



مركز الملك فيصل للبحوث والدراسات الإسلامية  
King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies

# Masarat

A report on recent developments in the Middle East and the Muslim world

## Understanding the Rise of the Lebanese Hezbollah

*The 1985–2000 South Lebanon Security Zone Conflict*

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This edition of Masarat is the latest publication of the King Faisal Research Center's new initiative: The Middle East Strategy Project. The aim of this project is to conduct in-depth research and analysis that falls within the scope of regional grand strategy of security and defense. In light of the recent events in the Syrian Arab Republic, the study will focus on examining the ongoing turmoil, study the resulting regional repercussions unfolding across the Levant, and analyze the policy objectives of the local, sub-state, and international actors.

While pundits attribute the Damascene regime's resilience in the ongoing Syrian conflict largely to the Russian intervention since September 2015, the sudden emergence of the Lebanese Hezbollah on Syrian turf since 2013 has arguably proven to be no less valuable for Bashar al-Assad's continuous grip on power. This report showcases, by virtue of a case study, a detailed account of Hezbollah's internal adaptability in transforming from a loose Khomeinist guerilla movement in its early stages into a "state within a state" in Lebanon. By depicting lessons learned from Hezbollah's performance in liberating Southern Lebanon from 1985 to 2000, the report sheds light on the methods and means of warfare it nowadays displays across its neighbor Syria.



## Introduction

In late spring 2013, Hassan Nasrallah announced that Hezbollah had embarked on bolstering Bashar al-Assad on Syrian soil. Since then, the Lebanese Shi'ite militia has proven to be a cornerstone in the efforts to roll back anti-regime forces along the Lebanese-Syrian border and to keep al-Assad in power. In view of the organization's key role today, the following analysis seeks to provide a concise assessment of the historical context of its inception as well as its strategy to liberate south Lebanon between 1985 and 2000, putting special emphasis on its tactical versatility in managing the pursuit of its military goals. This analysis includes an account of Hezbollah's remarkable adaptability in transforming from a loose Khomeinist guerrilla movement in its early stages into a coherent political movement encompassing extensive and robust military capabilities, which it nowadays displays across its neighbor Syria. Therefore, revisiting its hybrid warfare campaign against Israeli interference in south Lebanon provides illuminating tactical and operational insights, first, into Hezbollah's topical involvement on Syrian turf to date, and second, into how it maintains a strategic balance of deterrence vis-à-vis its Israeli foe alongside Lebanon's southern border.

## The fruit of foreign interference in Lebanon: Hezbollah emerges

In particular in the course of the 1970s, in the midst of the Lebanese civil war, south Lebanon became a resurgent theater of turmoil and terrorist activities by the locally operating Palestine Liberation Organization, ultimately resulting in Israel's military incursion, "Operation Litani," which was set in motion in 1978. In that context, the regional implications of heightened Lebanese-Israeli animosity, particularly after the failure of United Nations Resolution 426 to restore the territorial integrity of south Lebanon, further aggravated Israel's unilateral push (never explicitly called an annexation) to establish Israeli civil rule across the Syrian Golan Heights. It also prompted recurring attacks on and attempted assassinations in Israeli diplomatic mission in Paris and London in 1982.

The continuously mounting tension and fatal

incidents between members of the PLO and the Israel Defense Forces along the Lebanese-Israeli border provided another casus belli for a new Israeli invasion with the supposedly overarching goal of crippling the PLO hotbeds in south Lebanon. More tacitly, however, Israel's 1982 "Operation Peace for Galilee," a military operation much broader and encompassing in terms of its coercive impact compared with "Litani" four years prior, has at times been seen as the necessary pretext for turning the tide in the Levantine theater by imposing a pro-Israeli balance of power in Lebanon.<sup>1</sup> This narrative is further supported by the lack of restraint that Israel's campaign showed vis-à-vis Syria's military presence, which had been established on Lebanese soil since 1975. Accordingly, it was likely the ill-fated, cascading effect of

the following factors that, not coincidentally, provided the fertile soil for the creation of the Shi'ite militia offshoot, the Lebanese Hezbollah: first, the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which made possible the deployment of 1,500 Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps into what soon became a Shi'ite hotbed, namely, Lebanon's fertile Beqa'a Valley; second, Israel's recurring interventionism and its output of massive kinetic firepower; and third, the underlying and at the time already firmly established Syrian military occupation. The three factors exacerbated each other and were by no means diametrically opposed in terms of long-term strategic agendas. Both Israel and Syria, although perceiving each other as fierce enemies, deplored military clout in a shared effort to cripple Palestinian guerrilla activities. What is more, Hafez al-Assad also actively battled Lebanese leftists, although in the 1960s and '70s his domestic Ba'athist party pursued measures that partially fell within a push to nationalize the economy and to centralize

the bureaucratic as well as political apparatus. During the occupation of Lebanon, Hafez al-Assad's Syria was in fact more an Arab Socialist imprint inspired by a leftist Soviet pattern than anything else. On top of that, both Israel's and Syria's incursions sought to tip the otherwise relatively interreligious balance in Lebanon in favor of the Christian Maronite community that had been considered the faction with most congruity and political robustness, and which hailed neighboring Syria as a needed protector in the early '70s.

The devastating attacks in October 1983 on the US marine barracks close to Beirut's international airport and the simultaneous suicide bombing attack against French paratroopers caused close to 300 casualties altogether. Soon after, the meticulous command chain, presumably a prerequisite for executing sophisticated attacks on such a scale, was shown to be of Iranian origin. It brought to light the capabilities on which Iran's proxy, Hezbollah, was able to draw in the



Public rally in front of the Azadi Tower, in the Iranian capital of Tehran (Source: Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training)

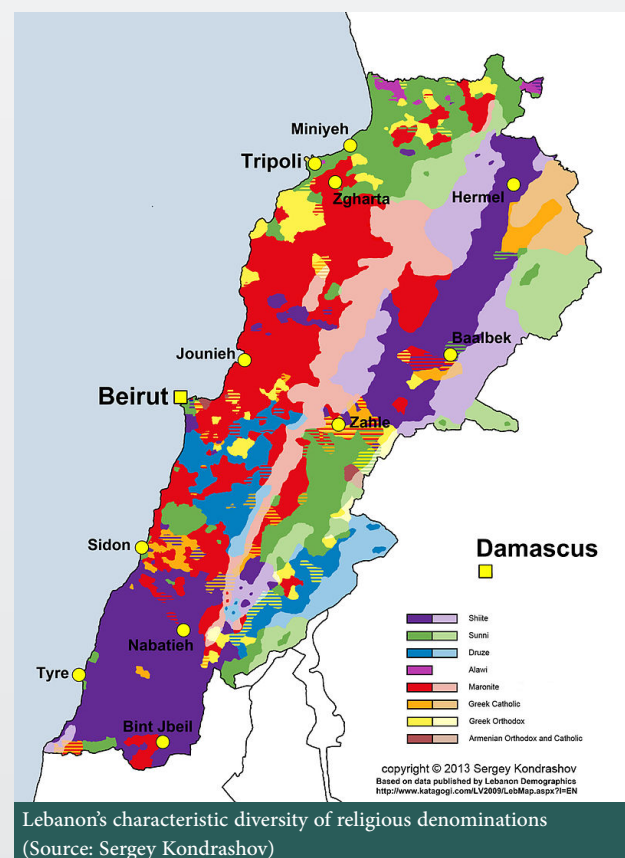


organization's earliest stages. More obviously, though, the attacks triggered the withdrawal of the United States Multinational Force in Lebanon, which turned out to be a short-lived military engagement from 1982 to 1984. Further disarray had been caused by the fragmentation of Beirut into two administrations, East Beirut under the Maronite General Michel Aoun and West Beirut under the Sunni Muslim Selim al-Hoss. At that time, as Lebanon was effectively left without the otherwise traditionally unifying figure of a single president, as enshrined in the constitution, the country became increasingly prone to a subtle but steady "militianization" throughout the 1980s, which played into the hands of Hezbollah. The "Party of God" used the political turmoil as a window of opportunity to gain traction also in the form of a political movement striving to carry on "the resistance" against the ongoing Israeli occupation.

Despite Israel's strategic achievement in dislocating the PLO's organizational structures and decisively crippling the Syrians, the course of history in the years after 1982 following the Israeli occupation serves as proof of the miscalculations committed by the Israelis in hoping to stabilize Lebanon through exclusive support to the Lebanese Maronites and related militias, especially the South Lebanon Army. In the aftermath of Israel's partial withdrawal from Lebanon, which left Israel in control of the south Lebanon security belt, which it governed alongside the SLA, Hezbollah's resistance against the remaining occupying forces did not come to standstill. In fact, in the years leading up to 2000, it has continued to fiercely challenge its opponents, ultimately prompting a complete and hasty unilateral Israeli withdrawal in May 2000.<sup>2</sup> Between 1985 and 2000, Hezbollah itself also underwent a critical evolution: deeply anchored by its affinity to the Shi'ite belief system linked to Ayatollah Khomeini, it emerged as a violent paramilitary resistance force, but in the follow-

up to the Ta'if Accord of 1989 that paved the way for the end of the Lebanese civil war, it experienced an integration into the Lebanese political sphere, culminating in its election into the Lebanese parliament in 1992. It thus received considerable support above and beyond the manifold Lebanese confessional cleavages. To secure this support, Hezbollah has ramped up its commitment to the provision of significant social services, maintains generous welfare structures, and contributes to domestic labor unions, yet again demonstrating its sociopolitical consolidation within the Lebanese state.

The inner-Lebanese factions became particularly visible after 1985, in the later stages of the Lebanese civil war following the collapse of the Tripartite Agreement signed that year. They resulted in what William W. Harris has aptly termed "the heyday of cantons and militias."<sup>3</sup> On top of divergent intraconfessional interests, the influence of the Syrian and Israeli presence sparked fur-





ther deterioration of any prospects of Lebanese political stability. Riots and civil unrest ensued and created further potential for severe violent conflicts among Lebanon's militias. First, the "War of the Camps," mostly between armed Palestinian guerrillas and the Shi'ite Amal militia, was fought across parts of the Lebanese capital as well as in parts of south Lebanon. This ultimately caused the return of the "standard Syrian modus operandi"<sup>4</sup> in West Beirut, which was occupied by Syrian troops and their temporary proxy, Amal.<sup>5</sup> Just as Amal had been increasingly challenged by Arafatist Palestinians and disappointed by the lack of support from its former

ally, the Druze, and the growing tensions with "Jumblatt's Communist associates as competitors for secular Shi'ite support,"<sup>6</sup> it seems reasonable to view Hezbollah's relative absence during the "War of the Camps" as a first strategic step worth proper investigation. Given the "Party of God's" organizational immaturity at that time, it clearly estimated the hierarchy of its achieved goals in keeping a relatively low profile and avoiding taking sides in the partitioned and volatile city of Beirut. Instead, Hezbollah prioritized the possibility of gaining ground and consolidating support among its natural constituency in the majority-Shi'ite south Lebanon.

## The "Party of God" navigates troubled domestic waters

Hezbollah's strategic calculus explains its nonintervention and its avoidance of the risk of being dragged into the intra-Lebanese conflict at that particular time, as well as its more subtle attempts to obtain "a larger slice of the sectarian pie"<sup>7</sup> from its Shi'ite rival Amal. Hezbollah consequently perceived the "War of the Camps" as an opportunity,<sup>8</sup> allowing it to systematically intensify its grassroots campaign for support; this was logical insofar as it became clear that it was by and large the Shi'ite population in south Lebanon that had to bear the consequences of the Israeli and PLO presence in its "Security Zone." Buoyed by the financial, logistic, and military support provided by the significant number of Iranian Revolutionary Guards operating from the Beqa'a Valley, Hezbollah's activities were at first exclusively devoted to raising support among its local Shi'ite clientele. Only in 1988, following an armistice between Amal and

the PLO, did the rivalry and the competition for domination between Amal and Hezbollah become evident, eventually erupting in clashes between the two sides in West Beirut. In close coordination with Tehran, Hezbollah managed to gain ground through superior discipline and a crucial advantage in terms of military equipment, supplied by its Iranian masters. Moreover, the dynamic of the intra-Shi'ite conflict was greatly influenced by broader geopolitical developments at that time. In the summer months of 1988, the ongoing war between Iran and Iraq was leaning toward a decisive Iraqi advantage, thus also rebalancing the relations between Tehran and Damascus, at the very least by giving the latter additional momentum. As a result, Syria's military engagement fatigue with respect to the ongoing Hezbollah-Amal clashes was not necessarily an indication of the weakness of Syrian power politics, but rather a



sign of a temporary relaxation of pressure on one of its allies on Lebanese soil, Amal.<sup>9</sup> Damascus's release of Amal, which it had hitherto kept on a short leash, worsened Amal's instability, since its organizational shortcomings were now increasingly exposed to the Lebanese public; this development benefited its rival, Hezbollah. In addition, Amal had, quite obviously, at least some common goals with Israel at this time, most obviously the shared interest in preventing the emergence of radical tendencies in Lebanon's south. In the ongoing turmoil of the civil war, the partial interconnectedness of the Israeli occupying power and Amal proved fateful, since both Syria, always keen to recover the Golan Heights,<sup>10</sup> and Iran, for whom the destabilized country offered a potential entrance ticket into the Levantine power play, had an interest in maintaining high pressure on the Israelis and the SLA. Amal simply was no longer suited for this role, and thus had to leave the stage to Hezbollah, which until that point had been clandestinely increasing its foothold in southern Lebanon.

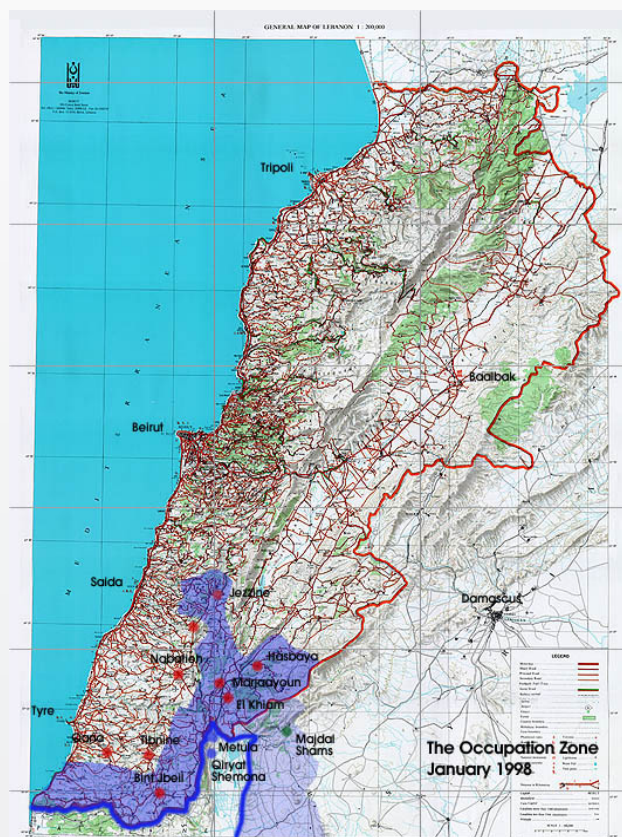
However, Hezbollah's impact was far from being geographically limited to the south; in the words of Augustus Richard Norton, "the clashes and conflicts that occurred in the South were often rehearsals or encores of similar patterns of violence in the Beirut suburbs."<sup>11</sup> With the tumultuous intra-Lebanese power struggle in the midst of the civil war, the time for Hezbollah to intensify its underground resistance had finally come. Hierarchically coherent and operationally robust and flexible, it was able to establish itself within an increasingly heterogeneous Shi'ite constituency living in a dramatic socioeconomic environment that had been further degraded by Israel's "iron fist" policy. The increasing hardship and misery suffered by the disproportionately impoverished Shi'ite community thus paved the way for Hezbollah's rise: "Hizb Allah can offer not only the virtue of ideological simplicity and authenticity, but the rewards of hard cash

as well. Whatever the individual's stake in the outcome of the political struggle for the soul of the Shi'a, the body must also be fed."<sup>12</sup>

In terms of logistical support, large stockpiles of equipment and weapons were brought from Iran and over Syria, above all into the Beqa'a Valley, a transfer that the Lebanese army, at that stage, could not prevent. Training camps and recruitment support for potential militiamen had proven effective, generously supported by financial aid from Tehran. In addition, psychological mobilization and the strengthening of tactical resilience were necessary in order to consolidate the defensive capability of Hezbollah's overarching resistance concept, which was soon put to the test in southern Lebanon. The Iranian revolutionary ideology and the Open Letter of 1985<sup>13</sup> should therefore be considered the cornerstones of Hezbollah's ideological and political thinking in this period, and they proved to be key in cultivating a parallel economy in southern Lebanon in order to secure the survival and structural independence of the "Party of God" during the civil war and the intra-Shi'ite conflict. Ultimately, they should also be seen as a conceptual anchor for the stability and coherence that the organization sought in the post-civil war political constellation. In sum, Hezbollah's ascendancy, from its emergence to the elaboration of the Ta'if Agreement, can thus be accurately described as a process of gradually unfolding incubation.<sup>14</sup> The strategy through which it tried to handle and come to terms with the oppression of the Lebanese Shi'ites had been shrouded in a pan-Islamic guise in order to push back foreign states' influence with open terrorism<sup>15</sup> before the organization openly surfaced in the mid '80s, while simultaneously seeking to systematically embrace and empower its Shi'ite constituency and prepare for a resilient dualism of political and military struggle. As such, although the organization was still embedded within greater Syrian pan-Arab ambitions and



dependent on Iranian backing,<sup>16</sup> Hezbollah's success can be attributed to its capability to merge the concept of social mobilization with nuanced preparation for waging a war of attrition against the occupying forces in the Security Zone.



Marked in blue the IDF- and SLA-controlled security belt stretching into south Lebanon during 1985 to 2000 (Source: Al Mashriq.hiof.no)

Hezbollah's versatility in recognizing the pivotal signs of the times became apparent yet again during the process of Lebanonization that it underwent in the early '90s: from 1991, the Lebanese government decided to dissolve all armed, domestically operating militias and ordered the handover of their weapons. Furthermore, the militias were urged to reintegrate into the state military and into civilian institutions in order to prevent renewed conflict. With the same objective, representatives of the civil war parties were summoned to governmental institutions. However, one noteworthy exception soon proved a crucial sticking point. As determined in the Ta'if Agreement, all necessary measures

were still considered valid to liberate the entirety of Lebanon from Israeli occupation. Due to its extensive activities and the foothold it had achieved in the south of the country, Hezbollah was not considered a purely paramilitary militia but rather a resistance group, and it was consequently excluded from the disarmament, a deal facilitated through a Syrian-Iranian summit in 1991. In a logically consistent manner, Hezbollah took the Lebanese state and society by storm and became an increasingly autonomous political actor<sup>17</sup> through its participation in parliamentary and municipal elections in 1992, 1996, and 1998.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Hezbollah's aptly labeled "strategy of walking on the edge"<sup>19</sup> allowed it to be perceived both as a legitimate armed resistance force capable of resorting to arms and as an elected political actor that remained profoundly immersed in the domestic social arena and governmental structures.<sup>20</sup> It thus not only managed to maintain an Islamic resistance force in the service of the Lebanese state, with the ultimate goal of expelling the IDF and the SLA, but also penetrated successfully into the very heart of Lebanese politics in the aftermath of the civil war in an attempt to become an influential political actor. As such, it successfully overcame former sectarian divisions in order to unleash professionalized guerrilla warfare on an unprecedented scale under the guise of a patriotic doctrine: "The resistance is Hizbu'llah and Hizbu'llah is the resistance."<sup>21</sup> At times, the "Party of God" was even embraced by non-Shi'ites, who joined the active resistance in particularly designated guerrilla divisions, most notably comprising Sunni groups' resistance brigades that coordinated their activities on the ground with Hezbollah.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Hezbollah's widening welfare apparatus, consisting of schools, educational and community aid, clinics, and hospitals, expanded considerably, to the point that within its traditional strongholds in the southern outskirts of Beirut, south Lebanon,



and the Beqa'a Valley, its widespread network provided services, facilities, and support to Sunnis, Christians, and Druze alike.<sup>23</sup> Hezbollah had thus recognized and adopted the new political rules that resulted in its adamant efforts to pursue short-term stabilization of the Lebanese political system in the aftermath of the Ta'if Agreement. The establishment of its own modern television broadcast station, al-Manar, in 1991 not only created a home for hundreds of employees; the station also became deeply integrated with and garnered support from the Lebanese Workers' Federation, labor unions, farmers' associations, and academic and student associations.<sup>24</sup> Hezbollah's media capabilities, including the airing of combat footage on satellite television, was considered a major factor in its resilience in the war of attrition against its Israeli

foe.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, with the growing importance and omnipresence of the media, al-Manar has proven a pivotal cornerstone in Hezbollah's struggle for Lebanese hearts and minds, and it ultimately explains the considerable public support that enabled Hezbollah to start escalating its military resistance in the south;<sup>26</sup> in the words of Eitan Azani, "throughout the 1990s, Hezbollah maneuvered within the Lebanese political system by promoting extensive social, educational, civic, and religious-Islamic programs. . . . Hezbollah attempted to simultaneously attain two contradictory goals: to create social solidarity surrounding 'The Resistance' and win sympathy for it – but without appearing to interfere with the daily life and existential needs of residents of the south."<sup>27</sup>

## Hezbollah's military performance in south Lebanon: Resilience and hybrid warfare

When one considers more closely the performance of the "Party of God" on the battlefields of southern Lebanon from 1985 to 2000, it appears that during the early stages, the scope of the resistance was in operational terms fairly limited, not least because Hezbollah was still mostly resorting to suicide bombings executed by relatively loosely operating individuals or small and incoherent groups who mounted their explosives during expected clashes with Israeli patrols.<sup>28</sup> These attacks were answered with massive shellfire by the Israeli army, a response that claimed a growing toll of casualties among the civilian population. At the same time, Israel's military responses were intentionally delivered on a broad scale in order to remind the Shi'ite community whom it should consider accountable for any retaliatory blows in the first place.

Nonetheless, Hezbollah's efforts to absorb Israeli shelling and in particular the southern Lebanese population's resilience proved to be key in consolidating the resistance struggle over time. Having been put to the test militarily over the years, the armed wing of Hezbollah evolved tremendously, both in scope and in tactical finesse. By the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, the former guerrilla groups showed increasingly the characteristics of a regular professional army with a coherent command structure, including capabilities in the fields of reconnaissance, artillery output, and concerted infantry units. Armed Hezbollah groups were now able to initiate pinpointed infantry intrusions and shelling with blanket coverage, notably by the use of Soviet-made Katyusha rockets fired into the Security Zone.



Katyusha rockets fired from southern Lebanon (Source: BBC News)

The resistance was also benefiting from streamlined coordination and decision-making on the ground, as important military decisions were no longer being made solely by the highest politico-military echelons. For this purpose, Hezbollah established a dense chain of military headquarters, including in the coastal town of Sidon, enabling it to gather real-time intelligence and to produce more accurate analyses of the tactical conditions prevailing across southern Lebanon. Given the resulting reduction in uncertainty and increased operational readiness, Hezbollah was in a position to launch an armed insurgency by means of offensive strikes, countering the enemy in the Security Zone.<sup>29</sup> The emerging success of the military campaign can also be linked to the combination of guerrilla tactics and elements of conventional warfare, which allowed Hezbollah to compensate for its quantitative military inferiority vis-à-vis the Israelis and their proxy. The longer the conflict lasted, the more Hezbollah expanded

its operational scope, eventually intruding deeper into the Security Zone. Its attacks were executed through surface-to-air missiles and artillery, used variably and in an atypical fashion. Hezbollah also took advantage of the geographical conditions in the hilly landscape, which were conducive to the use of camouflage and to ambush operations to counter Israel's permanent imagery intelligence efforts.<sup>30</sup> Hezbollah's strategy of evacuating quickly from the battle zone after a surprise attack necessitated mobility and required a good network of hiding places among the local population, which, to a considerable degree, sympathized with the guerrillas. As described earlier, from the very start of the resistance, the support of the civilian population was a crucial and deliberate part of Hezbollah's overall military strategy in order to counter the enemy's superiority in terms of the raw output of firepower. On this account, Hezbollah's sophisticated hybrid warfare demonstrated a notable degree of awareness





of cost-benefit considerations regarding the estimated number of casualties among civilians resulting from the asymmetric conflict. In spite of Israel's massive retaliatory action against civilian infrastructure and the rising death toll on both sides, Hezbollah's approach has essentially proven successful in areas in which the civilian population has maintained its support of Hezbollah's long-term policy goal, that is, an Israeli withdrawal. To achieve this goal, Hezbollah employed effectively the entirety of its versatile capabilities: agile pinprick attacks on fixed targets within a geographically and temporarily defined environment and the combination of extensive use of light weapons and the support of heavy artillery. This strategy was further facilitated by the end of the Lebanese civil war, which slowly but

surely led to the return of substantial numbers of formerly internally displaced people across southern Lebanon to undertake efforts in civil reconstruction. In addition, Hezbollah was still largely organized as a militia, which meant that its fighters oftentimes pursued regular civilian employment alongside their military duties. The distinction between Lebanese combatants and civilians, not altogether neglected by the IDF and the SLA, became progressively blurred and resulted in a dilemma for the occupying forces: A defensive strategy would lead to a mounting loss of control and would demand an even greater military commitment to secure the "zone" for longer periods. But a more offensive strategy, on the other hand, would trigger an even higher death toll, which would result in the further strengthening of Hezbollah domestically, as



Characteristic topography of south Lebanon, in the environs of Bint Jbeil in Nabatiye Governorate (Source: Josh Wood, freelance journalist. Photo credit: Sam Tarling.)

well as in Israel's worsening isolation and allegations against it on the international stage. An example of the failure of such an offensive retaliatory strategy on Israel's part can be seen in "Operation Accountability" in July 1993, which had devastating consequences for Lebanese civilian infrastructure and caused approximately 350,000 refugees. Only three years after, "Operation Grapes of Wrath" in April 1996 prompted another violent escalation, in the course of which Israeli artillery fire killed more than 100 Lebanese civilians. In the ensuing years, as the number of casualties increased, Hezbollah followed suit and embarked on significantly intensified attacks against the occupying forces; these attacks reached their peak in 1999 with approximately 1,500 operations conducted over that year. The self-perpetuating cycle of Israeli and Hezbollah violence encompassed both direct attacks and indirect deterrence – exercised through putting pressure on the Lebanese state by Israel and through retaliatory shelling of northern Israel and soft Israeli targets abroad by Hezbollah. In retrospect, Hezbollah's agile conduct of its resistance turned out to be effective against Israel's high-intensity warfare, leading to a balance of deterrence.<sup>31</sup> With the unilateral Israeli withdrawal of its troops in 2000, Hezbollah ostensibly reached an operational success.

In the final analysis, several aspects stand out. First, the intensification of Hezbollah's operational resistance triggered fractures within the IDF as well as the SLA, since the latter had to bear the brunt of the imposed guerrilla warfare. With shrinking engagement and signs of structural disorganization on the part of the SLA, the Israeli army faced two options: either to increase its own military presence, therefore risking higher casualties, or to decide on withdrawal of its own forces from southern Lebanon. Neither option would have left Israel with the prospect of achieving tangible gains in what had become an intractable quagmire. At

the outset of establishing a sphere of influence in the Security Zone on Lebanese soil, Israel had seen its actions as a means of attaining broader political goals.<sup>32</sup> However, they turned into a war of attrition fought mainly against an elusive yet capable enemy. Second, Hezbollah's achievements in mounting attacks and inflicting heavy losses on the IDF and the SLA through the intelligent dispersion of its forces rendered any short-term, clear-cut Israeli military solution impossible.<sup>33</sup> By the same token, the pressure exerted by Hezbollah on the Israeli population through its accurate psychological warfare grew more intense as the conflict endured.<sup>34</sup> The Israeli public increasingly called the occupation of southern Lebanon into question, thus raising the political stakes for the leadership to a point at which withdrawal appeared the only possibility left. As a last resort, given Lebanon's domestic political constellation at the time, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak hoped that in the event of a unilateral withdrawal, Hezbollah would stop its armed struggle and concentrate its activities on political issues inside Lebanon. However, it soon became clear that this was a grave miscalculation, with far-reaching consequences. Finally, it must be noted that to a large extent it was Israel's event-driven and inadequate strategy vis-à-vis hybrid, asymmetric threats and its errant overarching framework of political guidelines for dealing with Hezbollah that made Hezbollah's military success possible.

## Conclusion

During the period from 1985 to 2000, as shown earlier, the "Party of God" undertook activities in a variety of dimensions; its integration into Lebanese politics and involvement in welfare provision ought to be seen as supporting the organization's fundamental *raison d'être*, that is, the resistance. Throughout its trajectory, from its emergence to the ultimate achievement of its goal, it has been able to keep up the image of a



nonaccountable, evolving movement embedded in the geopolitical sphere of Syrian, Iranian, and Israeli influence in the Middle East. Its highly effective military tactics and its adaptability within the domestic struggle for power were the paramount factors that allowed it to successfully dislodge the IDF and the SLA by means of hybrid and asymmetric warfare, culminating in the unilateral withdrawal of Israeli troops and the liberation of southern Lebanon in 2000. By contrast, Israel tacitly burdened itself by self-limiting its strategic room for maneuver with its hasty disengagement. The Lebanese armed forces were not able to fill the resulting power vacuum in the south. And so, unsurprisingly, from 2000 to 2006 Hezbollah continued to provoke low-level fighting on the slopes of the Sheba'a Farms<sup>35</sup> – which it continues to consider occupied land – and Israel's tempered response was largely interpreted as a weakness of appropriate deterrence. The impression of Israel as unable to exercise dissuasive means decisively resonated in

the aftermath of 2000, and it possibly forestalled Israel's "Change of Direction," the eponymous military operation that heralded the second Lebanon war of 2006, in which Israel decided to close the deterrence deficit. The 34-day conflict in 2006 still marks the latest major confrontation along the Israel-Lebanon border, and the interim report of the Winograd Commission, an Israeli governmental inquiry into the events of the 2006 military engagement in Lebanon, succinctly articulates the lessons that Israel had to learn the hard way in its struggle against the military wing, political party, and welfare provider that is the Lebanese Hezbollah:

"The ability of Hezbollah to sit 'on the border,' its ability to dictate the moment of escalation, and the growth of its military abilities and missile arsenal increased significantly as a result of Israel's unilateral withdrawal in May 2000 (which was not followed, as had been hoped, by The Lebanese army deploying on the border with Israel)." <sup>36</sup>

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23- Simon Haddad, "The Origins of Popular Support for Lebanon's Hezbollah," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29, no. 1 (2006): 21–34.

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25- Frederic M. Wehrey, "A Clash of Wills: Hizballah's Psychological Campaign against Israel in South Lebanon," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 13, no. 3 (2002): 53.

26- Joseph Elie Alagha, "Hizbollah's Gradual Integration in the Lebanese Public Sphere," *Sharqiyyat* 13, no. 1 (2001): 37–50.

27- Azani, "Hezbollah's Strategy," 747.

28- In its initial stages, "Hezbollah's favored tool of choice was the use of bombings and guerrilla warfare. . . . As a violent tool of empowerment for a weaker entity in a struggle for political dominance, terrorism proved successful against Western interests that sought to mediate the Civil War and end Lebanon's anarchy"; Steven Childs, "From Identity to Militancy: The Shi'a of Hezbollah," *Comparative Strategy* 30, no. 4 (2011): 399.

29- "Militarily, the insurgency has proven capable and effective through the use of a fluid umbrella-styled organization of centralized command and decentralized execution"; Sami Hajjar, *Hizballah: Terrorism, National Liberation, or Menace?* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2002), 21–34.

30- "At the end of 1997, the IDF and the SLA remained hopelessly bogged down in a military quagmire which is played out daily in the hills and valleys of Southern Lebanon"; Brendan O'Shea, "Israel's Vietnam?," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 21, no. 3 (1998): 307.

31- Shmuel Bar, "Deterring Nonstate Terrorist Groups: The Case of Hizballah," *Comparative Strategy* 26, no. 5 (2007): 471–73.

32- Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, "Mowing the Grass: Israel's Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1 (2015): 65–90.

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