

The Social Services of Hezbollah

[KATE KIAMEH]

In efforts to categorize the status of the state of Lebanon, the terms of capacity and autonomy are often utilized to help describe the abilities of the state. Autonomy is a description of the country's power to act independently of outside actors such as international bodies or the public of the state.¹ Capacity refers to the ability of a country to provide its citizens with public goods and services.² A country is often seen as the provider of public goods as it maintains a kind of legitimacy that allows for citizens to rely on it for resources and support. However, this capacity to provide for citizens is not present in the Lebanese state. Failing geopolitical powers, such as Lebanon, are characterized by weak institutions that have little capacity and autonomy. They lack basic legitimacy and thus lose support from citizens due to their inability to provide public goods necessary for citizen survival.³ Citizens at this stage may choose to transfer allegiance to informal groups that can provide resources where the government is unable. The capacity of Hezbollah to provide social services to the community has encouraged the terrorist hold over the vacuum of power in Lebanon. In support of this argument, I will first review the causes of the vacuum of power in Lebanon and describe the ideology and political goals of Hezbollah. Following this discussion, I will examine the strong Shiite support base for Hezbollah's resource provisions. I then will cite the specific resources provided by Hezbollah and discuss the scope of Hezbollah's capacity in opposition to the Lebanese government. In conclusion, I will discuss the implications of Hezbollah maintaining a hold over the vacuum of power in Lebanon.

Looking at the circumstances of Lebanon, the vacuum of power can be traced back to the Lebanese Civil War, the sectarian government, and economic severities. Lebanon dealt with foreign occupation of Syrian and Israeli troops for twenty-five

1 Patrick H. O'Neil, *Essentials of Comparative Politics*, 7th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), 49.

2 O'Neil, *Comparative Politics*, 49.

3 Boaz Atzili, "State Weakness and 'Vacuum of Power' in Lebanon," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 8 (July 13, 2010): 758, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2010.494172>.

years causing an incapability to maintain a monopoly of force over the region.⁴ Though Hezbollah's rise to power originated after the end of the Lebanese Civil War, the government struggled to return to a place of high autonomy as outside militias and Syria retained large influence in Lebanon.⁵ The presence of non-state forces eliminated the capability of the Lebanese government to maintain sole power in the region which led to Hezbollah's rise to power. The government of Lebanon, too, was divided into religious sects that vied for economic and political power.⁶ The principle of this form of government was established in the hopes of providing a share of power among the different sects; however, it proved to escalate the divides among the various religious communities.⁷ The lack of consensus among the ruling groups created tension that eliminated the ability for strong government performance. The economy of Lebanon furthered the burdens of the state in that it could not develop a clear system of taxation to provide funding for military and civilian services.⁸ Furthermore, corruption was commonplace in the economy as most of the power was focused into a small group of elites, and goods were used to prompt loyalty.⁹ Thus, Lebanon lacked a strong power structure which aided the terrorist group Hezbollah in seizing power.

Though it may seem counterintuitive that a terrorist organization also provides social services for people in need, Hezbollah is classified by the United States as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). In order for a group to be classified by the Secretary of State as an FTO, it must meet the criteria of being a foreign organization engaging or intending to engage in acts of terrorism.¹⁰ In addition, these acts of terrorism must threaten the security of the United States or citizens of the United States.¹¹ This designation as an FTO holds ramifications for these groups as it limits the United States' ability to aid financially and stigmatizes the group on a larger world scale.¹² Furthermore, by taking a stance in classifying the organization as an FTO, the United States illustrates to other countries the heightened need to lessen the power of these groups in promoting terrorism.¹³ Hezbollah received its designation as an FTO on October 8, 1997, and remains on this list currently.¹⁴

The basis of the terrorist group of Hezbollah centered on its aim to end Israeli occupation and form an Islamic Republic within the state of Lebanon.¹⁵ Hezbollah

4 Bryan R. Early, "Larger than a Party, yet Smaller than a State': Locating Hezbollah's Place within Lebanon's State and Society," *World Affairs* 168, no. 3 (2006), 115.

5 Atzili, "State Weakness," 770.

6 Atzili, "State Weakness," 761.

7 Atzili, "State Weakness," 763.

8 Atzili, "State Weakness," 761.

9 Atzili, "State Weakness," 762.

10 "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

11 "Foreign Terrorist," U.S. Department of State.

12 "Foreign Terrorist," U.S. Department of State.

13 "Foreign Terrorist," U.S. Department of State.

14 "Foreign Terrorist," U.S. Department of State.

15 Early, "Larger than a Party," 120-121.

claimed to be influenced by the religion of Islam and aimed to assert its ideology in various parts of society.¹⁶ The religious ties to Islam mandated certain obligations for Muslims to participate in forms of charity.¹⁷ For example, Zakat, one of the five pillars of Islam, requires that individuals contribute part of their income to others in need.¹⁸ Furthermore, Muslims were encouraged to participate in good behavior as a means of convincing non-Muslims to join Islam through the practice called Da'wa.¹⁹ Religion provides Hezbollah with the justification and motivation for its emphasis on providing resources in support of the community. As an anti-Israel terrorist organization, Hezbollah used this stance to create a Lebanese support base that reached beyond the Shiite population.²⁰ The military strength of Hezbollah allowed the group to resist the Israeli occupation in the strongholds of southern Lebanon, while the Lebanese military was unable to provide this support. This part of Hezbollah's ideology was justified not only by the forced removal of Shiites from Israel but also by Israeli occupation in the southern region of Lebanon.²¹ The Israeli occupation of the now majority Shiite population of southern Lebanon confirmed the tensions created in the forced removal of the Shiite community from Israel. At its fundamental level, however, Hezbollah asserts that the identity of its members can be streamlined to their position as soldiers.²² As a terrorist organization Hezbollah would resort to violence as a means of swaying politics in favor of the group.²³ Ultimately the goal of Hezbollah is to rid Lebanon of the Israeli presence and create a state united under Islam through means of social welfare and violence if needed.

The Shiite communities living in the disadvantaged areas of Lebanon are specifically aided by the services of Hezbollah in the absence of government support. The Shiite population is consolidated into primarily three regions of Lebanon that include Southern Lebanon, Beqaa Valley, and Beirut.²⁴ As a community, the Shiites have been forced onto land that has proven to be less apt for production while other religious groups are given the more advantageous areas of Lebanon.²⁵ By the 1960s, Shiite occupied areas of Lebanon showed significant deficits in resources and illustrated an immense gap in the progression of infrastructure projects.²⁶

16 Eyal Pascovich, "Social-Civilian Apparatuses of Hamas, Hizballah, and Other Activist Islamic Organizations," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 21, no. 1 (March 2012): 136, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1949-3606.2012.00130.x>.

17 Pascovich, "Social-Civilian Apparatuses," 129.

18 Pascovich, "Social-Civilian Apparatuses," 129.

19 Pascovich, "Social-Civilian Apparatuses," 129.

20 Early, "Larger than a Party," 123.

21 Early, "Larger than a Party," 119.

22 Eitan Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 11 (October 11, 2013): 902, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.832113>.

23 Pascovich, "Social-Civilian Apparatuses," 135.

24 Pascovich, "Social-Civilian Apparatuses," 130.

25 James, Love, *Hezbollah: Social Services as a Source of Power*. (Hurlburt Field: Joint Special Operations Agency, 2010), 5.

26 Love, Hezbollah, 8.

These findings emphasize the strong geographical disadvantage of the Shiites that causes the community to lean more heavily on the resources provided by Hezbollah. The vacuum created by the absence of government support would create the conditions for individual constituents to look elsewhere for necessary services.²⁷ In the case of Hezbollah, its ability to meet the needs of the community while avoiding corruption proves to stimulate loyalty from the Shiite community.²⁸

Hezbollah provides public goods to the citizens of Lebanon through three branches of social welfare called the Islamic Health Unit, the Educational Unit, and the Social Unit. The Islamic Health Unit operates three hospitals, fire departments, and dental and health clinics within the Lebanese state that offer free or subsidized treatment.²⁹ The services Hezbollah provides also encompasses mobile units for receiving treatment and facilities for blood donations.³⁰ The medical services provided by Hezbollah fill a gap of unaffordable or unavailable health care under the Lebanese government. The Educational Unit places its focus on ensuring the students of Lebanon receive proper education and learn the values of Islam. Between the years of 1996 and 2001, Hezbollah has dedicated fourteen million dollars towards scholarships for furthering students' education.³¹ Hezbollah's services even provide for meals during the day and compensate for the logistics of transportation to schools.³² As a result, more children within Lebanon have access to the resources and funds that allow them to continue prioritizing their education. Under the Social Unit, the Jihad Construction Foundation focuses on efforts to create construction and agricultural projects, especially those in Shiite populated areas.³³ This foundation provides funding for those who have suffered infrastructure damage because of bombings from Israel.³⁴ Also under the Social Unit, the Hezbollah Martyrs Foundation and the Foundation for the Wounded provides monetary support, services, and medical care to those who have been hurt or killed in the battle against Israeli forces.³⁵ Overall, the Social Unit of Hezbollah centers on improving the infrastructure of Lebanon and providing aid to those affected by the fight against Israel.

Hezbollah secures services for the Shiite community that outstrip the minimal support of the Lebanese government. Following an Israeli bombing in 2006, Hezbollah put forth 281 million dollars towards reconstruction and aid while the Lebanese government only contributed twenty-one million dollars towards rehabilitative

27 Shawn Teresa Flanigan, "Nonprofit Service Provision by Insurgent Organizations: The Cases of Hizballah and the Tamil Tigers," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (June 13, 2008): 503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10576100802065103>.

28 Flanigan, "Nonprofit," 504-505.

29 Flanigan, "Nonprofit," 510.

30 Pascovich, "Social-Civilian Apparatuses," 130-131.

31 Love, *Hezbollah: Social Services*, 26.

32 Azani, "The Hybrid," 905.

33 Pascovich, "Social-Civilian Apparatuses," 131.

34 Early, "Larger than a Party," 123.

35 Flanigan, "Nonprofit," 507.

efforts.³⁶ This evidence suggests that Hezbollah has a greater capacity than the Lebanese government to provide for its citizens, which leads the Lebanese people to showcase greater loyalty towards Hezbollah. However, the autonomy of Hezbollah to provide these services is somewhat limited as the source of much of their funding is from Syria and Iran. Hezbollah must balance relations between one of the historically stronger forces within Lebanon, Syria, while also maintaining a good stance with their additional financial supporter, Iran.³⁷ Due to potential conflict between funding nations, the nature of Hezbollah's monetary support can prove to be conditional. At the same time, Hezbollah's status as a non-governmental organization allows it to receive funding from the Lebanese government according to the annual budget that is set aside for non-profit organizations.³⁸ In addition, the title of a non-governmental organization allows for Hezbollah to partner with other NGOs without being rejected by the prejudices attached to the terrorist organization's name.³⁹ Though the United States has limited funding to Hezbollah in response to its classification as an FTO, Hezbollah does retain some amount of funding from the Lebanese government that helps perpetuate Hezbollah's existence.

Currently, citizens of Lebanon are dealing with severe electrical shortages that leave many without power or dependent upon generators.⁴⁰ Hezbollah has seized this shortage as an opportunity to publicize its capacity to provide fuel and generators for the people of Lebanon, even going so far as to showcase this display amid a parliament blackout.⁴¹ Whether for the purposes of expanding Islam or resisting Israeli occupants, Hezbollah has utilized the vacuum of power in Lebanon as a pathway to provide for citizens, especially the marginalized Shiite population. Using its health, education, and social units, Hezbollah has been successful in exceeding the scope and quantity of resources provided by the Lebanese government. Though Hezbollah has gained a large support base due to its service provisions, Lebanon is facing a significant number of citizens fleeing the country, almost 3,100 people daily.⁴² These numbers signify a large population of citizens that have lost faith in the potential of Lebanon to recover from its position as a failing state.⁴³ Ultimately, the question remains whether Hezbollah's hold over the vacuum of power is enough to provoke sufficient confidence to keep future generations from fleeing Lebanon.

36 Flanigan, "Nonprofit," 520.

37 Early, "Larger than a Party," 115.

38 Flanigan, "Nonprofit," 510.

39 Flanigan, "Nonprofit," 510.

40 Nader Durgham, Suzan Haidamous, and Liz Sly, "Hezbollah Flexes Its Muscles in Lebanon and Provides Free Iranian Fuel," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/lebanon-hezbollah-fuel-crisis-us-sanctions/2021/09/23/2b87da8a-1c79-11ec-bea8-308ea134594f_story.html.

41 Durgham, Haidamous, and Sly, "Hezbollah Flexes."

42 Scott Simon, "Lebanese Flee Their Own Country amid Economic Crisis," September 26, 2020, in *Weekend Edition Saturday*, podcast, audio, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/26/917185909/lebanese-flee-their-own-country-amid-economic-crisis>.

43 Simon, "Lebanese Flee."