

Hezbollah: An Iranian Project?

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Abstract

Hezbollah, which in Arabic stands for the "Party of God," has over the last few decades grown into one of the most influential Lebanese political organizations and militias. Hezbollah was conceived in the midst of the violent civil War of Lebanon, and in its early stage it often resorted to terrorist acts. However, over the years it has gradually transformed into a legitimate political current. The Party differs from the other Middle Eastern factors in that it has never been defeated or severely weakened by Israel. Hezbollah is a Shiite fundamentalist party and thus it is strategically supported by the Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran. By observing the Party's dynamics, actions, agenda, hierarchy, structure, and rhetoric, one can identify many direct links to the Islamic Republic. This implies that Iran had been heavily involved in the Party's founding and organization. Furthermore, since the Party keeps being politically,

ideologically, financially, and logistically dependent upon Iran, it is valid to wonder whether it is, likewise, controlled by Iran. When the mentioned elements are taken into account, it becomes rather apparent that Hezbollah is most probably the Iranian proxy in Lebanon, serving as the extended arm of influence in a deeply divided country of Lebanon, and in the vicinity of the State of Israel. There have been numerous speculations, mostly in the media, about whether Hezbollah is indeed an Iranian project. However, the notion of Hezbollah being the Iranian creation has been somewhat avoided in the academic circles, and a properly composed academic analysis has been lacking. Yet, as this brief paper will show, there is a number of undeniable facts which point into this direction. If it is true that Hezbollah is an Iranian tool, this knowledge will greatly impact future analyses and research on the subject, especially when regional power relations and Iranian foreign policy are concerned. Also, this phenomenon is explainable in terms of the politics of realism, since it is most likely the Iranian rational interest to keep investing into and to sustain the grip on this Shiite group for geopolitical and religious purposes. On the other hand, whenever asked about this possible feature, Hezbollah's leadership has energetically denied it, asserting that the Party is exclusively a Lebanese creation—a result of the Lebanese sociopolitical realities. However, bearing in mind the Party's sustained successes and power in Lebanon, as well as its mentioned "Iranian" features, does spark curiosity as to whether a much bigger sponsor (or a controller) stands in its shadow.

Introduction

The year of 1982 has been one of the most significant ones in both Lebanese and Middle Eastern modern history. What took place were two major developments which have changed the course of local and regional political affairs. June 4, 1982 marked the beginning of a full-scale Israeli invasion of Lebanon with the goal of destroying, or at least weakening the anti-Israeli Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)¹. The second crucial development was the formation of the Shiite resistance movement of Hezbollah, whose name translates into 'the Party of God.' This military and political group came to exist within a few months following the Israeli invasion. In order to understand

¹ The War on Lebanon, 2000.

some key operational aspects and the actual role of this fundamentalist Shiite group, as well as its regional and international significance, it is necessary to inspect its origin, early stage, as well as the factors that contributed to the building of its functional capacities. The religious and moral fundamentals of Hezbollah are based upon its “claims of deep faith and a literal interpretation of God’s words as expressed in the Koran” (Harik 2005: 1).

One of the main issues that one is confronted with whenever Hezbollah’s origins, role, and achievements are discussed is the dilemma of who really stands behind the scene. Even though such analyses can be considered somewhat “conspirational,” it is still absolutely valid to wonder whether Hezbollah is a purely Lebanese project of resistance against Israel, or if it is a long-term geopolitical project of the Shiite-dominated Islamic Republic of Iran, which wishes to have its own strategic enclave, or at least an extended arm of influence in the multicultural state of Lebanon. In simpler words, whose truly is Hezbollah; Iranian or Lebanese?

Hezbollah is often described as: Iran-backed, Iran-supported, pro-Iranian, fundamentalist, terrorist, purely Iranian, etc.; but not enough has been done to construct a proper academic research in order to answer this crucial question. While many researchers have been putting Hezbollah into the Iranian context, Hezbollah’s top officials repeatedly remind that Hezbollah is exclusively a product of the organized Islamic Resistance in Lebanon, which claims to be only *ideologically* supported by Iran.

However, my research indicates that these somewhat populist statements can easily be proven incorrect. Hezbollah has been politically, economically and militarily *dependent* on the Islamic Republic from its earliest beginnings. Hezbollah was *conceived* thanks to Iran. It directly resembles the operational, ideological, structural, and political standards that were put forth by the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Its fundamental executive capacities and decision-making have been exposed to and affected by the Iranian government, since the Iranian Supreme leadership (which at the time of Hezbollah’s foundation was headed by the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini) has had the final word on the crucial matters of the Party. This short paper shall discuss the weight of these arguments, which aim to justify the idea Hezbollah being more likely an Iranian project than, as its officials claim, a “self-propelled” Lebanese movement.

Finally, seeing Hezbollah as the Iranian project leaves great implications for the regional and international security.

With this assumption, one can easily apply the *realist* model to explain ambitions and behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran—the country that tends to be rather politically problematic for the Western community. It is in realist approach where one shall look for an answer to why Iran has “invested” or even founded the Party in the first place. Firstly, the Party’s Iran-orchestrated evolution shall be extensively covered before one is able to apply the model.

Tracing Hezbollah’s Iranian Origins and Control

The current Secretary General of Hezbollah, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah touched upon the mentioned dilemma in the interview given on September 11, 1992 to the Lebanese pan-Arab magazine *Al-Watan Al-Arabi*. Nasrallah hereby declared:

Hezbollah is in fact the outcome of a self-propelled movement launched in the wake of the Israeli invasion of 1982. This means that it is the outcome of the will and decision of a group of Lebanese people who were inspired by Khomeini’s ideology, and who took advantage of the climate created by the Islamic Revolution, and Syrian support, to launch a resistance movement against the occupation (Noe 2007: 92).

Later, describing the Party’s structure, Nasrallah characterized it as the outcome of the merger between 1) a number of people that separated from the Shiite Islamic Amal faction; 2) The Ulama—the group of Shiite religious authorities and clergymen; and 3) Shiites affiliated to the Party of Islamic Daawa in Lebanon under Sheikh Subhi Tufeili².

It is the Daawa Party that proves direct Iranian involvement. Unlike Nasrallah, Tufeili (Hezbollah’s former Secretary General) points out that “Hezbollah *is* in essence the Daawa party from which [they] removed the title of Daawa and entered it into military rounds in order for it to start the resistance” (Jaber 1997: 54). However, the truth is that Daawa originates from Iraq, where it was supported by the pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiites, whose ideology came straight from Ayatollah Khomeini’s circle in Najaf (Dekmeijan 1985: 166-168). Here, the octopus’ arm stretches directly from the

² Lebanese Political Parties: Hezbollah, 2003.

Iranian revolutionary leader Khomeini to the Party's foundations.

Hezbollah was extremely secretive from its earliest stages. Even though its militiamen were quite visible, not much was known about the Party's hierarchy and the actual foundation. Also, given that in 1982 the Lebanese Civil War anarchy was at its maximum, the formation of the new current could be neither immediately noticed nor successfully covered by intelligence agencies (Jaber 1997: 47-53). If it is true that Hezbollah owes its existence to Iran, this clandestine atmosphere might have been favorable for establishing and consolidating hardly visible vectors of control of the Islamic Republic over the newly established Party.

Even though it may seem that the Party receives merely an ideological inspiration from Iran, the landmark document, *Hezbollah's Manifesto* of February 16, 1985, proves otherwise. Having the image of Ayatollah Khomeini on the back cover, the actual content of this manifesto clearly shows the Party's Iranian orientation, and clarifies that its most supreme leadership lies in Teheran. The key part quotes:

We, the sons of Hezbollah's nation in Lebanon, whose vanguard God has given victory in Iran and which has established the nucleus of the world's central Islamic state, abide by the orders of a single wise and just command currently embodied in the supreme exemplar of Ayatollah Khomeini (Jaber 1997: 54-55).

Furthermore, this document endorsed the concept of *wilayat al-fatih*. It literally stands for 'the Jurisdiction of the Jurist-Theologian,' who was nobody else but Khomeini himself. Nicholas Noe (2007) argued that "Hezbollah's, allegiance to the principle of *wilayat al-fatih* opened the party to charges that it followed non-nationalist—and in particular Iranian—dictates, since it apparently had to comply with any decision issued by the *fatih*" (p.26). Essentially, this Manifesto calls for the establishment of the Islamic State in Lebanon, based on the example provided by the Islamic Republic of Iran (Hamzeh 2004: 146). When all of this is taken into account, it becomes very clear who might hold the strings. Hypothetically speaking, given the Iranian executive and legal powers regarding the Party, if successful, Shiite Lebanon would become at least a satellite state, if not the Iranian-controlled enclave in the Levantine Middle Eastern region. In this case it appears superfluous to confirm that

there is a great possibility that Hezbollah indeed is an Iranian organization and its geopolitical tool.

The Lebanese Shiites have often shown their respect for the Islamic State idea in numerous campaigns through Party's propaganda, as well as the general Party's "aesthetics," especially in the early period. Here, the deviation from inspiration-only to an all-out support of the Iranian authorities becomes visually noticeable. During the first years of Hezbollah's existence, when it was becoming clear that the new Shiite current had been introduced to Lebanon, the militiamen could often be seen wearing green bands around their heads containing inscriptions such as 'Qaaiduna Khomeini,' ('Our Leader is Khomeini'). Posters of the Ayatollah could be found virtually everywhere, while the Shiite women and young girls rapidly transformed their clothing style into a more traditional Shiite outfit characteristic of that prevalent in Iran, both as a sign of support and compliance with Hezbollah's new "tradition," as well as to avoid harassment by radicals. Furthermore, Khomeini's slogans such as "USA=Great Satan" have often been put in the streets of many Lebanese cities on public display (Jaber 1997: 52-53).

Hezbollah as a Potential Instrument of the Global Islamic Revolution

Concerning the Islamic Republic of Iran alone, it is necessary to introduce some of the arguments of John Simpson (1988), another expert of the Iranian affairs. In his book *Inside Iran*, he argues that Hezbollah, as we know it, had come out as a branch of the Iranian Hezbollah, which had been permanently stationed in Iran. This *original Iranian* Hezbollah, as he argues, was founded in 1979 upon Khomeini's revolutionary return to Iran, and has ever since been used as a symbol of patriotism and Shiite religiosity, as well as the tool for ideological and organizational strengthening of the official ruling Islamic Republican Party (IRP). Simpson further argues that the establishment of the relationship and active contact with the Lebanese Shiites was realized through the Iranian organization called Global Islamic Movement (p. 90-100). If the original idea of Hezbollah had been, as it is hereby argued, only a part of the Global Islamic Movement, then the nomenclature itself tells us that the entire creation of the Party of God was for

the sake of the Iranian foreign and international strategic purposes, since this movement is supposed to be *Islamic* and *global*.

When observing the creation of Hezbollah in a bigger picture, and with global elements taken into account, Jaber's (1997) claims tend to be quite similar to the ones mentioned by Simpson. Once he took power, the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini aspired to revive the '*Umma*' which can be understood as the worldwide Islamic caliphate. Khomeini aspired to eventually become 'Amir al-Munimum'—'the Commander of the Faithful' (p.109). Of course, this would have involved the mechanisms that would have ensured the export of this revolution in a somewhat similar way that the Soviet-controlled Comintern had tried to export socialism. Even though not many details are known about the Iranian-instigated instruments for the export and spreading of the Islamic Revolution, some of the clues provided by the mentioned sources can reassure us that the creation and functioning of Hezbollah may be viewed as a part of this long term Iranian plan for regional domination.

Concrete Iranian Involvement

There is a number of well-known instances which convey the extent to which Iran was directly involved in the founding of the Party. When Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, the leading Shiite clerics of Lebanon travelled to Teheran to attend the annual Islamic Conference. Iran immediately let the clerics know that it would assist them and volunteer in consolidating and strengthening the organized Shiite resistance in Lebanon. However, it is interesting that Subhi Tufeili, the previously mentioned Lebanese cleric and former Party's SG became the "central figure in realizing Iran's initiative: [he] became the first leader of the new Islamic movement. Hezbollah had been conceived" (Jaber 1997: 47). This leads us to the next stage of observation of the Iranian involvement in Hezbollah's affairs, which, since Hezbollah was now founded, would briefly analyze the implications of Iranian support for the Party's political, economic, and military future.

From the very beginning, Iran's involvement proved to be more than just "voluntary assistance." Instead, it becomes evident that the support was well organized and consistent, which, of course, raises the question of whether it can really be deemed merely as a support, or a carefully devised plan to establish a long term grip on Hezbollah.

From the early beginnings of Hezbollah's existence, or more precisely after the mentioned conference in Teheran, Iran embarked on the arms-supplying of the Party and other pro-Iranian groups and operatives elsewhere, through its Ministry of Intelligence and Internal Security. The initial budget for such foreign military supplies was equal to \$210 million, and through *Bank Markazi Iran* the Islamic Republic had channeled part of their funds to Hezbollah and its operatives in southern Lebanon. The Ministry of Intelligence and Internal Security controlled the Iranian Arms Procurement Agency through which both Hezbollah and Syria were supplied. The Agency operated in quite a clandestine and "blurry" manner. What attests to this is the fact that this agency was based in the National Iranian Oil Company's offices in Victoria Street in London, and was forcefully closed down by the British government in 1987 for having been, as Simpson (1988) put it, "the clearing-house for all the orders for weapons, missiles and ammunition which Iran [bought] throughout the world." (p. 209-210). However, by the late 1990s the Party's financing has adopted a more stabilized trend: as it has been estimated in the U.S. State Department reports pertaining to the state of global terrorism, Hezbollah had annually been receiving approximately \$100 million in the form of pure financial support from Iran (Noe 2007: 96).

Besides helping the military operations through its financial support, Iran has also provided Hezbollah with great deal of instruction and military guidance. After 1982, about 1000-1500 Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), called "Pastaran" were sent to Bekaa valley to train and to help the already employed PLO instructors train Hezbollah's fighters, as well as to assist with the actual arming of the new divisions. The success of these actions can be easily seen in the fact that in the early stage, Hezbollah had mobilized more than 7000 of its partisans. It was the Iranian government who provided monthly salaries to those troops (Harik 2005: 40; Noe 2007: 26).

Ultimately, the survival and later development of the Party would have hardly been possible had it solely relied on inspiration and motivation provided by Iran and its Islamic Revolution. In order to not only survive but to make a difference in the Lebanese chaos, Hezbollah needed more than just sheer rhetoric, and this is exactly what it got: Iran's money and weapons were received, while the *Pastaran* took charge of the Party's resistance operations, security, and training (Jaber 1997: 50-51). The Islamic Republic of Iran

has clearly been an “invisible” controller of Hezbollah's actions and growth in general.

Iranian “Hezbollah Project” in the Realist Perspective

If the previously mentioned arguments succeed in making one able to at least consider the possibility of Hezbollah being an Iranian project, the questions are *why*, and what this can mean for the regional/international relations and security. Assuming that Hezbollah indeed is the Iranian instrument, this Iranian undercover policy may be almost perfectly explained by observing the basic tenets of the *realist* approach to international relations and security; more specifically using the premises of realism in international relations as outlined by Holsti (2004).

Ever since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has been often denounced by the West as fundamentalist and radical, to the extent that ever since 1984 it has constantly been on the U.S. Department of State's list as a State Sponsor of Terrorism.³ Meanwhile, many different sets of sanctions have been imposed against it. The ultimate threat to the country's integrity became apparent during its war against Iraq, while the current situation continues to be tense due to the Iranian alleged nuclear program and its potential confrontation with Israel (Jafarzadeh 2007: 17, 202).

Now, since the Iranian regime seems to have felt threatened from the very beginning, and since in realism there is no world authority to manage crises and disputes, one could say that Iran's behavior portrays the so-called “security dilemma.” In the self-help anarchic world, the “search for security often leaves its current and potential adversaries insecure” (Holsti 2004: 53). Hezbollah may be viewed as the link which would decrease the chances for Israel (who Iran clearly sees as a threat) to engage in hostile actions against it. On the other hand, Hezbollah can be easily mobilized and deployed, and as such threaten the Israeli interests, while disrupting the potential actions against the Iranian “mainland.” Since Hezbollah truly is a strong political and military organization in Lebanon, it is logical to assume that it is viewed as a constant threat to the Israel's national security. This simultaneous posing of threats could

³ Department of State, 2009.

remind one of the game theory, out of which, at least in this particular case the balance of power situation emerges.

Since this realist balance of power becomes the subject to relative capabilities of actors, conflict becomes a rather natural state of affairs, where “those that fail to cope with it will not survive” (Holsti 2004: 53). This state of affairs provides powerful incentives for hostile interactions between the two actors. Hezbollah has confronted Israel during the Civil War, in numerous side-operations, as well as in the “Thirty Day War of 2006” (Rubin 2007: 219). Israel has seen that troublesome security crisis can come from as near as across the border, from a group that is either pro-Iranian or Iranian itself.

Realism postulates that state behavior is rational, i.e. guided by the logic of the national self-interest, which is normally defined in terms of power, relative capabilities, survival, and security (Holsti 2004: 54). Iran’s developed perception that they may become a target in the future, has become most relevant ever since the U.S. invaded Iraq and Afghanistan. In order to satisfy the needs of the Iranian national interests (keeping the regional hegemony, national security, and, in the worst case scenario, fighting for survival), Hezbollah has come to be only one of the “aces” Iran constantly holds on alert in order to tip the bargain, or at least to lower the successes of the U.S.’s ally Israel in their potential attacks (Polk 2007: 220).

The discussed situation clearly portrays the final premise of realism, namely the assumption that the states, as unitary actors, “in their actions primarily respond to external rather than domestic political forces” (Holsti 2004: 54). As mentioned above, having the enclave political organization of Hezbollah in the Levantine part of the Middle East not only allows Iran to exert its own power influence, but it also enables it to have a prepared unit in case the existence of the Islamic Republic’s regime becomes threatened by *external factors*.

Conclusion

Clearly, Hezbollah still remains a very mysterious and controversial phenomenon. Nowadays when it has become the Lebanese political reality, after gradually having taken the shape of a legitimate political movement, many questions still remain unanswered. Nevertheless, Hezbollah still remains heavily dependent on Teheran, which points towards an influential legacy of the Iranian involvement in its

founding and initial realization. In this paper, I have tried to analyze the arguments that would support the assumption of the Party of God being a predominantly Iranian geopolitical project, via which Iran can exert pressure on both religious and political developments outside its immediate domain—in this case the Levantine Middle East.

When observing Hezbollah's original goals: the freeing of what is referred to as the Occupied Palestinian Territories; establishment of the Iran-like Islamic state in Lebanon; the spreading of the Islamic Revolution as advocated by Khomeini—can all be viewed as nothing else but the elements of the Iranian foreign policy. Besides the inspiration provided by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the once marginalized and somewhat backward Shiite society would have hardly been able to survive the chaos of the Lebanese Civil War, challenge the Israelis, and become one of the key players in the region had it not been for the actual “physical” and organizational support coming from Teheran. From the very beginning, Hezbollah was supplied, funded, and trained by Iran, and it continues to be up to this date. Therefore, in order to be able to analyze Hezbollah's activities in the future, the policy makers, political scientists and religious scholars must not neglect the actual interests and the extent of the Iranian involvement in the Party's existence, functioning, and operations. When Hezbollah is analyzed on military, socioeconomic, or political grounds, the Iran-factor shall be set as one of the crucial points of analysis.

In order to understand the reasons and dynamics behind the Iranian support for Hezbollah, as well as the behavior of Iran itself, this relationship should be put into the realist context, in order to be able to identify the manner in which Iran is fighting a double war: keeping regional supremacy through its proxies like Hezbollah, and trying to make it as difficult as possible for the Islamic regime to fall by showing itself as ready to deploy these same proxies for its own security.

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