

Reclaiming Lebanon from Hezbollah's Grip

Beyond dismantling Hezbollah's military, focus on its social services.

By Raphael Benaroya

One of the key challenges in achieving sustained stability and prosperity in Lebanon is how to extricate the Hezbollah terrorist organization from power. The dysfunction inflicted on this once flourishing country by Hezbollah—enabled by Iran and Syria—has festered far too long.

Lebanon's Foreign Minister, Youssef Raggi, recently asserted that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) would fully disarm Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon within three months. Raggi said that completion of the first stage, by November 2025, would include the removal of all weapons south of the Litani River, about 18 miles north of the Israeli border.

Certainly, removing Hezbollah's well-trained militia, rockets, missiles, weapons caches, and tunnel networks in this border zone would go a long way toward eliminating the conflicts that have persisted there for decades. But defanging Hezbollah's military is not nearly enough—the Lebanese government must engage in a much broader initiative to counteract Hezbollah's deep penetration into Lebanese society by replacing Hezbollah-run social functions with viable government services.

What makes Hezbollah most formidable is that it has become a state within a state. Hezbollah is rooted within Lebanon's political machinery—controlling ministries and influencing parliament—and operates a vast network of its own social, financial, and healthcare institutions that outperform governmental organizations. These soft levers of power—providing basic needs for an underserved Shia population—have enabled Hezbollah to endure. The Lebanese government must take over that role by providing community services equal to or surpassing those of Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's parallel state infrastructure has penetrated nearly every aspect of life in the Shia community in Lebanon. Hezbollah has guided construction projects, run hospitals, managed schools, and funded youth programs through institutions like the Emdad Committee for Islamic Charity, the Al Jarha Association for the wounded, and the Jihad Al-Binaa Developmental Association. The Al-Shahid Social Association guarantees living and education expenses for the families of "martyrs" who have died fighting for Hezbollah, cementing loyalty across generations. And the Al-Qard al-Hassan Association—Hezbollah's non-profit "bank"—reinforces this loyalty by providing low- and no-interest loans, accepting deposits, and operating ATMs, all beyond the reach of the Lebanese Central Bank.

These institutions are not merely charitable organizations; they are deliberate political investments. By filling voids left by the Lebanese state, Hezbollah has bound the Shia population to its network of services, allowing it to survive pressures from the Lebanese government and external forces.

Hezbollah has also long been connected to the global drug trade, which provides significant financial resources for the group. Hezbollah's illicit drug network includes a narco-terrorist hub at the shared border of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay; money laundering for South American drug cartels; and collaboration with groups in Colombia and Mexico to move drugs to Europe and the Middle East.

Hezbollah's grip over Lebanon is by no means absolute—it currently holds only 13 of Lebanon's 128 parliamentary seats, unchanged since elections in 2018 and 2022. But it doesn't need more seats to exert disproportionate influence through political alliances. Hezbollah holds key ministerial portfolios, including agriculture and public works, that allow it to funnel government resources to its constituents. These ministries also serve as revenue sources for Hezbollah, through rents and contracts. The result is a hybrid system that intertwines Hezbollah's network with the Lebanese government's machinery, making disentanglement difficult.

Accordingly, removing Hezbollah from Lebanon's governmental and societal fabric will not take a single, decisive stroke. It will require a lengthy, persistent, multi-faceted process to dismantle Hezbollah's parallel economic and welfare systems and transfer legitimacy, authority, and the delivery of social services back to the Lebanese state.

The U.S. clearly can play a role in both demilitarizing Hezbollah and helping the Lebanese government replace Hezbollah's social services. But the U.S. must act only as an influencer and enabler—not an overbearing, hands-on orchestrator—to help Lebanon reassert its sovereignty while avoiding inflaming the Lebanese societal divisions that entrenched Hezbollah's power in the first place.

So what can the Lebanese government do with the help of the U.S. and its European and Arab allies to unshackle itself from Hezbollah, stabilize Southern Lebanon, deliver prosperity across the country, and encourage peaceful coexistence in the Middle East?

Consider the following actions:

1. The U.S. can help develop international financial backing for the reconstruction of Lebanon, including debt relief, International Monetary Fund support, and more foreign direct investment, especially by Arab nations. Economic stability will help the Lebanese government become more relevant, politically stable, capable of standing up militarily to Hezbollah, and able to effectively address other domestic challenges.
2. Lebanon must pull every lever to supplant Hezbollah's social services with reliable government alternatives. Lebanon must make targeted, visible investments in healthcare, financial institutions, education, and social safety nets in Shia areas where Hezbollah's influence is strongest. Shia families must be able to get these basic services without going through Hezbollah. Hezbollah's power rests largely on its exploitation of Lebanon's

fractured, sectarian political system. As long as state institutions remain weak and corrupt, Hezbollah's services will continue to outmatch the government's.

3. The U.S. military should leverage the experience and resources of its Central Command to support the LAF's efforts to disarm Hezbollah and strengthen the Lebanese government's presence in Southern Lebanon, including by providing the requisite assets, training, and intelligence.
4. Lebanon, the U.S., and the E.U. would be well advised to coalesce an international effort to dismantle Hezbollah's (and Iran's) illicit financial activities, including with drug cartels and rogue regimes like Venezuela. This effort would align with domestic security initiatives in both the U.S. and Europe.
5. The U.S. should stop funding the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which gets 27% of its budget from America. UNIFIL has been accused of corruption—letting Hezbollah exploit UNIFIL's border-monitoring systems, enabling Hezbollah tunnels to be built close to UNIFIL watchtowers, and allowing Hezbollah rocket launchers to be placed near UNIFIL bases. (In one of my trips to the Lebanon-Israel border, I personally witnessed the Hezbollah flag flying side-by-side with the UN flag, without a Lebanese flag in sight.)

During the 2006 Lebanon War, I visited Israel with the late General Charles "Chuck" Boyd, USAF (Ret.), and assessed the conflict for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Israel Defense Forces. I am struck by how a key observation we submitted then remains relevant today, now that Israel has (once again) diminished the military capabilities of Hezbollah and its sponsor in terrorism, Iran. Our observation was as follows:

Dismantling Hezbollah's ability to fight militarily will have short-lived effects unless the Lebanese government breaks Hezbollah's grip on civil institutions, education, and health and welfare organizations in Southern Lebanon. Capturing the loyalty of people through service organizations and financial aid has been the cornerstone of Hezbollah's power, and that power must be broken.

A viable counter to Hezbollah's societal influence requires just as many carrots as sticks. The West has imposed economic sanctions on Hezbollah for years, but they have not undermined Hezbollah's domestic strength. In fact, sanctions have sometimes reinforced Hezbollah's narrative that it is defending Lebanon's Shia people against a hostile international community.

Reclaiming Lebanon from Hezbollah's grip will entail a long, arduous transformation of the country's economic and social structures, which will require stability, reformative thinking, and institutional changes in the Lebanese government. Fortunately, the quality of Lebanon's current leaders and the recent actions they have taken are a promising sign of things to come.

Hezbollah's hold on Lebanon is the result of decades of state failures, regional conflicts, debilitating foreign intervention, and the group's deliberate investments in parallel governance. Loosening that hold requires not just dismantling Hezbollah's military capabilities, but also breaking away from its shadow political, financial, and social levers of power.

With the neutering of Iran and removal of the Assad regime in Syria, the Lebanese government now has a great opportunity to extricate Hezbollah and restore Lebanon as an independent, prosperous nation, free from malign outside influences. This effort will not yield results overnight, but over time, a single, sovereign Lebanon can rise again, with no armed factions standing above the state.

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