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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.

On October 8, 2023, the day after Hamas-led attacks on Israel, Hezbollah began firing projectiles into northern Israel as part of its stated support for Hamas. Subsequent clashes between Hezbollah and Israel displaced tens of thousands on both sides of the border. Conflict escalated significantly in September and October 2024, with Israel killing longtime Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and launching ground operations against the group in southern Lebanon. These and other Israeli actions appear to have taken a significant toll on Hezbollah’s manpower, arsenal, and leadership, but the group retains some military capabilities, as well as influence in Lebanon’s political system.

A U.S.- and French-brokered cease-fire between the two sides went into effect in November 2024. The United States and Israel apparently hope that the cease-fire’s terms allow for better enforcement of the largely unimplemented provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which was adopted shortly after the last Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006.

Leadership, Structure, and Size

Hezbollah’s leader is Secretary-General Naim Qassem, whom Hezbollah’s Shura Council selected to succeed Hassan Nasrallah in October 2024 after his death. The charismatic Nasrallah had served as the group’s leader for 32 years, helping Hezbollah acquire significant military and political power in Lebanon and influence in the region. Qassem, a 71-year-old cleric who has been Hezbollah’s deputy leader for 34 years, is described by some as “underwhelming.” He now oversees Hezbollah’s military and political wings. Some countries and the European Union (EU) have designated 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. Prior to the 2024 escalation of conflict with Israel, reports estimated that Hezbollah may have had 50,000 or more fighters, including the Radwan Force, an elite special operations unit. In October 2024, Israel’s then-Defense Minister estimated that around 20% of Hezbollah’s arsenal of rockets and missiles, once estimated at as many as 120,000-200,000, remained.

Figure 1. Lebanon



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

Objectives and Operations

For nearly two decades, Hezbollah’s stated objective was to drive Israel Defense 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 Hezbollah’s persistence as an armed militia outside the structure or purview of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).

Hezbollah, ideologically aligned with Iran’s government, has been seen as the strongest of the armed groups Tehran supports to bolster Iranian strategic objectives. The State Department’s 2022 *Country Reports on Terrorism* says 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) says, “Hizballah seeks to limit U.S. influence in Lebanon and the broader Middle East”—goals Hezbollah shares with the Iranian government. 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, and played a key role in assisting pro-Asad forces during Syria’s civil war. Hezbollah also provides weapons and training to Yemen-based Houthis (another Iranian ally), and Hezbollah commanders have reportedly assisted the Houthi campaign against international shipping in the Red Sea.

Beyond the Middle East, Hezbollah operates a global criminal-financial network, with reported activities in Africa, Latin America, and Europe. Among other illicit activities, Hezbollah reportedly plays a 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 has drawn 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.

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, two in Argentina during the 1990s, and the 1983 truck bombing of the U.S. Embassy and Multinational Force barracks in Beirut. 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 Department of the Treasury 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.

Conflict with Israel

Hezbollah fought a 34-day war with Israel in 2006, after which the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1701, which 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 continued to operate in this area after 2006 and engaged at times in bouts of fighting with the Israeli military.

In September and October 2024, after Israel's cabinet added a goal of returning evacuated Israelis to its official war objectives, Israeli operations escalated significantly. Beyond the killing of Nasrallah and other leaders, Israel reportedly orchestrated the explosion of hundreds of electronic devices used by Hezbollah members and initiated ground operations against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Since October 2023, more than 3,700 people in Lebanon have been killed, along with more than 100 in or from Israel.

On November 26, President Joe Biden announced that Israel and Hezbollah had agreed to a cease-fire, which went into effect the following day. The U.S.- and French-brokered understanding (to which the Israeli and Lebanese governments formally agreed, and Hezbollah reportedly informally assented) includes the following arrangements:

- The Lebanese government will "prevent Hezbollah and all other armed groups" from carrying out attacks against Israel and will aim to deploy 10,000 LAF soldiers in southern Lebanon (the "UNIFIL Zone" from **Figure 1**), where they will work to "dismantle" and prevent unauthorized military positions and arms production facilities.
- Israel will halt attacks on targets in Lebanon and withdraw forces from Lebanon within 60 days.
- A tripartite mechanism chaired by the United States and also consisting of France and UNIFIL will monitor enforcement of the ceasefire, including reports to the mechanism by Israel and Lebanon of alleged violations.

According to an Israeli media report, a U.S. "side letter" to Israel will permit Israel to conduct reconnaissance flights over Lebanon and take military action there under certain circumstances in response to breaches of the agreement.

Legislation and Issues for Congress

Congressional measures authorizing secondary sanctions against persons and entities that facilitate financial transactions for Hezbollah include 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).

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, and some Members have raised questions about the possible diversion of U.S. funds to Hezbollah. Congressional attention regarding U.S. assistance for the LAF and contributions to UNIFIL may increase as the United States helps monitor the 2024 Israel-Hezbollah cease-fire.

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