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Lebanese Hezbollah

Hezbollah (“Party of God,” also spelled Hizballah) is an Iran-backed Lebanese Shia militia and U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Hezbollah is an Iranian partner force, helping Tehran project power across the region, train allied militias (reportedly including Hamas), and threaten U.S. interests and allies across the region. Formed in the wake of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the group has conducted numerous attacks against Israeli and Western targets. In addition to authorizing sanctions against Hezbollah, Congress has sought to bolster Lebanese state institutions to counter its influence. Clashes between Hezbollah and Israeli forces have escalated since the October 2023 Hamas-led attack on Israel, displacing tens of thousands on both sides of the border and increasing the prospect of a broader military confrontation.

Figure 1. Lebanon



Source: Created by CRS. UNIFIL = United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon; UNDOF = United Nations Disengagement Observer Force.

Leadership, Structure, and Size

Hezbollah’s leader is Hassan Nasrallah, who has served as Secretary-General since the assassination of his predecessor by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in 1992. According to the U.S. government, the External Security Organization (ESO, also known as the Islamic Jihad Organization), headed by Talal Hamiyah, is the arm of Hezbollah responsible for overseas terrorist attacks. Some countries and the European Union (EU) separate Hezbollah’s military and political wings—designating the former for sanctions

while maintaining dialogue with the latter. U.S. officials have described this division as a “false distinction,” and one not made by Hezbollah itself. Reports estimate that Hezbollah’s fighters number between 40,000 and 50,000 or more. That figure includes the Radwan Force, an elite unit trained to conduct special operations. Hezbollah’s arsenal of rockets, missiles, and drones is estimated at over 150,000.

Objectives and Operations

For nearly two decades, Hezbollah’s stated objective was to drive IDF forces from southern Lebanon. Since the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, Hezbollah has used Israel’s remaining presence in the Sheb’a Farms and other disputed areas in the Lebanon-Syria-Israel tri-border region (see **Figure 1**) to justify ongoing violence against Israel—and its persistence as an armed militia outside the structure or purview of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

Hezbollah is aligned with the ideology of Iran’s government and bolsters Iranian strategic objectives. The State Department’s 2022 *Country Reports on Terrorism* states that Iran provides Hezbollah with “most of its funding, training, weapons, and explosives, as well as political, diplomatic, monetary, and organizational aid.” The 2024 *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (ATA) states that, “Hizballah seeks to limit U.S. influence in Lebanon and the broader Middle East,” goals it shares with the Iranian government.

Hezbollah also operates a global criminal-financial network, with reported hubs in Africa and Latin America. A 2022 Europol report stated, “The network of collaborators built by Hezbollah in the EU is suspected of managing the transportation and distribution of illegal drugs into the EU, dealing with firearms trafficking and running professional money laundering operations.” Other reports highlight Hezbollah’s role in the trafficking of amphetamine-type stimulants, marketed as captagon, along the Syrian border.

Hezbollah in Lebanese Politics

Hezbollah has participated in Lebanese elections since 1992 and draws popular support from its vast network of schools, clinics, youth programs, and other social services. The group entered the cabinet for the first time in 2005 and has held one to three seats in each Lebanese government formed since then. Hezbollah has at times sought to block cabinet decisions, twice prompting the collapse of the government by withdrawing from the cabinet alongside its political allies. The group is part of the March 8 political coalition, which also includes the Free Patriotic Movement (Christian) and the Amal Movement (Shia). Hezbollah holds two seats in Lebanon’s caretaker government.

Hezbollah did not gain additional parliamentary seats in the 2018 or 2022 legislative elections (it continues to hold 13 out of 128). However, since the expiration of President

Michel Aoun's term in October 2022, Hezbollah and its March 8 allies have obstructed efforts by parliament to elect a president by preventing the formation of a quorum and by casting blank ballots in parliamentary electoral sessions.

Areas of Military Operation

Hezbollah is based in Lebanon and primarily operates in the Middle East, though it has conducted attacks elsewhere.

Lebanon. According to U.S. government assessments, Hezbollah controls access to parts of Lebanon and operates inside the country with relative impunity. The group was implicated in the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in a car bombing in downtown Beirut that also killed 21 others.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006) directs the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to assist the Lebanese government in establishing an area “free of” non-state armed personnel between the Blue Line (Lebanon's de facto border with Israel) and the Litani River. Hezbollah's continued operation in this area is a major factor in ongoing clashes with Israel.

Syria. Hezbollah has a long-standing relationship with the government of Syrian President Bashar al Asad, which facilitates the transit of weapons through Syria from Iran to Hezbollah. Hezbollah has played a key role in assisting pro-Asad forces during Syria's civil war.

Yemen. Hezbollah also provides weapons and training to Houthi militants in Yemen, and Hezbollah commanders have reportedly assisted the Houthi campaign against international shipping in the Red Sea.

Attacks and Threats to U.S. Interests

Hezbollah has been linked to a series of terrorist attacks, including one in 2012 against Israeli tourists in Bulgaria and two in Argentina during the 1990s. Hezbollah attacks against U.S. personnel and facilities abroad include the truck bombing of the U.S. Embassy and Multinational Force barracks in Beirut in 1983 and the kidnapping of the Central Intelligence Agency chief of station in Beirut, who later died while held captive. Hezbollah leaders reportedly armed and trained Shia militias that carried out attacks on U.S. forces during their 2003-2011 deployment to Iraq.

The 2024 ATA states that Hezbollah “maintains the capability to target U.S. persons and interests in the region, worldwide, and, to a lesser extent, in the United States.” In 2023 congressional testimony, FBI Director Christopher Wray stated, “FBI arrests in recent years also indicate that Hizballah has tried to seed operatives, establish infrastructure, and engage in spying here domestically—raising our concern that they may be contingency planning for future operations in the United States.”

The Treasury Department reported in 2024 that Hezbollah “members and sympathizers have long been involved in an array of large-scale criminal schemes, including sophisticated money laundering, smuggling, and trafficking networks that have involved the U.S. financial system.” U.S. law criminalizes support for Hezbollah and authorizes a number of secondary sanctions against non-U.S. nationals who provide it with material support or facilitate financial transactions on its behalf. A 2022 study found that 19 individuals were charged in federal courts with providing material support to Hezbollah between 1997 and 2020, with

dozens more Hezbollah-affiliated individuals charged with non-terrorism-related offenses.

Ongoing Conflict with Israel

Hezbollah and Israel, which fought a 34-day war in 2006, have exchanged fire since October 2023, raising fears of a broader escalation in which Hezbollah could threaten Israeli strategic sites and population centers. UNIFIL recorded nearly 9,000 projectiles fired in both directions across the Blue Line between October 2023 and February 2024, of which nearly 8,000 were fired from the southern side of the line. Since October 7, 2024, 60 Lebanese civilians and 289 Hezbollah fighters reportedly have been killed; Israel's defense minister estimated in April 2024 that Israeli strikes had killed half of Hezbollah's commanders in southern Lebanon, a claim Hezbollah denied. Hezbollah has reportedly killed at least 9 Israeli civilians and 11 soldiers. Israeli officials have threatened wider military action in Lebanon if Hezbollah's fighters are not withdrawn north of the Litani. U.S. officials have sought to broker an arrangement that keeps Hezbollah back from the border in a way that mitigates the threat of an October 7-style attack and permits the roughly 60,000 evacuated Israelis to return to their homes in Israel's north.

Some observers have assessed that the parties have reasons to avoid a broader conflict, including Israel's continued military engagement in Gaza and Hezbollah's domestic political constraints. Apparent gradual escalation since February 2024 has raised some observers' expectation of such a conflict, as both Israel and Hezbollah seem inclined to “intensify the conflict to eventually reach calm,” which might heighten the potential for miscalculations. In April 2024, the United States and other Western powers said they were “particularly concerned by the situation along the Blue Line” and stated the LAF and UNIFIL played an “essential stabilizing role...in mitigating” the risk of wider conflict. For it to de-escalate, Hezbollah has insisted Israel first halt fighting in Gaza, though it is unclear what impact, if any, a cease-fire in Gaza would have on Israel-Hezbollah conflict.

Legislation and Issues for Congress

Congress has passed several measures authorizing secondary sanctions against persons and entities that facilitate financial transactions for Hezbollah, including the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015 (P.L. 114-102), as amended by the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-272). In the 118th Congress, the House agreed to a resolution urging the EU to designate Hezbollah “in its entirety” as a terrorist organization (H.Res. 599).

State Department officials have described the LAF as “an institutional counterweight to Hezbollah,” an assessment some observers dispute. Successive appropriations acts have prohibited the availability of funds for the LAF if it is “controlled” by a designated terrorist organization. In exercising oversight of U.S. security assistance to the LAF, some Members have raised questions about the possible diversion of U.S. funds to Hezbollah.

Clayton Thomas, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Jim Zanotti, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

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