

# Hezbollah Post October 7—Beaten But Still Dangerous

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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**The group has been greatly diminished by a year of war, but the Lebanese people won't feel the difference unless the international community pushes Beirut and the LAF to reestablish trust and authority.**

**P**ost October 7, 2023, Israel succeeded in transforming Hezbollah from Iran's regional army to a local militia or insurgency. Thanks to Israel's intelligence and targeted attacks, Hezbollah today has lost most of the pillars of its military and political powers. The challenge now is to translate these shifts into political change in Lebanon.

Hezbollah made two drastic mistakes that led to its downfall in Lebanon. First, while Israel has been preparing for its third war with Hezbollah since 2006, the group was distracted by its growing regional role and military operations in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, convincing its people and members that Israel had been deterred by what Hezbollah called its own "divine victory" of 2006.

Second, Hezbollah believed this narrative and miscalculated the response that would come out of Israel after October 7. The leadership of the group and its Iranian sponsors did not understand that the events of October 7 would shift all Israeli priorities and deterrence calculations. A war with Hezbollah was inevitable, but Hezbollah insisted on continuing with the "support for Gaza" war, refusing to decouple it from the Lebanese front, until Israel forced them to. But it's already too late.

In Lebanon, there is the pre and post pagers Hezbollah. Before the pagers incident, when thousands of pagers used by Hezbollah members exploded at the same time, Hezbollah was still convinced that it had some leverage over the Israeli and American governments—that its calculated attacks against the north of Israel had been successful and deterring. Post the pagers explosions—followed by the assassination of its leader Hassan Nasrallah, and many others that followed—Hezbollah realized that they were more exposed than they ever imagined, and that Israel was no

longer deterred. That was also the moment when they realized it was too late to decouple the Lebanese and Gaza fronts—Israel was going all the way.

## **Border Security to Replace Ceasefire**

**W**e are today at a crossroad that will decide the future of Lebanon, its relationship with its neighbors, and the future of Hezbollah within the Lebanese political and security scenes. For Israel, the most obvious step is to ensure the implementation of UNSCR 1701 (which ended the 2006 war). In 2006, 1701 was implemented as a ceasefire agreement—it stopped the war, but eventually allowed Hezbollah to rebuild its military infrastructure south of Litani. The UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces failed at preventing Hezbollah from reestablishing itself.

Israel wants to make sure that Hezbollah can no longer have this opportunity—and repeating the mistakes of 2006 is out of the question. Therefore, Israel insists on reserving the right to freedom of movement in Lebanon after the war, and eventually targeting Hezbollah if they try to rearm. Anything short of this will be unacceptable for a post October 7 Israel.

For Lebanon itself, it's clear that there will be no border security with the current political structure in place. Border security is a matter of sovereignty, as the Lebanese-Israeli borders are linked to the Lebanese-Syrian borders and other points of entry—only a sovereign and independent Lebanese government can prevent weapons and cash smuggling from Iran to Lebanon. Maintaining the status quo—that is, a government that cannot allow positive political change—means that eventually the ruling elite will once again submit to Hezbollah's decisions for war and peace, turn a blind eye to smuggling, and ignore the international community's calls for the implantation of any agreement or resolution.

As a result, Israel will have to resort to continuous military action to make sure Hezbollah does not rehabilitate its military infrastructure. It will most likely resemble the scenario with Syria, where Israel has been conducting military operations for years against Hezbollah and Iranian targets.

## **Hezbollah's Crumbling Structure**

**H**ezbollah's three pillars of power within Lebanon have been shaking for a while, but in the past three months, these pillars have crumbled. These are the group's military infrastructure—including its arsenal of missiles and heavy weapons, and its high-ranking commanders—its political alliances inside Lebanon, and the Shia community. Without these pillars, it will be challenging for Hezbollah to maintain its power without further alienating the general population.

In the last parliamentary elections of 2022, Hezbollah lost the parliamentary majority—thanks to the overwhelming protests of 2019 leading to the loss of most of its allies in parliament. But Hezbollah was still armed to the teeth and was able to obstruct change with the threat of its weapons and considerable support from the Shia community. However, when the war in Lebanon expanded, its two other pillars crumbled. Hezbollah lost most of the group's strategic weapons, while at least 1.2 million Lebanese from the South, Beqaa, and the southern suburbs of Beirut have been displaced.

The real reckoning is yet to come—after the war ends or subsides, Hezbollah will wake up to a military structure that has been severely damaged, and a community that is expecting compensation and protection. The pressure will mount on the group, but the resources will not be there.

The victory of 2006 was made divine because right after the war, Iran immediately sent in bags of US Dollars for compensation and the rehabilitation of the military infrastructure, while the Gulf States took care of the reconstruction of the cities and towns that were destroyed. This time will be different. The Gulf States will not help with the reconstruction. Not only is Lebanon considered a hopeless case for many of these states, but it is also no

longer a unique country—Syria and Gaza need a reconstruction budget as well. Any reconstruction funds will be linked to political solutions.

Hezbollah will have to deal with five layers of expenses: compensations, reconstruction, recruitment and training, salaries, and the most expensive layer: the rehabilitation of its military infrastructure. Iran does not have the resources to provide Hezbollah with enough hard currency to do what it needs to do in order to regain its power.

When the war ends and the Shia refugees go back to their towns and cities, all of this will hit them hard. Since 1982, Hezbollah has told the Shia that it is their protector and provider, and that no matter what happens, it will take care of them. However, the Shia are starting to realize that Hezbollah did not protect them; on the contrary, it dragged them into an unnecessary war, and it will not be able to provide for them. Hezbollah is no longer the paternal entity it once was—and the only leader they trusted, Hassan Nasrallah, is gone. This reckoning will eventually force the Shia to look for an alternative—and this alternative should be the State of Lebanon.

## Hezbollah's Options and Policy Opportunities

**T**he reckoning will also hit Hezbollah when they, in turn, realize that there are no good options. They know they are no longer Iran's crown jewel. They failed at maintaining deterrence with Israel and lost all of Iran's years of investment in Lebanon in a matter of weeks. They know that Iran left them to face all this alone, and that they cannot complain or demand anything. But they also know that the Iranian regime will not completely let them go. Hezbollah still has a few options but none of them are easy.

In the short term, the group wants to maintain its power inside Lebanon. We could see the remnants of Hezbollah's military evolve into street gangs with thousands of young men armed with light weapons, carrying out incidents similar to the May 7 events of 2008, when Hezbollah used its arms against the Lebanese for the first time to enforce its security and political decisions. It could also resort to its earlier methods from the 1980s, when it focused on terrorist activities against embassies and diplomats inside and outside Lebanon. But all this had a high price, internally and internationally. It will become more isolated, and its own community will pay the highest price.

The Iranian regime has already sent the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to lead the battle on the ground, now that Hezbollah's capable leaders have been killed. This could evolve into a more established Iranian presence in Lebanon, and a more direct Iranian occupation—at least until a new class of Hezbollah commanders is trained and appointed. This would likely create even more volatility with Israel, as seen when IRGC elements have deployed to neighboring Syria.

The challenges that Hezbollah will face also constitute opportunities for a sustainable and enduring border security. With a much-weakened Hezbollah, the Lebanese security and military institutions have the opportunity to reestablish themselves as the state power—one that all Lebanese can trust, including the Shia community. Before the LAF can effectively implement the most crucial provisions of UNSCR 1701, the institution must regain the people's trust, especially the Shia who constitute the majority of the southern population.

This is where the LAF comes in—as the institution that can fill the vacuum and reassure Shia that they will be protected. The LAF should deploy in communities outside the main southern war zone as soon as possible, especially in places where sectarian violence is on the rise and armed gangs seem likely to form. Nevertheless, the LAF needs major restructuring to make sure the pro-Hezbollah elements within the institution do not take part in any deployment, especially in the south.

But the LAF cannot do much without a political decision—or clear orders from the Lebanese government. And with no sitting president in Beirut and a weak caretaker government at the helm, there is no one to make the necessary tough decisions. In this environment, only external pressure can compel Nabih Berri to convene the parliamentary sessions required to choose a president with no prior agreement or conditions. In addition, Najib Mikati will need to

be compelled to publicly order the LAF to fully deploy and take charge of security.

Only a new political structure could take on the challenges awaiting Lebanon after the war, such as reconstruction, containing “Hezbollah 2.0,” and monitoring the borders with Syria and other points of entry. Only a new sovereign government could implement the Taif Accord, UNSCR 1701, 1559, and 1680. Otherwise, the alternative is more insecurity, an empowered Hezbollah, and a situation of instability and constant wars.

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