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which served as the ultimate catalyst for the inception of "the spiritual child of Imam Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution," as Hezbollah was described in 2006 by one of its founders, the former Iranian ambassador to Syria Ali Akbar Mohtashemi.³

Following the official announcement of its establishment in 1985, there was nothing inexorable about Hezbollah's steady monopoly of the military resistance to the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon. Indeed, the operations had been mainly carried out up until then by leftist parties before restrictions were imposed upon them under Syria's

watch. The privileged treatment conceded to Hezbollah by virtue of the Syro-Iranian alliance⁴ was further illustrated by its exemption from the militia demobilisation that was implemented in the wake of the Lebanese civil war in 1991. Although Israel has previously expressed its willingness (in 1993 and 1998) to achieve a gradual military withdrawal from Lebanon in exchange for security guarantees, Lebanon will nevertheless remain committed to the principle of unconditional withdrawal without prior negotiations, a stand that reflected its Syrian tutor's aim of strengthening its position at the negotiation table regarding the Golan Heights by keeping the Lebanese southern front open. This logic prevailed even after the unilateral Israeli pullback in 2000, when Hezbollah rejected disarmament by putting forth that the Shebaa farms remained under occupation.⁵

The Syrian agenda was not irreconcilable with Iran's quest to upset the "peace process,"⁶ and reap the ideological benefits of Hezbollah's increasing popular legitimacy as a resistance movement in the Islamic realm, which culminated in the partial setback suffered by Israel in the 2006 war⁷ (preceded by unsuccessful Israeli campaigns in Lebanon in 1993 and 1996). However, Iran had another less obvious agenda and that was to progressively convert Hezbollah into a key strategic element of its deterrence and retaliatory capabilities against Israel. Indeed, the enhancement of Hezbollah's arsenal⁸ and

¹ On this theory see Enayat, *Iran: Khomeini's Concept*, 1983, 160-180.

² Shaery-Einsenlohr, *Shi'ite Lebanon*, 2008, 104 and 108.

³ Minoui, *Les révélations d'un cofondateur*, 2008, 89.

⁴ This partnership was nonetheless not devoid of competition over the political control of the Lebanese Shia sphere, which reached its peak during the internecine fighting between Amal and Hezbollah (1988-1990). Both regional actors sponsored a twin agreement in 1989 and 1990, ending the conflict between their Lebanese accomplices.

⁵ Kassir, *A Polity in an Uncertain Regional Environment*, 2003, 91-96; Kaufman, *Who Owns the Shebaa Farms?*, 2002, 576-596.

⁶ Harris, *Faces of Lebanon*, 1997, 314.

⁷ Haddad, *Al-Qaïda/Hezbollah*, 2007, 173-177.

⁸ Hezbollah is estimated to have around 130,000 missiles today. ICG, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, 2018, 6.

regional role took place in parallel with the advancement of Iran's nuclear programme. From this perspective, this article will shed light on part of Hezbollah's multifaceted and transversal involvement in domestic and regional issues.

II. "Lebanon's eye and hand"

In 1992, Hezbollah took part in the first post-Lebanese civil war parliamentary elections once it had secured the consent of Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei. The latter's intercession was officially motivated by the need to arbitrate an internal debate,⁹ but one can also legitimately assume that Hezbollah's move entailed the following implied message conveyed to Syria (whose tutelage role in Beirut had been tacitly recognised by the United States as a result of its joining the anti-Iraq coalition): while Hezbollah acknowledges operating "under the Syrian roof" (*taḥta al-saqf al-sūrī*), Ayatollah Khamenei is its *faqīh* (jurist-ruler) not only from a religious standpoint but also from a political one when it comes to strategic issues.¹⁰ In any respect, Hezbollah's decision to engage in the political process carried a pragmatic orientation, which admits the present infeasibility of implementing an Islamic state in a multi-sectarian setting.¹¹ That did not prevent it, however, from expanding the breadth of its Islamist social institutions¹² in an endeavour to establish, in a very Gramscian manner, a "society of resistance" in its strongholds while benefitting from weighty Iranian funding¹³ along with opaque fund-raising activities, including (recently) the use of cryptocurrencies.¹⁴

It soon became clear that Hezbollah's agenda was at odds with the aspirations of slain Sunni leader Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri to lay the foundation for the integration of Lebanon into a post-peace Middle East. In this regard, the liberation of South Lebanon in 2000 had, by a Weberian unintended consequence, strengthened the campaign spearheaded by Christian and Druze leaders calling for the end of Syrian hegemony. At the opposite end, Syrian-backed forces suspected Hariri of subtly supporting their impetus for change and colluding with France to push for UNSC Resolution 1559, which calls upon remaining foreign forces to withdraw and provides for the disarmament of all militias present on Lebanese soil. More concerned about the latter component, Hezbollah made its first entry into government in the aftermath of Hariri's assassination and the ensuing end of Syria's stranglehold on Lebanon in 2005. Years later, a senior investigator for the UN-backed Special Tribunal for Lebanon was quoted saying: "Our theory of the case was that Hezbollah pulled the trigger, but could not and would not have done so without the blessing and logistical support from both Syria and Iran."¹⁵ The fate of Lebanon was unmistakably in Hezbollah's hand after having survived the 2006 war; thwarted a government attempt to dismantle its communications network in 2008 (by briefly seizing west Beirut); propelled its main Christian ally Michel Aoun to head of state in 2016; and strengthened its position in the parliamentary elections of 2018.

While increasingly subject to sanctions by the Trump administration,¹⁷ Hezbollah was met in 2019 with a yet greater and unforeseen

⁹ Alagha, *Hizbullah's Conception*, 2007, 101.

¹⁰ Tellingly, Hezbollah has since then refrained from publicly requesting Khamenei's guidance on strategic issues.

¹¹ Alagha, *Hizbullah's Conception*, 2007, 104-105.

¹² Harik, *Hizbullah's Public and Social Services*, 2006, 259-286.

¹³ Amounting to \$700 million per year (before US sanctions) according to former US special envoy for Iran. Sly and Haidamous, *Trump's Sanctions*, 2019.

¹⁴ Passot, *Israeli Strategy*, 2020, 16.

¹⁵ Filkins, *The Shadow Commander*, 2013. The UN court, which was not allowed to indict countries, governments or organisations, ultimately convicted in absentia Hezbollah member Salim Ayyash in the Hariri killing case.

¹⁶ Treasury Labels Bank, US Department of the Treasury Press Release, 2019.

¹⁷ Haddad, *La révolte libanaise*, 2020, 26.

challenge in the form of the Lebanese cross-sectarian uprising against the corruption, dysfunctionality and unaccountability of the confessional governance, which along with the rentier economy adopted in the post-civil war era has been largely blameworthy for the country's economic meltdown. Hezbollah has succeeded much better than traditional parties in retaining the support of its social base (by using a mixture of intimidation and enticement) and this is undoubtedly the main reason for the precarious survival of the political class as a whole in the face of the popular wave. Therefore, Hezbollah currently represents the guardian of the confessional system – notwithstanding its aspiration to tilt it even more in its favour. This serves, mostly through its alliances with President Aoun and Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri, as a shielding screen for its paramilitary vocation. Yet Hezbollah is not merely the staunch custodian of the mechanics of corruption in Lebanon; it is one of the important cogs.¹⁸ To take but one example, it has monopolised smuggling operations on both sides of the border with Syria to the detriment of the Lebanese treasury¹⁸ (which might lead to tensions with the Lebanese army in the future¹⁹).

And therein lies one of the core discrepancies between Hezbollah's regional role and the prerequisites for Lebanon's recovery. Indeed, Lebanon is required to apply strict structural reforms in order to unlock billions of dollars from the IMF and international donors spearheaded by France – an existentially critical issue after its first debt default and the devastating Beirut port blast in 2020,²⁰ not to men-

tion the economic impact of COVID-19. However, Hezbollah seems to reject the prospect of a full IMF programme, which would involve reforms such as the enhancement of governmental control over the land borders, harbours and airport, an event that would certainly affect its smuggling activities.²¹ But if it is to resume talks with the IMF – however arduous they may be, and not just because of Hezbollah's stance – Lebanon desperately needs to form a reform-oriented cabinet in accordance with a French road-map²² as it is on the verge of collapse. Although Hezbollah "appears the best able to weather the country's deterioration" among Lebanon's factions,²³ it is by no means immune to soaring discontent among Shia citizens regarding impoverishing living conditions. Moreover, once it had secured the control of Shia representation within the future government – and of the finance portfolio, "which can wield effective veto power over other ministries' expenditures and will be crucial for carrying out any reform agenda"²⁴ – it no longer had a conspicuous interest in prolonging the long-running stalemate over the formation of a fully functioning government. Yet, except for lip service,²⁵ the party has been passive with regard to ending the political wrangling in which the officials concerned with the cabinet formation process, i.e. President Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri (Rafiq Hariri's son), have been entangled for seven months.²⁶ There are thus grounds to believe that the holding pattern in which Lebanon is stuck is being used as a bargaining chip for Iran's benefit in its trial of strength with the US under the Biden administration.²⁷

¹⁸ Ezzi, *Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria*, 2020, 10-12.

¹⁹ Rabih, *Entre l'armée et le Hezbollah*, 2021.

²⁰ The company that bought the ammonium nitrate which exploded in Beirut last August had possible links to two Syrian businessmen under US sanctions for supporting the Syrian regime's war effort. Reuters, *Beirut blast*, 2021.

²¹ Taleb, *Hezbollah agrees to IMF help, under conditions*, 2020.

²² Reuters, *Factbox: Key points from draft French programme*, 2020.

²³ ICG, *Avoiding Further Polarisation*, 2020, 14.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

²⁵ Dakroub, *Hezbollah warns of social explosion*, 2021.

²⁶ At time of writing, France was considering – in cooperation with EU and American partners – imposing sanctions against Lebanese politicians in order to break the deadlock. Samrani, *Sanctions: Paris passe à la vitesse supérieure*, 2021.

²⁷ Barthe, *Au Liban, les chefs de parti*, 2021.

In light of all this, it was hardly surprising that Ayatollah Khamenei praised, in his first public speech since the US assassination of IRGC Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani in a drone strike near Baghdad airport in 2020, the latter's "distinguished and extraordinary" role in enabling Hezbollah to become "Lebanon's eye and hand."²⁸

III. A game-changer in Syria

Hezbollah has played, particularly since 2013, a pivotal military role in ensuring the al-Assad regime's survival, which has allowed the party to guarantee territorial contiguity along the Lebanese-Syrian border; secure the transit of Iranian weapons to its bases in Lebanon through Syria; prevent the establishment of Salafi-jihadist controlled areas on its doorstep;²⁹ enhance its combat experience; expand its presence to southwestern Syria³⁰ (in a bid to gain strategic depth and broaden the deterrence spectrum vis-à-vis Israel); as well as protect the Shia shrine of Sayyida Zaynab south of Damascus (bolstering Hezbollah's mobilising power among its core constituency).³¹

Although Hezbollah's intervention in Syria was fundamentally driven by strategic calculations, it did contribute to inflaming sec-

tarian tensions in Lebanon and beyond and severely damaged its long-standing efforts to present itself as a party embracing pan-Islamic causes. Hezbollah (which is estimated to have lost over 1,500 fighters) has nonetheless shown its willingness to pay the consequential costs entailed by its external projection of power,³² which include the designation of its "military wing" as a terrorist organisation by the European Union in 2013³³ and the persistent exposure of its depots and arms convoys in Syria to Israeli airstrikes.³⁴

This latter approach was defined in the Israel Defence Forces Strategy Document as "a continuum of low-intensity military actions" aimed at delaying the next confrontation.³⁵ However, it carries the risk – by the Israeli military intelligence's own admission – of Hezbollah becoming more eager to reinvigorate its deterrence rationale by provoking limited escalations without the intention of triggering a war.³⁶ Meanwhile, both parties vie in zeal to demonstrate their ability to inflict fatal damage on each other's positions.³⁷ All of this reinforces the idea that an all-out confrontation "could only be a miscalculation away,"³⁸ especially amid the challenges that Russia is facing in its attempts to prevent the use of Syria as an arena for an Iranian-Israeli showdown.³⁹

²⁸ Khalaji, *New Khamenei Speech*, 2020.

²⁹ However, Hezbollah finds itself caught up in a series of contradictions in its endeavour to thwart the spread of Salafi-jihadism in Lebanon. Haddad, *Lebanon: A Spillover to be?*, 2017, 36.

³⁰ Some unverified reports refer to a worsening of relations between Syria and Hezbollah because of Syrian-Israeli security contacts (held under Moscow's auspices), related in particular to the search for a modus vivendi in order to insulate that area from Iranian influence. Rabih, *De l'eau dans le gaz*, 2021.

³¹ For details, see Ezzi, *Lebanese Hezbollah's Experience in Syria*, 2020.

³² Haddad, *Shifting from consensus on Iraq*, 2015, 53-54.

³³ Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian Civil War seemingly had a greater impact on the EU's decision than the attack in Bulgaria that killed five Israeli tourists in 2012, for which Hezbollah was blamed. Interview with a European diplomat in Paris in 2013. Germany designated Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organisation last April.

³⁴ "Israel largely has given up on interdicting long-range missiles, of which Hizbollah now has many, and shifted to preventing the group's acquisition of precision weaponry that would enable it to target Israel's most sensitive locations". ICG, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, 2018, 5-6.

³⁵ Passot, *Israeli Strategy*, 2020, 7.

³⁶ L'Orient-Le Jour, *L'Iran utilisera ses "supplétifs"*, 2021.

³⁷ Shaham, *In message to Hezbollah*, 2021; Haddad, *Hezbollah: la nouvelle dissuasion*, 2021.

³⁸ ICG, *Israel, Hizbollah and Iran*, 2018, ii and 16; Haddad, *Lebanon and the plight*, 2019, 9-10.

³⁹ Al-Arabiya, *Russia refuses Syria's use as an arena*, 2021.

IV. A critical intercessor in Iraq

There is nothing mechanical about the solidarity between Shia movements in the arc stretching from Afghanistan to Lebanon. Suffice it here to say that Hezbollah caused discontent among major Iraqi Shia movements when it voiced opposition to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 (with the aim of saving its resistance credentials).⁴⁰ Only gradually did Hezbollah serve as an “intermediary” for Quds Force to train Iraqi Shia militants, a role that came into the limelight in the wake of an attack that killed five US soldiers in Karbala in 2007.⁴¹ Later on, Hezbollah reportedly provided training to Iraqi Shia fighters in Lebanon ahead of their joining the battlefields in Syria alongside the al-Assad regime⁴² – a move that was far from achieving consensus among Shia movements, as evidenced by the criticism levelled at Hezbollah by the influential Iraqi cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr as regards its intervention in Syria.⁴³ There was a greater consensus about the despatch of up to 500 Hezbollah specialists to Iraq in order to contribute to the military formation of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) in the aftermath of the so-called Islamic State’s large-scale offensive in Iraq in 2014.⁴⁴

At all of these stages, Hezbollah’s representative in Iraq, Mohamad Kawtharani, has reportedly been instrumental in advocating Iranian interests, to the extent that he “had taken

over some of the political coordination of Iran-aligned paramilitary groups” formerly organised by Qasem Soleimani (who was killed along with the deputy leader of PMF Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis⁴⁵) according to the US State Department under the Trump administration, which offered up to USD 10 million for information on his activities, networks and associates.⁴⁶ Kawtharani was nevertheless faced from the outset with “serious – perhaps unsurmountable – challenges in filling the shoes of the leaders killed in the drone attack”⁴⁷ considering the high level of authority required to manage the fractious relationships within the constellation of Iraqi parties loyal to Iran’s supreme leader. Furthermore, he vanished from view after the announcement of the abovementioned award,⁴⁸ with unverified reports claiming that he was banished to Lebanon by Iraqi prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in the wake of rocket attacks on US interests, which were blamed on the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militia Kata’ib Hezbollah.⁴⁹ His banishment – if true – might well fall within the framework of Washington’s effort to disrupt the “financial mechanisms” of Hezbollah⁵⁰ at a time when slain Iraqi political expert Hisham al-Hashemi had estimated the profit generated annually by Hezbollah’s financial activities in Iraq at USD 300 million.⁵¹ Given the importance of the security and economic issues at stake, it is unlikely that Hezbollah would willingly forgo its thriving influence in Iraq absent an Iranian request.

⁴⁰ Haddad, *Regards libanais sur la turbulence du monde*, 2018, 305-312.

⁴¹ Cordesman, *Iraq’s Insurgency*, 2007, 632.

⁴² Gulmohamad, *Iraq, Kurdish politicians denounce Hezbollah*, 2020.

⁴³ El-Nashra, *Al-mustaqbal: Al-Sadr ablagha*, 2013.

⁴⁴ Philipps, *Hezbollah: The real winner*, 2019. The Shia highest religious authority based in Najaf, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who had originally endorsed the formation of this paramilitary institution, later took a dim view of it when it appeared clear that several of its units remained loyal in practice to IRGC, and not to the Iraqi state, after IS had been almost defeated. He thus decided in 2020 to put the PMF’s brigades loyal to him under the direct authority of Iraqi security forces. Al-Salhy, *Iraqi Shia leader*, 2020.

⁴⁵ Hezbollah denied that any Lebanese national had been killed in the drone attack after reports had mentioned that Samer Abdallah, head of its external operations and a son-in-law of slain Hezbollah military commander Imad Mughniyeh, was among those killed. Al-Arabi al-Jadid, “*Hizbullah*” *yanfi*, 2020.

⁴⁶ Reuters, *U.S. offers \$10 million*, 2020.

⁴⁷ Reuters, *Tehran-backed Hezbollah steps in*, 2020.

⁴⁸ Abu al-Khair, *\$10 million bounty*, 2021.

⁴⁹ 24.ae, *Al-Kadhimi yadfa’*, 2020.

⁵⁰ Reuters, *U.S. offers \$10 million*, 2020.

⁵¹ Abdul-Hussein, *Akhir dirasa*, 2020.

V. Palestine remains at the heart of the stakes

While many Shias have long had to deal with – or even revolt against – the peripheral status of the Beqaa and South Lebanon within the Lebanese state, Hezbollah has succeeded over the years in endowing these territories with a major strategic value in the Middle East (thus taking a revenge on the state) by virtue of its ambition to link the strong sympathy felt for Palestine in the Islamic world with Iran's power politics and regional aspirations.⁵² That sympathy is still prominent nowadays, which explains Iran's continuous bid to keep the Palestinian issue within its realm of control, notably through its renewed rapprochement with Hamas.⁵³

Hezbollah's commitment to the Palestinian cause is thus strategically oriented to the benefit of Iran and goes beyond rhetoric. In point of fact, one should not forget that Hezbollah's abduction of two Israeli soldiers in July 2006 (treated as a *casus belli* by Israel) was arguably motivated in part by its keen-

ness to burnish its credentials as a resistant party while Hamas was faced with a military campaign in Gaza (following the capture of an Israeli soldier). Moreover, its threat to invade the Galilee region in the event of a new war against Lebanon, which has been occasionally brandished by Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and is part of a deterrence strategy, is taken very seriously by Israel.⁵⁴

Hezbollah still plays a decisive role in consolidating the "axis of resistance," as evidenced by its rejection, along with Hamas, of Arab normalisation agreements with Israel,⁵⁵ and its endeavour to restore ties between Hamas and the Syrian regime (which deteriorated following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011).⁵⁶ Therefore, at a time when Iran has repeatedly denied any link between its regional influence and its 2015 nuclear deal with major powers, there are sound reasons to believe that the "resistance front" will not be weakened without progress in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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⁵² Haddad, *Regards libanais sur la turbulence du monde*, 2018, 325.

⁵³ Abou Jalal, *Iran offers unconditional support*, 2020.

⁵⁴ Passot, *Israeli Strategy*, 2020, 3.

⁵⁵ The New Arab, *Hezbollah, Hamas chiefs meet*, 2020.

⁵⁶ Abu Amer, Iran, *Hezbollah lead mediation*, 2021.

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