

JIHADIST GOVERNANCE AND STATECRAFT

Matthew Levitt

HEZBOLLAH SHADOW GOVERNANCE IN LEBANON



Hezbollah Shadow Governance in Lebanon

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In many of his speeches, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah highlights the system of shadow governance the group established parallel to Lebanon's weakened political system and its inadequate social governance structures. He has even gone so far as to say that Hezbollah's existence as a political and militant entity is strengthened by this parallel governance program, which provides the group both popular support and means of illicit funding to finance social and religious programs that make the group part of the fabric of Lebanese society. Hezbollah today has the best of both worlds—with members holding cabinet positions and seats in parliament, it is very much a part of the Lebanese state even as it remains an independent group that operates apart from the state.

By design, Hezbollah is not the de facto governing authority in Lebanon, which serves the group's purposes. By virtue of Hezbollah not being an official government institution, it avoids the accountability that typically comes with holding elected office. It continues to function as an independent militia while maintaining its influence in Lebanon's parliament and developing a shadow economy built on a system of political patronage. This shadow economy has allowed Hezbollah to develop a "shadow citizenry" from whom it draws political support and a measure of authority, allowing the group not only to increase its power and

influence but simultaneously to undermine the legitimacy of the Lebanese state. In regions it controls—primarily in southern Lebanon, parts of Beirut, and the Beqa Valley—Hezbollah provides social services, jobs, and welfare support to its followers, fostering dependency on the group’s institutions and making it the de facto enforcer of a system that encourages political patronage.

When it comes to financing, Hezbollah’s unique position allows it to participate in both licit and illicit economies, running entities as diverse as narco–money laundering enterprises abroad and environmental NGOs at home, each in the service of the group’s shadow economy and militant operations. The group’s social service activity provides day jobs for its members, a means to raise and launder funds, and places to spot and recruit new members. Hezbollah members see this social service activity as “an act of resistance of jihad that is integral to Hezbollah’s struggle against Israel and the West” that further builds a “culture of resistance” within the country’s Shia community. Due to it being the only militia to maintain its arms following the 1989 Taif Accord, Hezbollah maintains its position as the sole enforcer of this corrupt political system built on sectarian patronage and criminal intent.

In the two decades since Hezbollah first began participating in government, the group’s members have held many positions in parliament and a variety of Lebanese ministries, where they have the power to influence—or disrupt—the Lebanese political process and key government decisions. The group takes credit for the actions of the ministries under its control, but is never held to account when the government fails to provide key services. Hezbollah even weaponizes the discontent many Lebanese feel with their elected leaders, swaying them to Hezbollah’s cause as a member of the “shadow citizenry.” Hezbollah leverages its position as a hybrid political actor with one eye toward governance and the other toward terrorism, which allows it to make decisions about war and peace independent of the Lebanese state.

This type of activity may be most prevalent in the group’s activities along the Blue Line—the UN-demarcated border between Israel and Lebanon. Hezbollah frequently violates United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701—the UN resolution that officially laid out an end to hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah and established the mandate for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in 2006—by setting up tents on the Israeli side of the Blue Line, allowing other

terrorist groups like Hamas to launch attacks on Israel from its stronghold in southern Lebanon, and intentionally damaging the security barrier to cross into Israeli territory. The group's special forces, the Radwan, are frequently seen operating along the Blue Line and conducting training operations—the group even published a six-minute video in July 2023 commemorating Lebanon's 2006 war with Israel by simulating an assault on an Israeli military base.¹ In the wake of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on southern Israel, Hezbollah initiated a campaign of near-daily shelling of Israel in support of Hamas, a fellow ally of Iran.

Additionally, Hezbollah is well known for frequently interfering with UNIFIL operations along the border, even going so far as to kill an Irish peacekeeper named Sean Rooney in December 2022.² A Lebanese military tribunal charged five Hezbollah militants with the crime; only one of the accused was ever arrested—Mohamad Ayyad—though he was released on bail less than a year later, in November 2023.³ In April 2024, four UN peacekeepers were injured by a roadside bomb reportedly placed there by Hezbollah.⁴ Hezbollah also often enjoys the protection of the Lebanese Armed Forces, who use their authority to deny UNIFIL access to key areas in southern Lebanon, further demonstrating the ways in which Hezbollah takes advantage of and embeds itself within the country's corrupt political and economic system. The group even invents its own cover for its disruptive activity along the Blue Line, using a Hezbollah cover organization and environmental NGO called Green Without Borders to build structures and conduct surveillance along the Lebanese border with Israel.

This type of antagonistic behavior often pushes Lebanon into diplomatic rows it would otherwise have had no involvement in. During the summer of 2022, Hezbollah interfered in maritime negotiations between Israel and Lebanon by threatening to attack a rig located in Israel's Karish natural gas field and later launching three drones to surveil the vessel.⁵ In April 2023, Hezbollah set up two tents on the Israeli side of the Blue Line, prompting a flurry of negotiations to avoid war over the illegal military outpost. Hezbollah parliament members inevitably weighed in on the debate, warning Israel to “shut up and walk back” the demand to remove the tents if it wanted to avoid war.⁶ As the group's near daily shelling of Israel since October 7, 2023, underscores, Hezbollah makes life-and-death decisions for all Lebanese without consulting the government or the people of Lebanon.

As a type of corrupt “shadow government,” Hezbollah’s position in the Lebanese parliament and many of its ministries allows it to influence or even completely disrupt activities of the state with which it does not agree. The investigation into the 2020 Beirut port explosion, which resulted in at least 218 deaths and \$15 billion in property damage, was impeded by Hezbollah officials from the beginning. The explosion called into question the relationship between Hezbollah and Syria’s Assad regime, for which the group reportedly imported the tons of ammonium nitrate that detonated in August 2020, and also the corrupt political system that allowed for such a blatant disregard for basic safety precautions. Hezbollah officials obstructed the investigation by threatening judges, launching a disinformation campaign, and attempting to usurp the investigation altogether.⁷ A senior Hezbollah security official later connected to the Beirut port incident, Wafiq Safa, was designated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2019 for his role in exploiting Lebanese ports and borders to allow Hezbollah officials to travel freely and smuggle goods.⁸ In doing so, Safa not only endangered his fellow Lebanese but also diverted millions of dollars in tax revenue away from the country’s free-falling financial system. The Lebanese political system, its ranks propped up by a large number of Hezbollah officials, allows the group’s actions to go unquestioned and its crimes unpunished as it functions as both a part of and above the system.

Despite not completely controlling Lebanon, Hezbollah is undeniably an influential actor in the region that exemplifies the spectrum of governance upon which many jihadist actors fall. By virtue of having members in the government and a blocking third in parliament, Hezbollah is in a position to prevent the state from being able to deter or contain Hezbollah’s actions. With the country experiencing several political and economic crises, few in Lebanon have any interest in a war with the country’s southern neighbor. Contrary to the general lack of appetite for war in the country, Hezbollah ratcheted up tensions in recent years, continuing to escalate its aggressive behavior along the Blue Line and provoking conflict with Israel.

It is likely that other terrorist actors like Hamas will attempt to imitate the Hezbollah model, in which an extremist group latches onto the institutions of a failing state to exert power and influence to serve its own interests. This parallel governance strategy has allowed Hezbollah to survive as an armed group for decades after the Taif Accord required all Lebanese militias to disband and

disarm.⁹ This approach has entrenched Hezbollah in many of Lebanon's key state institutions, afforded it considerable influence in parliament, and allowed it to use the cover of official action to protect its members from political pressure or judicial investigation. The group's social welfare activities have resulted in a vast network of support from the Lebanese "shadow citizenry" that benefits from Hezbollah's healthcare, educational, and civil services. Hezbollah serves its and Iran's interests first and the Lebanese people's second, further exemplifying the degree to which the group has undermined the state and its institutions, weakened the rule of law, and prevented the Lebanese government from serving the population that put it in power.

NOTES

- 1 “Hezbollah Publishes Video of Simulated Attack on Israeli Outpost,” i24 News, July 17, 2023, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/levant-tur-key/1689568869-hezbollah-publishes-video-of-simulated-attack-on-israeli-outpost>.
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- 3 Kareem Chehayeb and Abby Sewel, “Lebanon Releases a Man on Bail Who’s Accused of Killing an Irish UN Peacekeeper,” Associated Press, November 15, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-hezbollah-unifil-peacekeeper-ireland-fb034fc88016f31b797cbf2446e67ef8>.
- 4 Emanuel Fabian, “IDF Says UN Peacekeepers in Lebanon Were Hit by Hezbollah Roadside Bomb,” *Times of Israel*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-un-peacekeepers-in-lebanon-were-hit-by-hezbollah-roadside-bomb/>.
- 5 Emanuel Fabian, “IDF Shoots Down 3 Hezbollah Drones Heading for Karish Gas Field,” *Times of Israel*, July 2, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-it-shot-down-3-hezbollah-drones-heading-for-karish-gas-field/>.
- 6 “Hezbollah Said to Evacuate One of the 2 Tents It Set Up on Israeli Side of Blue Line,” *Times of Israel*, July 2, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hezbollah-said-to-evacuate-one-of-the-2-tents-it-set-up-on-israeli-side-of-blue-line/>.
- 7 Hanin Ghaddar, “Washington Should Sanction Officials Obstructing the Beirut Port Investigation,” PolicyWatch 3705, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 17, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-should-sanction-officials-obstructing-beirut-port-investigation>.
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- 9 Jeanine Jalkh, “Hezbollah Weapons: What Exactly Does the Taif Agreement Say?” *L’Orient Today*, August 17, 2023, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1346673/hezbollah-weapons-what-exactly-does-the-taif-agreement-say.html>.