

Jakub Drewek

Beyond Resistance: The Multifaceted Dimensions of Hezbollah

Abstract

This article examines the multifaceted role of Hezbollah in shaping Middle Eastern geopolitics, with particular emphasis on its relationship with Iran. It explores the political, military, social, and ideological dimensions of this alliance, highlighting Hezbollah's dual function as both an autonomous Lebanese actor and a proxy advancing Tehran's regional agenda. The study discusses Hezbollah's operations as an enforcer of Iran's broader strategic interests across the Middle East, including Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Special attention is given to Hezbollah's funding mechanisms, including organized criminal activity and its connections with the Lebanese diaspora, as well as the group's intelligence operations, which significantly enhance its military capabilities. The article argues that the Hezbollah-Iran relationship is characterized by ideological cohesion, mutual strategic dependence, and pragmatic adaptability, but also faces increasing challenges considering shifting regional dynamics, internal constraints, and geopolitical setbacks since late 2024.

Keywords: Hezbollah, Iran, Lebanon, organized crime, intelligence operations

Introduction

Hezbollah came into existence in 1982 during the Lebanese civil war, with support from Iran. It was formed as a coalition to coordinate Shia militant efforts against the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) during their invasion of Lebanon¹. It was the result of different factors that allowed for the creation and rapid expansion of the party.

¹ B. Berti, *War, Resistance, and „Combatant Identity“: Hezbollah's Political Identity and the Legacy of Conflict*, „Terrorism and Political Violence“ 2020, 34(8), p. 3.

The politicization of Lebanese Shias since the 1950s, under the leadership of Persian imam, Musa Sadr with the „Movement of Deprived”, a popular movement to help the poorest Lebanese Shias. Al-Sadr also lobbied to undermine the influence of feudal barons by creating a representative organ of Lebanese Shias, which in 1968 will be called „Higher Shia Council”². With the continuing radicalization of sectarian groups before the start of the Civil War in 1975, Al-Sadr’s movement also established a militant group called AMAL, which is an acronym for „Lebanese Resistance Battalions”, in Arabic *amal* is „hope”³.

The political awakening of Lebanese Shia by Al-Sadr’s activity has become a foundation for further politization and even radicalization. After imam’s disappearance in 1978, the leadership has moved towards secular approach, with Nabih Berri, lawyer, educated in US, became a leader of AMAL. Berri was a moderate, who refrained from military confrontation with Israel⁴. In result, the religious cadres were dissatisfied and planned to change the party from within by implementing young religious figures within the party, such as Hassan Nasrallah, future Secretary General of Hezbollah. But many members of AMAL left to more radical Shia organizations such as Muslim Students Union or Dawa Party of Lebanon and Hezbollah in the future years⁵.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran and the following „export” of the revolution found its biggest foothold in Lebanon. During Khomeini’s exile in Iraq, he promoted the idea of *velayat-al faqih*, which in Farsi means the „guardianship of Islamic jurist”. In short, the doctrine advocates for the transfer of all political and religious authority to Shia clergy, with state decisions requiring approval from the supreme clerical leader.

In the following years of Civil War and aftermath of Islamic Revolution, Hezbollah will emerge as a significant force in Lebanese politics and regional conflicts, shaped by a combination of local grievances, religious fervor, and strategic international alliances. Its establishment was not merely a reaction to immediate conflicts but was also deeply rooted in a longer historical process of Shiite political mobilization and radicalization underpinned by Iran’s ideological and material support. This trajectory highlights the enduring influence of historical legacies and ideological commitments in shaping the group’s actions and strategies.

The identity of Hezbollah throughout its four-decade history was changing. Established in 1982, the core of its identity is resistance (*muqawama*). Hezbollah identifies itself as a resistance group that fights Zionism, Western powers or anyone who may be a threat to them or Lebanon. In February 1985, Hezbollah

² N. Blanford, *Warriors of God. Inside Hezbollah’s thirty-year struggle against Israel*, New York 2011, p. 17.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁴ M. Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God*, Washington 2013, p. 12.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

publishes an „Open Letter Addressed by Hezbollah to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World”. It is an important moment in the history of organization as they publicly reveal themselves to the world⁶. The message of a manifesto is containing all the elements that were defining an identity of civil-war Hezbollah. In the Open Letter Hezbollah declares itself as an vanguard of Islamic community and use combatant descriptions of itself. The civil war, Israeli invasion, presence of foreign armies like US or France and UNIFIL mission in Lebanon were the major influences of Hezbollah combatant rhetoric. In the Open Letter, Hezbollah defines its combat role as a justified, essential, and defensive armed effort aimed at combating any foreign intervention in Lebanon. It particularly emphasizes the need for armed resistance against Israeli presence in Lebanon and offers support to the broader Palestinian cause⁷. Hezbollah in its manifesto sees the departure of Israel from Lebanon as a precursor to its obliteration and the eventual liberation of Jerusalem. It perceives the U.S., France as imperialist forces that need to leave Lebanon and UNIFIL forces are also perceived as an ally to the U.S and Israel, despite being neutral. When it comes to internal enemies, the Phalanges were designated as main enemy, due to its participation in Sabra and Shatila massacre in 1984. Hezbollah establishes its identity within the framework of the oppressor versus oppressed dichotomy, a central concept in Shia theology, Hezbollah anchored itself in the historical narrative of the Shia community in the Middle East, particularly drawing from the experiences of Lebanese Shia history⁸. This framework helps the organization to gather more support from Lebanese Shias from Southern Lebanon, who became more disillusioned with IDF activities, especially after Sabra and Shatila massacre in 1984. While Hezbollah goals were to establish Islamic state in Lebanon, the party often referred to nationalistic and patriotic rhetoric in which, expulsion of Israel from the country should be an national, above the sectarian divisions struggle. In the Open Letter, Hezbollah tries to proselytize the Christians to Islam or at least reach a hand to cooperation. What is surprising, Christians will become closest political allies to Hezbollah in parliament, within the anti-Western, 8 March Bloc.

How those nuanced differences relate to defining Hezbollah? Contemporary Hezbollah may be defined as VNSA due to its multi-faceted nature of militia, drug cartel, crime organization that specializes in money laundering. Its motivations are political (resistance against Israel), the wellbeing of Lebanese Shia (social), existence in Lebanon's politics, implementation of velyat al-faqih (ideological/religious). Hezbollah has mastered the guerilla warfare and southern Lebanon is full of underground facilities, bunkers, ammo depots that may provide

⁶ N. Blanford, *op.cit.*, p. 72.

⁷ B. Berti, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

necessary logistics support in event of open conflict with Israel. What Hezbollah managed to develop in Lebanon is creation of „state within state”. Where Lebanese government fails to provide daily necessities of the citizens, Hezbollah steps in with their previously mentioned social welfare programmes. As terrorist organizations have rather secretive nature of relations with state actors, VNSAs have very often an open relation. This applies to Hezbollah, which is part of „Axis of Resistance”, an anti-Western, anti-Israeli axis of Syria, Iran and Hezbollah. The organization has sent fighters to support Syrian regime in the wake of Syrian Civil War; Iran equips the party with its most modern military equipment (mainly UAVs and missiles). Other VNSAs like Taliban were also supported (unofficially) by Pakistan, providing shelter in the Tribal areas. Hezbollah is too big and too extensive organization to be put in the category of terrorist organization. Their activities are multi-dimensional, with violence being the main activity, but besides that this is a political party with diminishing but still strong presence in the Parliament.

Relations with Iran

How Hezbollah in Lebanon, by considering political, military, social and ideological aspects affect relations with Iran? Overall, the relations between Hezbollah and Iran were always strong and sympathetic. Both parties are in state of „symbiosis”. Hezbollah as proxy, provides an opportunity of Iranian soft and hard power to flourish in Lebanon. One such example of Iranian soft power and the cohesion of Axis of Resistance are portraits of Qassem Soleimani in areas controlled by Hezbollah, such as southern Beirut.

Hezbollah utilizes funding from Iran to develop its military capabilities and social programs, which helps sustain its society of resistance and other key aspects of its ideology. This financial support has enabled Hezbollah to establish a „state within a state”, transforming it into more than just an armed militia. As a result, it has emerged as a significant political force in Lebanon, with Tehran’s guidance and approval playing a crucial role in shaping the party’s current position. Hezbollah has not downplayed or abandoned its ideological connection to Iran, as the principle of *wilayat al-faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist, has always been central to its ideology. Abandoning this principle would fundamentally change Hezbollah’s identity, making it different from the party described in its Open Letter⁹.

There are two different agendas of Iranian influence on Hezbollah in internal and regional activities of Hezbollah. When it comes to Hezbollah’s political

⁹ N. Blanford, *op.cit.*, p. 482.

participation, Iran gives the party an extensive autonomy, believing in Hezbollah's loyalty to the cause and ideological principles. But the regional activities of Hezbollah are dictated by Iran, transforming the organization into Tehran's enforcer in the Middle East. While sure, with Hezbollah gaining more technical, intelligence expertise allows for the organization to be more independent from Tehran and even outsourcing Iran's training of allied proxies, groups, the relation on regional level is still hierarchical. The Iranian government decides whether Hezbollah would be deployed to other states in the region. Hezbollah has proven to be an excellent tool on putting pressure on Israel and grow influence of Iran in the region. It has been proven by Iranian strikes against Israel in IV 2024, as retaliation of Israel bombing Iranian embassy in Damascus. Most of the offensive weapons were launched from within Iran's own territory, but Iran's regional proxies – Hezbollah, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthi regime in Yemen – also participated in the operation¹⁰.

The Iran-Hezbollah relationship is founded on a mutual recognition that each needs the other to achieve its tactical and strategic objectives. Lacking the ability to develop its own advanced weaponry, Hezbollah depends on Tehran for supply and logistical support. Syria plays a crucial role as the supply and logistics hub, facilitating the transportation of these weapons to Lebanon. For Tehran, Hezbollah stands out as the only regional proxy capable of directly challenging Israel.

Contemporary Middle East is in state of „cold war” between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is a conflict of hegemony over the region and has underlying themes of Sunni vs Shia or Arab vs Persian discourse¹¹.

The Middle Eastern cold war is most visible in Yemen as Saudi Arabia was a leader of coalition intervening in the country since 2015. Iran has directly supported Houthi rebels as a means of fulfilling the role of defender of Shia groups in the region and a way of countering Saudi influence in southern Arabian Peninsula. Hezbollah role in this conflict is of high value. This geopolitical dimension of Iran-Hezbollah relations is shown especially in Syria or Yemen. Hezbollah is an „enforcer” of Iran, while technically allowing the plausible deniability for Tehran. Yet, in III 2023, Riyadh and Tehran entered the state of *détente*, by signing under Chinese patronage, a declaration of renewing diplomatic relations. Combined with decreased intensity of war in Yemen and since X 2023, Houthi rebels have shifted their targets to Israeli and western ships moving through Red Sea. Hezbollah has now more focused on confronting Israel rather than supporting

¹⁰ U. Rubin, *Operation „True Promise”; Iran's Missile Attack on Israel*, BESA, 18 VI 2024, <https://besacenter.org/operation-true-promise-irans-missile-attack-on-israel/> (5 X 2025).

¹¹ J. Jarzabek, *Uwarunkowania selektywnej sekurytyzacji w polityce zagranicznej Iranu*, [in:] *Badanie polityki zagranicznej państwa: Stany Zjednoczone, Azja Wschodnia, Bliski Wschód i Ameryka Łacińska*, eds. P. Matera, M. Pietrasiak, R. Bania, M. Stelmach, Warszawa 2017, p. 114.

other Shia groups in the region. Also, the lowering intensity of war in Syria, allows Hezbollah to shift its resources to southern border of Lebanon.

But the relationship faces challenges. The main challenge is Hezbollah's attempts at concealing how big of an impact have the Iran decision making over organization's internal and regional activities. According to leaked speech that Hassan Nasrallah gave in 2016, he admitted that budget, expenses, food, weapons are connected to Iran. Nasrallah acknowledged that the group saw itself as serving under the command of Iran's Supreme Leader. Later, Hezbollah claimed that the speech was forgery. Also, Naim Qassem, current Secretary General of Hezbollah, said in 2009 that Hezbollah cannot initiate an attack on Israel without obtaining religious approval from Iran's Supreme Leader¹².

And although it is an open secret in Lebanese society that Hezbollah is directed by Tehran, organization tries to reframe its image to more nationalistic approach and downplay its relations with Iran. Hezbollah frames Iran to Lebanese public as an ally and partner and not as a supervisor of the organization, despite claiming in Open Letter from 1985, that Ayatollah Khomeini is their religious and ideological leader.

Since IX 2024, Hezbollah and Iran and whole Axis of Resistance face nothing but major defeats. Infamous pager explosions, killing of Hassan Nasrallah and following assassinations of high value targets both from political and military wing and Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, all just in IX 2024. Fall of Bashir al-Assad's regime in XII 2024, major hit to logistics security of Party of God as most of supplies, weapons, people come through Syrian town of Zabadani, just 30 km north of Lebanese Syrian border. This streak of defeats has put strain on Iranian capabilities to support its proxies in the Middle East. Gone are the times of uninterrupted supply of Axis of Resistance with weapons, cash, people. Iran has now gone for option of sending cash only to Lebanon, that from time to time gets intercepted by Lebanese authorities¹³.

The relationship between Hezbollah and Iran is a complex, multifaceted alliance characterized by a deep ideological bond, mutual strategic interests, and a dynamic balance of power. The group's military prowess, social influence, and political activities have all been underpinned by Iranian support, demonstrating a „state within a state” structure that allows it significant autonomy in Lebanese internal affairs, while maintaining loyalty to Tehran's regional agenda. Iran's influence on Hezbollah manifests in two distinct spheres: political and regional.

¹² *Hezbollah is the Long Arm of Iran- Factsheet 5*, AJC Global Voice, <https://www.ajc.org/news/hezbollah-is-the-long-arm-of-iran-factsheet-5> (5 X 2025).

¹³ Institute for the Study of War & American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project, *Iran update: August 14, 2025*, <https://understandingwar.org/background/iran-update-august-14-2025> (5 X 2025).

Domestically, Hezbollah enjoys relative freedom to navigate Lebanon's political landscape, relying on Iran's financial and ideological backing. However, its regional activities – particularly in conflicts involving Israel or other Iranian adversaries – are directly guided by Tehran. Iran's use of Hezbollah as a proxy force in the broader „Axis of Resistance” against Israel and other regional powers like Saudi Arabia has cemented Hezbollah's role as a vital enforcer of Iranian interests in the Middle East. Despite the tight relationship, Hezbollah must carefully manage its image within Lebanon, where it seeks to portray itself as an independent nationalistic force rather than an Iranian puppet. The organization's shift of resources back to Lebanon's southern border signals a renewed emphasis on its original mission. Looking ahead, the alliance between Iran and Hezbollah remains robust but not without potential challenges. A change in Iran's Supreme Leader could introduce new dynamics, though a fundamental shift in Hezbollah's allegiance to Tehran is unlikely. The organization's identity is too deeply intertwined with Iran's ideological and strategic framework to break away entirely. Nonetheless, Hezbollah's attempts to reframe its image and assert its autonomy may grow in prominence, especially as it navigates Lebanon's complex political environment and the broader regional power play.

Organized criminal activity of Hezbollah

The creation of „state within state” in Lebanon where Hezbollah can fund all the necessary projects, military is surely an expensive activity. While Iran sends money to Hezbollah to maintain its power in Lebanon and region, the organization managed to create its own sources of income, both legal and illegal to fund its struggle against Israel and its presence in Lebanon. In this part, more illegal sources of income would be presented as a means of developing power and influence, both military and political in Lebanon and in the Middle East.

To start with, it is necessary to present Lebanese diaspora globally. There are no UN reports or academic works regarding the exact number of Lebanese citizens, people of Lebanese descent living abroad Lebanon. But there is consensus that: there are more Lebanese living outside Lebanon than in the country which has 5.3 mln people and that Lebanese diaspora is living mostly in South America (Argentina, Brazil) and in the U.S.

What also is generally agreed upon is that remittances coming from diaspora are an important source of income for many families. In 2024 Banque du Liban has released a report in which around 30.7% of country economy which is 6.7 bln USD were remittances coming from Lebanese living abroad, which comparing the percentage of remittance in country's economy is the third highest

position in world¹⁴. What is worth noting that Lebanese diaspora is one of the most-educated, richest diasporas in the world.

The drug empire of Hezbollah started to develop already in 1980s. Hezbollah would send its operatives with the goal of establishing contacts with South American drug cartels through Lebanese diaspora. And Lebanese Shias living in Brazil, Argentina would assist in drug trafficking operations through tri-point border of Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina and in Colombia. In 2009, U.S. Department of State in Country Reports on Terrorism stated that „The Argentine, Brazilian, and Paraguayan governments have long been concerned with arms and drugs smuggling, document fraud, money laundering, trafficking in persons, and the manufacture and movement of contraband goods through the TBA [tri-border area]¹⁵”. Tri-border area due to it being a jungle is an area where border control is more loose than on other points of state borders, which results in fertile ground for developing illegal activities, mainly drug trafficking.

Hezbollah operative, Assad Barakat was supervising the trafficking operation in TBA, along with operating the revenue that would be used to fund Hezbollah. His shop in Paraguay would be used as a front for his and his brother's activities related to drug trafficking and money laundering. U.S. Treasury would later find out that Iran is also involved in Hezbollah criminal activity as Barakat's assistant, Sobhi Mahmoud Fayad was a liaison between TBA Hezbollah and Iranian embassy. Fayad very often met with Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon and Iran.¹⁶

Main import destinations for drugs are U.S., Europe and Middle East to some extent. When it comes to trafficking drugs to Europe, Hezbollah uses a „Highway 10”, which is a shortest distance between South America and West Africa near 10th parallel, hence the name. The main destination for ships sailing from South America is Guinea-Bissau, due to corruption and lawlessness in the country. Then the drugs are moved to southern Europe and distributed around the continent. According to UNODC report in 2012, the drug trafficking operation through Guinea-Bissau generates around 900 mln USD annually¹⁷.

It may seem striking that an Islamist extremist group is involved into drug trafficking operations. In Islam, it is forbidden to abuse alcohol, let alone drugs. Yet, Levitt had pointed out another case of pragmatism mixed with religious zeal. Iranian clerics in 1980s issued fatwa that justifies the engagement into drug traf-

¹⁴ S. Bechara, *Lebanon received \$6.7 billion in remittances in 2023: World Bank*, L'Orient Today, 3 VII 2024, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1419163/lebanon-received-67-billion-in-remittances-in-2023-world-bank.html> (5 X 2025).

¹⁵ M. Levitt, *Hizbullah Narco-Terrorism: A Growing Cross-Border Threat*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 15 X 2012, p. 37, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hizbullah-narco-terrorism-growing-cross-border-threat> (5 X 2025).

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 37-38.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

ficking: „We are making drugs for Satan – America and the Jews. If we cannot kill them with guns, so we will kill them with drugs¹⁸”. In the eyes of Hezbollah, a holy war is at all fronts, whether military, social, political, cultural or religious.

Hezbollah effectively delves into the darker, often hidden mechanisms that sustain organization’s power and influence, revealing the complexities behind the organization’s funding sources. While Hezbollah’s social, political, and military presence in Lebanon has been widely acknowledged, the exploration of its illegal activities, particularly its involvement in drug trafficking, sheds light on the less-discussed avenues that contribute to its financial self-sufficiency. The connections between Hezbollah and the global Lebanese diaspora, particularly in South America, serve as a key element in understanding how the organization operates beyond Lebanon’s borders, leveraging illegal networks for both ideological and practical purposes.

The pragmatic contradiction of an Islamist group engaging in activities like drug trafficking is striking. However, as noted, Hezbollah’s approach is a blend of religious zeal and pragmatism, reflecting a broader interpretation of jihad that transcends military engagement to include economic and social warfare. The justification provided by Iranian clerics for drug trafficking as a means of harming enemies like the U.S. and Israel illustrates the complex moral framework within which Hezbollah operates. It highlights the group’s willingness to bend religious principles for the sake of achieving its broader goals.

Hezbollah’s involvement in illegal activities such as drug trafficking is not merely a financial endeavour but a strategic extension of its ongoing conflict with Israel and the West. These activities allow Hezbollah to maintain its influence both in Lebanon and the broader Middle East, while also contributing to global drug-related problems. Understanding these intricate financial networks provides a more nuanced view of Hezbollah’s role not only as a militant group but as a global actor with far-reaching influence in both legal and illegal spheres.

Hezbollah’s military deployments in the Middle East

Hezbollah was heavily involved in the Syrian Civil War and the civil war in Yemen. Hezbollah and Iranian instructors have been training Shia militias that fought against ISIS and Tehran’s enemies in Iraq. However, the actors that Hezbollah supports and trains in these conflicts are different. In the Syrian Civil War, Hezbollah supported the regular forces of the Syrian military under the Assad regime. In Yemen and Iraq, they support and train non-state actors, such as the Yemeni Houthi rebels and Iraqi Shia groups. One of Iran’s foreign policy

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

goals is to protect Shia minorities in the Middle East, and Tehran acknowledged the importance of its alliance with Damascus before Bashar al-Assad's fall. Iran sent its instructors to Syria and Hezbollah fighters to further support Bashar al-Assad's regime. The support of the Syrian regime was more of strategic objective rather than the protection of Shia minorities. Although Syria is a Sunni-majority country, it is ruled by a minority of Alawites. For Hezbollah, the Syrian regime is the most important transport and logistics hub, facilitating the movement of people, money, and weapons.

Syria (before Assad's regime fall in XII 2024)

Hezbollah publicly announced its involvement in Syria in VIII 2013, with Nasrallah outlining the reasons for the organization's participation in the conflict¹⁹. Nasrallah stated that Hezbollah's involvement in Syria was part of the broader struggle against Israel. However, this explanation did not convince public opinion, as Hezbollah was seen as supporting an oppressive regime in Syria and becoming part of the apparatus of oppression. In the public eye, Hezbollah which often described itself as part of Axis of Resistance, joined forces with the oppressive regime of Bashar al-Assad. Hezbollah has set three main objectives of supporting Assad's regime: perseverance of Axis of Resistance, retaining access to transport hub in Zabadani in southern Syria and preventing the emergence of Sunni-dominated regime if Assad's regime falls²⁰. All those objectives has failed in XII 2024. The importance of Syria's geographical and political position in Axis of Resistance was the reason why Hezbollah military deployment is the strongest in Syria as mentioned objective were presented as critical challenge to the security of Hezbollah as a whole, both militarily and politically. According to Levitt, in 2021 where nearly ten thousand fighters were in Syria, although the number may be lower due to the rotation system²¹. Beside fighters, Hezbollah has sent instructors, experts to train Syrian Army and loyalist forces in more unconventional warfare and sniper training. Hezbollah's deployment in Syria is extremely beneficial for military capabilities of organization. Having the ability to fight and train alongside conventional armies, like Syrian, Iranian or elite Russian Spetsnaz units. An interesting scenario was presented by Nadav Pollak and IDF Brig. Gen. Muni Katz in which,

¹⁹ M. Levitt, *Hezbollah Regional Activities in Support of Iran's Proxy Networks*, Middle East Institute, 26 VII 2021, p. 11, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollahs-regional-activities-support-irans-proxy-networks> (5 X 2025).

²⁰ M. Sullivan, *Hezbollah in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, 2014, p. 5, https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf (5 X 2025)

²¹ M. Levitt, *Hezbollah Regional Activities...*, p. 11.

Russian commander sits with Hezbollah, Iranian, and Syrian commanders and lays out the military strategy for the Syria campaign. He talks about the objectives, the timeframe to achieve these objectives, and the priorities in the fight. He then emphasizes which assets can be instrumental in battle and perhaps offers important lessons from past operations such as the counterinsurgency campaign in Chechnya. For Hezbollah, this will be the first time it will be able to watch how a first-tier military plans a fighting campaign²².

This „educational exchange” has strongly enhanced Hezbollah military capabilities, which at this point may already surpass the Lebanese Armed Forces. But despite the victories, extensive cooperation with its allies, lessons learned from Syria may be difficult to implement when it comes to confronting the IDF. Hezbollah was facing mostly non-conventional armed groups like ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups. But IDF is a conventional army with its air force, modern armoured units and navy with high knowledge of Hezbollah operations²³.

Iraq

Iraq is seen as first foreign deployment of Hezbollah. Started in 2003, when US-led coalition invaded Iraq, it opened a window of opportunity for Iran. Iran's objectives in Iraq were decentralized and weakened Iraq dominated by Shia forces, which lacks the capacity to threaten Iran, fostering unity among Shia political parties and movements and bogging down coalition forces in war of attrition²⁴. In contrary to Syrian deployment, Hezbollah operations in Iraq are based around training and support for Iraqi Shia militant groups. The Quds Force, a branch of IRGC which is specialized in espionage, assassinations, non-conventional warfare and training Shia militias in the Middle East, has been operating in Iraq since 1980s. While Hezbollah had its own reasons for its presence in Syria, we may believe that Hezbollah was ordered by Tehran to start its operation in Iraq. Hezbollah role in Iraq was more a subordinate to IRGC, rather than its own support deployment with its own agenda. At request of Iran, Hezbollah created Unit 3800, which is similar to IRGC's Unit 1800, committed to support Palestinian terrorist groups²⁵. US intelligence reports stated that Hezbollah successfully made contact with Moqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army in VIII 2003 and started to buy

²² M. Katz, N. Pollak, *Hezbollah's Russian military education in Syria*, The Washington Institute, 24 XII 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahs-russian-military-education-syria> (5 X 2025).

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ M. Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global...*, p. 290.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 297.

RPGs and anti-tank missiles and that relations between Hezbollah and Mahdi Army were not ties between individuals but rather were seen as decisions between top of the organizations, pointing to relationship between Nasrallah and al-Sadr²⁶. In 2004 Mahdi Army began to splinter into smaller groups, similar to local gangs than militias, which opened another window of opportunity for Iran and Hezbollah to train and fund new groups²⁷. For Iran, splinter groups were an possibility to recreate Hezbollah model, with main goal to hold a plausible deniability for attacks on coalition. When it comes to training, Hezbollah being able to train Mahdi Army in cooperation with Quds Forces showed volumes on how Iran perceives the expertise and professionalism of Hezbollah instructors. It showed to Tehran that it is ready to „outsource” its training²⁸. Fighters were sent to Iran for 20-day training, where they learned marksmanship, reconnaissance, small unit tactics, communications and IEDs training. After 20 days, small part of graduates will be chosen for advanced training aimed at making them commanders, so the additional training included: logistics, tactics, information operations, explosives engineering²⁹. In conclusion, Hezbollah’s deployment in Iraq exemplifies the intricate and strategic collaboration between the group and Iran, with Hezbollah playing a crucial role in advancing Tehran’s objectives in the region. By training and supporting Shia militant groups, Hezbollah not only extended Iran’s influence in Iraq but also demonstrated its capacity to serve as a vital extension of Iran’s military strategy beyond its own borders. This relationship underscores Hezbollah’s evolution from a Lebanese resistance group into a key player in Iran’s broader regional ambitions, contributing to the destabilization of Iraq while ensuring that Iran’s interests are securely entrenched.

Yemen

Hezbollah alongside Iran is engaged in Yemeni Civil War, with support mission like its Iraqi deployment. Since 2015, Hezbollah and IRGC members were either supporting and training Houthi rebels in advanced equipment such as UAV or ballistic missiles. Hezbollah and the IRGC are not only involved in training the Houthis in operating advanced weaponry, but they are also responsible for the maintenance and assembly of these missiles. The missiles often arrive in parts, a tactic used to evade detection and control over the shipments. This deceptive strategy allows them to transport the missile components more discreetly and

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 299.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 301.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 302.

assemble them upon arrival at their destination³⁰. The conflict in Yemen began with peaceful protests against President Ali Abdullah Saleh, which soon escalated into violent clashes involving various tribal and political factions. By 2015, these confrontations intensified into a full-blown civil war, pitting the Houthi movement, a Shiite political-religious group, against forces loyal to the government, which were backed by Saudi Arabia. Yemeni Civil War is a prime example of power struggle that is present in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a Middle Eastern „cold war” with conflict in Yemen bringing analogies from Korean War, with one party, which is Saudi Arabia that was a leader of coalition has directly militarily intervened in Yemen, much like United States and Iran in-directly supporting Houthi with advanced weaponry and training, much like Soviet Union. In II 2016 press release, Saudi-supported government has revealed that Hezbollah operatives were not only training Houthi forces but were also actively engaging in combat operations, including participating in border skirmishes³¹. According to statements by Saudi officials, it was Hezbollah that was responsible for launching an Iranian-supplied ballistic missile from Yemen targeting Riyadh International Airport in 2017³². This act was seen as a significant escalation in the conflict, demonstrating Hezbollah’s active role in supporting the Houthis and directly threatening Saudi Arabia’s security. Hezbollah-Houthi relationship is well developed, which is shown by a fundraiser that Houthis created for Lebanese after 2020 Beirut port explosion. This action faced strong criticism, as Yemeni activists argued that fundraising efforts were merely a cover for financing the Houthis’ war campaign. Activists also condemned the Houthis’ behavior, pointing out the irony and injustice of asking the Yemeni people, who are already suffering from famine, war, and disease, to sacrifice their last savings to support the war effort³³. Since X 2023, Houthi rebels are actively attacking civilian ships that pass through Red Sea with drones and missiles. Although there are no reports of Hezbollah or IRGC direct involvement in those attacks, we may deduct that due to years of training of Houthi rebels in operating drones and missiles, there are footprints of both parties being involved in the Red Sea crisis. The attacks were escalated after joint US-UK strikes at Houthi facilities in Yemen since

³⁰ F.A. Alasar , *Iran, Hezbollah operating with impunity in Yemen*, Arab News, 19 II 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1630276> (5 X 2025).

³¹ U. Rubin, *Hezbollah and the Yemeni Missiles*, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 29 XI 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep16867> (5 X 2025).

³² B. Anderson, H. Clarke, *Missile attack ‘an act of war’ by Iran, Saudi Foreign Minister says*, CNN, 6 XI 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/06/middleeast/saudi-foreignminister-interview/index.html> (5 X 2025).

³³ *Houthis Accused of Exploiting Beirut Blast to Raise Donations for Hezbollah*, Asharq Al-Awsat, 8 VIII 2020, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2436621/houthis-accused-exploiting-beirut-blast-raise-donations-hezbollah> (5 X 2025).

II 2024. The Red Sea crisis was putting an economic strain on many countries as currently ships were taking course around Africa rather than crossing the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

Hezbollah was a formidable military force, engaging in conflicts across multiple regions, including Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and southern Lebanon. This extensive involvement underscores its evolution from a Lebanese resistance group into a key player in broader Middle Eastern geopolitics. The organization's ability to operate on various fronts is supported by a sophisticated and well-coordinated infrastructure that blends traditional military tactics with modern technological advancements. Hezbollah's military capabilities are notably bolstered by its extensive arsenal of rockets and missiles, which is widely regarded as one of the most significant threats to Israel's security. The organization has continually upgraded its stockpile, incorporating more advanced and precise weaponry, which enables it to conduct both conventional military operations and asymmetric warfare with high efficiency. The sheer volume and sophistication of Hezbollah's rocket arsenal allow it to exert considerable pressure on its adversaries, complicating military planning and operations for those who oppose it. In addition to its weaponry, Hezbollah's involvement in regional conflicts, particularly in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, illustrates its strategic alignment with Iran's broader regional ambitions. In Syria, Hezbollah has provided significant support to the Assad regime, not only through direct military engagement but also by training Syrian forces in unconventional warfare tactics. This collaboration has allowed Hezbollah to gain valuable experience in conventional military operations, working alongside Syrian, Iranian, and even Russian forces. The skills and knowledge acquired in Syria have undoubtedly enhanced Hezbollah's overall military effectiveness, although the challenges of confronting a conventional army like the IDF remain formidable. In Iraq, Hezbollah's role has been more focused on training and supporting Shia militant groups, aligning with Iran's objective of expanding its influence and creating a decentralized, Shia-dominated Iraq. This involvement has extended Hezbollah's reach beyond Lebanon, positioning it as a key player in Iran's strategy to exert influence across the region. Similarly, in Yemen, Hezbollah has been instrumental in training and supporting the Houthi rebels, providing them with advanced weaponry and expertise. This has further cemented Hezbollah's role as a critical component of Iran's military strategy in the Middle East, enabling Tehran to project power and influence in the ongoing „cold war” between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Overall, Hezbollah's evolution into a multifaceted military and political entity reflects its ability to adapt to the complexities of modern warfare. By leveraging a combination of traditional military tactics, advanced technology, and strategic alliances, Hezbollah has maintained its position as a significant force in the Middle East. Its ongoing modernization efforts, combined with its deep-rooted connections to Iran, ensure that Hezbollah will

continue to play a central role in regional conflicts and geopolitical dynamics for the foreseeable future.

Hezbollah intelligence gathering

Since 2006 war, Hezbollah reassessed its weaponry and tactics. Besides procuring more advanced armament from its allies, Hezbollah focused on rebuilding its communication for command. One of Hezbollah military commanders said in the interview that organization is more worried with building communication centres rather than procuring weapons. „We have many friends, thanks to God, so we do not worry about arms coming our way. All we need to do is stay awake and be able to communicate amongst ourselves. You cannot go to war when you are blind. Today we are back to where we were in 2006, and I would say we are in an even better position³⁴”.

SIGINT

In all areas where Hezbollah is deployed or has high popular support (southern Beirut, Bekaa Valley, southern Lebanon), a fiber-optic network has been developed. Those cables were reportedly hooked up to Syrian and Iranian SIGINT stations for intel gathered by Iranian or Syrian officers to be transferred to Hezbollah commanders in Lebanon, which faces a challenge to Israeli counter-intelligence capabilities³⁵. In fact, the invading IDF's poor communication security inadvertently bolstered Hezbollah's communications intelligence capabilities. Overconfidence led many IDF personnel to underestimate Hezbollah's intelligence efforts, with some soldiers openly using cell phones to speak with family back home. This lax approach to communication security appeared to be a low priority for the IDF, further aiding Hezbollah's intelligence operations. Hezbollah's strategic focus on enhancing its communication infrastructure signifies a critical shift in its operational priorities³⁶.

The turning point for increasing SIGINT capabilities is IDF withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000. After 2000, Hezbollah managed to intercept IDF's

³⁴ B.Y. Saab, N. Blanford, *The next war: How another conflict between Hizballah and Israel could look and how both sides are preparing for it*, The Saban Center at Brookings. The Brookings Institution, VIII 2011, p. 6 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/08_hizballah_israel.pdf (5 X 2025).

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

³⁶ C.A. Wege, *Hezbollah's Communication System: A Most Important Weapon*, „International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence” 2014, 27(2), p. 245.

radio messages. The monitoring was conducted by Hebrew-speaking personnel positioned at regional listening stations, who collected information and passed it to sector commanders. There was likely also a central unit specifically assigned to this task. Although the full scale of the operation is hard to assess, the available evidence indicates that it was continuous, and that any unencrypted IDF tactical communication network in the northern area could have been intercepted by Hezbollah³⁷.

Cyber warfare is a field that Hezbollah has taken interest into and uses it to its profit. With Virtual Private Network (VPN), being more popular among public around the world, the organization utilizes the attributes of VPN for secure communication within Lebanon and globally with either Lebanese diaspora or operatives who are performing tasks outside Lebanon. Though unsuitable for most military operations, these VPNs work effectively for managing fundraising and logistical support tasks³⁸. Nicholas Blanford, an English journalist in his book about Hezbollah „Warriors of God” wrote: „The IED may have been the deadliest tactical weapon in Hezbollah’s arsenal, but arguably the most effective strategic weapon was the camera³⁹”. In the Age of Internet it may seem that communication is currently Hezbollah’s most effective strategic weapon. Hassan Nasrallah himself declared that Hezbollah’s most vital weapon is its communications capability, and in many respects, this is true⁴⁰. Rather than solely relying on the procurement of advanced weaponry, Hezbollah recognizes the paramount importance of robust and secure communication networks. This approach not only ensures effective command and control but also fortifies its operational resilience against adversaries. The development of a comprehensive fiber-optic network, bolstered by alliances with Syrian and Iranian intelligence, exemplifies a sophisticated and adaptive strategy. This network enables Hezbollah to maintain a state of readiness and enhances its capability to coordinate actions across its areas of influence, thereby reinforcing its overall military efficacy and civilian support. As such, Hezbollah’s investment in communication infrastructure is a testament to its evolving tactics and its commitment to sustaining its strategic objectives amidst ongoing regional challenges.

³⁷ N. Flamer, *Hizballah’s Intelligence Collection Leading Up to and During the 2006 War With Israel: How a VNSA Conducts Operative Intelligence*, „Terrorism and Political Violence” 2025, 37(11), p. 6.

³⁸ C.A. Wege, *op.cit.*, p. 247.

³⁹ N. Blanford, *op.cit.*, p. 134.

⁴⁰ C.A. Wege, *op.cit.*, p. 248.

HUMINT

Unit 1800 is Hezbollah's unit responsible for recruiting assets for operation against Israel. Agents recruited by Hezbollah were mostly Israeli Arabs from families that were divided by Blue Line. The case of Razek and Sarhan families perfectly presents how Hezbollah recruits and leads its agents. After IDF withdrawal in 2000, families finally could safely reunite and meet by the border fence. Recruiters from Unit 1800 often went to reunions to meet and talk to Israeli. In this case, Jamal Hassan Sleiman, Unit 1800 operative and a relative to families, approached Salim Abdul Razek and Majid Sarhan. Sleiman asked Razek and Sarhan to join Hezbollah and collaborate with the group, and they agreed to think about it. Jamal gave them a Lebanese mobile phone and a contact number for future communication. They also created a list of code words to use in later conversations, covering topics such as kidnappings, attacks, the army, tanks, soldiers, military facilities, and other related terms. After this first meeting, Razek and Sarhan stayed in contact with Hezbollah members, mainly through someone named Yusuf⁴¹.

Hezbollah instructed Razek and Sarhan to carry out various intelligence-gathering tasks. Their assignments included observing IDF movements along the Lebanese border, tracking soldiers entering and leaving military bases, counting the number of soldiers in each vehicle, noting how many vehicles carried troops, and identifying the locations and personnel strength of IDF bases. They successfully collected and relayed this information to Hezbollah, which included details on IDF checkpoints, patrol schedules, vehicle descriptions, soldier counts, and the types of weapons used. This operation went on for several months before their eventual arrest⁴².

Before Razek and Sarhan arrest in XI 2000, their handlers asked them to recruit new agents. None of recruitment attempts succeeded for a few reasons: recruits were afraid of potential risks; family members forbid them to work for organization or plans were not executed because of arrest of Razek and Sarhan. New recruits were supposed to: kill pro-Israeli Abu Sanan residents, smuggle weapons into Israel, monitor IDF facilities and soldiers⁴³.

Hezbollah appears to have devoted considerable resources to the development of its human intelligence (HUMINT) network. The organization systematically refined its procedures for the recruitment and management of informants and simultaneously expanded the scope of the information collected. Intelligence operations were not confined to the immediate border zone but extended further into Israeli territory. This expansion was intended to enlarge the pool of potential

⁴¹ N. Flamer, *op.cit.*, p. 2-3.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

targets, both for routine operational purposes and for contingencies involving a large-scale confrontation.

The case referenced here constitute only a limited sample of numerous similar incidents in which Hezbollah operatives directed agents inside Israel between 2000 and 2006. While dozens of such individuals are known to have been active during this period, the actual number was likely considerably higher, as available data are restricted to those apprehended and whose arrests were made public. The principal motivations for collaboration during this time were financially linked to drug trafficking – as well as ideological alignment. Collectively, these intelligence-gathering efforts markedly enhanced Hezbollah's operational capabilities and contributed to the construction of a comprehensive intelligence framework in anticipation of future conflict, encompassing both military and civilian domains.

Conclusion

Since IX 2024, Hezbollah has gone to the defensive. Annihilation of upper echelons of party and militia, destruction of many ammo and weapon caches, renewed discussion of Hezbollah's disarmament and fall of Assad's regime show that 2024 and 2025 may become Hezbollah's *annus horribilis*. Hezbollah's trajectory over the past decades demonstrates the organization's transformation from a Lebanese resistance movement into a highly complex actor at the center of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Its close partnership with Iran, grounded in ideological loyalty to the principle of *wilayat al-faqih* and reinforced by shared strategic goals, has enabled Hezbollah to develop into a hybrid entity that combines political influence, military strength, social legitimacy, and transnational financial networks. This evolution has elevated Hezbollah to the position of Iran's most significant proxy, capable of projecting Tehran's power across the region while maintaining a strong base in Lebanon.

At the same time, Hezbollah's dual role as both a Lebanese political party and a regional enforcer of Iranian interests creates tensions. Domestically, the organization seeks to portray itself as a nationalist actor defending Lebanon against external threats, yet its overt reliance on Iranian support – financial, military, and ideological – undermines that narrative. Internationally, its involvement in conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen has expanded its operational capacity, provided valuable battlefield experience and enhanced its intelligence and technological sophistication. However, these same deployments have also linked Hezbollah inseparably to Iran's broader regional agenda, making it vulnerable to shifts in Tehran's fortunes.

The reliance on illicit funding channels, particularly global drug trafficking, further complicates Hezbollah's image and highlights the pragmatic contradictions inherent in its operations. While these networks provide financial sustainability, they expose the organization to international scrutiny and undermine its claims of religious and ideological purity.

Recent setbacks, including military losses, leadership decapitation, and challenges to its logistical routes revealed the fragility of Hezbollah's current position. Nevertheless, the depth of its institutional ties with Iran, its entrenched infrastructure in Lebanon, and its ability to adapt to shifting circumstances suggest that the Iran–Hezbollah axis will remain a central pillar of regional politics. In the long term, Hezbollah's survival and influence will depend on its capacity to reconcile its Lebanese identity with its function as Tehran's proxy, as well as on the evolving balance of power in the Middle East.

Abstrakt

Jakub Drewek

Poza oporem: Różnorodne oblicza Hezbollahu

Artykuł analizuje wielowymiarową rolę Hezbollahu w kształtowaniu geopolityki Bliskiego Wschodu, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem jego relacji z Iranem. Omawia polityczne, militarne, społeczne i ideologiczne wymiary tego sojuszu, podkreślając podwójną funkcję Hezbollahu jako autonomicznego aktora libańskiego oraz proxy realizującego regionalną agendę Teheranu. Studium przedstawia działania Hezbollahu jako wykonawcy szerszych strategicznych interesów Iranu na Bliskim Wschodzie, obejmujących Syrię, Irak i Jemen. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono mechanizmom finansowania Hezbollahu, w tym działalności przestępczej oraz powiązaniom z libańską diasporą, a także operacjom wywiadowczym, które znacząco zwiększają jego zdolności militarne. Artykuł dowodzi, że relacje Hezbollah–Iran charakteryzują się ideologiczną spójnością, wzajemną strategiczną zależnością i pragmatyczną elastycznością, lecz stoją wobec rosnących wyzwań wynikających ze zmieniającej się dynamiki regionalnej, wewnętrznych ograniczeń i geopolitycznych niepowodzeń od końca 2024 r.

Słowa kluczowe: Hezbollah, Iran, Liban, przestępczość zorganizowana, działalność wywiadowcza

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Jakub Drewek – mgr stosunków międzynarodowych. ORCID: 0009-0003-4471-4056