

WHAT IS HEZBOLLAH?

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Overview

Hezbollah (Hizb Allah—“Party of God”) is a Lebanese Shi’a militia and socio-political movement. It is one of the most powerful non-state actors globally and Iran’s top proxy group. Hezbollah has been designated as a terrorist group, fully or partially, by the U.S. and many other countries, and has carried out attacks against Jewish, Israeli, and Western civilian targets worldwide. Its goals include the destruction of Israel and resistance against Western influence in Lebanon.

Background

Hezbollah was established in 1982 with Iranian help after Israel invaded Lebanon to root out Palestinian militants. Hezbollah used Iranian funding to finance guerilla warfare against Israel and develop a social services network for Lebanon’s long-neglected Shi’a community. It continued to attack Israel after the IDF withdrew from most of Lebanon to a security zone along the border in 1985, and from Lebanon entirely in 2000. The group also attacked foreign bases in Lebanon and kidnapped over 100 Western citizens. Israel and Hezbollah fought a short and intense war in 2006 after a deadly Hezbollah cross-border attack and kidnapping. [U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701](#), which assigned UNIFIL to maintain the peace, failed. A fragile quiet held until October 2023, when Hezbollah joined in Hamas’ attack against Israel by launching thousands of rockets at the north of the country.

Today, Hezbollah is a sprawling organization with a large military, diverse financial streams, and major social, cultural, and media institutions. The group is more powerful than Lebanon’s military and has a controlling stake in the country.

Military

The U.S. [estimates](#) the group has 40,000-50,000 dedicated fighters. Besides its Radwan commando force and geographic commands, Hezbollah has sizable rocket and drone units, as well as units tasked with facilitating arms transfers from Iran, internal security, external operations, training of allied militias, intelligence, and more.

Hezbollah’s pre-war rocket and missile arsenal was [estimated](#) at 150,000. While most are short-range, several thousand can reach central Israel. Hezbollah also has several thousand suicide and surveillance drones. The IDF has reportedly destroyed [some 80%](#) of Hezbollah’s rocket and missile array and the group has launched thousands of rockets and drones in the current war, but its stockpiles remain significant. Hezbollah possesses large quantities of small arms, RPGs, and anti-tank guided missiles, and has developed combat infrastructure, including extensive tunnel networks, across Lebanon.

Financial

Hezbollah’s budget is [estimated](#) at roughly \$1 billion per year, with roughly \$700 million coming directly from Iran. The remaining \$300 million is derived from a wide array of illicit industries in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, including drug and gun trafficking, money laundering, and smuggling. This is augmented by deposits at Hezbollah’s primary banking institution, al-Qard al-Hassan, which operates outside of Lebanon’s banking system. Hezbollah also leverages its control of government ministries and preferential status for its organizations to funnel cash and contracts to its own enterprises. As Lebanon’s economic crisis deepens, Hezbollah has expanded its holdings in sectors like real estate, electricity, and pharmaceuticals.

Political

Lebanon’s sectarian political system limits Hezbollah’s formal influence, though it dominates Shi’a politics. Lebanon’s unique power-sharing arrangements mandate a Christian president, a Sunni prime minister, and a Shi’a parliament speaker. Despite Hezbollah’s prominence, the leader of Amal, Nabih Berri, has long held the speakership. Hezbollah, however, controls key government ministries which it uses to channel funds and contracts to its own organizations.

Hezbollah maintains political alliances outside the Shi'a community in the formal framework of the **March 8 alliance**, a loose cross-sectarian grouping of pro-Syria parties formed in 2005.

Social

Hezbollah operates a large network of health, education, social service, youth, and media organizations, many of which enjoy tax and customs exemption, government funding, and preferential state contracts.

Iran-Hezbollah Relations

Hezbollah is Iran's oldest and most capable, ideologically aligned, and loyal proxy. It has regularly helped train other proxies, including Iraqi militias and the Houthis. Notably, Hezbollah **entered** the Syrian civil war in 2013 at Iran's behest. Hezbollah receives ample Iranian funding and technological and military aid. Many argue that Hezbollah's most important function in Iran's eyes is as a second-strike capability if Israel ever targets the Iranian nuclear program.

Hezbollah Abroad

Hezbollah often operates within Lebanese diaspora communities for fundraising and trafficking purposes, and has carried out terror attacks worldwide. Oftentimes these activities are facilitated by Lebanese dual citizens or via sham charities. Major Hezbollah activities and attacks have taken place in West Africa, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

Hezbollah's Future

Hezbollah and Israel are currently engaged in **open warfare**, and Israel appears to decisively have the upper hand. It has eliminated the vast majority of Hezbollah's leadership, killed and injured thousands of fighters, destroyed 80% of the group's rocket and missile stores, targeted Hezbollah financial and arms transfer networks, and pushed the group back from the border. However, Hezbollah is a large, well-financed organization deeply integrated into the Lebanese state and society, and can dispel any internal attempts to disarm or eliminate it. Hezbollah will remain a key player in Lebanese society and is likely to remain a critical threat to Israel.

