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Hezbollah (a.k.a. Hizbollah, Hizbu'llah)

Authors: [Jonathan Masters](#), Deputy Editor, and [Zachary Laub](#), Online Writer/Editor

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Introduction

Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim political party and militant group that the United States and European Union consider a terrorist organization. With significant support from Iran and Syria, Hezbollah maintains an extensive security apparatus, political organization, and social services network in Lebanon, where the group is often described as a "state within the state." Hezbollah's *raison d'être*, resistance to Israel and Western involvement in the Middle East, has made it an effective proxy for Iranian foreign policy while earning the group some support from beyond its Shiite base. But as it has become increasingly embroiled in the Syrian civil war, where its fighters have fought for the Assad regime, it has alienated some of its Lebanese constituents and reportedly prompted deadly reprisals in Beirut from partisans of the predominantly Sunni Muslim Syrian rebels. The U.S. government and its European allies consider Hezbollah a global terrorist threat and a menace to Mideast stability.

What are Hezbollah's origins?

Hezbollah (or "Party of God") emerged during Lebanon's fifteen-year-long civil war (1975–1990) in the aftermath of Israel's invasion in 1982 and subsequent occupation. Israel aimed to expel Palestinian militants operating in southern Lebanon, but the move galvanized a faction of disenfranchised Shiites to take up arms in support of an Iranian-style clerical regime. In its infancy, the movement obtained critical financial support and training from [Iran's Revolutionary Guards](#). Suicide attacks on the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in October 1983 (258 Americans killed) furthered the group's image as leaders of the Shiite resistance. Just months later, President Ronald Reagan [withdrew U.S. Marines](#) who had been deployed to Lebanon as part of a multinational peacekeeping force.

Hezbollah issued its founding manifesto in 1985, around the time that analysts believe the group coalesced into a unified organization. The platform vowed Hezbollah's loyalty to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; urged the establishment of an Islamic regime; and called for the expulsion of the United States, France, and Israel from Lebanese territory, as well as for the destruction of the Israeli state. The [manifesto](#) states:

"Our primary assumption in our fight against Israel states that the Zionist entity is aggressive from its inception, and built on lands wrested from their owners, at the expense of the rights of the Muslim people. Therefore our struggle will end only when this entity is obliterated. We recognize no treaty with it, no cease-fire, and no peace agreements, whether separate or consolidated."

What is Hezbollah's leadership and organizational structure?

Hezbollah's top commander, the general secretary, is chosen by a seven-member shura council, which in turn oversees five sub-councils: 1) the political assembly, 2) jihad assembly, 3) parliamentary assembly, 4) executive assembly, and 5) judicial assembly.

Hassan Nasrallah has led Hezbollah as general secretary since 1992, following Israel's targeted killing of the group's cofounder Abbas al-Musawi. Nasrallah was a member of Hezbollah's ideological predecessor, al-Dawa al-Islamiya (The Islamic Call), a militant group that followed the teachings of prominent Iraqi cleric Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr. Other ranking Hezbollah members include Naim Qassem, second-in-command, and Hussein al-Khalil, a top political adviser to Nasrallah.

For more than twenty years, **Imad Fayeze Mugniyah** was considered Hezbollah's top planner of worldwide terrorist operations, and was on several U.S. and international most wanted lists. Experts say Mugniyah joined Hezbollah in its early days and quickly rose to a senior position in the organization. He was killed in a car bombing in Damascus in February 2008 that Hezbollah officials accused Israel of orchestrating. The Israeli government has denied involvement.

Iran bankrolls Hezbollah with **up to \$200 million a year**, Matthew Levitt, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said at a CFR meeting in October 2013. It is a particularly substantial investment, considering the economic stress of international sanctions that Iran has been under, Levitt said.

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Where is Hezbollah active?

Hezbollah's base is in Lebanon's Shiite-dominated areas, including parts of Beirut, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley, an important farming region in the east. Israel withdrew from Lebanon in 2000 after years of fighting Hezbollah guerrillas there.

Hezbollah continued to periodically shell Israeli forces in the disputed Shebaa Farms border zone. Periodic conflict between militants and Israeli forces erupted in a month-long war during the summer of 2006, in which Hezbollah launched thousands of rockets into Israeli territory. The group's use of sophisticated **anti-ship and anti-armor weaponry**, which Western officials suspect was supplied by Iran, surprised many Israeli commanders. Though Lebanon suffered heavy losses, the campaign bolstered Hezbollah's resistance credentials, analysts say. A UN-brokered cease-fire was formalized in August of that year, but Israel-Hezbollah tensions remain high.

"Its recent involvement in Syria has raised the question: is it a Lebanese nationalist organization, or a group more interested in protecting Shiite interests throughout the Middle East?"—Robert Danin, Council on Foreign Relations

In mid-2013, **Nasrallah publicly pledged** his forces to the survival of Syria's Assad regime, Hezbollah's longtime ally. "This battle is ours ... and I promise you victory," he said in a televised address. Some Western analysts say the influx of Hezbollah fighters has been critical to his survival so far.

At that time, more than a thousand Hezbollah fighters helped Syrian forces retake the strategic city of

Qusayr. They have since helped government forces secure supply corridors in the Bekaa Valley, alongside the Lebanese border. Analysts estimate that Iran and Hezbollah are marshaling [several thousand](#) fighters in support of the Assad regime.

"The decision to send expeditionary forces to Syria marked a major turning point for Hezbollah, leaving southern Lebanon potentially exposed to Israel," says CFR's [Robert Danin](#). "This move has left many Shiites in Lebanon worried that Hezbollah has overreached and forsaken its commitment to Lebanon in favor of its larger alliance with Iran and Assad's Syria."

Israel is believed to have conducted multiple air strikes in Syria to destroy shipments of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah. The United States and the European Union have accused Iran's [Quds Force](#), an elite unit of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, of providing material support to Hezbollah and Syrian forces. Israeli officials believe Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani has traveled to Damascus to manage operations.

Where else does Hezbollah operate?

The U.S State Department designated Hezbollah a Foreign Terrorist Organization in October 1997, and believes the group operates terrorist cells in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In 2010, the Obama administration described Hezbollah as "the most technically capable [terrorist group in the world](#)." With Iranian sponsorship, "Hezbollah's terrorist activity has reached a tempo unseen since the 1990s," said a 2013 [State Department fact sheet](#). Several major terrorist operations across the globe have been attributed to Hezbollah or its affiliates, though the group disputes involvement in many. Incidents include:

- the 1983 suicide attacks on U.S. facilities in Beirut
- the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847
- the 1992 car bombing of the Israeli embassy and 1994 bombing of a [Jewish community center](#) in Argentina (disputed)
- the 1996 [Khobar Towers bombing](#) in Saudi Arabia (disputed)
- the 2005 assassination of Lebanese prime minister [Rafik Hariri](#) (disputed)
- the 2012 bombing of bus carrying [Israeli tourists in Bulgaria](#) (disputed)

Since 2012, alleged Hezbollah operatives have been detained in [Nigeria](#), [Thailand](#), and Cyprus, where a court convicted a Swedish-Lebanese man for plotting [multiple attacks](#) on Israeli targets. Hezbollah disputed these charges. In July 2013, the European Union labeled the group's armed wing a [terrorist organization](#) after considerable debate among the bloc's members. Some governments feared such a move would bruise relations with Lebanon and fuel Mideast instability.

What is Hezbollah's role in Lebanese politics?

Under Lebanon's 1943 [National Pact](#), the prime minister must be Sunni, the president a Maronite Christian, and the speaker of parliament a Shiite—a system designed to accommodate the country's primary religious groups, whose coexistence has long required delicate balancing.

Hezbollah joined the Lebanese political process in the early 1990s following the 1989 [Taif agreement](#)

—brokered by Saudi Arabia and Syria—which addressed some of Lebanon's deep-seated sectarian challenges and brought an end to its civil war. However, the agreement allowed Hezbollah to remain armed, and Syrian troops stayed to keep the peace. Israel occupied southern Lebanon until 2000, while Syria eventually withdrew its forces in 2005.

Hezbollah won eight parliamentary seats (out of 128 total) competing in national elections for the first time in 1992. Analysts note the group's political strength grew significantly in May 2008 after Hezbollah was effectively granted veto power in the cabinet via the so-called [Doha agreement](#). The accord helped bring an end to an eighteen-month-long political crisis that culminated in Hezbollah's takeover of West Beirut.

Hezbollah won ten parliamentary seats in the 2009 national elections. Just months later, the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, updated Hezbollah's manifesto and expounded on the merits of democracy. "Even Hezbollah has had to accommodate its fundamentalist religious messaging to a pluralistic culture in which piety and modernity exist side-by-side. This has required a gradual shift from the group's Khomeinist roots toward a more contemporary Islamist nationalist approach," wrote the nonpartisan U.S. [Congressional Research Service](#) in a 2011 report.

Nasrallah restated Hezbollah's rejection of an Israeli state in 2009: "This stand is firm, permanent, and final, and it does not tolerate any retreat or compromise even if the entire world recognizes Israel."

In recent years, Hezbollah has continued to play a consequential role in Lebanese politics. The group brought down the government of [Saad Hariri](#), a Saudi-backed Sunni, in 2011. And though Hezbollah helped usher in a replacement in Prime Minister Najib Mikati, it forced his departure from office and a collapse of the government in March 2013 in a dispute over the Lebanese security forces.

Hezbollah's ongoing military engagement in Syria has invited reprisals from Sunni militants fighting the Assad regime, who threatened attacks in Beirut as long as Hezbollah remains active in Syria.

In November, Hezbollah rival Future Bloc said it would only form a cabinet if "[Hezbollah returns from Syria](#)"; Nasrallah called this an "impossible condition," and as of January 2014, the government remained gridlocked while Beirut appeared to be turning into a proxy battleground for the neighboring civil war.

"Hezbollah is at a critical juncture in its political evolution. Its recent involvement in Syria has raised the question: is it a Lebanese nationalist organization, or a group more interested in protecting Shiite interests throughout the Middle East?" says CFR's Danin. "In many ways, the war in Syria and Iran's future posture in the region will determine Hezbollah's fate. It could emerge from the Syrian war empowered and emboldened and able to play a dominant role in Lebanese politics. Conversely, it could emerge weakened, tarnished, and without a solid base even amongst Lebanon's large Shiite community."

Additional Resources

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This CFR Crisis Guide provides an in-depth, multimedia look at the history of the [Arab-Israeli conflict](#).

In this 2013 policy analysis, the Washington Institute's Matthew Levitt examines how [Hezbollah partners with Iran's Quds Force](#) in a war on the West.

Bilal Saab [writes](#) in *Foreign Affairs* that as Hezbollah becomes increasingly entangled in Syria's civil war, it is alienating its Lebanese Shiite base—and may find itself in an existential crisis.

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