

# HEZBOLLAH'S POLITICAL CLOUT

## Organizationally Effective Social Jihad and Public Relations Outreach

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This paper seeks to outline the tactics that have allowed Hezbollah, a Shi'a Islamist terrorist group and political party based in Lebanon, to gain significant political influence in comparison to its non-state organizational competition within the Middle East. Specifically, Menghani analyzes how Hezbollah's use of social services through its "hearts and minds" campaign, as well as its propaganda PR efforts, have enabled its unprecedented advancements in weakening the Israeli government, gaining a broad base of popular support, and ultimately spreading its interpretation of Sharia law. First, the paper indicates how Hezbollah has leveraged Iranian sponsorship and funding to create a brand of legitimacy, while gradually replacing the role of the Lebanese government by providing aid and economic opportunities to the population. This explanation is followed by an analysis of the group's PR efforts, which communicate the inevitability of popular resistance and inculcate this message in the minds of young generations. The paper concludes with a recommendation for future counter-terrorism efforts, which should target Hezbollah's appeal to the poor and replace its social jihad with government intervention.



## GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Hezbollah, meaning “Party of God” in Arabic, rose as a radical Shi’a, Lebanese-based militant power following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the 1980s. Today, Hezbollah’s primary objective is the establishment of an Islamic government across the Arab world in accordance with its pillars of obligatory jihad and Islamist implementation of Sharia.<sup>1</sup> With a steady life-line of Iranian support, Hezbollah has attracted defectors of rival parties, received sympathy from within the Lebanese population through its provision of social services throughout the country, and achieved the status of a legitimate political party. Notably, the group has weakened the local government and has become embedded in the multiparty political infrastructure of the country.<sup>2</sup>

The connection between Iran and Hezbollah is described by analyst Daniel Byman as “probably the strongest and most effective relationship between a state sponsor and a terrorist group in history.”<sup>3</sup> Using external aid strategically, Hezbollah has cultivated a positive and far-reaching public image that has garnered a broad base of popular support. Hezbollah’s reliance on funding to create an appealing brand, alongside its commitment to a “hearts and minds” social campaign has contributed to unprecedent-

ed organizational successes, earning the group a reputation as one of the most geopolitically significant and pervasive non-state actors in the Middle East.

## ORIGINS

Hezbollah’s emergence as a radical jihadist group was a direct result of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which exacerbated the country’s deteriorating infrastructure and prompted the return of Western troops to Beirut, creating further grievances against perceived U.S. imperialism. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was another equally important factor in the rise of Hezbollah, which according to analyst David Rapoport marked the beginning of the fourth wave of religious terrorism and sparked a new Islamic century.<sup>4</sup> Around the same time, various contemporaneous Islamic movements occurred across the Arab world and increasingly politicized the Shiite population of Lebanon.

Hezbollah possesses a distinctive feature as an Islamist movement fighting for organizational strength in a multiparty government, differentiating it from groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt that have opposed authoritarian regimes. Hezbollah primarily wishes to compete with political forces in Lebanon and to engage in a “war of positions” before turning to its broader goal of a nation built on Sharia

law.<sup>5</sup> Its innovative approach to gradually winning the loyalty of Shiites by creating a credible brand before engaging in the broader Islamist movement has allowed its integration into the Lebanese political system, earning it an enduring base of support since its early shift to a legitimate political party.

## STATE SPONSORSHIP

Hezbollah's Shiite identity has attracted active sponsorship from Iran, which in turn has provided the terrorist organization with financial and military support in the form of safe havens, funding, training, and organizational aid. Byman categorizes Iran's relationship with Hezbollah as a case of "strong support" in which the state is highly committed to the group and able to offer it significant resources that extend to the provision of missiles and other arms as well as diplomatic backing and ideological direction.<sup>6</sup> Iran's support of Hezbollah stems from the incentive to fight a proxy war against Israel as a means to destabilize the state and export Shi'a ideology.<sup>7</sup> In particular, Iran's long-term commitment to sponsoring Shi'a militants allows Hezbollah to differentiate itself within the broader Islamist movement by providing the funds necessary to build an organization suited to engage in a prolonged conflict against Israel, while also enabling the group to establish itself as a key player in the politics of Lebanon.

Financial support dramatically expands Hezbollah's capabilities to gain popular support through attractive welfare services and an appealing reputation. State sponsorship elevated Hezbollah to strategic significance in the Arab-Israeli conflict, as opposed to succumbing to the strain of organizational competition with other Islamist actors. The magnitude of Iranian support, which has been valued at around \$100 million per annum, endows Hezbollah with greater resources than most other sectarian militant groups.<sup>8</sup> However, Hezbollah's success in leveraging financial resources to mobilize the Lebanese population in favor of its political aims derives from the group's internal characteristics that were suited to state sponsorship. Iran's financial support proved essential to Hezbollah's realization of its goals from the outset of its formation, as its founders developed a transparent financial model that would ensure its fighters' dedication to the cause. Limited salaries that prevented the retirement of fighters, coupled with welfare benefits that secured the approval of Lebanese families, allowed Hezbollah to develop a durable military force at a time when other Arab armed groups, such as Amal and Fatah, faced corruption and an absence of financial incentives that weakened the loyalty of combatants.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the early success of Iranian sponsorship can be attributed to the military and



social expertise of Hezbollah's founders, as Subhi al-Tufayli and subsequent secretary generals already possessed influence in the Shiite political circles of Hizb al-Da'wa and Amal (two other powerful Shiite groups). The reputable origins of Hezbollah account for its predisposition to political survival in a war of positions, while the availability of external resources from Iran has assured continual progression and institutionalization of its intended "hegemonic ideological space."<sup>10</sup> Naim Qassem, deputy secretary-general of Hezbollah, asserts that the group openly embraces Iranian support because its leaders have long viewed Iran as "a vivid manifestation of Islam's applicability," and one to which every Muslim should adhere.<sup>11</sup> Iran thus constitutes a credible source of support that opens doors for Hezbollah in appealing to the ummah beyond sectarian ties and using finances as an opportunity to capitalize on prominent public relations platforms.

## SOCIAL SERVICES

The poverty of Shiites remains an important factor in determining Hezbollah's share of power within the Lebanese government as well as its popular support in winning the "hearts and minds" of communities that rely on the terrorist group as a provider of social services. As Von Hippel emphasizes in "Poverty is an Important Cause," poverty creates an "enabling environ-

ment" for terrorist groups when their charitable causes are the first to arrive at the scene of a disaster. Hezbollah seeks to reveal the weaknesses of competing political parties, as seen when the group compensated Lebanese families affected by the Israeli bombings of 2006 before the government could do so. Shi'a sympathizers of Lebanon even attribute their support to Hezbollah's unique efforts to provide "security and support while remaining transparent" about their intentions.<sup>12</sup> The group's supply of social, educational, and medical services is especially prevalent in southern Lebanon, and ultimately empowers the community thus sustaining the loyalty of poor Shiites to Hezbollah's political policies and terrorist tactics.

The presence of Hezbollah-affiliated non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within Lebanon secures the unwavering support of citizens who feel disenfranchised by other powers within the government. After the 2004 municipal elections, Hezbollah gained control of the majority of municipalities in southern Lebanon, where it continues to meet public health needs through hospitals and affordable health-care for low-income populations. As the living conditions in the region have deteriorated due to economic troubles, Hezbollah has stepped in with the necessary social welfare network that appeals to peasants and laborers, including free education for children and initiatives for deliver-

ing water.<sup>13</sup> To disadvantaged Shiites, Hezbollah represents a charitable organization that fills the holes left by an incompetent government. In a survey regarding the image of Hezbollah, 72% of the poor preferred the political party and 64% believed it provided the greatest social services in Lebanon.<sup>14</sup> In the words of Qassem, Hezbollah's social work "serves to enrich supporters' confidence in the viability of the Party's cause and course," and the party's official institutions have boosted its reputation by responding to societal needs. The extensive services provided by Hezbollah pinpoint government weaknesses (such as waste accumulation, restoration of destroyed buildings, electricity, and sewage utilities) and ultimately encourage the population's lasting cooperation with the party.<sup>15</sup> Hezbollah thus forms an agreeable image, develops the cultural context necessary to facilitate religious terrorism, and distinguishes itself from other organizations within the Islamist movement by openly and tangibly signaling its concern for the Muslim community.

## WELFARE BENEFITS AND RECRUITMENT

The group's monetary handouts, allotted from Iranian funding, include welfare provisions such as medical care for injured fighters, free vocational schools, and employment for the

dependents of fallen fighters through the Martyrs' Foundation branch of Hezbollah.<sup>16</sup> As Von Hippel reiterates, Hezbollah's apparent charity work takes advantage of the needs of the poor to persuade Lebanese families to send potential recruits to fight for the cause as foot soldiers, despite the Islamist charity's widely truthful reputation among local populations.<sup>17</sup> In addition, many of Hezbollah's 14,000 school children march in militant parades, indicating that the group effectively integrates propaganda against Israel into its school curriculums. NGOs run by Hezbollah have also been found to refuse service for Lebanese citizens who fail to abide by Shi'a religious principles.<sup>18</sup> Qassem, on the other hand, views active support from the population as a "natural consequence" of generous social work.<sup>19</sup> In truth, Hezbollah evidently capitalizes on the low standard of living and widespread alienation experienced by poor Shiite neighborhoods. Its social services serve primarily to boost its own image of necessity, and the success of the strategy confirms that poverty remains an individual motivation of lower-ranked fighters to join Hezbollah as a full-time fighter, or at the very least to support the party politically in elections. Charity and welfare give insight into a crucial individual cause of poverty that lies behind participation in a terroristic Islamist movement and these provisions enhance the organizational effectiveness of Hezbollah by building a



solid constituency and expanding its approval to particularly vulnerable populations.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS GAME

Hezbollah's adeptness in its propaganda strategy in the midst of Lebanese political developments, in addition to the strength of its social service network, remains unmatched by similar Islamist organizations and highlights the organizational effectiveness of Hezbollah in continually presenting its image as a purified resistance force. Hezbollah leverages Iranian funding to display its power visually through PR campaigns, which include billboards that publicize graphic photos of Israeli defeats, speeches on the group's Al-Manar television station that aim to undermine Israel's trustworthiness, and large-scale marches that are marketed as protests against foreign occupiers.<sup>20</sup> The speeches and interviews of Hezbollah's charismatic current leader, Nasrallah, are intentionally conveyed as "dramatic political performances" that communicate a sense of urgency for action and further mobilize the population in favor of Shi'a politics. Hezbollah media outlets even began publishing sentimental poetry and anthems that praised the achievements of Nasrallah following the 2006 Lebanon War.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the authenticity of the group has been projected through *The Arab Knight*, a children's book released by a Hezbollah-affiliated publisher that praises the secretary

general as an extraordinary hero for the ummah. His actions are justified throughout the text as uniting the mujahideen and "bring[ing] them together to struggle for freedom."<sup>22</sup> Through its propaganda PR efforts, Hezbollah sets a precedent of establishing a credible, prominent brand that other Islamist terrorist groups have attempted to reproduce.

Hamas, a Sunni-Islamist jihadist group in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has been known to "take a page out of Hezbollah's playbook" through its recent formation of a social service wing and advances in propaganda efforts that similarly involve television stations, newspapers, and Internet sites.<sup>23</sup> Many Islamist groups like Hamas have followed Hezbollah's example to use media as a tool of war and gain popular support through the provision of services that aim to weaken their common enemy, Israel. Like Hezbollah, Hamas has inflated its success in media and presents a one-sided narrative to the public in order to rise as a political entity in the Gaza Strip. Unlike Hezbollah, however, Hamas has failed to convert its imitated efforts into genuine popular support, as the number of Palestinians who benefit from its social services is much smaller and is dwarfed by NGOs as well as the public work of the Palestinian government. In fact, lasting support for the authority of Hamas derives from the appeal of its uncompromising stance on Pales-



tinian rights and the demonstrated credibility of its threat to Israel, rather than its commitment to caring for its population through aid.<sup>24</sup> The instruments used by Hezbollah to draw support and manipulate its image have served as the epitome of organizational strength that Hamas has failed to replicate solely as a result of propaganda. Moreover, Hezbollah's track record in providing social welfare to the Shiite community serves as an innovative and revered example of maintaining popular support, an aspect of group strength that remains critical to the organizational success of actors in national movements.<sup>25</sup>

## FRAMEWORK OF INEVITABILITY

Above all, PR efforts consistently portray Shi'a supporters as marginalized and therefore acting out of a need to resist oppression through Islamist violence. In its 2004 Identity and Goals declaration, Hezbollah insists that its resistance is a "natural and inevitable" part of a greater war against Israel and that the group acts violently out of necessity due to circumstances beyond its control. The document states that the "Israel threat obliges Lebanon to endorse a defensive strategy that depends on a popular resistance."<sup>26</sup> Its defensive discourses are similar to those of totalitarian regimes. Explaining how despotic rulers have justified their use of terror, Hannah Arendt in *Ideology and Terror* highlights the

self-proclaimed progression of "natural law" often cited by perpetrators of horrific crimes to overcome traditionally-accepted legality and to force all individuals to play a role in advancing the unavoidable. In the distorted sense of totalitarian lawfulness, everyone must participate in producing an obligatory, natural development.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the history of terrorism, both non-state and state actors have defined terror on the basis of laws that transcend norms of morality, as they claim to act in pursuit of an inevitable justice in which the oppressed must overcome the powerful. Hezbollah has notably operated within the framework of necessity by which powerful terrorist groups have advanced their movement in the past. This very brand of a defensive war perpetuated by Hezbollah in an innovative manner allows it to gain popularity and to encompass the entire Muslim community as essential to the success of a war waged by Israel, just as terrorism throughout history has long described itself as virtuous and destined to succeed in order to promote its legitimacy.

## RELIGIOUS WAVE

Hezbollah's violent tactics align with characteristics of Rapoport's "religious wave" that rely mainly on bombings, including the tactic of suicide bombing that the group popularized in Lebanon.<sup>28</sup> However, the group's tactical successes remain average and thus fail



to account for its longevity as a high-level player in Middle East politics, positioning itself as a leader by frequently holding the most Shiite seats in Lebanon's parliament and overshadowing groups in the Arab-Israeli conflict in terms of social strength as well as popular support.<sup>29</sup> When comparing the tactics of Hezbollah (Figure 1) with those of Hamas, another key actor in the Islamist movement (Figure 2), the reasons behind the durability of the organizations cannot be reduced to their similar tactical achievements and approaches to violence. Both groups possess a record of high civilian deaths mainly due to bombings and explosions. Hezbollah's reliance on violence has even declined in recent decades, which Byman attributes to a greater need to protect the appeal of its brand by avoiding actions that alienate the Muslim community.<sup>30</sup>

Instead of pointing towards Hezbollah's capacity to inspire fear through violence, scholars recognize that Hezbollah has attained lasting respect in comparison to other non-state actors in the Middle East due to its adaptive communication strategy and consequent dissemination of ideology.<sup>31</sup> The mediocrity of Hezbollah's tactical violence relative to other terrorist groups in the religious wave confirms that the group has achieved organizational survival and renown in Lebanon through its display of prowess in PR initiatives and demonstrated representation of supporters by means of its extensive regional

service network. Hezbollah's operational infrastructure is moreover regarded as much more cohesive and capable of directly resolving conflicts in its support base than that of Hamas.<sup>32</sup> Its elaborate public relations strategy and endorsement of a positive political brand have built a foundation for Hezbollah that enables long-term organizational survival, whereas mere tactical effectiveness prevents the group from distinguishing itself from other established powers in the region.

## FUTURE OF COUNTERTERRORISM

Hezbollah has evidently differentiated itself in the Islamist movement and the fight against the enemy of Israel through its maintenance of organizational survival and a widespread mobilization of support in Lebanon. Its ability to rise as a brand within a local multiparty system while also transcending the boundaries of sectarian tensions stems from its provision of services for marginalized communities as well as tremendous investment in public relations efforts that have shown progress in uniting the global ummah in favor of its cause. Given that Iran's partnership with Hezbollah allows for its expansion of PR platforms and political survival through sustained funding, the U.S. should adopt a counterterrorism approach that punishes Iran's use of terrorist groups as proxies. The



sanctions involved in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (colloquially known as the Iran Nuclear Deal) held the “collateral benefit” of reducing Iran’s financial backing of Hezbollah and inhibiting the terrorists’ international operations, and the United States should therefore return to the agreement of nuclear sanctions to prevent an influx of Iranian aid to terrorists.<sup>33</sup> Byman agrees that the U.S. should demonstrate a prioritization of counterterrorism policy by pressuring Tehran through an allied coalition to hold Iran accountable as a state sponsor of terrorism.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, counterterrorism from the Lebanese government should constitute a pragmatic approach that incorporates minority Shiite voices and establishes strong local institutions of social services that replace those under the control of Hezbollah in impoverished Lebanese communities. Government intervention may then undermine Hezbollah’s appeal to the poor and limit its influence as a jihadist political party. Weakening the skillfulness of Hezbollah’s PR strategy would require a combination of sanctions against Iran alongside a proactive Lebanese government that assumes the role of Hezbollah in representing Shiite constituents, while facilitating solutions to internal conflicts through the development of inclusive, government-provided public services. Only when the Lebanese government is regarded as competent among the most vulnerable

segments of the population will the brand of Hezbollah lose its appeal to the ummah and succumb to organizational competition in the war of positions within the Middle East.



# ENDNOTES

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