

# Changes in Hezbollah's Identity and Fundamental Worldview

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Since Hezbollah was founded, a prominent feature of its basic worldview has been a dilemma regarding its identity, goals, and future path. This dilemma was particularly evident following the end of the civil war in Lebanon in the late 1980s; after Israel withdrew from the security zone in 2000; following the Second Lebanon War in 2006; following the bloody clashes in Lebanon and the Doha Agreement in 2008; and while fighting for the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. This dilemma centers on the choice between two opposite vectors that have characterized Hezbollah's development. On the one hand is its commitment to the ideological, religious, and denominational foundations upon which it began its journey and in whose shadow it chose a path of persistent resistance to Israel. On the other hand is the increasing aspiration over the past decade to divert resources toward entrenching the organization's hold in Lebanon through politics and the economy, while receiving widespread legitimacy in the torn state and alongside a rapid military buildup. The first vector is accompanied by extremism, and points toward escalation and a civil war in Lebanon, while the second vector demands moderation and acceptance of the country's prevailing rules of the game. Hezbollah's response to this dilemma shapes the organization's fundamental worldview on various fronts, and is likely to alter the organization's strategy in the future. It is possible that this decision will determine the nature of Hezbollah's next round of war with Israel, and when it will occur.

An analysis of Hezbollah's development indicates the evolution of its identity as follows: at first, it was defined by a non-state identity, coupled

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with a supra-state identity reflecting ideological and religious concepts above the level of the state and activity beyond any defined territory. This was followed by the salience of a sub-state identity, reflecting sectoral activity more limited than state level activity. Today, Hezbollah's activity features predominantly state characteristics. This dynamic reflects the organization's effort to contain Lebanese politics through dialogue, and its willingness to compromise with various forces in Lebanon. In effect, the inflexible principles on which Hezbollah was founded have evolved and effected a change in the organization's basic worldview. Furthermore, Hezbollah's activity has featured a heightened response to the threat to its physical power and its continued buildup within Lebanon.

Thus, for instance, one can explain Hezbollah's relative restraint in the face of Israeli actions, for fear of being recklessly dragged into an escalating confrontation. The growing consideration of the international arena and the closer ties and security and strategic agreements between Hezbollah and Russia in Syria could also be explained in this manner, as well as the organization's intention to invest considerable resources in deterring and threatening Israel, while still being immersed in the fighting in Syria. At the same time, with regard to Hezbollah's attempts to legitimize its existence and worldview as "the defender of the Lebanese nation," its maneuverability and ideological flexibility that have characterized its involvement may present its fight against the Sunni jihad not merely as an ideological addendum, but also as a substitute for the long fought *muqawama* (violent resistance) against Israel.

This development has been reflected in decisions based on a clear and unmistakable set of priorities derived from a logical system of rules: first, stability and control in the internal Lebanese arena, along with defense against concrete threats from Syrian territory, and only then, principled ideological opposition to Israel.

### **Dynamics in the Lebanese Arena**

The four million people living in Lebanon are divided religiously and ethnically into 18 different communities. This demographic makeup constitutes the basis for the deep rifts and power struggles that have characterized all aspects of Lebanese society. The background is important for understanding the long road traveled by the Shiites in Lebanon as a minority that suffered from lack of recognition and oppression while controlled by a Western-oriented Sunni and Christian majority. This was

the basis for the founding of Hezbollah, the shaping of its ideas, and the decisions it has taken over the years.

Hezbollah's ideas were also shaped by the difficult situation in Lebanon during the civil war that erupted in 1975. Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese lost their lives in this war, and hundreds of thousands became refugees. The agreement signed in Taif, Saudi Arabia in 1989 ended the war, and signaled the beginning of a long and prolonged process of reconstruction in Lebanon. Since then, the possibility of reversion to internal warfare in Lebanon is a matter of concern to all the religious groups and factions in Lebanon, including Hezbollah and the greater Shiite community. Therefore, in 1992, with support from Iran, Hezbollah became a political organization that began legitimately representing the Shiites as a political party in parliament and in the local authorities.

During the 1990s, Hezbollah escalated its operations against Israel with rocket fire at Israeli communities, mainly from positions located in the center of populated villages. During these years, the incidental damage suffered by the population of South Lebanon did not prompt changes in the nature of Hezbollah's military activity. For Hezbollah, the disruption of daily life in South Lebanon was of little importance, compared to military action – Hezbollah's main concern at the time.

Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 was regarded in the Arab world as a success for the idea of resistance. The following period constituted the best years for Hezbollah, whose success was perceived by many Muslims as theological validation of their belief in God. At the same time, geopolitical changes in the region have significantly affected Hezbollah's prosperity, despite the fact that Hezbollah's military and political strength has since increased. From 2000 and onwards, Hezbollah's strategy was faced with numerous obstacles, mainly regarding events in Lebanon, which created a discrepancy between the organization's basic worldview and the changing balance of power and geopolitical developments in Lebanon and the region.

The death of President Hafez al-Assad in June 2000 and the dramatic decision by his son Bashar al-Assad to withdraw his forces from Lebanon in 2005 destabilized the Syrian order in Lebanon and strengthened the Lebanese camp opposed to Syria and Hezbollah. More specifically, Syria's exit from Lebanon gave rise to an ongoing struggle against Hezbollah and supporters of the Syrian regime by moderate, pro-Western groups in Lebanon. Against the backdrop of this friction, former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Harari was assassinated in 2005, leading to an unusual

wave of popular protest in Lebanon. The demonstrators demanded a new Lebanese order – more liberal, democratic, and open, hearkening back to what prevailed before the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon in 1975.<sup>1</sup> These events marked the beginning of a disturbing trend for Hezbollah, which included pressure and demands for change by the general public in Lebanon. Overall, the organization found itself facing a new situation that was less convenient for retaining its power, and forced it to enter the political vacuum that emerged in Lebanon.

The Second Lebanon War was an unplanned event, following an erroneous assessment by Hezbollah about the nature of the Israeli response to the kidnapping of soldiers at the border. While the war was a successful operation for Hezbollah, strategically it led to a low point in its complex relations with the Lebanese state, and to a concrete threat of another civil war in the country.

The struggle reached a peak in 2008, when violent conflicts erupted between Hezbollah and the Lebanese army and Christian and Druze groups. At the end of 18 months of fighting, Hezbollah gained the upper hand, leading to the disarming of the rival militias and the government's surrender to its dictates, as stipulated in the Doha Agreement, which gave Hezbollah and its political allies veto power in the Lebanese cabinet.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, from a broader perspective, the Hezbollah "victory" over its opponents in the Lebanese arena became a factor increasing the already strong pressure on the organization. Hezbollah's opponents asserted that the events in 2008 proved that the organization was capable of using its weapons internally in Lebanon, in contrast to the image it had always tried to portray of being "solely a defender of Lebanon against external threats." This public criticism was reflected in the 2009 elections, which reduced Hezbollah's political power.<sup>3</sup>

Hezbollah's intensive involvement in events in Syria since 2011 is also evidence of the change in trend that began in 2005. On the one hand, this involvement is related to Hezbollah's original foundations and its partnership with its ideological, religious, and ethnic allies – a partnership that reflects shared morals and values. On the other hand, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria is a function of material interests and the fulfillment of practical needs aimed at preserving its strategic alliance with its partners in order to counter the threat to Lebanon posed by radical jihad Sunni organizations. When the fighting began to approach Lebanon's eastern border, Hezbollah was prompted to operate in Syrian territory in order

to avoid having to stand against these threats on Lebanese soil. However, Hezbollah's activity in Syria continues to undermine its status in Lebanon, and interferes with its efforts to project its strength. Hezbollah is regarded by many in Lebanon as a "warmonger bringing disaster on the country."<sup>4</sup> The decline in the organization's standing in Lebanese public opinion led to the collapse of Hezbollah's March 8 alliance in 2013.<sup>5</sup>

In response to the bloody terrorist attacks carried out by Lebanese Salafi-jihad organizations against Hezbollah and its supporters in 2013 in protest of the organization's involvement in the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah made great efforts to protect its assets, its operatives, and the Shiite villages, while at the same time tightening its cooperation with the Lebanese security agencies.<sup>6</sup> Cooperation of this sort has political consequences, and it was important for Hezbollah to ensure that the attacks against it would be treated as terrorists threats of a national character directed against the Lebanese state, not only against the organization.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the organization tried to maintain relative tranquility in the Lebanese political system, and Hezbollah's leadership therefore preferred to reach a compromise on the appointment of a prime minister in Lebanon, while postponing the parliamentary elections.<sup>8</sup>

The importance attributed by Hezbollah to Lebanese unity at that time was reflected in Nasrallah's speech marking the sixth anniversary of the Second Lebanon War:<sup>9</sup>

Today, there are tensions in Lebanon, for which there are reasons, some political, some economic, some social... To the people of Lebanon and all those present and listening, especially the people of the resistance, I call for calm, patience, restraint... experience proves that our blood, that of our children, and our lives are ransom for the peace of the country, its honor, and its stability... If something of our honor is sacrificed, this is not a problem. Do not succumb to every provocation; there are those trying to provoke you. Someone is accelerating anarchy in Lebanon, a civil war in Lebanon. We are not among them, so I call on you to show restraint and discipline... We have therefore assumed the silence of the strong.

One indication of a change in the organization's priorities during these years was the belief among many in Lebanon that Hezbollah was unable or unwilling to conduct the *muqawama* against Israel. The conflict with Israel was marginalized, due to the pressure exerted on Hezbollah in

Lebanon concerning its involvement in Syria,<sup>10</sup> in addition to the heightened awareness in the Arab world of the public uprising, which forced Hezbollah to concentrate on internal policy.<sup>11</sup>

Nasrallah's comments on two questions stood out in his speech marking the eighth anniversary of the Second Lebanon War. Already in his opening remarks, he noted the path followed in Hezbollah's actions in Lebanon – through Lebanese politics and the attempt to settle the disputes between the various factions in Lebanon:<sup>12</sup>

This is a coalition government just like any coalition government in the world. It has blocs, convictions, and views which might agree and disagree with each other. However, in principle we seek to solve our problems and disputes through dialogue and close discussion. We in Hezbollah are and will be committed to keep any dispute with any component in the current government and any dispute with our allies covert and not make it open... We do not mention our criticisms openly... We prefer dialogue... We stress this alliance, which is a strategic alliance.

Nasrallah's second point was the identification of the new threat to Lebanon, while appealing to the unity of Lebanon:<sup>13</sup>

Brothers and sisters, I call on the Lebanese and all the peoples of the region... regardless of what has been happening for the past three years, with the disputes that have arisen about it... Let us put it to one side, because all this is of no use now, and why? Because there is a real danger to our existence, our countries, and our homes... This is therefore no time for criticism. You want to criticize? All right, we'll do it later, but now all the peoples in the region face a great, new, and real danger, this thing called ISIS... The slaughter that has been committed is first and foremost against the Sunnis... What we want, therefore, is that no one should portray this campaign as an ethnic campaign. I call on every Lebanese – put tribal fanaticism aside.

The combination of Lebanon's weakness and inability to defend itself against external threats, as reflected in the increasing Sunni jihad attacks beginning in 2014, strengthened the connection between Hezbollah and the Lebanese state. This situation brought public opinion in Lebanon to favor the organization, which was perceived as the central element that could prevent anarchy from penetrating into Lebanon.<sup>14</sup> A key indication

of this emerging connection can be seen in the dramatic decision by Saudi Arabia, a traditional supporter of Lebanon, to halt its crucial aid to the country, in the wake of Hezbollah's activity.<sup>15</sup>

### **Hezbollah in the International Arena**

Hezbollah's first two decades were defined primarily by non-state or supra-state activity, with no commitment whatsoever to international agreements and with no concrete influence of the international community on the organization's development. UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701 forced Hezbollah, for the first time, to confront through the internal Lebanese political theater, calls for its disarmament and the imposition of an embargo on the organization.

To this was added a turn of events that had a strong influence on Hezbollah – the establishment of a special UN tribunal for Lebanon for the purpose of investigating the 2005 murder of Rafiq al-Harari. The establishment of the tribunal and the international community's involvement in the murder investigation were the source of much controversy and a focus of political conflict. The pro-Syrian alliance, led by Hezbollah, rejected the establishment of the tribunal, alleging that the international investigation was designed as a political tool to weaken Syria and its ally in Lebanon.<sup>16</sup> This was the background to the withdrawal of Hezbollah's representatives from the Lebanese government and the overthrow of the government in November 2006 – a measure that paralyzed the Lebanese political system for an extended period. After the court was set up in 2009, the political conflicts concerning Harari's assassination continued to reflect deep and wide internal political fissures, more than the issue of the murder itself. With the country in the grip of these conflicts, Hezbollah's representatives resigned from the government a second time, leading to its collapse in 2011, followed by a rapprochement between the Druze and the Shiites, which made it possible to form a government more to Hezbollah's liking.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701, which challenged Hezbollah only moderately and for a limited time, the long process of setting up the international tribunal and conducting the trials has left a mark on the political system in Lebanon from 2005 until today. It forced Hezbollah to devote extensive resources and efforts to limit the ongoing and exhausting international penetration into the organization's sphere of influence in Lebanon. This reduced Hezbollah's capabilities of maneuver and control in the political theater, and also its ability to plan

its moves in the political system – a difficult enough task in its own right. The process sharpened the dilemma facing Hezbollah: it was forced to choose between uncompromising resistance to cooperation on the part of the political system with the international tribunal, and its desire to appear to the international community as a legitimate faction in Lebanon.

Another threat against Hezbollah in the international arena involving its legitimacy followed its classification as a terrorist organization by leading Western countries. This trend gained force in Europe following the terrorist attack attributed to Hezbollah against a bus of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria in 2012.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, during the months prior to the European Union's decision to classify it as a terrorist organization, Hezbollah invested lobbying efforts and political capital in order to thwart the process, while emphasizing the manner in which it differs from other terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda.<sup>19</sup> This is further evidence of the change in Hezbollah's orientation from an organization with sub-state characteristics to an organization defined by a national dimension and concerns of international diplomacy.

Hezbollah's deep involvement in Syria and its readiness to suffer severe losses have led to an important development concerning its regional status and role as seen by the international community. The tightening of the security and strategic connections between Hezbollah and Russia above all highlights the organization's actual influence on events in the region. Together with its Iranian and Russian allies, Hezbollah has become a key partner in decision making, and thereby regards itself as having the influence of a state.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Change in the Balance between Hezbollah and Iran**

Iran's activity in Lebanon is based on its hegemonic ambitions in the region. From this perspective, Iran built its status in Lebanon out of the chaos and anarchy in the civil war in the 1980s, followed by the various periods of paralysis in the Lebanese political system that have occurred since. Outbreaks of violence and Lebanon's continued weakness have therefore abetted Iran's prolonged grip in this region.<sup>21</sup>

Since 2011, the geopolitical events in the region have changed the balance and quality of the relations between the two actors, and have caused the emergence of vectors that do not necessarily overlap. The Iranian nuclear agreement and Hezbollah's integration into Lebanon have led Iran-Hezbollah relations to a new and complex era in their special relationship. First, Iran's desire for relations with the West on the nuclear issue required the

downplaying of its direct connection with Hezbollah, at least for the sake of appearances. As a result, Iran reduced its financial support for Hezbollah, a cut reflected in Hezbollah's ability to allocate resources for its military and social-institutional activity in Lebanon.<sup>22</sup> Second, since 2011, due to Hezbollah's growing involvement in Syria, the organization has acquired the reputation of a strong player willing to roll up its sleeves and get its hands dirty. While Hezbollah has been successful in exerting considerable influence on events in Syria, the Iranians have shown their sensitivity to losses in personnel and hesitation in sending massive forces into the fighting in Syria.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the war in Syria reflects different interests. For example, the Iranian effort is dispersed in remote regions, in eastern and northern Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, while Hezbollah is operating, almost independently, closer to Lebanon. Furthermore, as the list of Hezbollah fatalities in the fighting in Syria has grown and concern about a civil war in Lebanon has risen, more and more voices among the Shiites in Lebanon are questioning "Islamic unity" with Iran.<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, to the extent that these trends continue to develop in the future, Iran is likely to discover that the use of Hezbollah for particular needs is more difficult than in the past. For its part, Hezbollah realizes that demonstrable actions at Iran's side are likely to damage its standing in Lebanon. All this generates a change in the subordination that formerly characterized relations between Iran and Hezbollah.

### **The Economic Influence on Hezbollah's Development**

Hezbollah's socioeconomic power was tested after the Second Lebanon War. Believing that the money received from Iran was not sufficient to achieve its objectives, and in consideration of the possibility that this budget might be cut, over the years the organization has developed independent sources of income designed to reduce its dependence on Iran. These sources include commercial companies managed by Hezbollah, or companies in which it is a partner; donations in Lebanon and throughout the world; money from criminal activity in Lebanon and throughout the world; and payments charged by Hezbollah for social services.<sup>25</sup> In Iraq, for example, the organization has begun investing in the development of commercial companies. This income is used for a variety of purposes, including the promotion of political objectives and a continued grip on the country.<sup>26</sup>

Hezbollah's intense involvement in the war in Syria starting in 2011 effected a turning point in the organization's economy. First, Iran, which

over the years was considered the main source of support for Hezbollah, began to cut back on its financial support for the organization. Second, this multi-faceted war required many resources, at the expense of allocations for Hezbollah's development and grip in Lebanon. To this was added the increasing enforcement by the American administration of sanctions and economic isolation against Hezbollah.<sup>27</sup>

Thus as Hezbollah became stronger, it had to exercise judgment in managing its budget at both the institutional level and in its socioeconomic support, while highlighting its involvement in expanding circles within Lebanon.

### **The Dynamic in the Israeli Arena**

The IDF's insights from the Second Lebanon War concerning the extent and nature of the Hezbollah threat have led Israel to sharpen operational plans and build a stronger operational response. This response by Israel prompted in turn a reflexive change in Hezbollah's strategy. Since 2006, the organization has taken care to observe clear rules of the game between being deterred and deterrence against Israel.<sup>28</sup> Within a decade, Hezbollah more than doubled its number of soldiers, from 20,000 to 45,000; expanded its arsenal of missiles and rockets ten-fold to 130,000; and introduced advanced systems against aircraft, thousands of anti-tank missiles, and hundreds of miniature unmanned aerial vehicles. Beyond this, from being primarily defensive, the organization's operative plans have become based on attack and conquering territory on the Israeli side of the border. These dimensions indicate preserving a deterrent balance against Israel, despite the organization's efforts in the internal Lebanese arena and its participation in the fighting in Syria.<sup>29</sup>

The development of the abovementioned military balance allows an understanding of the development of Hezbollah's fundamental worldview on a deeper level. One can say that since 2006, due to the significant events occurring in 2005 and 2006, as well as the military balance, Hezbollah's actions vis-à-vis Israel have become more calculated and cautious than ever before. In addition to the known and direct threat to the organization, the Second Lebanon War proved Israel's willingness to target Lebanese national infrastructure, create destruction, and force the Lebanese population in southern Lebanon to flee northwards, given Hezbollah's inability to prevent the havoc caused by the IDF attacks and protect the civilians. This has subsequently created an indirect though significant threat to Hezbollah,

sparkling internal pressure within Lebanon through public opinion and the political system, and ultimately challenging Hezbollah's legitimacy to operate in Lebanon. In other words, since 2006, Hezbollah has included the possible consequences of a conflict with Israel as part of its broader calculations from a long term perspective.

Under new, self-drawn rules of the game, Hezbollah has shown greater self control vis-à-vis Israel, insofar as the Israeli threat is much more subject to control than the other threats facing Hezbollah. The organization's leadership, in cooperation with the Iranian leadership, has enjoyed quiet in the Israeli arena, while the threats to the organization in Lebanon and Syria have grown. This quiet is achieved by operating beneath the Israeli response threshold, which is relatively stable and predictable. This assumption fits in with its relatively restrained policy, as reflected in 2008, when attacks on Hezbollah military wing commander Imad Mughniyeh and Syrian general Muhammad Suleiman were attributed to Israel. The same is true of the attack on Hassan al-Laqqis in Beirut in 2013 and a recent attack against Hezbollah operatives, including Jihad Mughniyeh and a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander. These attacks are in addition to many other operations attributed to Israel, including attacks in Syria and Lebanon against arms shipments to Hezbollah. The organization's response included one significant action – an attack in July 2012 in Burgas, Bulgaria – plus unsuccessful attempts at other attacks outside Lebanon and isolated calculated attacks on Israel's borders with Lebanon and Syria.

## Conclusions and Consequences

Despite Hassan Nasrallah's fervent declarations reflecting basic Islamic-Shiite ideology, over the past decade developmental dynamics have seen an increase in Hezbollah's instrumental-utilitarian operations, in an attempt to reinforce its state-related identity. First, Hezbollah has assigned increasing importance to the threats facing it, while considering the wider scope of events in Lebanon, as well as the background and history that have led to this strategy. In addition, Hezbollah has exhibited an ability to study and assess the enemy and adapt its operations accordingly, thus reflecting a clear set of priorities established by a clear set of rules – achieving stability and control inside Lebanon, while defending against tangible threats from Syria, and only afterwards pursuing the struggle with Israel. Second, events in its various circles of influence indicate the great degree of control in the organization's strategy and operations. Third, considering the analysis of

events, one can notice a correlation between the means used to achieve the objectives and the degree to which these objectives were achieved. Thus the organization's objectives reflect an internal logic and consistency. Fourth, the organization's operations vis-à-vis Israel over the past decade, as expressed in Nasrallah's statements and the manner in which the organization operated, reflect the ability to consider alternatives carefully while attempting to manage elements of uncertainty. In addition, when assessing the result, the means used to achieve its objectives justified the risks taken. In addition, the organization was extremely involved in the political arena in order to ensure the support of its decisions and objectives, while attempting to appease popular opinion in Lebanon.

Since 2011, as a result of Hezbollah's growing involvement in Lebanon, the organization has earned the reputation of a strong actor that achieves its objectives, and succeeds in exerting considerable influence on the chaos in Syrian territory. Today there are many indications of Hezbollah's new status and of its position among the leading elements affecting events in the region. Thus from an Iranian proxy, Hezbollah has evolved to a central partner in the political regional decision making process, alongside its Iranian and Russian allies. This process is likely to worsen Hezbollah's strategic balance with Israel. The moment Hezbollah is committed to Lebanon more than ever before, and not just the Shiites and Iran, as in the past, the threat to the organization and its potential loss increases, due to the ability of its enemies to exert pressure on it by damaging infrastructure and daily life in Lebanon, without any ability on the part of the organization to prevent this damage.

## Notes

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