

HEZBOLLAH'S DILEMMAS

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Executive Summary

The Lebanese Hezbollah is no longer the same organization that in 2006 battled the Israeli army to a standstill: the group today is more global, but has a weaker domestic position than in the past. For the last decade, Hezbollah has focused its formidable energies on helping its longtime ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, win the country's civil war. As that conflict winds down with Assad secure in power, Hezbollah is pulled in many competing directions. Lebanon itself is in crisis, with Hezbollah's own legitimacy declining. Iran is pushing Hezbollah to be even more expansive, continuing to help fight Israel and to bolster militant groups in Iraq, Yemen, and other countries. Hezbollah retains its enmity towards Israel and remains a dangerous threat, but the group appears careful to avoid activities that might escalate into all-out war. The United States can put more financial pressure on Hezbollah and otherwise attempt to weaken the group, but the group's fate will ultimately depend on Lebanese and regional dynamics, with the group exercising considerable influence in Lebanon and the region, though not necessarily seeking greater conflict with Israel or the United States. Until the Lebanese themselves put their own house in order by reducing corruption, engaging in economic reform, and improving transparency, there will be limits on how much the United States can, or should, engage with Lebanon.

In July 2022, the Lebanese Hezbollah sent unmanned drones to threaten Israel as it attempted to begin production at Karish gas field. Israel viewed the drone flights with alarm and shot them down. Yet for all the concern, the Hezbollah threat did not stop Israel and Lebanon – where the group is a powerful political player – from negotiating a deal over the field, heralded as an important step forward in bilateral normalization.¹ Indeed, despite Hezbollah's bluster, it proved willing to allow the deal to move forward and eventually even praised it, suggesting it might want to rock the boat but not tip it over.

Although Hezbollah's blustering over Karish seemed to suggest the group was ending its decade-long focus on Syria and returning to menace its historic enemy, the Lebanese group is no longer the same organization that in 2006 battled the Israeli army to a standstill: Hezbollah today is more global, but has a weaker domestic position than in the past. For the last decade, the group focused its formidable energies on helping its longtime ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, win the country's civil war. As that conflict winds down with Assad secure in power, Hezbollah is pulled in many competing directions. Lebanon itself is in crisis, with Hezbollah's own legitimacy declining. Iran is pushing Hezbollah to be even more expansive, to continue to help fight Israel, and to bolster militant groups in Iraq, Yemen, and other countries.

Hezbollah itself has multiple strategic aims. It has long moved away of its vision of imposing an Iran-like theocratic state in Lebanon, instead seeking at least a strong, and perhaps a dominant, political role in the country while working with other communities. Hezbollah is also committed to its fight with Israel, regarding the Jewish state as fundamentally illegitimate and, as part of this struggle, assisting Palestinian militant groups. The group also seeks to advance Tehran's foreign policy interests, working with Iran's minions and would-be allies around the world. Hezbollah balances these competing, and at times conflicting, priorities, but the group is likely to remain cautious about renewing any conflict with Israel or striking the United States.

To understand Hezbollah's dilemmas, it is important to examine the different theaters in which the Lebanese group operates.

To understand Hezbollah's dilemmas, it is important to examine the different theaters in which the Lebanese group operates. These include Hezbollah's changing position in Lebanon; the group's relationships with its longtime state sponsors, Syria and especially Iran; Hezbollah's role in various conflicts in the Muslim world, often at Iran's behest; its stance towards Israel, its traditional nemesis; and finally, the broader terrorism threat it might pose to the United States. An examination of these different theaters suggests Hezbollah is likely to be cautious in the years to come, trying to play multiple roles yet avoiding all-out clashes with Israel or other steps that might prove disastrous for the group. The United States has limited influence in Lebanon, but it can take small steps to weaken Hezbollah.

The Lebanese theater

Hezbollah benefits from its powerful position in Lebanon, and seeks to ensure its own political strength and preserve a political balance that gives the group considerable freedom of action. The group and its allies have long enjoyed considerable political influence in Lebanon, at times even having a majority in parliament. The group maintains its own military forces without interference from the Lebanese state. In addition, its political clout gives it both access to the resources of the Lebanese state, enabling it to reward its followers, and also a de facto veto over government policy.

Lebanon, however, is melting down. Hezbollah's position is probably less vulnerable than that of other leading Lebanese actors, but it too is under pressure. The country's currency has lost a staggering 95 percent of its value, and GDP has plunged from \$55 billion in 2018 to \$20.5 billion in 2021.² Not surprisingly, banks are collapsing, unemployment has soared, and many Lebanese are impoverished. Ordinary Lebanese are outraged by their government's failure to function as crises have enveloped the country.

Hezbollah's electoral position has slipped, albeit not dramatically. In the May 2022 Lebanese parliament elections, Hezbollah preserved its dominant position among Lebanon's Shi'a Muslims, but it lost support among Christian and Sunni Muslim allies.³ Support for the Lebanese Forces, a Saudi-supported faction that favors disarming Hezbollah, grew and became the largest single group in parliament, calling into question Hezbollah's long-standing claim⁴ that most of Lebanon favors the group's military activities. President Michel Aoun, one of the leaders of Lebanon's Christian community, has long worked closely with Hezbollah, but this partnership appears to be fraying as Hezbollah seeks other possible partners in the Christian community.⁵

Yet the impact of the election and other political changes on Hezbollah's overall position should not be overstated.⁶ Overall, Lebanon's political system produces paralysis, not action. Hezbollah retains considerable political support, particularly among Lebanon's Shi'a Muslim community, the country's largest. Large percentages of Christians, and significant if smaller numbers of Sunnis and Druze, see Hezbollah as a legitimate political organization.⁷ With its allies, Hezbollah can block a confidence vote for any cabinet it opposes. Hezbollah and its allies also retain the ability to block Lebanon's next president, if the candidate is not to Hezbollah's liking. Lebanese President Michel Aoun has long worked with Hezbollah, but his term ended on October 31. It is quite possible that both pro- and anti-Hezbollah blocs in parliament will prevent their opponents from electing a president by denying a quorum until a compromise candidate can be found.

More importantly, electoral power is only one pole in the Hezbollah tent, and certainly not the longest. Hezbollah runs hospitals, schools, and other social services. It has access to considerable funding from Iran, from the Lebanese Shi'a diaspora,⁸ and from illicit activities,⁹ and is otherwise an important player beyond its role in parliament. Hezbollah has not hesitated to intimidate and even assassinate political opponents and critics in Lebanon.¹⁰

Perhaps most important are Hezbollah's armed forces. These are independent of the Lebanese Armed Forces and are well-armed and well-trained, often due to Iranian support, and even have advanced systems like precision-guided munitions.¹¹ Much of Hezbollah's political efforts are spent to ensure autonomy for its military forces and these, in turn, protect the group's strong position in the country overall.

Relationships with Iran and Syria

Hezbollah has a close relationship with the clerical regime in Iran, but it is not an Iranian puppet. In its 2020 report, the U.S. State Department estimated¹²

that Iran funded Hezbollah to the tune of \$700 million, and the group raises another \$300 million on its own, though the particulars of where that money comes from and where it goes are lacking. Iran has also provided Hezbollah with thousands of rockets and missiles (over 100,000 in all)¹³ as well as other weaponry, including anti-ship, anti-aircraft, and anti-armor systems.¹⁴ Hezbollah also has an array of drones it developed with Iran's help,¹⁵ and Iran has also assisted Hezbollah with precision systems.

Hezbollah and Iran share a common worldview, even though their locations and dynamics often give them different interests.

Hezbollah and Iran share a common worldview, even though their locations and dynamics often give them different interests. Hezbollah exercises some autonomy in its relationship with Tehran even as it aids the Iranian regime in opposing Israel, supporting proxies in Iraq, Yemen and other countries, and coordinating terrorist attacks around the world. Most of Hezbollah's actions outside Lebanon and in the confrontation with Israel are on behalf of Iran, with Hezbollah operatives well-integrated into Iranian networks. Some of this is probably in exchange for Iranian funding, but Hezbollah leaders have long shared Iran's ideological objectives and believe that a strong Iran helps keep Hezbollah strong.

Iran has made a strong and enduring commitment to Hezbollah despite the country's many economic problems, with its currency falling, inflation soaring, and poverty rising.¹⁶ The widespread protests over headscarves in 2022¹⁷ highlighted the dissatisfaction that many Iranians feel toward their government and suggest that the regime has its hands full at home. Iran is not likely to abandon Hezbollah, however, and indeed Hezbollah remains a low-cost way for Iran to project power and build up allied forces in other countries. However, a high-cost direct clash with Israel is not something Iran is likely to encourage, given its many other problems.

Hezbollah has long worked with Iran against an array of targets, helping Iran pursue its ambition of being the leading power in the Muslim world. Support included training proxies, working with them to finance their activities, and information operations. Hezbollah expert Matthew Levitt characterized the relationship as one where Hezbollah was “the managing partner for Iran’s proxy network,”¹⁸ often commanding militants from other Shia groups.

Shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Hezbollah, at Iran’s behest, created a dedicated unit to train Iraqis to fight coalition forces.¹⁹ This unit often worked closely with Iran, backing a range of militias and greatly increasing their lethality, including against U.S. forces. When the Islamic State emerged as a threat after 2014, Hezbollah helped Iraqi groups fight the Islamic State and defend shrines in Iraq.²⁰ Iran also worked with Hezbollah to train Houthi recruits in Yemen²¹ – even before the latest wave of conflict that led Iran to step up support, the Houthis worked with Hezbollah and looked to it as a model. Hezbollah’s role recently has included launching Iranian-supplied missiles against Saudi Arabia, according to Saudi officials.²²

At Iran’s behest, Hezbollah made a massive investment in the Syrian civil war – a conflict Hezbollah initially sought to avoid, as the sympathies of many Lebanese were on the side of the opposition to Assad’s Syrian dictatorship. Hezbollah established two new military commands that focused on Syria²³ and moved key personnel from their emphasis on Israel, including Mustafa Badreddine, who took over leadership from Imad Mughniyeh, who was killed in 2008 (Badreddine himself would be killed in 2016). Tens of thousands of Hezbollah fighters fought in Syria, and Hezbollah suffered over 1,500 killed and around 5,000 wounded.²⁴ Hezbollah tried to rationalize its defense of Syria, claiming it was part of the fight against Israel, but that convinced few observers. During the course of the war, Hezbollah worked closely with Iranian commanders, often in a subservient role.²⁵

In addition to the casualties and general drain on its forces, Hezbollah suffered a reputation hit. The organization had long prided itself on being an

Islamic, not Shia, resistance group that was focused on defeating Israel. In Syria, it found itself backing a genocidal dictator against a largely Sunni Muslim opposition that enjoyed considerable sympathy among many Muslims.

The gradual consolidation of the Assad regime in Syria and the decreased military role for Hezbollah offers the group opportunities. It can try to improve its image among those who see it as a sectarian pawn of Iran. In addition, it can devote its military and financial resources to other needs.

Until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Damascus used Lebanon as an arena in which to fight Israel, thus reducing Israeli retaliation on Syria itself and giving the Assad regime a degree of deniability when Hezbollah or other Lebanon-based groups attacked Israel. After the war broke out, however, Syria itself became an arena for the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Israel regularly attacks airports, convoys, and other targets in Syria²⁶ that it claims are part of Iranian efforts to arm Hezbollah via Syria, and the assumption is that this will not lead Hezbollah to respond against Israeli civilian targets.²⁷ Israel’s hand became even freer in Lebanon, when Syria surrendered much of its chemical weapons stockpiles,²⁸ reducing a major deterrent to Israel intervention. (The United States too conducts airstrikes in Syria against targets linked to Iran and Iranian-backed groups.)²⁹ Hezbollah, for its part, has established operatives along the Syrian Golan³⁰ to build its capacity to strike Israel from there.

Conflict with Israel

In rhetoric if not in practice, Hezbollah has always put its conflict with Israel forward as its number one priority and, indeed, as the group’s *raison d’être*. Since Hezbollah formed in the early 1980s, it has fought a long guerrilla war with Israel, conducted terrorist attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets around the world, and in 2006 engaged in a bitter 34-day war, raining down rockets on Israel even as the Jewish state tried to pound the group into submission.

Hezbollah has prepared for war with Israel. As became clear in 2006 and in subsequent revelations,³¹ Hezbollah has a vast tunnel network near the border with Israel where it hides weapons and fighters for use in a conflict. Its rocket and missile arsenal, already vast in 2006, has grown far larger since then,³² and some of its systems have precision guidance.

Since 2006, Hezbollah has expanded its rocket storage and basing areas well beyond southern Lebanon. With rockets and missiles of greater range, Hezbollah is less reliant on the areas immediately adjacent to the Lebanese border. This makes an Israeli ground offensive far more difficult. In addition, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)'s mandate is confined to the area south of the Litani river, unless the government asks for help elsewhere (which Hezbollah would make sure never happens). UNIFIL is an annoyance for Hezbollah when it comes to its own movements, but it has no "eyes and ears" above the Litani.

Hezbollah has also used its global network, and that of its Iranian partner, to strike Israeli and Jewish targets around the world (Hezbollah often considers the two to be one and the same). After the 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's operations chief, Hezbollah attempted attacks in Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Cyprus, India, Kuwait and Turkey. All of those failed, but in 2012 a Hezbollah suicide bomber killed six Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, in an attack on a bus there.³³

Hezbollah, however, has often been cautious toward Israel. Hezbollah did not seek out the 2006 war, and since then has avoided provocations that would escalate into all-out conflict. In the last decade, Hezbollah has focused on the Syrian civil war,³⁴ devoting many of its resources and most of its personnel to that fight, not the struggle against Israel.

The dispute over the Karish gas field³⁵ illustrates both the potential for conflict between Hezbollah and Israel and the caution both sides exercise. The potential deal between Israel and Lebanon would

facilitate greater production from the field, benefiting both countries. Hezbollah, and its Iranian patron, do not want to increase the normalization of Israel³⁶ and worry that a deal over the gas field could pave the way for further cooperation and normalization in the future. In July 2022, shortly before extraction was scheduled to begin, Hezbollah flew unarmed Iranian-made drones to the field as an implicit threat to companies that might drill there.³⁷ Israel shot down the drones and has stepped up its naval, air, and missile defense presence in the area and otherwise prepared for a broader conflict.³⁸ Although Hezbollah couched its position as seeking the rights of Lebanon over all its maritime territory, the drone flights were a way of demonstrating that it, not the Lebanese government, still calls the shots when it comes to Lebanon's relationship with Israel. Hezbollah, however, recognizes that Lebanon needs the revenue³⁹ and Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's eventual acquiescence indicates that he knows that Hezbollah must balance Lebanon's needs with the group's posturing against Israel. Indeed, Nasrallah eventually defended the agreements, claiming it as a victory for Hezbollah itself.

Hezbollah seeks to foment unrest against Israel while using its support to increase its influence with different Palestinian factions.

Part of how Hezbollah stays engaged in the fight against Israel yet limits its own exposure is to work with Palestinian groups. Hezbollah seeks to foment unrest against Israel while using its support to increase its influence with different Palestinian factions. Hezbollah helps smuggle weapons to militants in the West Bank.⁴⁰

Hezbollah has had an up-and-down relationship with Hamas, which rules Gaza and is the leading Palestinian group that is violently opposed to Israel. Hezbollah has long worked with Hamas, even helping teach it suicide bombing techniques in the

early 1990s.⁴¹ Working with Iran, Hezbollah has also taught Hamas engineers rocket-making techniques. Relations frayed after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, when most of the Arab world sided against the Assad regime and its Hezbollah and Iranian allies. Hamas, trying to win over popular support, reduced ties to Iran and Syria, but over time it resumed relations, in part due to its reliance on Iran for many weapons systems.

During conflicts, Hezbollah tries to assist Palestinian groups with operational support. In the clash between Israel and Hamas in May 2021, Iran and Hezbollah organized a joint operations room to coordinate the activities of Palestinian groups.⁴²

Hezbollah and Iran have long had a close relationship to the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terrorist group.⁴³ Hamas, for now, is not seeking a conflict with Israel, which limits Iran's options and isolates PIJ, creating even greater mutual interest.⁴⁴

Israel responds to Hezbollah by trying to weaken and deter the group. Israel has long tried to deny Hezbollah advanced weapons systems⁴⁵ and otherwise try to weaken it, or at least limit its power, while avoiding an all-out clash. Israel has assassinated Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers⁴⁶ and others involved in arming and training Hezbollah. The Israeli navy regularly intercepts cargo ships sending weapons from Iran to Hezbollah.

Israel also has threatened Hezbollah, and Lebanon as a whole, with a massive conflict⁴⁷ if Hezbollah provocations get out of hand — a repeat of the devastation of the 2006 war, in essence. Although Israeli officials recognize that many Lebanese officials vehemently oppose Hezbollah and that the Lebanese state cannot constrain Hezbollah, the threat is a way of trying to ensure that public opinion in Lebanon favors stability over confrontation. At the same time, however, Israeli officials are aware of the humanitarian cost of this (and implications for Israel's image) and thus often hedge or equivocate⁴⁸ when making such threats.

Yet Israel also recognizes that Hezbollah is pragmatic even as it is hostile. One Israeli intelligence source told the media that Nasrallah "is calculated, credible, plays by the rules, sticks to his promises — and at the same time is deterred,"⁴⁹ going on to note that his rhetoric is bellicose but his actions are pragmatic. The Israeli military believes⁵⁰ that Hezbollah's threat primarily comes in the context of a broader clash with Iran, not Hezbollah acting on its own over an issue like the Karish gas field. However, Hezbollah will continue to threaten Israel with terrorist attacks, support for Palestinian groups, and other measures that will lead to an Israeli response but not all-out war.

The risk to the United States and its allies

Hezbollah works with Iran to prepare for, and at times conduct, terrorist attacks around the world, including in the United States. Much of what Hezbollah does is pre-attack surveillance and the stockpiling of explosives to be used in the event that it and Iran decide a terrorist attack is necessary: they are professionals, preparing for strikes even if nothing is planned immediately.⁵¹ Hezbollah operatives in the United States have surveilled the New York subway, landmarks like the Brooklyn Bridge, transportation hubs like JFK airport, Jewish facilities like the University of Chicago Hillel Center, sites in Boston and Washington, and Americans involved with the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, a violent Iranian dissident group. Hezbollah has done similar surveillance in Canada and Europe. In Europe, Hezbollah has worked with Iran and killed or tried to kill dissidents in France, Austria, Denmark, and other countries. Hezbollah has also conducted surveillance of U.S. and Israeli targets in Latin America, where in 1992 and 1994 it attacked Israeli and Jewish targets in Argentina, killing over 100 people.

The majority of Hezbollah operations in the United States are linked to fundraising,⁵² with Hezbollah operatives often working with various criminal groups to raise money by smuggling, fraud, and other illicit financial activities. Yet Hezbollah also conducts operations in the United States beyond raising money. A study by the Program on Extremism at George Washington University found that 19 of the 128 individuals involved in Hezbollah-linked criminal cases from 1997 to 2020 did some form of operational conduct, such as surveillance, procuring weapons, or smuggling people into the country.⁵³ Iran and Hezbollah also value potential operatives who have U.S. or other Western passports.⁵⁴

Law enforcement, however, has proven effective, hindering surveillance and otherwise disrupting the group's operations.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Hezbollah's consistent efforts suggest that it seeks some operational capacity in the United States, at least for contingency purposes. An analysis by Ioan Pop and Mitchell Silber, both experts from the New York Police Department, found that "Iran and Hezbollah have sought to create a sleeper network in the U.S. and Western Europe, which could be activated to launch attacks as part of a retaliatory attack."⁵⁶

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For the most part, however, Hezbollah and its Iranian backers are cautious with regard to anti-U.S. terrorism in particular. Even when seeking revenge for the killing of Qassem Soleimani, who commanded the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, Iran and Hezbollah are likely to avoid a huge strike that would invite a massive response and threaten the stability of Iran's regime. Hezbollah has proven particularly cautious regarding strikes on U.S. soil, focusing on targets in other countries, in part because operations are often easier in other countries, but also because the risk of escalation is much higher should there be an attack on U.S. soil.

Dilemmas and trade-offs

Hezbollah is not going anywhere, but it will need to manage many conflicting demands and priorities if it is to thrive in the future. Within Lebanon, Hezbollah often tries to portray itself in patriotic terms, a Lebanese organization defending the country's true interests and rising above its corrupt politics. The organization's regional, indeed global, roles – often in close partnership with Iran – make this claim more difficult to uphold. The organization's confrontational posture with Israel creates an ever-present risk of military clashes or even all-out war, at a time when Lebanon desperately needs stability. Similarly, Hezbollah's Goldilocks approach to political participation in Lebanon, claiming to be above the political fray while benefiting from the system, is wearing thin, and like other parts of the Lebanese establishment, its political credibility is declining.

For now, Lebanon's decline may make Hezbollah less likely to seek a confrontation with Israel or other enemies. Hezbollah's tacit acceptance of the Karish oil field deal suggests that the group will remain cautious in its overall approach. It has not stopped Lebanon from making a major move towards normalization with Israel, a sign that Hezbollah recognizes that Lebanon's situation is so dire that it would lose popularity among many Lebanese should it stand in the way of a potential opportunity, as well as alienate allied leaders from other communities who hope to benefit politically from the deal.

Outside Lebanon, and with the Assad regime mostly triumphant in the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah can focus on Iraq, Yemen, and other countries, resume its long-standing focus on Israel, and otherwise try to balance its own priorities and those of Iran with its limited resources. Hezbollah is not eager to start a major crisis, but it will supplement Iran's efforts to press U.S. allies and maintain Tehran's influence in Iraq.

Putting pressure on Hezbollah is difficult. One standard Israeli approach – threatening Lebanon – is increasingly problematic given the numerous problems the country faces. The collapse of Lebanon’s currency and other problems dwarf the impact of an Israeli bombing and might even distract public attention from the Lebanese government’s many failures. U.S. allies like Saudi Arabia have tried to support rivals to Hezbollah in Lebanon, in part to decrease the group’s influence (and, by association, that of Iran). But these efforts have floundered, in part due to the venality and incompetence of Riyadh’s chosen candidates, and in part due to the difficulty of pushing any change through the political morass of Lebanon’s system.

The United States has tried to build up the Lebanese army and police as a counterweight to Hezbollah, while conditioning financial support on long-overdue economic reform. Such efforts are perhaps the best the United States can do in Lebanon, which is not a policy priority and where the United States has little influence. Because of this neglect, the U.S. ability to exploit Hezbollah’s problems is low.

Yet there are some limited steps the United States can take to put more pressure on the group. Hezbollah and its allies benefit extensively from smuggling and other illicit financing, including smuggling fuel to Syria that benefits the group and the Assad regime, and smuggling drugs like captagon⁵⁷ around the world. The United States should focus more on smuggling, perhaps using the Magnitsky Act,⁵⁸ which is tied to corruption as well as human rights violations, to give U.S. efforts some clout. Washington could also play up efforts to support a truly independent Lebanese president, making it clearer to the Lebanese public that this would help create conditions for more international assistance to Lebanon.

Such measures would help curb Hezbollah, but the group’s fate will ultimately depend on Lebanese and regional dynamics, with the group exercising considerable influence though not necessarily seeking greater conflict. Indeed, until the Lebanese themselves put their own house in order by reducing corruption, engaging in economic reform, and improving transparency, there will be limits on how much the United States can, or should, engage with Lebanon.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Jeffrey Feltman, Matthew Kirchman, Emma McCaleb, Bruce Riedel, Bilal Saab, and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on previous versions of this paper and Alexandra Dimsdale for her help with the publication process.

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