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HEZBOLLAH AND ISRAEL:  
FROM THE EMERGENCE OF “THE PARTY OF GOD”  
TO THE MUTUAL DETERRENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyzes the relationship between Hezbollah and Israel, from the emergence of the “Party of God” to 2024. Hezbollah is a Shiite militant group and political party that emerged in Lebanon in 1982 as a response to the invasion of Israel of that year. It defines itself a “resistance movement”: its core goal, since its emergence, is the resistance against Israel. The relationship between Hezbollah and Israel, however, despite being always tense, is characterized by periods of clashes and others of greater stability. In 2006, a war broke out and ended with no winners: both actors made strategic mistakes and could not obtain the desired objectives. After the war, understanding that a next round of clashes would be devastating, a mutual deterrence is deployed. How is this mutual deterrence structured? Starting from this research question, the thesis aims at finding which are the characteristics of the strategies. An equilibrium has been preserved since 2006, and the relationship between the two actors has remained stable for 18 years. Hence, the strategy is working and the elements used to deter the adversary are effective. Moreover, knowing the means upon which the deterrence is built, it is possible to determine which are the changes that can disrupt this balance. This analysis becomes even more useful after the attack of Hamas against Israel of October 7, 2023. A different scenario has opened, and it could introduce new elements into the relationship between Hezbollah and Israel.

Hezbollah was created for three main reasons: the influence of the Shiite ideologues, the Israeli invasions in 1978 and 1982, and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. During the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), after the second Israeli invasion, members of the Shia community in Lebanon gathered to contrast the occupation. Iran immediately offered assistance and provided fighters, resources and training to the new born militia, Hezbollah. The party was formed of actors from different groups within the Shia community in Lebanon, unified by a common goal - which became the leading reason of Hezbollah - the resistance against Israel. In 1985, the group released its first

Manifesto, the “Open Letter”, which delineated its identity and agenda. They are “the sons of the umma (Muslim community) - the party of God (Hizb Allah)”. They had to follow the guidance and rule of the “tutor and *faqih* (jurist), Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini” and to spread the Iranian Revolution in Lebanon. The objectives were to destroy Israel and expel foreign presence, namely the USA and France, from the country.

Initially, Hezbollah contested the Lebanese sectarian political system, considered corrupted and unable to provide for the necessities of the population; and it wanted to create an Islamic state in Lebanon. Within time, and already at the end of the civil war, its ideology has evolved and it got more involved in the Lebanese domestic policy, until becoming a major political party. The group recognized that its very survival depended by the support of the population and the acceptance of the parliament. From 1992, under the leadership of Hassan Nasrallah, the current Secretary-General, Hezbollah focused its efforts on domestic policy and on winning popular support.

Hezbollah managed to contrast Israel, that withdrew from Lebanon in 2000. After 18 years of tensions against Hezbollah, Israeli society began to complain about the high numbers of soldiers' deaths beyond the border and to question the utility of the occupation, and the Ehud Barak's government decided to withdraw. A relatively stable period followed, and both Hezbollah and Israel assumed a deterrence posture to avoid a massive escalation. Only limited, periodic attacks between the military personnel and the fighters were deployed, remaining very careful in dealing with the enemy. However, Hezbollah continued to prepare and rearm for the next eventual confrontation. And on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2006, after an attack by Hezbollah that killed eight IDF soldiers and kidnapped two more, Israel chose to unilaterally escalate and attacked Hezbollah with the intent of destroying it. Israel pursued what scholars call an "optional war", that went on for thirty-three days. The war was a failure for both Israel and Hezbollah, that proved to be unprepared to face the enemy. At the end of the war, concluded by the Security Council Resolution 1701, none of the conflicting

parties won, and both had massive damages and failures. Hence, both Hezbollah and Israel implemented a deterrence strategy, understanding that a next confrontation would be devastating.

The first chapter is dedicated to an historical excursus from the emergence of the Party of God, with references to the main actions of the group that characterized its evolution and its relationship with Israel. Since 1982, Hezbollah has become a strong and mature militia, among the most powerful in the world; it has gained importance in Lebanon, in the Arab region and globally; and lastly, it has become a difficult enemy for Israel to face. The second chapter analyzes the evolution of the relations between the two actors from the 2006 war, underlying the failures made by the two sides, to the deterrence strategies implemented afterward, exposing their strengths and weaknesses. The third chapter, finally, describes the relationships of Hezbollah with other actors, which were crucial for the development of the Party of God and which had deeply influenced its actions over the years. In particular, Iran is Hezbollah's "patron state", it has contributed to the emergence of the group and it has sponsored it since then. At the same time, it used the proxy as a tool to reach its goals. For these reasons, it had both a direct and an indirect impact on Hezbollah. Second, Syria was fundamental as well for the emergence and evolution of Hezbollah, thanks to its training and funding. However, the two actors had an up-and-down relationship, because Syria has always been interested in expanding its control over Lebanon and Hezbollah could be an obstacle. Finally, the United States and European Union had worked – and are working – to limit the power of Hezbollah, which they have designated as a terrorist organization in, respectively, 1997 and 2013.

The literature used is composed of books and articles of experts on Hezbollah and Israel, sustained by official documents of the Israeli and American governments and UN Resolutions. Newspapers articles, then, have been used to report historical events, speeches and interviews.



## CHAPTER 1 - HEZBOLLAH AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH ISRAEL

### 1.1 What is Hezbollah: emergence, ideology, Lebanese politics, military force

Hezbollah is a Lebanese political party and militant group founded in 1982 during the Lebanon's civil war. Using its own words from the 1985 Manifesto, it is “the Party of God (Hizb Allah)”<sup>1</sup>. And finally, it defines itself as a “resistance movement”.

#### *Emergence*

The group was founded in 1982 within the context of the fifteen-years Lebanese civil war<sup>2</sup> (1975-1990), and three factors – traceable already from the '70s - contributed to the creation.

Lebanon gained independence in 1943, after twenty-three years as a French mandate. With the National Pact, the political power has been divided among the major religious groups – Sunni Muslims, Maronite Christians and Shiite Muslims (Robinson, 2023). In particular, the President of the Republic has to be a Christian Maronite, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament a Shia Muslim (Makdisi and Sadaka, 2005). Due to this division, the government was based on a

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<sup>1</sup>Open Letter of Hezbollah of 1985 translated by International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), 1986 (hereinafter referred to as Open Letter, 1985).

<sup>2</sup>The Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, due to a combination of domestic and external factors. At the internal level, confrontations emerged because of the sectarian political system in place since 1943: the division of power among the three major political and religious parties had advantages – it avoided the hegemony of a single party – but also disadvantages. The imposed balance prevented the building of a strong state that could carry out substantive administrative reforms; moreover, the sectarian system favored corruption and clientism (Makdisi and Sadaka, 2005). Finally, the Muslim political leaders started to demand for a more equal division of power. The tensions were exacerbated by important socioeconomic disparities in the country. The main external factor that contributed to the breakout of the civil war was the emergence of Palestinian military groups in Lebanon – in 1974 Amal was created, and it was one of the major warring factions in the civil war. The two main camps in the war were the Christian Maronite on one side, and the Muslims and Palestinians on the other; but almost all the major and minor groups in the country were involved. The civil war ended with the Taif Agreement of 1989, that confirmed the division of the sectarian political system, with some minor modifications. The parties involved in the civil war agreed on a compromise to return to a political stability in the country (Makdisi and Sadaka, 2005).



fragile balance, which, however, worked for more than thirty years. But in 1975, the Palestinian presence in Lebanon was the spark that disrupted this equilibrium. In fact, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the official representative of the Palestinian people, founded in 1964, relocated its headquarters in Lebanon, and the number of Palestinian refugees increased causing discontent and instability (Robinson, 2023). The Palestinian groups were expelled from Jordan in 1970, and the South Lebanon became the only sanctuary for the PLO to manage their operations. Since their arrival, clashes with the Lebanese Army and the Christian Party were common, until the breakout of the civil war (Makdisi and Sadaka, 2005). Muslims supported the PLO, even if there was tension also within the Muslim community between the Sunnis and the Shiites. On the contrary, Christians opposed the presence of the PLO in the country, fearing an erosion of their power. In general, a multitude of parties and groups were involved in the civil war, that can be divided in two main warring camps: one in support of the political sectarian division, led by the Christian, and one in opposition, led by the Muslims. However, clashes arose also within the factions (Makdisi and Sadaka, 2005). Finally, external countries got heavily involved in the fighting in support of one side or the other; for instance, Syria entered in the conflict in 1976 in support of the Christians Maronite at the request of the then Lebanese President; Israel invaded the country in 1978 and 1982 to contrast the PLO (Makdisi and Sadaka, 2005). One year after the beginning of the war, the country was split in half, with the Christians controlling the north, and the Muslim governing the south (Britannica, 2009).

This situation has been fertile ground for the birth of Hezbollah. As mentioned above, according to Nicholas Blanford (2022), three factors contributed: the influence of the Shiite ideologues, the Israeli invasions in 1978 and 1982, and the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Shiite ideologues, such as Mohammed Baqr al Sadr and Ruhollah Khomeini, promoted Islamic values as a counterweight to the secularism that was gaining attraction among the Arab youths. And in 1974 Musa Sadr created Amal, the first strong Shiite movement, in response to the repression of the Shiaa community

in Lebanon by Christians and Sunni Muslims. Secondly, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 in an attempt to destroy Palestinian guerrilla bases and expel Palestinian fighters from Southern Lebanon. And lastly, the construction of Hezbollah was strongly influenced by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, that culminated with the advent of the theocracy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Revolution contributed to strengthen the Shiite ideology in Lebanon. Lebanese clerics, among which Sheikh Sobhi Tufayli, future Hezbollah's first secretary-general, engaged in discussions about the possibility of a revolution in Lebanon and the creation of an armed anti-Israel movement (Blanford, 2022).

In 1982, after the second Israeli invasion, a group of Shiites took up arms to contrast the occupation. Iran immediately offered assistance, deployed 5'000 Revolutionary Guards<sup>3</sup> (then reduced to a thousand), and provided funds and training to the new born militia, Hezbollah (Blanford, 2022). Iran used this situation as an opportunity to expand its power in the Arab region and to favor the spill over of the Iranian Revolution within the Lebanese border. The intention was to create a movement that could establish an Islamic Republic in Lebanon (Hussain, 2009). Rallies and propaganda started to spread all over the country against the unjust and corrupted Lebanese government. It was "virtually nonexistent" because devastated and weakened, both in the infrastructures and in the legitimacy, by the civil war. In this scenario, it was relatively easy for Hezbollah to settle as a powerful actor (Hussain, 2009).

Hezbollah was formed of actors from different Islamic groups within the Shiaa community in Lebanon, such as Fatah' Group, Islamic Amal, the United Islamic Students, Dawa Party, and other independent parties (Al-Aloosy, 2020). The composition of Hezbollah was one of the factors that contributed to its rapid

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<sup>3</sup>Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), also known as Pasdaran, created as the defenders of the 1979 revolution. Nowadays, they have evolved into an institution with vast political, economic, and military power.

development. The majority of the members were previously affiliated with other violent non-state groups, hence when they joined Hezbollah they already had a considerable military experience (DeVore, 2012). Some future leaders as well - for instance, Husayn al-Khalil and Imad Mughniyah - were part of the Palestinian groups in South Lebanon before joining Hezbollah (DeVore, 2012). The unifying factor, that represented the main goal of Hezbollah, was the resistance against Israel. In fact, Hezbollah is first a resistance movement, that then became a political party (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

Within two years after the creation, Hezbollah has expanded from the Beeka Valley in the northern Lebanon to the south, obliging Israel, in 1985, to withdraw to a security belt along the border (Blanford, 2022).

In 1985 the Party of God published the “Open Letter”, its first Manifesto which defined its identity and agenda. As for the identity, they declared themselves as “the sons of the *Umma* (Muslim community) - the party of God (*Hizb Allah*)” (Open Letter, 1985, p.2). They didn't intend to constitute an “organized and closed party in Lebanon, nor [...] a tight political cadre”, because the founding element was the “solid doctrinal and religious connection of Islam”. Important factors were the culture, based on the “Holy Koran” and the military apparatus “to carry out the Holy War”. Each member of the group is a “fighting soldier”. Finally, they stressed their ties with Iran and their connotation as an Iran-inspired Islamist regime (Open Letter, 1985, p.2).

As for the objectives, the Manifesto began by explicitly declaring the enemies: the Phalanges, Israel, France and the US. Then, the main goals were: “(a) to expel the Americans, the French and their allies definitely from Lebanon, putting an end to any colonialist entity on our land; (b) to submit the Phalanges<sup>4</sup> to a just power and bring them all to justice for the crimes they have perpetrated against Muslims and Christians; (c) to permit all the sons of our people to determine their future and to

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<sup>4</sup> Lebanese Maronite Christian Party, that has aligned itself with France and the West. After independence, Sunni and Maronite politicians signed the National Pact without consulting the Shiites or any other community.

choose in all the liberty the form of government they desire. We call upon all of them to pick the option of Islamic government which, alone, is capable of guaranteeing justice and liberty for all. Only an Islamic regime can stop any further tentative attempts of imperialistic infiltration into our country” (Open Letter, 1985, p.4).

Finally, a separate paragraph is dedicated to the necessity of destroying Israel, condemned as “the hated enemy that must be fought”, due to the fact that it is the “vanguard of the United States in [the] Islamic world” (Open Letter, 1985, p.8).

### *Organization*

The leader of Hezbollah is Hassan Nasrallah since 1992, when he took over the power after the assassination of his predecessor, Abbas Al-Musawi. The party is then composed by a seven-member Shura Council and five subcouncils: the political, the jihad, the parliamentary, the executive, and the judicial assemblies.

According to the estimates of the US State Department, Hezbollah has ten thousand members and thousands of supporters worldwide (US Department of State, 2022).

### *Lebanese politics*

By the end of the civil war in Lebanon in 1990s, Hezbollah's ideology has evolved. Notably, they put aside the attempt of creating an Islamic State and they became more involved in the domestic policy. They moved toward the resistance against the Israeli occupation, and soon the movement became definitely an anti-Israel force (Hussain, 2009). The civil war ended in 1989 with the National Reconciliation Accord, or Taif Agreement; the parties involved in the civil war agreed on a compromise about the Lebanese political system to enhance the return to a political stability in the country. The accord determined the independence, sovereignty and Arab identity of Lebanon, that is a free country, home for all the Lebanese. In addition, it provided that the militias in the Lebanese territory were dismantled; only Hezbollah was allowed to maintain its military apparatus because it was a resistance force against Israel (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

Hezbollah criticized the agreement, judged as a repression of the Muslims of Lebanon,

since Maronite would maintain the higher position in the political system. However, Magnus Ranstorp (1998) found the reason of this objection in the fact that the end of the civil war and the return to a political stability eliminated the vacuum that Hezbollah was able to exploit for its rapid success. Hence, Hezbollah was obliged to adapt to this new situation and to become part of the Lebanese political system, which it has always opposed (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

In 1992, the group formed a political party and participated in elections in Lebanon. This decision was debated since it would have meant a contradiction to the 1985 Manifesto that rejected the sectarian political system. The approval of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iranian leader, tipped the balance: the party decided to participate and won eight parliamentary seats (Blanford, 2022). This success allowed Hezbollah to form a political bloc in the parliament that would sustain its operations (Hussain, 2009). Moreover, in 1992 Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah became the new leader after the assassination of his predecessor, Abbas Musawi. Under Nasrallah, Hezbollah focused its efforts on domestic policy and on winning popular support: new bodies were created to manage political, military and social activities; a television station and a media relations office were opened; and dialogues with other factions were promoted. All of that without neglecting the main Hezbollah's goal: Resistance. In fact, as Nasrallah explained after 1992 elections, "Our participation in the elections and entry into [parliament] do not alter the fact that we are a resistance party" (Blanford, 2022).

This transition was reflected in the revision of the flag and the motto, which became "Islamic Resistance in Lebanon" (Hussain, 2009).

According to some scholars, this period was "Hezbollah's golden age": the movement succeeded in obtaining the support of the Lebanese population and of the Islamic world. And, above all, it managed to repel Israel, that in 2000 withdrew from the occupied territory (Blanford, 2022).

From 2000, after Israel's withdrawal, Hezbollah faced a fluctuating period. On one

hand, the boost in reputation due to its contribution in obtaining this result, on the other hand, Lebanese population believed that it was no longer necessary that it kept the army (Blanford, 2022). Some people further accused Hezbollah of being more attentive to Iranian, rather than Lebanese, interests. However, Hezbollah, that could count on the Syrian support, was able to give convincing explanations. In 2005, the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rafik Hariri, was assassinated. Syria was blamed for that and had to pulled out the troops from the country. Hezbollah could not rely on its support anymore and had to engage more in domestic politics to defend its interests and its “resistance priority”. In 2005 it joined the cabinet for the first time (Blanford, 2022).

On July 12, 2006, after some years of a relative stability, Israel attacked Hezbollah in retaliation to an operation of the group, which killed eight IDF soldiers and kidnapped other two. A war started and went on for thirty-three days. The Lebanese government soon released a statement condemning the war, accusing Hezbollah for the Israeli response (Salem, 2008). As the days went by, it became clear to the government that the IDF was using a disproportionate use of force against civilian towns and villages; Israel was not only fighting against Hezbollah, but also conducting an all-out war against Lebanon. Consequently, the Lebanese government played a central role in the negotiations for the ceasefire, to restore the stability in the country (Salem, 2008). Hezbollah, on the other side, saw things differently: it accused the government of siding with the USA and hence Israel, of giving information to the enemy, of trying to get in the way and weaken the group. For Hezbollah's leaders, the proof arrived when the UN Security Council imposed the Resolution 1701 for the ceasefire. One of the provisions was the disarmament of Hezbollah. As said, the Lebanese government was among the leading countries for the negotiations, hence for Hezbollah it was the clear evidence that the March 14 alliance, the majority coalition in the government, was doing the interests of the USA and Israel. The war exacerbated the divisions in the country (Salem, 2008). Hezbollah, after the war, had to face a new reality. On one

hand, it felt to have won the war<sup>5</sup>: it was able to resist to the Israeli attacks, and to inflict several damages on the IDF, despite the military superiority of the adversary (Cordesman, 2007). On the other hand, the Party of God itself and the Shiia population suffered heavy damages. Moreover, from a political point of view, three negative consequences impacted on Hezbollah's position in the country. First, Hezbollah lost some of the popular support that it was laboriously building – a large part of the population blamed Hezbollah for triggering the Israeli retaliation, and for the subsequent economic and humanitarian damages that Lebanon was suffering; second, the acceptance and integration in the Lebanese government was deteriorated; third, the UNSCR 1701 provided for the deployment of 15'000 UN troops<sup>6</sup>, through the UNIFIL mission, in South Lebanon, in order to remove the area from the control of Hezbollah (Salem, 2008). The Resolution, finally, demanded for the Hezbollah's disarmament. But once again, the Party strongly refused. In a speech in September, Hassan Nasrallah, indeed, claimed that “No army in the world will be able to make us drop the weapons from our hands”<sup>7</sup> (Samaan,2014). The year 2007 began with a country more divided that ever (Salem, 2008).

In the elections of 2009 - year of the release of the new Manifesto, that will be analyzed lately- Hezbollah demonstrated to still hold a solid political power in the country. In fact, despite the Hezbollah-led opposition lost the elections, it exploited its influence to obtain a “unity cabinet”. The March 14 Alliance, the majority coalition, had fifteen members, Hezbollah and its allies ten, and five members were independent. The result was that Hezbollah could leverage the support of the independent part to block unfavorable policies and decisions (Berti, 2010).

In 2011, Hezbollah has been accused of the Prime Minister Hariri's assassination. When the government aligned with the allegations, Hezbollah and its political allies

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<sup>5</sup>The thesis will return to the topic in the next chapter, with a deeper analysis of the strategies deployed during the war by Hezbollah and Israel, the objectives and the outcomes.

<sup>6</sup>UN Security Council Resolution 1701, 11 August 2006, p.1

<sup>7</sup>“Hezbollah chief Nasrallah refuses to disarm,” Associated Press, September 22, 2006

forced its collapse and formed a new government led by Najib Mikati (Blanford, 2022). Hezbollah at the leadership of the country succeeded in building support from both Shiite and non-Shiite population due to the provision of social services in the field of infrastructures, healthcare and education. And it maintained its military army in spite of the protests (Robinson, 2023).

Mass protests started in 2019 due to the economic crisis that the country was facing, characterized of price spike, high unemployment, widespread corruption and poor public services (Blanford, 2022). With a percentage of above 150 percent of GDP, Lebanon's public debt is considered by the IMF "unsustainable"<sup>8</sup>. Protests have spread in 2020, with COVID-19 pandemic, and then when Salim Jamil Ayyash, a Hezbollah affiliate, has been found guilty of the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. In the last elections in 2022, Hezbollah and the allies lost their majority (Robinson, 2023).

#### *The "Rebirth": 2009 Manifesto*

On November 30, 2009, Hezbollah released the new Manifesto<sup>9</sup>, twenty-four years after the first one. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's secretary-general, read it during a live press conference in Beirut. According to many scholars, it represented the "rebirth" of the organization, which underwent a modernization process and the complete integration into the Lebanese political system. Meanwhile, others have underlined the continuity with the 1985 Manifesto. In general, it is possible to see that the document maintained similar concepts regarding foreign policy and contained some changes in the approach to domestic policy (Berti, 2010).

Starting from foreign policy, the 2009 Manifesto reaffirmed the condemnation of foreign presence and interference in Lebanon and in the Muslim world, accusing especially the United States, Europe and Israel, that remained the main enemy.

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<sup>8</sup>International Monetary Fund, Country Report No. 19/312 "Lebanon", October 2019

<sup>9</sup>Hezbollah's Manifesto of 2009 translated by lawandisrael.org (from now on, referred to as Manifesto, 2009)



However, even if the concepts were more or less the same, Hezbollah showed with this document a greater political sophistication and understanding of international relations. Indeed, in the 1985 Manifesto they considered the United States an “evil and oppressive force”, in 2009 they rejected instead the American “polarization and hegemony” and the globalization. Referring to Europe, they shifted from directly attacking it to a more nuanced critics to its link with American policies, aggravated by the responsibility that it held for the damage it has caused because of “the colonial inheritance it has left behind” (Manifesto, 2009; Berti, 2010). In addition, a new element that emerged was the recognition of the regional alliances, showing how Hezbollah became more involved and aware of its political role in the region and in the regional resistance axis. However, the document lacked a specific reference to Iran partnership, probably due to the will of characterizing the organization as a strong Lebanese political actor and not a sole Iranian affiliate. Finally, a theme that remained unaltered was the sentiment towards Israel, that stood as the main enemy of Hezbollah and the “eternal threat to Lebanon” (Manifesto, 2009; Berti, 2010).

Moving to domestic policy, in the Open Letter the main goal of Hezbollah was to create an Islamic State, taking the distance from the corrupted Lebanese sectarian system; on the contrary, the 2009 Manifesto showed that Hezbollah became more involved in the Lebanese government, considered as an exploitable environment to operate in. And the construction of an Islamic State is no longer in Hezbollah's plans in 2009. Moreover, they added the consideration of democracy as a “fundamental basis for governance in Lebanon” (Manifesto, 2009; Berti, 2010).

Finally, another important element remained the military force. Hezbollah repeated its intention to keep a military role in Lebanon and its refusal to disarm yet recognizing the role of the Lebanese army as an auxiliary force, differently from 1985 when it was considered an enemy (Berti, 2010).

### *Military force*

Hezbollah is recognized as “the world’s most heavily armed non-state actor” thanks to its large arsenal and in particular its missile and rocket forces – today estimated at

130'000 (Shaikh and Williams, 2021).

Iran, from 1982, mobilized, trained, equipped and funded the emerging Hezbollah. Since then, the organization's arsenal developed. The war against Israel in 2006 represented a turning point for Hezbollah's military force. It used new weapons, for instance it launched drones in strategic sites, applied new tactics and improved fighters' training. Meanwhile, a successful strategy deployed by Hezbollah in the conflict against Israel has always been the use of small, man-portable and unguided surface-to-surface artillery rockets. The use of this particular type of weapons obliged Israel to fight a ground battle, for which IDF was unprepared (Shaikh and Williams, 2021). The 2006 war saw no clear winner and was devastating for both of the parties, but Hezbollah showed power and preparation that Israel did not expect. "Today we can say proudly that if any Israeli government decides to launch war in the future, it will take into consideration that war with Lebanon will not be a picnic,"<sup>10</sup> Nasrallah claimed in August 2006 (Wilson Center, 2023).

Nowadays, Hezbollah has become a militia more capable, prepared and equipped than many regular armies, thanks to the experience and weapons accumulated in forty years. The military strength of Hezbollah can count on at least 150'000 rockets and missiles, 20'000 active fighters and as many reserves, anti-tank guided missiles, man-portable air defense systems, armed and unarmed drones; and the organization has used malware to gather information and track targets (Wilson Center, 2023).

### *Terrorist attacks*

The USA designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in 1997, the European Union in 2013: since its emergence, the group has carried out attacks, not only against Israeli citizens, but also against Americans and Europeans, both in the Middle East and on their territories (US Department of State, 2022). Among them, it's worth mentioning, in 1983, 63 people died in an attack to Beirut's US Embassy<sup>11</sup>; the same year the group

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<sup>10</sup>Nasrallah's speech, 14 august 2006, Shaikh Nasrallah: "We stand before a strategic and historic victory for all of Lebanon", Crescent International (icit-digital.org) in Wilson Center 2023

<sup>11</sup>US Department of the State, Terrorist Group Profiles, November 1988, p.16

simultaneously truck bombed the U.S. Marine barracks and the nearby French Paratroop headquarters, which killed 309 people between American servicemen and French soldiers<sup>12</sup>; in 1992, the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires is bombed<sup>13</sup>; in 2012, Hezbollah was responsible for an attack on a passenger bus carrying 42 Israeli tourists in Bulgaria<sup>14</sup>.

## 1.2 The Palestinian cause

Lebanon, and especially the southern part at the border with Israel, has been the battleground for the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian guerrillas for decades. However, the country became involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict only after the Six Days War of 1967. Previously, Lebanon tried, indeed, to maintain a position of neutrality in the conflict, adopting only precautionary defensive measures (Sorby, 2012).

The Six Days War, also known as Third Arab-Israeli War or June War, which took place from 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> June 1967, has represented a turning point in the dynamics of the Middle East, and has been the result of weeks of clashes in the region. On June 5, Israeli Air Force launched an attack to Egyptian, Syrian and Jordan bases and in few days occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank of Jordan and the Golan Heights – of which the Sheeba Farms are part. There is a debate among scholars between those who consider this war as the product of some miscalculations from both sides, and those who regard it as an “inevitable conflict” (Karsh, 2017). Lebanon was the only Arab country bordering Israel which kept a defensive position, particularly because it was soon clear that Israel would prevail. It thus escaped the

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<sup>12</sup>*ibidem*

<sup>13</sup>CIA Memo “Iran enhanced terrorist capabilities and expanding target selection”, April 1992, p.11

<sup>14</sup>In 2023, the Bulgarian's Supreme Court sentenced to life imprisonment Meliad Farah and Hassan El Hajj Hassan for their role in the July 2012 terrorist attack, in which six people between Israeli and Bulgarian died. The attack was the reason that led the EU to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. “Bulgarian supreme court confirms life sentences for Bourgas Airport terrorist attack”, 7 March 2023, The Sofia Globe

devastation of its small armed force and the occupation of its territory. After the war, the UN Security Council Resolution 242 of November 22, 1967, represented the first effort for the settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict (Sorby, 2012).

As a major consequence of the Six Days War, the Palestinian resistance movements emerged for three reasons: first, to replace the inability of the Arab countries in the Arab-Israeli conflict; second, the UN Resolution 242 failed to address the Palestinian cause; and third, the Arab countries were more focused on taking back the territories invaded by Israel than on the Palestinian cause (Telhami, 2017). Hence, guerrilla operations started – and rapidly increased - from Jordan and Lebanon, provoking the Israeli retaliation (Sorby, 2012). During the first period after the war, the Palestinian guerrilla movement in Lebanon was effectively taken under State control, due to the influence of the Tripartite Alliance formed by the three Christian parties. The Palestinian militias were seen by the Alliance, and also by some part of the Muslim community, as a threat to national security and stability, exposing Lebanon to the danger of Israeli attacks (Sorby, 2012). On 28<sup>th</sup> December 1968, Lebanon suffered, indeed, the first large-scale Israeli retaliation. In April of the following year, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) reunited most of the Palestinian guerrillas under the Armed Struggle Command. This increased the development of the Palestinian commando in Lebanon with the subsequent increase in clashes with the Lebanese Army. Hence, dialogues between the Lebanese government and the Palestinian guerrilla leaders began on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1969 at Cairo, resulting in the Cairo Agreement, signed by the Lebanese Commander Imil Bustani, and the head of PLO Yasser Arafat: guerrillas could operate from southern Lebanon but under some restrictions, as a compromise between the two sides (Sorby, 2012). The PLO could control the refugee camps in South Lebanon and coordinate the actions against Israel from there, on the conditions that information about the operations was shared with the Lebanese High Command, and that the PLO respected the government's sovereignty over Lebanon (Siklavi, 2017).

However, the Cairo Agreement happened to be vague in defining the role of the two sides, and consequently the Palestinian militias were able to substitute the

authorities in South Lebanon, creating a State within a State, referred to as the “Fatah Land”, which led to new clashes (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

The Shia population in Lebanon initially supported the Palestinian organizations, due to the endorsement on an Arab and Islamic unity. Though, they soon became intolerant to the oppressive and violent presence of the Palestinians. They damaged the economy in the South, monopolizing the market of gas and flour, mostly through a corrupting system (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Citizens in the south, then, complained about the creation of checkpoints and raids, and the public carrying of weapons<sup>15</sup> (Al-Aloosy, 2020). This, added to the ineffective attacks against Israel, that only provoked large retaliation at the expense of the southerner population, led to disapproval and contrast from the Shias. The situation has deteriorated when in 1978, and then again in 1982, the Palestinians did not resist, but fled, to the Israeli persecution. The Shia community strongly condemned the fact that they were in Lebanon for the war against Israel, they had the means and resources to resist but they did not (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Hence, a part of the Shias, led by the Amal organization and his leader Musa al-Sadr, began to oppose to the Palestinian guerrillas and PLO, labeled as cause of anarchy and terror in the Arab world and not sincere in their actions against Israel. Al-Sadr believed that the best path for Lebanon in the Arab-Israeli conflict, that represented also the way to overcome the difficulties for the south, was a grand Arab strategy to fight Israel (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

The divide between the Shias and the Palestinians was so deep that, when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, the Shia population welcomed the arrival of the enemy, seen as the possibility for the end of the Palestinian oppression. Hisham Jaber, a former Lebanese general, commented that “people were not sure if they would throw stones or throw sweets at the Israelis”<sup>16</sup>. However, the Israeli presence demonstrated quickly to be worse than the previous one: the Israeli violence and damages to the

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<sup>15</sup>Interview with Mona Fayyath in Al-Aloosy, 2020

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Hisham Jaber in Al-Aloosy, 2020

villages led to mass migration; the management of the market with the introduction of Israeli products produced an economic blockade (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Consequently, the resistance resumed and a new radical movement, Hezbollah, emerged. In 1978, Amal's leader Musa al-Sadr disappeared during a visit in Lybia. The following leadership engaged Amal in the corrupted Lebanese political system, attracting criticism and discontent. Hezbollah exploited this loss of legitimacy and internal contrasts of Amal to gain support (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

The Palestinian cause was at the center of Hezbollah's rhetoric, as shown by the speeches and rallies. It considered Palestine's liberation as a duty shared by all Muslims. However, after the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah recognized that it would have been impossible to militarily defeat Israel, because of the large disparity in military means and resources. As explained by Nasrallah, "We are not unrealistic. We do not pretend that our military capabilities and the numbers of our mujahidin would be enough to regain Jerusalem .... We do, however, believe that the resistance has to finish the job it started."<sup>17</sup> Hezbollah were, indeed, aware that it would have taken "eras" for the Islamic umma to gather the required capabilities to liberate Palestine. Hence, Hezbollah proposed another possible strategy to obtain this objective: it planned a referendum within all Palestinian and Israeli territories, because being the Palestinians a much larger population, they would have win. This showed that even if the Palestinian cause has always been a central element in Hezbollah's discourses, the actual implementation of this goal has been indefinitely postponed (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

### 1.3 Hezbollah and Israel

Israel is Hezbollah's first enemy, its *raison d'être*. Indeed, the organization constituted as a resistance movement in response to the Israeli occupations of Lebanon of 1978

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<sup>17</sup>Interview with Hassan Nasrallah in Nicholas Noe, ed., *Voice of Hezbollah: The Statements of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah*, 2007, quoted in Samaan, 2014

and 1982. From its emergence in 1982 the main Hezbollah's goal was to expel Israel from Southern Lebanon and to destroy it. The “struggle will end only when this entity [Israel] is obliterated”. Israel is addressed as the “hated enemy that must be fought” until its complete destruction (Open letter, 1985, p.8). Again, in the 2009 Manifesto, Hezbollah reaffirmed that Israel is the “eternal threat to Lebanon” (Manifesto, 2009). During the decade 1982-1992, Hezbollah's hit-and-run guerrilla tactics were effective in contrasting Israel; Israel in fact responded unsuccessfully with air and artillery blitzes against Lebanon (Blanford, 2022). The late 1990s are considered the “golden years” of Hezbollah, that gained increasingly greater results against the enemy. In 2000, Israel withdrew from Lebanon; it was the first loss against force of Arab arms (Blanford, 2022). After 18 years of tensions against Hezbollah, Israeli society began to complain about the high numbers of soldiers' deaths beyond the border and to question the utility of the occupation. This increased pressure convinced Ehud Barak's government to withdraw, in the belief that this would prevent Hezbollah's attacks because they would lack the support of their society and the understanding of the international community. The 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2000, after twenty-two years of occupation, Israel completed the removal of soldiers from Southern Lebanon. The vacuum created was soon filled by Hezbollah's army. (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

The withdrawal created a new reality in Lebanon; after two decades, the attention of the Lebanese government and society could turn to something else. The main change was in the role of Hezbollah: the group itself had to understand and determine which new path to follow; meanwhile, the other political players feared that it would use this new situation as an opportunity to achieve domestic goals with its army. Moreover, an urgent issue to be solved was the disarmament, since Hezbollah did no longer need to keep its army and should dismantle it in accordance with the Taif Agreement. All the sectarian parties in Lebanon, Christian, Druz, Sunni, and also the United Nations – with Security Council Resolution 1559 - called for disarmament, but the requests remained unheard, thanks also to the continuous Syrian support. Nasrallah, in an interview in 2005, effectively justified the maintenance of the military

status by claiming that the role of resistance movement was still in place since the Sheeba Farms were still occupied (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

Hezbollah was able to exploit a long-standing dispute among Lebanon, Syria and Israel. The Sheeba Farms are located in the bordering area among the three countries, which is 14 km in length and about 2 km in width. The issue of defining the border sets back to 1920, at the beginning of the French mandate, when the French authorities wanted to survey and map the territories under their control. Following the Lebanese independence, the government made official requests to Paris for material regarding the Syrian-Lebanese border. Later, a similar demand arrived also from the Syrian government. However, France replied that it did not have information about the exact outline of the border; and evidence showed that in the 1960s the boundary was not yet officially delineated (Kaufman, 2002). Hence, in 1964 a Commission was asked to decide on the matter, and the result was that the Sheeba Farms belonged to Lebanon, based on the land ownership in the area. Yet, the maps were not adjourned and the border anomaly persisted – and was exploited by both Lebanon and Syria for their own interests – until 1967, when Israel invaded the Sheeba Farms during the Six Days War (Kaufman, 2002). Subsequently, along the 1970s Lebanon and Syria claimed or disclaimed sovereignty over the area to reach some useful agreements within the aid of United Nations, for instance the first accepted the boundary to establish the UN Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) in 1978, the latter accepted it for the signing of the Disengagement Agreement with Israel in 1974. The issue of the Sheeba Farm was back in the spotlight after the Israeli withdrawal in 2000. United Nations sent a delegation to the region to investigate the issue and determine the exact position of the border, and on June 16, 2000 the former UN Secretary-general Kofi Annan declared that Israel had completed the withdrawal, since the Sheeba Farms were not part of the Lebanese territory. But Hezbollah rejected it and remained armed since Lebanon was not in fact free from the Israeli presence. Hezbollah used the ancient debate on the Sheeba Farms as the justification to continue the resistance, and on the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 2000 it launched the first attack against Israel in the region, followed by other periodical offensives (Kaufman, 2002).



From 2000 to 2006 both Hezbollah and Israel assumed a deterrence strategy, and the military operations changed from action to reaction, in order to avoid a massive escalation (Al-Aloosy, 2020). After the withdrawal, Hezbollah maintained its army with the justification of the Sheeba Farms, but remained very careful in dealing with the enemy, deploying only small attacks to military personnel. Its goal was “to confront and defend against aggression”<sup>18</sup>, as by the words of the Deputy Secretary General Naim Qasim. Contrary to the expectations of experts, Hezbollah did not try to exploit the eventual chaos created by the vacuum left by Israel (Al-Aloosy, 2020). It chose instead to respect the new responsibility on south Lebanon and towards the population, to whom, being a non-state actor, it owed its very survival. And, not only it avoided to attack Israel, but also stopped Palestinian attacks. This did not mean, as Nasrallah explained, that Hezbollah accepted the legitimacy of Israel, but a shift in the strategy to a more pragmatic base. In the meanwhile, Israel began to treat Hezbollah as a rational actor and respected the agreement in order to prevent attacks against the population (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

Hezbollah, however, continued to prepare and reinforce for the next confrontation. It increased the training of its fighters. It developed the artillery with new advanced anti-tank missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) – it used it for the first time in 2004, successfully because it remained twenty minutes in Israeli airspace without being detected -, and it built a defensive network composed of bunkers, tunnels, ambush positions. This system of tunnels covered the majority of South Lebanon and it comprehended rocket launchers strategically placed to be nearly impossible to detect by the enemy (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Finally, the group composed a new strategy and military doctrine. It meticulously studied the territory and the adversary, surveilling the border for years to collect as much intelligence as possible. A tactic used, kids were sent to the border holding books in their hands to memorize and

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<sup>18</sup>Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, *In Their Own Words: Hizbollah’s Strategy in the Current Confrontation*, 2007 in Al-Aloosy, 2020

report all the movements they saw (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

In the meantime, Israel continued to underestimate the guerrilla tactics of Hezbollah and did not prepare its Israeli Defense Forces to face them. Moreover, the army underwent large budget cuts. Therefore, by 2006, at the wake of the war, Hezbollah presented itself much more prepared than Israel (Cordesman, 2007).

On 12<sup>th</sup> June 2006, Hezbollah killed eight IDF soldiers and kidnapped two more. Israeli reaction wasn't the one predicted, and instead of the usual light relation, Israel chose to unilaterally escalate and attacked Hezbollah with the intention of destroying it. Israel pursued what scholars call an "optional war", that went on for thirty-three days. It launched long- and medium-range rockets, and in the next days it bombed different targets in Beirut - the airport and Hezbollah's headquarters - and posed a blockade on Lebanese ports (Cordesman, 2007). Israel attacked Lebanon, and not only Hezbollah, because it considered the received attacks as "action[s] of a sovereign state", it held the whole Lebanon responsible and warned that "it will bear the consequences"<sup>19</sup> (Al-Aloosy, 2020). On July 16, Hezbollah launched long-range rockets for the first time. Both the air and land campaigns have continued to further intensify. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of August, Israel decided to deploy all of its available forces with the objective to go beyond the border and to take southern Lebanon; but the action was stopped by the pressure of the international community, which believed that Israel had mismanaged the war causing excessive damages and civilian casualties in Lebanon, and called for a ceasefire. Hence, on August 13 Israeli government accepted the ceasefire, that went into effect the next day (Cordesman, 2007). The government of Italy gave an important aid during the negotiations for the ceasefire; in August, during a telephone conversation, the then Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora thanked the then Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi for the "support offered by Italy" to the country<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup>Press Conference of PM Olmert, 12 July 2006 in Al-Aloosy, 2020

<sup>20</sup>"Siniora: Hezbollah collaborerà con forza Onu", 17 August 2006, Corriere della Sera

Several mistakes were made in the definition of the Israeli strategy. The major one was to rely almost exclusively on the air power because this is ineffective in the case of conflict against a non-state actor like Hezbollah, who on the contrary was very prepared on conventional and guerrilla tactics. When IDF decided to change the strategy, it emerged their incompetence on conventional ground campaign. Another error was to underestimate the power of short-range rockets; Israel did not consider them a decisive weapon and did not gather intelligence about them, so it wasn't able to detect and stop them when Hezbollah used them against the Israeli northern territory. This had a devastating effect on the Israeli society (Al-Aloosy, 2020). In general, Israel focused too much on its own goals and perceptions and relied too much on its force, without studying carefully the information about the enemy – its tactics, weapons and realistic power (Cordesman, 2007). The war of 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel ended with the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

“The war proved that mutual destruction is the name of the game between Hezbollah and Israel.” (Al-Aloosy, 121). Both of the parties suffered massive damages and civilian casualties. Israeli society, the most important figure for Israel, suffered massive damages; the Lebanese government demonstrated its inability and scarce state's capacity and the Lebanese infrastructures were seriously affected. According to a case study of the International Committee of the Red Cross:

- “Israel’s Air Force flew more than 12,000 combat missions. Its Navy fired 2,500 shells, and its Army fired over 100,000 shells, destroying as a consequence large parts of the Lebanese civilian infrastructure, including roads, bridges and other ‘targets’ such as Beirut International Airport, ports, water and sewage treatment plants, electrical facilities, fuel stations, commercial structures, schools and hospitals, as well as private homes; 30,000 homes were destroyed or damaged.
- The conflict resulted in 1,191 [Lebanese] deaths and 4,409 injured. More than 900,000 people fled their homes. It was estimated that one third of the

casualties and deaths were children.

- 43 [Israeli] civilians were killed, 997 were injured [...], 6,000 homes were affected and 300,000 persons were displaced by Hezbollah's attacks on Israeli towns in northern Israel."<sup>21</sup>

Hezbollah ended nonetheless the war being satisfied: despite the losses on the ground, it perceived to be the winner since it successfully faced Israeli attacks without releasing the captured soldiers. Also, it proved to be able, again, to fill the vacuum left by the Lebanese government. For instance, it found the resources, thanks to the help of Iran, needed for the reconstruction of the country, resources that the government did not have (Al-Aloosy, 2020). In the "war of narratives" Hezbollah was able to turn the public opinion of the Arab World to its favor. The result was that, not only the Arab opinion accepted the aggressive behavior of Hezbollah, initially condemned, but also it led to an increased popularity and recruitment. In the group's discourses, the expression for the war was "divine victory", since Hezbollah considered itself as "touched by God and blessed by a religious fervor and determination to resist the enemy" (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

Hezbollah had to deal, however, with some downsides. First, after the war, a long-term ceasefire was established and, since Hezbollah's legitimacy was given by the resistance against Israel, it meant that Hezbollah lost its pre-war status and its room for maneuver. Moreover, the war showed that leaving the freedom of deciding between peace and war in the hand of the group was not the best decision for the state (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Second, it miscalculated the strategy against Israel: it believed that the situation could remain unaltered for much longer, with small mutual attacks every few months, and the violent Israeli retaliation was completely unexpected (Cordesman, 2007). Third, while the Party of God was determined to exploit the weakness of the Lebanese government, the latter, on the contrary, was ready to regain the monopoly of the force in the south. And this was facilitated by the UNSC

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<sup>21</sup>"Israel/Lebanon/Hezbollah Conflict in 2006", November 2006, ICRC

Resolution 1701, which established that only the government, sole holder of the sovereignty in Lebanon, had the right to bear arms (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Fourth, the group had to face the fact that its actions led to a massive destruction in the country; from the words of Nasrallah in 2007 “[i]f any of us had a 1 percent doubt that Israel was going to reply in this savage manner, we wouldn’t have captured those soldiers”<sup>22</sup>, it was clear that the group was horrified by the level of destruction.

As a consequence to all of these factors, Hezbollah eventually lost some of its power. As demonstrated by the fact that, for the first time in its history, it did not respond to the assassination of one of its leaders in 2008 (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

Since the end of the war, the number of attacks has sharply dropped and a long phase of deterrence has begun. At this point, both of the parties were well aware that a new confrontation would have meant a mutual destruction (Al-Aloosy, 2020). In particular, an “informal deterrence dialogue” has been established and, according to scholars, this was the key for maintaining the stability along the border. The enemies did not disarm but continued to prepare for the next battle, avoiding any incidents that could possibly trigger another escalation (Samaan, 2014).

Israeli deterrence strategy has been structured on what is referred as “Dahiya Doctrine”, which envisaged a disproportionate use of force in retaliation to any future attack by Hezbollah. In any future clash with Hezbollah, Israel would use a disproportionate force against any village used to launch attacks (Al-Aloosy, 2022). The core idea is that the villages, and any other civilian infrastructure used, will be considered military bases<sup>23</sup>. The name derived from the Dahiya quarter in Beirut, that has been devastated by Israel during the 2006 War (IMEU, 2012). Moreover, Israel mainly dedicated efforts to develop new missile defense systems, Arrow III, Iron Dome and Magic Wand, to stop Hezbollah's missile attacks (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

On the other side, Hezbollah built its deterrence strategy upon two factors. First, on the threat of an equally violent retaliation to an eventual attack from Israel. According

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<sup>22</sup>Nasrallah in a television interview in 2007, quoted by Al-Aloosy, 2020

<sup>23</sup>The next chapter will further delineate the provisions of the doctrine.

to Nasrallah's explication, Israel was wrong if it believed that he could apply the Dahiya Concept without expecting a massive retaliation. And this principle of eye for an eye was meant to be applied to any possible scenario – the destruction of a building, or a neighborhood in Beirut meant the destruction of the same targets in Tel Aviv. Second, Hezbollah strengthened its missiles arsenal, the sole capability that it could use to deter the adversary (Cordesman, 2007). Hezbollah's leaders recognized and often underlined that what protected Lebanon from Israel was the ability of deterrence of the resistance, not the power of the Lebanese state or the international law (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

The relations between Hezbollah and Israel remained relatively stable for years. However, the scenario could change in the foreseeable future due to the emergence of new factors. On the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023, the Palestinian group Hamas attacked Israel with a terrorist attack considered among the worst in history, and the deadliest one against Israel since its establishment in 1948. The events of 7<sup>th</sup> October marked the beginning of an ongoing war between Israel and Hamas (CSIS, 2023). This war could represent a shift in the relationship between Hezbollah and Israel and the end of the deterrence. Since the beginning of the conflict, border clashes have been resumed with mutual strikes and attacks. However, attacks have been contained in order to avoid an escalation. Hezbollah, in particular, as sources revealed, has used limited power to avoid a retaliation against Lebanon but to keep Israel occupied in the northern border (Reuters, 2023). At the moment of writing<sup>24</sup>, the confrontation has not yet reached the threshold of all-out war due to some constraints. The main one is probably the restraints imposed by Iran and the United States respectively on Hezbollah and Israel. The Party of God is an Iranian proxy and expeditionary force, as well as a major element of Iran's deterrence – thanks to its large arsenal that can be used against Israel in response to an American attack to Iran's nuclear program. Hence, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei seems unwilling to put this in danger. Simultaneously, the Biden administration was very clear in determining the expectations for Israel in the

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<sup>24</sup>June 2024

Gaza war: to defeat Hamas, and to avoid a conflict with Hezbollah, because this would mean a widening of the war in the region and a possible involvement of Iran and United States themselves (Cook, 2023).

The next chapter will go deeper into the analysis of the strategy of deterrence of the two actors, highlighting which were the factors that made them effective in maintaining a stability along the borders for several years and which could be the elements that could change it.

## CHAPTER 2 - THE CHANGE OF THE STRATEGY BETWEEN HEZBOLLAH AND ISRAEL: THE FAILURE OF THE 2006 WAR AND THE DETERRENCE

In 2000, after two decades of clashes with Hezbollah, Israel withdrew from Lebanon and for six years both sides maintained a cautious approach toward each other in order to avoid an escalation. They continued to prepare and reinforce for the next confrontation, but deployed only limited attacks. Expectations could easily assume that Hezbollah would boast of the success obtained and exploit the new situation to achieve even more victories. On the contrary, it limited itself to infrequent small attacks. Moreover, the confrontation was mainly confined in the Sheeba Farms, a gray area long disputed by Lebanon, Israel and Syria.

However, the 12<sup>th</sup> June 2006, after an attack of the Party of God in which it kidnapped two soldiers, Israel decided to massively retaliate. It chose to start what experts call an “optional war”, because it unilaterally escalated with the intent of destroying Hezbollah. The war went on for 33 days; it was concluded by the Security Council cease-fire Resolution UNSCR 1701. None of the conflicting parties won, and both had massive damages and failures. Hence, from 2006 both Hezbollah and Israel structured a deterrence strategy in order to avoid another escalation. They understood that a new war would have been mutually destructive.

This chapter will analyze the mistakes and lessons learned of the war and the characteristics of the deterrence strategy of Hezbollah and Israel.

### 2.1 The objectives of the war and the strategies deployed

#### 2.1.1 Israel's objectives and strategy

When Israel decided to attack Hezbollah on June 12, 2006 the objectives and the strategy seemed not very clear; decisionmakers did not provide a comprehensive frame of what they wanted or expected to achieve. The official motive was the will to free the two kidnapped soldiers, but it did not seem a sufficient reason to such an



escalation (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Since 2000, Israel and Hezbollah had occasionally attacked each other but maintaining a sort of status quo, so it was not clear why this time was different (Al-Aloosy, 2020). That is to say, it was far from clear if the rhetoric of the liberation of the captured soldiers was real or a justification for the attack (Cordesman, 2007).

One of the first definition of the goals was provided by an Israeli Official during a meeting some days before the end of the war. But it was only afterward, with the work of the Winograd Commission, that the strategy and grand strategy of Israel could be analyzed. This Commission was appointed by the government to study and define which were the main failures and mistakes made.

According to the Official, Israeli objectives for the war were the following<sup>25</sup>:

1. Destroy Hezbollah's military command and arsenal, before Iran could go nuclear.
2. "Restore the credibility of Israeli deterrence" at the eyes of the neighboring Arab countries, that have always perceived the state as powerful and almost invincible. After the unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005<sup>26</sup>, Israel started to be seen as weak and forced to leave. Hence, the supposedly victory against Hezbollah could counter this perception and restore Israel's image (Cordesman, 2007). Moreover, Hezbollah kidnapped three IDF soldiers in 2000 and Israel, while promised a strong retaliation, did

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<sup>25</sup> From Cordesman A. H., 2007, the identity of the official is covert because "the ground rules for all interviews and conversations held in Israel and with the Lebanese and other Arab officials preclude identifying the name, title, date and often organization or service of the individual involved."

<sup>26</sup>Israel's disengagement from Gaza. Israeli forces occupied the Gaza Strip during the Six-Days War in 1967. With the Oslo Accords of 1993, Israel and PLO had agreed to a framework for Palestinian self-governance in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank as part of a peace process. But negotiations came to an impasse with the outbreak of the Second Intifada (2000-2005). However, the cost of occupying the Gaza Strip outweighed the benefits, with rising casualties, and in 2005 Israel completed the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip.

nothing. According to Ehud Olmert, Israeli Prime Minister from 2006, the loss of deterrence was the principal reason that convinced Israel to start the war: “The Second Lebanon War began when Israel lost its deterrent capability; when it failed to act, explicitly contradicting its commitment to do so”<sup>27</sup> (Marcus, 2018).

3. “Force Lebanon to become and act as an accountable state, and end the status of Hezbollah as a state within a state.”
4. “Damage or cripple Hezbollah, with the understanding that it could not be destroyed as a military force and would continue to be a major political actor in Lebanon.”
5. Bring the two soldiers captured by Hezbollah back alive, without releasing the prisoners held by Israel – especially not the thousands demanded by Nasrallah.

However, Cordesman (2007) believed that the IDF started the war convinced that they would carry out a surgical strike against Hezbollah, not expecting instead an extended air campaign or a major ground campaign. These goals were, thereby, probably decided after the beginning of the war.

Moving to the strategy that Israel adopted to reach these objective, again, there was not a defined plan on how to structure the operations, the number and type of weapons and personnel to deploy, or the level of escalation. It seemed that Israel followed the course of the events to establish the next moves, without a predetermined direction (Cordesman, 2007). And this was perfectly clear when Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, Chief of Staff during the war, in an interview in September 2006 admitted that:

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<sup>27</sup>Ehud Olmert, “Second Lebanon War”, in Marcus, 2018

On that evening (July 12), we did not know we were going to war with Hezbollah. Rather, we were talking about an unrestrained response to Hezbollah's provocations. [...] I did not assess, nor did anyone else to the best of my knowledge, that the military campaign would get where it got. [...] It's [the] gap that separates expectations from reality that explains the magnitude of the disappointment.<sup>28</sup>

In general, Israel could decide between two main strategies to implement: a longer, larger-scale campaign to erode Hezbollah's military and organizational power; or a shorter campaign with the goal of inflicting great damages on Hezbollah in order to avoid a retaliation from the group. General Halutz opted for the second one, with the intention of deploying a decisive campaign to demonstrate Israel's power and quickly restore its credibility: Israel “will have to take a few very aggressive actions in order to establish a new pattern of rules of the game”<sup>29</sup> (Marcus, 2018).

The initial air campaign was well executed and resulted to be effective. During the first days of the war, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) was able to destroy the majority of Hezbollah's medium- and long-range rockets. An analysis by Ze'ev Schiff (2006) pointed out that Israel had the possibility to end the war, victorious, on 18<sup>th</sup> July. It had already obtained some results and Hezbollah and the Lebanese government proposed a cease-fire, so Israel would have gained some additional concessions (Cordesman, 2007). Deputy Chief of Staff Kaplinski recommended to Chief of Staff Halutz to stop the operations, since the IAF had already obtained the initial objectives – it had destroyed a large part of Hezbollah's arsenal – before it got worse, considering that “we have exhausted the [aerial] effort; we have reached the peak; from now on we can only descend” (Kober, 2008, p.4). Still, the war continued for 28 more days and the clashes escalated. The ill-prepared leadership, and a poor coordination between the military and political apparatus, led to a wrong strategic calculation and

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<sup>28</sup>Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz in an interview to Yediot Aharonot, Israeli daily newspaper, in Cordesman, 2007

<sup>29</sup>Ehud Olmert, “Second Lebanon War”, in Marcus, 2018

the subsequent decision to decline the ceasefire (Kober, 2008).

The escalation was another proof that the strategy was weak. After an initial escalation of the air campaign, that was no longer bringing the desired results, IDF had to start a ground battle in South Lebanon (Cordesman, 2007). The IAF could not adequately respond to short-range rockets fired by Hezbollah, because – due to the lack of preparation before the war – it did not have intelligence about the exact locations. Israel had, therefore, to change strategy and began a large ground campaign to dismantle Hezbollah's capability (Kober, 2008). The soldiers remained stuck in a land campaign without the right preparation and they had “to fight and refight for the same villages and meaningless military objectives”, giving Hezbollah time to reorganize and prepare (Cordesman, 2007). Almost at the end of the war, Israeli leadership finally agreed to begin a broader ground offensive and to make a deeper push into Lebanon to the Litani River – 20 kilometers north of the Israel-Lebanon border. However, they signaled the move in advance, making every move predictable by the enemy, and they did not block Hezbollah's possibility of retreating in the north. The result was a tentative and failing operation (Cordesman, 2007). In addition, the decision arrived late and when the ceasefire went into effect, the IDF had not completed the mission (Kober, 2008). In parallel, the escalation of the air campaign produced an increasing number of collateral damages without clear and effective military and tactical successes. When the cease-fire was decided, Israel was out of the war defeated and disappointed (Cordesman, 2007).

In conclusion, due to its uncertain and ill-prepared strategy, Israel was not able to achieve the desired objectives.

First, Israel, despite some successes at the tactical level, did not dismantle Hezbollah's military power. In the initial phase of the war, it destroyed medium- and long-range rockets. And even if there are no official data about the number of the remaining rockets at the end of the war, Israeli experts could confidently affirm that the majority of them had been taken down (Jane's Intelligence Review, 2006). However, there is no clear evidence about the impact on Syrian-supplied launchers

and rockets – that came as a surprise for Israeli intelligence – and on other weapons. While the IDF successfully destroyed the major part of the Hezbollah's long-range rockets, the group fired almost 4'000 short-range rockets during the thirty-three days campaign. Moreover, Hezbollah used both stationary and mobile launchers, and auxiliary ones were ready to use, stored in underground bunkers; as a result, the IDF efforts of counterattacks were mainly unsuccessful (Marcus, 2018). In addition, IDF couldn't counter the Party of God's resupply mainly because it did not have intelligence and resources to concentrate both on the war and on the surveillance of the border. Cordesman (2007) in his analysis underlined how detention, interdiction and prevention of movement across the border and inside Lebanon was difficult to control for the IDF during the war. Border control became impossible when Israel authorized humanitarian aid through the border and after the cease-fire. In some months, Hezbollah had completely rearmed its arsenal, thanks to the contribution of its “patron states” Iran and Syria (Cordesman, 2007). They had “more than enough weapons” if Israel tried to attack them again, as Hezbollah stated<sup>30</sup>. Finally, with regard to casualties, there aren't precise estimates, but it can be deducted that the war hadn't a great impact on Hezbollah's numbers – according to Israeli analyst Yakov Admiror, the number of casualties is around 700. The Party did not provide the size of its forces or casualties, but estimates considered that before the war, Hezbollah could count more than 10'000 fighters between the forces and the reserves. Hence, it was possible to assume that the losses were a minority. Moreover, Hezbollah could rely on an increased recruitment due to the conflict (Cordesman, 2007).

This characteristic of the Israel-Lebanon War showed a lesson for the asymmetric warfare. The most effective strategy against non-state actors has often been considered the “clear, hold and build” - clear the area from the enemy, hold it and build a new, more secure environment to prevent the re-emergence. But, as this situation demonstrated, it requires lot of resources and personnel. And despite the effectiveness in theory, it is very difficult to implement it in practice, in active combats

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<sup>30</sup>Spokesperson of Hezbollah in Shannon E., Mcgirk T., “Iran and Syria helping Hizballah Rearm”, 24 November 2006, Time

(Cordesman, 2007).

Second, the effect of the war was not the one hoped of restoring the credibility of the Israeli deterrence. Before the war, the neighboring Arab countries had no doubt about the power of the Israeli military force, recognizing its conventional superiority. With the withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and from Gaza in 2005, Israel lost this position of superiority and the attack on Hezbollah, expected to be a surgical strike, should have been the opportunity to restore it. However, the failures provoked the opposite effect, showing the weaknesses of the political and military leadership. A debate about the Israeli ability to win an asymmetric warfare was inevitable, and its deterrence was affected (Cordesman, 2007). Moreover, when Israel determined this objective, made the error to underestimate the negative perception that the excessive use of force could provoke. The attack, in fact, has attracted hostility in the Arab region. And many volunteers sided with the opponent. Israel, trying to restore its credibility, ended not only to undermine it even further, but also to improve the perceptions about Hezbollah and the cause for which it was fighting (Cordesman, 2007). However, at the same time, the unexpected level of escalation succeeded to produce a deterrent effect in the enemies, namely Hezbollah, Lebanon, Syria and Iran. This was confirmed by the words of Hassan Nasrallah himself after the cease-fire, who claimed that the movement, having seen the level of escalation deployed by Israel, would have avoid risking another clash. Overall, Israel's deterrence has been weakened, with a particular negative impact with regard to asymmetric warfare, use of proxies and non-state actors (Cordesman, 2007).

Third, Lebanon did not become more powerful and accountable to marginalize Hezbollah and end its status of state within a state; indeed, it had to recur to UN's and international intervention. It was the UN and the UNIFIL that successfully ended the war with the imposition of a cease-fire, mediating between the two forces on the ground. This solution, a compromise, was not the end for the war that Israel expected. Moreover, Lebanese army could not overpower Hezbollah's army, which remained in south Lebanon. And finally, also after the war, the Lebanese government could not impose its will on Hezbollah, that maintained its legitimacy and status of powerful

actor and party in the country (Cordesman, 2007). The fallacy in this objective laid in the fact that its realization depended on third players, the Lebanese government and the international forces, whose actions could not be controlled by Israel (Kober, 2008).

Fourth, Hezbollah did not exit the war damaged or crippled, but on the contrary, despite not having obtained any important success, it felt to have won the conflict. As described earlier, the IDF couldn't defeat or destroy the enemy in military term, as well as, in political term, and was not even able to damage it (Cordesman, 2007).

Fifth, lastly, Israel could not take back its two captured soldiers, the original casus belli. This element became a feature of the UN work for the cease-fire, but it was not given a central priority. And this, again, contributed to harm Israel's deterrence credibility (Cordesman, 2007).

#### 2.1.2 Hezbollah's objectives and strategy

Moving to Hezbollah's goals and strategy, the main objective has always been to destroy Israel, as it has been often reminded by Nasrallah during the years. But the attack and the kidnapping of the two prisoners was not meant for this. Indeed, when the Secretary-General praised the “heroic mujahidin” that perpetuated the attack, referred to as the “Operation true promise”, it comprehended only the attack, not the destruction of Israel (Cordesman, 2007). Later, after the war, when asked, Nasrallah confirmed that it was not in the Party's intention to provoke a war, and certainly not in their expectations<sup>31</sup>. Mahmoud Komati, deputy chief of Hezbollah's political council, claimed: “The truth is—let me say this clearly—we didn’t even expect [this] response”, on the contrary, Hezbollah expected the “usual limited response”<sup>32</sup> (Marcus, 2018). Despite, therefore, the escalation was not foreseen, Hezbollah was not unprepared. It had reinforced and trained for years, in order to be ready exactly for this scenario

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<sup>31</sup> “[I]f any of us had a 1 percent doubt that Israel was going to reply in this savage manner, we wouldn’t have captured those soldiers”, Nasrallah claimed in an interview in 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Interview to Mahmoud Komati of 25 July 2006 in Marcus, 2018

(Cordesman, 2007).

When the war started, the leadership recognized that they could not fight for the destruction of Israel; hence, they had to delineate lower-level, more achievable goals. In particular, the two shorter-terms objectives were: (1) to limit Israeli power as much as possible – taking for granted that was impossible to militarily defeat it -, by massively bombarding the territory and provoking high numbers of casualties; (2) to undermine Israeli credibility as an invincible military force by impeding it to reach its objectives and damaging its public image (Cordesman, 2007).

However, as for Israel, also Hezbollah could not achieve these goals. Nevertheless, Hezbollah claimed to have won, to have conquered a “divine, historic and strategic victory” (Al-Aloosy, 2020). According to Nasrallah, in fact, the Party of God was successful because it had achieved its goal of “resistance and survival”. These two terms started to appear in his discourses after the beginning of the war, probably when it was becoming clear that neither the grand objective (i.e. destroying Israel) nor the smaller ones were achievable (Cordesman, 2007).

At the tactical level, Hezbollah's military command was decentralized and organized horizontally, taking the distance from the typical hierarchical structure of the Arab armies. It deployed two types of fighters: the regular fighters - or elite fighters - that received advanced training; and the village fighters, more or less closely affiliated with the group. The fighters were then organized in independent teams that could act in autonomy, without a constant and direct line of communication with the leadership. This division was both a strength and a weakness of Hezbollah's strategy: on one hand, it could permit to adapt and react quickly to the Israeli attacks, on the other hand, every unit tended to fight for its own sake, without supporting the others in case of need. A lack of the resources necessary for the communication among unity made the system even more challenging (Cordesman, 2007).

The role of village fighters was fundamental for Hezbollah. As said earlier, one of the



goals for Hezbollah was to cause a high number of casualties<sup>33</sup>. At the same time, it had to defend against the attack. It was basically a “survival mission”. And this is where the villages in the south of Lebanon came into play: they created a “safe zone”, used by Hezbollah as a safe heaven, to build its facilities, to store weapons in civilians' houses and to direct the activities (Cordesman, 2007). Some of the bunkers were built under residences and mosques to make them nearly impossible to be reached by the enemy (Marcus, 2018). Meanwhile, the village fighters operated with determination and strength to claim victims. They have been essential for the successes obtained by the Party. In general, civilians are a fundamental component in asymmetric warfare. The strategy of bringing the clashes with Israel in the villages was an advantage for Hezbollah also because they limited the tank maneuver, obliging the IDF to use the infantry with armor, artillery and air power. And the IDF was not adequately prepared and trained for this type of ground battle (Cordesman, 2007).

Regarding the forces deployed by Hezbollah, the trump card was the use of small tactical rockets. In fact, the group could not match or even threaten Israeli conventional superiority and the IAF, as said earlier, succeeded in destroying the majority of Hezbollah's medium- and long-range rockets. Hence, it had to rely on a different strategy and it was able to launch a high number of short-range rockets into Israel until the end of the war (Cordesman, 2007). Hezbollah fired around 4'000 rockets<sup>34</sup> into the Israeli territory during the war. The high and consistent rate of rocket fire demonstrated the qualitative and quantitative improvements of its military capabilities made in the previous years (Marcus, 2018).

Overall, Hezbollah was capable to effectively contrast Israel thanks to the combination of guerrilla tactics, such as hit-and-run tactics and knowledge and utilization of the local terrain and population, and more conventional capabilities, like an advanced missile arsenal (Kober, 2008).

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<sup>33</sup> 117 IDF soldiers and 43 civilians were killed, 6'000 homes were affected and 300'000 people displaced, IRCR Report “Israel/Lebanon/Hezbollah Conflict in 2006”, 2007; Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs “The Second Lebanon War (2006)”, 9 November 2007

<sup>34</sup> 3'917 in Human Rights Watch Report, Civilians under assault; 4'200 in Israeli estimates.

Contrarily to the IDF, one of the main strength of Hezbollah was the fact that started the war trained and prepared. It used the period 2000-2006 to implement its preparation and capabilities for a possible conflict. And a huge support arrived from the Iranian resources and tactical training. It studied IDF tactical strategy, how the IDF would fight and with which weapons or personnel. At the wake of the war, it demonstrated to have become a mature guerrilla force, more mature and powerful than most guerrilla forces (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Thus, it managed to stand up to a powerful state like Israel. Alongside, the mistakes committed by the IDF increased the Party of God's possibility of victory. Still, it could not win the war because the strategy and military capacities could not overpower Israel (Cordesman, 2007).

## 2.2 No winners: the failures made by Israel and Hezbollah

The Israel-Hezbollah war ended, on August 14, 2006 with no winners. The cease-fire established by the UNSC Resolution 1701 represented an effort of compromise between the parts.

### *The Security Council*<sup>35</sup>

*Calls for* Israel and Lebanon to support a permanent ceasefire and a longterm solution based on the following principles and elements:

- full respect for the Blue Line by both parties;
- security arrangements to prevent the resumption of hostilities, including the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani river of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of Lebanon and of UNIFIL;
- full implementation of the relevant provisions of the Taif Accords, and of resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1680 (2006), that require the disarmament of all

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<sup>35</sup>S/RES/1701 (2006), 11 August 2006

armed groups in Lebanon, so that, there will be no weapons or authority in Lebanon other than that of the Lebanese State;

- no foreign forces in Lebanon without the consent of its Government.

*Decides*, in order to supplement and enhance the force in numbers, equipment, mandate and scope of operations, to authorize an increase in the force strength of UNIFIL to a maximum of 15,000 troops.

In the Report of 20<sup>th</sup> July 2006, the Security Council recognized that “UNIFIL, with a very limited mandate, has only been able to play a peripheral role in the current crisis and many have rejected it as a model for the proposed new international force”<sup>36</sup>. In accordance, UNIFIL II, with an expanded and more robust mandate, is authorized. The mission was implemented with new military equipment, integrated artillery and intelligence capacity. It demonstrated a significant change in the posture of the UN and the international community in the region (Elron, 2007).

Israel, despite the conventional military superiority, did not planned and implemented a clear and effective strategy, and IDF proved to not be prepared for a conflict against a non-state actor. On the opposite side, Hezbollah, even though it could count on the supply and training by Iran and Syria, could not match the air power of the enemy and was not able as well to obtain its objectives. This paragraph will analyze the mistakes committed by both combatants in the calculation and deployment of the strategy.

### 2.2.1 The failures made by Israel

The main failure made by Israel was to not define a clear war plan and strategy. It did not study the conditions on the ground and the characteristics of the adversary. And it made the first attack without really knowing which direction it would have followed. Finally, it lacked a coordination between the political and military leadership

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<sup>36</sup>UN Security Council Update Report No.5: Lebanon/Israel, 20 July 2006

(Cordesman, 2007). The government, disappointed by the result of the war, after its end, appointed an Inquiry Commission, the Winograd Commission, "to look into the preparation and conduct of the political and the security levels concerning all the dimensions of the Northern Campaign which started on July 12th 2006" (Interim Report, 2007). The Commission produced two reports: in an Interim Report it scrutinized the decision to go to war and covered the first days of the conflict, until the speech of the Prime Minister on July 17th, when he officially presented the campaign and its goals; and a Final Report, that investigated the conduct of the war after the initial decision to start it. The two Reports are, as explicitly specified by the Commission itself, complementary. With the words of the Commission, the Second Lebanon War was a "serious missed opportunity". "Israel initiated a long war, which ended without its clear military victory. A semi-military organization of a few thousand men resisted, for a few weeks, the strongest army in the Middle East, which enjoyed full air superiority and size and technology advantages". And when it decided to start the ground campaign, it was too close to the Security Council Resolution imposing the cease-fire to gain substantial results (Final Report, 2008).

Starting from the decision to attack Hezbollah, according to the Winograd Commission, the main failure was the fact that Israel did not study the characteristics of the adversary and the territory and did not prepare a detailed plan, taking into consideration all the possible scenarios after the fire. "A meticulous examination of these characteristics would have revealed the following: the ability to achieve military gains having significant political-international weight was limited; an Israeli military strike would inevitably lead to missiles fired at the Israeli civilian north; there was not other effective military response to such missile attacks than an extensive and prolonged ground operation to capture the areas from which the missiles were fired - which would have a high cost". These issues were not explicitly considered by the political leaders before taking the decision to strike (Interim Report, 2007).

After the decision to go to war, two possible ways opened up: a fast, strong and

decisive strike on Hezbollah; or a longer and larger ground campaign in South Lebanon for “cleaning” it of Hezbollah's presence. The choice was in the hand of the government, however, the first attack was made without a decision about the direction to follow - failure that affected the whole war. This “equivocation” was protracted during the war, without a clear discussion about it both in the political and military apparatus, resulting in a major weakness in the Israeli strategy (Final Report, 2008). During the first phases of the war, furthermore, many criticisms have been directed toward General Dan Halutz, the Chief of Staff, because it was accused to have exaggerated the capacity and effectiveness of the airpower, leading the IDF to disproportionately rely on it, delaying the ground campaign (Cordesman, 2007). Gen. Halutz claimed that only with the superiority in the air power, Israel would have obtained its objectives. But he did misunderstand the context of Lebanon and the characteristics of Hezbollah - and in general of non-state actors and asymmetric warfare -, and he did not see the necessity of a ground battle (Cordesman, 2007). Some analyses blame only the Israeli leadership and not the IDF, that instead recommended a ground action (Cordesman, 2007). The Winograd Commission confirms these claims partially, because the faults were on different levels.

Serious failing and shortcomings were found in: “• the decision-making processes and staff-work in the political and the military echelons and their interface; • the quality of preparedness, decision-making and performance in the high command, especially in the Army; • the lack of strategic thinking and planning, in both the political and the military echelons; • the defense of the civilian population; • a very long delay in the deployment necessary for an extensive ground offensive.” According to the Commission, these problems were mainly caused by a scarce preparation and strategic capacity, present already before the war (Final Report, 2008). Israeli political and military leaders lacked preparation and experience on non-state actors and asymmetric warfare (Cordesman, 2007).

Lastly, Israeli leadership did not study a “plan B” and an exit strategy. When fighting

in a war, nations should plan in advance alternative outcomes, in case the conflict does not go as expected. One of the failures of Israel was, indeed, to not take into considerations the possible contingencies that could emerge during the conflict (Cordesman, 2007). Moreover, the planning of conflict termination is an important part of the war strategies, since it largely determines the outcome of the wars. And Israel lacked this preparation. Presumably, the leadership was too inexperienced and had only some “hope” for the conclusion of the war, not an actual plan (Cordesman, 2007).

Overall, “Israel went to war too focused on its own values and perceptions”, not those of Hezbollah, the Lebanese government, the neighboring Arab states and in general the outside world. And this has always been an inclination of the Israeli leadership and its IDF, but in this case, dealing with a powerful non-state actor, this was the cause that led Israel to lose the war. If it had explored the whole context, it could have moved sooner to a ground campaign, it could have expected that the Lebanese government would have asked for an international support, it could have shown a different image to the Arab countries and through the media, increasing its deterrence credibility and not the contrary (Cordesman, 2007).

### 2.2.2 The failures made by Hezbollah

Hezbollah, on the contrary, showed to be prepared and trained to respond to an Israeli attack. Still, it did not win the war or even achieve its objectives. The first mistake was not to have expected the escalation. In fact, as said in the previous chapter, Hezbollah maintained periodic small attacks on the Israeli military personnel as a strategy of deterrence, to maintain the situation stable, and as the justification to keep its military status (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Hassan Nasrallah, on different occasions, claimed that the harsh response was not expected, or he would not have carried out the operation. Moreover, the kidnapping was probably intended as a bargaining chip to recover the fighters held by Israel, but this plan did not work out and the adversary

escalated rather than bargained (Cordesman, 2007). Consequently, after the beginning of the war, when it was clear that the goal of exchanging prisoners was not achievable, Nasrallah claimed that the objective was the “survival of the resistance”. After the war he considered to have won because the resistance survived (Cordesman, 2007).

Another weak point was the decentralization of fighters' teams. This strategy had, indeed, both advantages and disadvantages. The division, and the lack of resources to allow fast and effective communication, led every unit to fight its own battle, without coordination and support among each other. The result was a static defense, that could not exploit the mobility that the division in small units could give (Cordesman, 2007).

Despite all this, the major obstacle, that impeded Hezbollah to win the war, was the superiority of Israeli military capabilities. The IDF destroyed nearly all Hezbollah's medium- and long-range rockets. And the short-range ones and the other weapons that Hezbollah was able to use, leaving Israel speechless, were not enough to win (Cordesman, 2007).

In conclusion, both Hezbollah and Israel were not able to achieve their objectives and to win the war. A lesson learned was surely that a limited, optional war is easier to begin than to control and successfully end. Moreover, “the war proved that mutual destruction is the name of the game between Hezbollah and Israel” (Al-Aloosy, 2020, p.121). Consequently, both sides decided to implement a deterrence strategy to avoid another escalation.

### 2.3 Understanding deterrence

To understand the strategic choice to resort to deterrence by both Hezbollah and Israel, it would be useful to briefly describe deterrence theories. Starting from the

definition, deterrence is the practice of discouraging or restraining an unwanted action – e.g. an armed attack - from an opponent.

Modern deterrence theories were formulated in the aftermath of World War I, as a natural response to what has been considered one of the major failures of deterrence in the history of the international system (Maurer, 1995). Scholars, historians, policy analysts understandably tried to determine the causes of the breakdown. Theories then reached maturity in the Cold War, with the introduction of nuclear weapons in the equation. Concepts evolved from Carr (1939) through Morgenthau (1948) to Brodie (1946, 1959), Schelling (1960, 1966), and Waltz (1979).

A first, classical distinction is between deterrence by denial and by punishment. Deterrence by denial seeks to prevent an action “by making it infeasible or unlikely to succeed” (Mazarr, 2018, p. 2). According to Mearsheimer, the objective is to convince the opponent that he will not achieve his goals in the eventual war. On the other side, deterrence by punishment aims to prevent the attack by threatening severe consequences, such as large escalation or economic sanctions, in order to raise the cost of the attack.

Initially, the first wave of modern deterrence theories (Jervis, 1979) considered the balance of power as the necessary feature for deterrence to work, meaning for peace to prevail. However, this soon showed to not be supported by an empirical foundation, as demonstrated by the outbreak of WWI. It was fought under parity conditions, so if “an ‘equality of power [...] among the major powers’ minimizes the likelihood of war”, it should not have started (Waltz, 1993, p.77). Subsequently, theories were adjusted and they began to include the concept of the cost of war. Structural deterrence theory (Mearsheimer, 1990) determined that deterrence is directly proportional to the cost of war: under parity conditions, war becomes less likely to occur with an increased cost of warfare – in terms of casualties and damages for instance.

Theories are then expanded to cover related aspects of the concept of deterrence. In



particular, four main areas have been analyzed.

- Three-actors game (e.g. Werner, 2000): scholars studied the case of what is called extended deterrence, when the parties involved are more than two. A third actor can have a role in deterring an attack on another state, such as an ally.
- Bargaining and deterrence (Fearon, 1995; Slantchev, 2003; Wagner, 2000): this area of analysis includes all the various decisions and actions that states can take rather than only “attack” or “not attack”. Hence, it considers a broader concept of deterrence, that takes into consideration the full range of attacks that a state could launch – from a partial mobilization of troops to a full-on invasion – and the variety of efforts that a state could use to deter, which includes also non-military threats as economic sanctions. “States choose not only *whether* to make a demand, attack, and so forth, but also *how much* to demand, attack, and so forth” (Quackenbush, Zagare, 2016, p.15).
- Credibility: studies recognizes that credibility is a fundamental component of deterrence and of its success. And when information about the state preferences are incomplete, it is more difficult to determine the credibility. In this case, the perception of the opponent enters in the picture. Due to this reason, states have incentives to misrepresent their intentions, increasing the perception that they will attack (Fearon, 1995). “It is the perceptions of the potential aggressor that matter, not the actual prospects for victory or the objectively measured consequences of an attack” (Jervis, 1983, p.4). Sartori (2005) and Press (2004) focused on the evaluation of this credibility. Leaders acquire reputation for honesty or bluffing in proportion to the actual implementation of the threats. However, deterrent threats have to be balanced by compromises and dissuasion, in order to avoid that the opponent confuses deterrence with a will of destruction (Mazarr, 2018).

- Deterring terrorism: another focus in recent years have been the possibility to deter terrorism. In general, studies show that terrorist groups can be deterred, but it depends on the group itself, some prefer to fight in almost any case (Kang and Kugler, 2012).

After the end of the 2006 war, stability prevailed between Hezbollah and Israel, even if the root causes of the conflict had not been resolved. The key to understand this paradox, according to Samaan (2014) is the game of deterrence played by both actors. Especially, an informal deterrence dialogue has been implemented because they understood that a new conflict would be devastating. Hezbollah recognizes its inability to destroy Israel; Israel understands that it can't eliminate the Party of God: therefore, a mutual deterrence became the strategic posture adopted (Al-Aloosy, 2022). Both sides continued to reinforce for a next eventual confrontation, as a way to deter the other party by threatening a massive retaliation. The concept of deterrence has been, indeed, used in official documents, military doctrine and interviews by both Israel and Hezbollah (Samaan, 2014).

It is worth highlighting that while it is not surprising that a state, in particular a powerful one like Israel, can deter an insurgency, it is interesting that a non-state actor is able to deter a state (Al-Aloosy, 2022).

#### 2.4 Deterrence strategy of Hezbollah

In the case of Hezbollah, it is possible to trace elements of deterrence after the Israeli withdrawal in 2000. In fact, in the first years after the formation of the Party, the leading goal was the resistance against Israel and its destruction. The actions and strategies were led by a revolutionary spirit, far from a defensive posture. With the advent of Hassan Nasrallah as Secretary-General, Hezbollah's strategy reached a turning point. The core principle was still present but it was balanced by a new pragmatism. In fact, Nasrallah recognized the military imbalance with the IDF, and started to threat the use of rockets as a way of coercion, that paved the way the

following deterrence strategy. “We have to work instead toward creating a situation in which the enemy is subject to our conditions. We should tell him: ‘If you attack us, we will use our katyushas; if you do not attack us, we will not use our katyushas’” (Samaan, 2014).

It is from 2000, after it finally obtained the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, that Hezbollah adopted a more defensive approach in order to avoid new clashes. As said in the previous chapter, it focused its forces only on the Sheeba Farms to balance the necessity of justifying its army and the will of avoiding an escalation. The rhetoric of deterrence began to appear in Hezbollah's discourses, and after the end of the 2006 war it became the strategy deployed. In fact, while in the public speeches the war was described as “divine victory”<sup>37</sup>, the Party was well-aware that they had suffered massive military losses and they had to rearm and rethink the strategy (Samaan, 2014). In particular, the Party has resorted to what scholars (e.g. Youssef Nasrallah, 2012) call “psychological warfare strategy”, that is a sort of mental bargain with Israel to dissuade it from attacking. Two main features can be included in this approach, the development of the missile arsenal and the speeches of Hassan Nasrallah.

- (1) Resources were invested to develop the missile arsenal and to acquire an air defense system. The logic was to reinforce Hezbollah's ability to attack Israel deep inside its borders, while strengthening the capacity to reduce the impact of Israeli weapons in the case of a new confrontation (Samaan, 2014). Hezbollah focused its efforts to reinforce its missiles capability, because it is the only means effectively capable of deterring Israel (Al-Aloosy, 2022). The support of Iran and Syria was once more fundamental for Hezbollah for the rearmament and reconstruction after the war.
- (2) Nasrallah released speeches and interviews since the beginning of its mandate. Over the years, he has used the public speeches and the interviews to promote the Party's interests and to deliver messages. Reading his discourses, it is possible to see how the perception and posture of the Party changed. Hence, these messages,

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<sup>37</sup>Nasrallah's speech in September 2006, Hizbullah celebrates 'victory' - The Guardian

delivered more or less directly, are a fundamental component of Hezbollah's deterrence against Israel. In particular, Nasrallah has largely undermined the power of the opponent, underlining its weaknesses and defining it as “feebler than a spider's web” (in Samaan, 2014). Moreover, Nasrallah was able to shape the narrative of the war to demonstrate that Hezbollah, in spite of being a non-state actor, could powerfully coerce a strong state like Israel, and to depict the Party as the ultimate defender of the Arab cause in the region.<sup>38</sup>

Hezbollah's leaders studied Israel's military strategy, and used this knowledge in numerous occasions in interviews, documents and books to build an all-round rhetoric of deterrence (Al-Aloosy, 2022). In 2010 it was published a DVD including what is called “The speech of deterrence” (*Khitaab al radaa'*), in which Nasrallah threatened the IDF of retaliation in case of an attack from their side.

You destroy a Dahya building and we will destroy buildings in Tel Aviv. . . .  
If you target Beirut's Rafik Hariri International Airport, we will strike Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion International Airport. If you target our electricity stations, we will target yours. If you target our plants, we will target yours.<sup>39</sup>

The more Israel threatened to apply the Dahiya Concept – the newly developed military strategy -, the more Hassan Nasrallah stressed Hezbollah's ability to retaliate (Al-Aloosy, 2022).

In addition, a strong element that the Secretary-General used to fight the “psychological warfare” is the threat against civilians. At the beginning of the confrontation with Israel, Hezbollah's focus was only on military targets and machinery; over time, the attention has increasingly been dedicated to the human

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<sup>38</sup>Speech of the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, on May 25, 2000, the day of the Liberation of South Lebanon from Israeli occupation – trascribed in [resistancenews.org](http://resistancenews.org)

<sup>39</sup>Hassan Nasrallah, *Khitaab al radaa'*, DVD Video, Beirut (Lebanon), 2010 in Samaan, 2014

side, especially since the population is the vulnerable spot of the Israeli government. The latter has always been, indeed, very careful to avoid military and civilian casualties (Al-Aloosy, 2022). For instance, Hezbollah threatened to target Israel's Dimona nuclear reactor, or an ammonia storage facility near Haifa, both with the potentiality of causing damages to thousands of people (Udasin, 2017).

Alongside, Israel was rearming as well, and it was developing an Intelligence system capable of detecting and destroying Hezbollah's launcher sites. Thereby, the Party had to move the launchers, opening a new scenario for its presence in the country. The repositioning meant that Hezbollah was expanding in the whole territory, beyond South Lebanon. And then, it meant that a new clash between the two opponents would have been a full-fledged air war, larger than a ground campaign in the southern villages (Samaan, 2014).

Another aspect of Hezbollah's deterrent strategy, after the 2006 war, is the experience acquired by fighting in Syria. Hezbollah's fighters, indeed, supported the regime of Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war, from 2011. In 2013 they actively took part to Qusayr battle on the Syrian soil. They gained capabilities and competencies used by conventional armed forces and about offensive strategy (Jones et al., 2024). After years of defensive posture, this knowledge could be used to build an offensive campaign against Israel. In addition, Nasrallah made no secret of the plans<sup>40</sup> studied by the Party for an eventual invasion of Israel. First, they have constructed tunnels along the borders. Otherwise, a second plan envisaged that thousands of fighters entered in the country from several points while simultaneously bombarding different areas, hoping to overwhelm the IDF. The threat to use an offensive strategy against Israel and the revelation of the plans for an invasion contributed to create a psychological effect on the opponent, increasing the effectiveness of the deterrence (Al-Aloosy, 2022).

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<sup>40</sup>“Hezbollah's secret, grandiose plan to invade Israel in the post-tunnel era”, The Times of Israel, 30 June 2019

A second element of this offensive posture used to deter Israel is the offshore battle. Hezbollah, as part of the post-war rearmament, attained many land-sea missiles, among which the Russian-made Yakhont and the Chinese-made C-802 antiship missiles (Shaikh and Williams, 2021). Israel tried to avoid this acquisition by Hezbollah, but without success. Nasrallah threatened to attack Israeli ships – both military and civilian – as a retaliation in case of a coast blockade (Shaikh and Williams, 2021). “(As for) those ships which will go to any port on the Palestinian coast from north to the south, (I say) we are capable of hitting it and are determined to go into this...it they besiege our coasts”<sup>41</sup>.

Finally, Hezbollah attacked Israel also beyond the Lebanese-Israeli border and outside the Israeli territory, on an international scale, adding to the deterrent effect. The Party pursued, or in some case only attempted, some terrorist attacks against Israeli targets over the years, such as in Azerbaijan in 2009, Bulgaria in 2012, Cyprus in 2017 (Al-Aloosy, 2022).

Nevertheless, the deterrent posture of Hezbollah contains a self-sustaining paradox. The Party of God, even though it is a major actor in Lebanon and a powerful force in the region, it is not autonomous since it still relies on the support and contributions of Iran and Syria, and it does not control the country. Consequently, “the more Hezbollah becomes a military power able to deter Israel, the more it depends on external actors and the more it puts the domestic stability in Lebanon at risk” (Samaan, 2014).

## 2.5 Deterrence strategy of Israel

The concept of deterrence has long been present in Israeli military literature. Contrary to the classic approach, it does not require to completely avoid armed attacks, on the

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<sup>41</sup>“Nasrallah threatens to hit ships”, Ynet News, 25 May 2010

contrary these are an integral part of the strategy. Preventive attacks or retaliation are considered an element needed for a successful deterrence on the long-term (Samaan, 2014). Deterrence is a cumulative process, constructed on sporadic clashes to maintain the balance. In Israeli literature it is sometimes referred to as “cumulative deterrence”, that is “the simultaneous use of threats and military force over the course of an extended conflict”, as for the words of Doron Almog<sup>42</sup>, Israeli Major General. This specific deterrent approach works on two levels: on the micro level, to respond – and so to deter - to the single actor; on the macro level, to create the image of a major military power (Samaan, 2014).

Having defined the Israeli concept of deterrence, two considerations are necessary. First, this posture is not completely accepted in the international domain, especially by in the Western military circles. It appears to lack a solid theoretical foundation and to be sometimes overlapping with the concept of coercion. Second, the fact that clashes are considered a part of deterrence means that a new confrontation with Hezbollah could always happen as a means to preserve the balance in the long run (Samaan, 2014).

After the 2006 War, Israeli leadership, disappointed by the conduct of the operations, decided to adopt a deterrent posture against Hezbollah, in order to avoid another, devastating, escalation. Among the failures found by the Winograd Commission, one was the preparation of the IDF. Hence, massive efforts were directed to training and rearmament (Samaan, 2014). A first step was the construction of a new corps, the Depth Corps, to specialize in clandestine operation in the enemy territory (Al-Aloosy, 2022). On September 2007, the newly appointed IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi approved “Tefen 2012”, a plan of 60 billion dollars over five years to upgrade Israeli forces. In particular, ground forces and maneuver warfare were developed, due to the lesson learned from the Second Lebanon War, with the acquisition of Merkava Mk4 tanks, command and control structures, and unmanned systems. Another major element of the investment was the Intelligence, Reconnaissance and Surveillance

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<sup>42</sup>Doron Almog, “Cumulative Deterrence and the War on Terrorism,” *Parameters*, 2004

(ISR). Finally, Israel expanded its missile defense system, enhancing ballistic missile interceptor Iron Dome Arrow III and developing Magic Wand, medium- and short-range missile interceptors (Eshel, 2007).

A major novelty was, then, the Dahiya Concept (sometimes referred to as Doctrine). The traditional use of force, despite being powerful, was unsuccessful for Israel in the war with Hezbollah. In fact, the main strength of the Party of God – and weakness of Israel – was the battle in the villages in the South; the IDF demonstrated that it was not prepared and trained for this type of warfare. Consequently, Israel developed this new strategy: in any future clash with Hezbollah, Israel would use a disproportionate force against any village used to launch attacks (Al-Aloosy, 2022). The core idea is that the villages, and any other civilian infrastructure used, will be considered military bases. Moreover, the Doctrine includes two other provisions: (1) Israel will mainly rely on a strategy of massive firepower, primarily air power, in every pursuable case, rather than battle on the ground; (2) rather than spending efforts and resources to take down individual missile launchers, Israel will attack the entire area from which the rocket had been fired (Reut Institute, 2009). The Doctrine was modeled on the devastating bombardment of the Dahiya neighborhood during the war, an episode used as an example of the outcomes of a potential conflict in the future. In an interview in 2008, IDF Commander Gadi Eisenkot, explaining the meaning of the new doctrine for Israeli deterrence, claimed: “Hezbollah understands very well that firing from villages will lead to their destruction. Before Nasrallah issues an order to fire at Israel, he will have to think 30 times if he wants to destroy his basis of support in the villages. It’s not a theoretical thing with him. The possibility of hurting the population is Nasrallah’s main restraint and the reason for the calm.” And he added that it “is not a recommendation. [It] is a plan and it has been approved”<sup>43</sup>. To recall the theoretical definition of deterrence, the Dahiya Doctrine is an example of “deterrence by punishment”, based on the threat of a large-scale retaliation to maximize the

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<sup>43</sup>“Israel warns Hizbullah war would invite destruction”, 10 March 2008, Ynet.com



deterrent effect (Marcus, 2018).

## 2.6 Potential game changers in the deterrence system

At the time of writing<sup>44</sup>, the strategic stability based on mutual deterrence prevails. However, this delicate balance could be abruptly changed by the alteration of external factors, or internal ones (a clear example is the start of the war of 2006, after six years of efforts to avoid an escalation). Over the years some issues have been potentially dangerous.

A first element that could have a great impact in the relationship between Hezbollah and Israel is the influence of Iran and Syria. Briefly – the next chapter will analyze these relations -, in 2011 a civil war erupted in Syria and Hezbollah took part in the conflict, supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad (Samaan, 2014). The fall of al-Assad regime, that has largely sustained and funded the Party of God, would cause deep negative consequences, both politically and militarily, for Hezbollah. In fact, the latter has received an essential support from Syria over the years, from weapons and training, to political support against the Lebanese government. Moreover, an increased involvement of Hezbollah's fighters in the Syrian war could trigger an Israeli reaction, worried by a potential worsening of regional dynamics and spreading of the conflict (Samaan, 2014). This prospect seemed closer in 2013 when Hezbollah actively fought on the Syrian soil in the Qusair battle and on 30<sup>th</sup> January Israel hit Jamraya, in the Syrian territory. This operation is exactly what could trigger the regionalization of the conflict and the reopening of the Lebanese-Israeli front. However, Israel with this strike tried, on the contrary, to contain the Syrian crisis. It was a way to separate the two issues, with the intent of maintaining the confrontation with Hezbollah disconnected from the other dynamics in the region. The deterrence system, accordingly, resisted (Samaan, 2014).

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<sup>44</sup>June 2024

Another factor that could trigger a change in the balance between Hezbollah and Israel is the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran. This evolution would surely impact all the dynamics in the Middle East, influencing potentially also the single relationships. Moreover, the Iranian nuclear capability could be a powerful new element in the deterrent posture of Hezbollah – and Iran itself – against Israel (Samaan, 2014). However, several experts<sup>45</sup> believe that Iran would not take any risk for its country to support the Party of God. After the Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, a new threat for an expansion of the conflict emerged. On May 9, 2024 Kamal Kharrazi, an adviser of the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, warned Israel that the country could change its nuclear doctrine if threatened. “We have no decision to build a nuclear bomb but should Iran’s existence be threatened, there will be no choice but to change our military doctrine”<sup>46</sup>.

Finally, a factor that has a large influence on the Israel-Hezbollah relationship is the internal Lebanese politics. The latter, indeed, influences the very existence of the Party and of its military apparatus. If finally the Lebanese leadership succeeded to implement the Taif Agreement and the Resolutions that in the years have tried to impose the Hezbollah's disarmament, it would change irreversibly the balance (Samaan, 2014). However, though it seems counterintuitive, the elimination of Hezbollah could be a disadvantage for Israel. In fact, Lebanon has been driven by the influences of its neighbors for all its history, hence the removal of Hezbollah could mean the replacement with Syria or Iran. A scenario even more complicated for Israel. So, while Israel hopes for the fall of Hezbollah in the long-term, in the short-term it would be more advantageous if the Party of God remains in Lebanon and preserves the deterrence balance (Cook, 2023).

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<sup>45</sup>Shashank Joshi, *The Permanent Crisis: Iran’s Nuclear Trajectory*, Routledge, 2012 in Samaan, 2014

<sup>46</sup>“Iran warns it will change nuclear doctrine if “existence threatened”, 9 May 2024, Al Jazeera English

An example of the fact that the balance of deterrence between Hezbollah and Israel could suddenly fall is the attack of Hamas against Israel of October 7, 2023. An external, unpredictable factor could influence and alter all the dynamics in the region. In this case it is even more relevant since Hamas is affiliated with Hezbollah and they sustain the same cause. In fact, Israel nearly launched a preventive strike against Hezbollah, believing that the latter could take part in a multi-sided attack against the country. Israeli leadership notified the USA about the intention and asked for support, that though was not given. US officials wanted to avoid a regionalization of the war (Jones et al., 2024).

After recent developments, analysts have reopened the investigations about the factors that could trigger an escalation (Jones et al., 2024). First, the attack changed the security landscape; Israeli insecurity increased and the attacks had a dramatic psychological impact on Israel. In addition, Hezbollah has violated the provisions of the UNSCR 1701 several times since 2006 by placing its fighters in the zone between the Litani River and the Blue Line (Jones et al., 2024). Consequently, Israeli leadership's risk tolerance has presumably changed. And the fear of an enlargement of the conflict, due to the close relationship of Hamas with Hezbollah and Iran, could trigger a reaction from Israel, which could reopen the Lebanese front. In the weeks after the attack of 7<sup>th</sup> October more than 4'000 incidents between the two parties have been reported. Hassan Nasrallah warned, "You expand, we expand. You escalate, we escalate."<sup>47</sup> An element to consider is the Israeli belief that a war with Hezbollah is inevitable in the future, and Israel would not want to be attacked first. According to Herzi Halevi, Israeli Chief of Staff, the chances of war are currently highly increasing (Jones et al., 2024).

At the moment of writing, deterrence is prevailing. The costs of a potential war are still too high for both sides. Israel, already engaged in a deadly conflict within its borders, does not want to regionalize the conflict. Hezbollah has openly declared that

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<sup>47</sup>"Hezbollah's Nasrallah: Cease Cross-Border Attacks Contingent on Gaza Ceasefire," Shafaq News, February 13, 2024

has no intention to broaden the conflict if the circumstances does not change. However, an all-out war is still very risky, and the United States and Europe are working on coercive diplomacy to avoid this dramatic scenario (Jones et al., 2024).



## CHAPTER 3 – THE INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEZBOLLAH

To complete the analysis of Hezbollah, this last chapter will describe the relationships of the Party of God with other actors. Some states, such as Iran and Syria, have been fundamental for the development of the group, since they provided training and resources for its growth. Then, over time, Hezbollah has become increasingly influential in the region, and its path has crossed with that of other states: among other actions, it took sides in internal conflicts, it trained fighters all over the region. All these interconnections contributed to build Hezbollah as it is today, and to influence the conflict as well against Israel. Finally, Hezbollah has been involved in terrorist attacks and illicit activities on American and European territory. For these reasons, among others, the group has been designated as a terrorist organization from both the United States (in 1997) and the European Union (in 2013).

### 3.1 Iran: Hezbollah's "patron state"

Since its formation, Hezbollah has been closely tied with Iran. The latter, in fact, contributed to the Party's construction and development. Iranian sponsorship influenced, both directly and indirectly, Hezbollah's leaders decision-making (DeVore, 2012). Hezbollah, as said in the previous chapter, has become one of the most mature and powerful insurgency. It gained a significant geopolitical weight as one of the most violent non-state actors. According to Daniel Byman, it is "the single most effective adversary Israel has ever faced". And a key factor for this success is the support of Iran (DeVore, 2012, p.90). This sponsorship has been, overall, a huge advantage for Hezbollah. However, the control of Iran had also some costs: the group has been limited by the decisions and indications of Iran, and sometimes it had to do some operations that considered disadvantageous, for instance the hostage crisis of 1982-91 (DeVore, 2012). In fact, during the years, Hezbollah worked to acquire more independence (Levitt, 2021).

Before describing the characteristics of the Iranian support to Hezbollah, it would be useful to understand the main reasons that led the state to sponsor a non-state actor. There were three distinct, but interconnected, issues (DeVore, 2012). First, Iran supported anti-Israeli militias, such as Hezbollah - but also Palestine Islamic Jihad and Hamas – to strengthen its position within the larger Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and consequently to acquire popularity in the Arab world. Otherwise, it would have been difficult to obtain a powerful role in the Arab region being a religiously Shiite and ethnically Persian state (Takeyh, 2006). Second, Iran declared itself as the leader of the Shia community and promoter of its grievances, after the discrimination imposed in various part of the region by the Sunni governments (DeVore, 2012). Third, recognizing its conventional military weakness, Iran sponsored non-state actors to use them to attack or deter the adversaries (Ward, 2005).

### 3.1.1 Hezbollah's emergence

In 1982, one of the three main reasons that led to the building of Hezbollah was the Iranian Revolution of 1979. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon of 1982, Iran deployed around a thousand (initially 5'000, then reduced) Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) in the country, to recruit and train Lebanese Shias with the goal of exporting the Islamic Revolution in the Arab region. IRGC installed in the Beeka Valley<sup>48</sup> and started to “provide political and religious indoctrination and military training”<sup>49</sup>. The IRGC were sustained by the Iranian Embassies in Beirut and Damascus<sup>50</sup>. Iran provided the nascent Party of God with sanctuary, financial aid and political support (DeVore, 2012). The presence and support of Iran was, thus, a key factor for the emergence of Hezbollah (Levitt, 2021).

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<sup>48</sup>Lebanese territory occupied by Syria; Iran convinced Syria to let it use the area as safe haven in exchange for an annual subsidy of 9 million barrels of Iranian oil (DeVore, 2012).

<sup>49</sup>CIA Report “Iranian Terrorist Activities in 1984”

<sup>50</sup>CIA Report “Iranian Terrorist Activities in 1984”

In 1985, Hezbollah released its first Manifesto, which confirmed the attachment to Iran. “We are the sons of the *umma* (Muslim community) - the party of God (Hizb Allah) the vanguard of which was made victorious by God in Iran” (Open Letter, 1985). The group recognized the leadership of Iran, and became bearer and promoter of the Iranian Revolution in Lebanon. “We obey the orders of one leader, wise and just, that of our tutor and *faqih* (jurist) who fulfills all the necessary conditions: Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini” (Open Letter, 1985). The Lebanese Shias are historically bound to Iran: clerics in Lebanon have been educated and trained in Iran and married into Iranian clerical families, to then expand the Iranian theological ideology in Lebanon (Levitt, 2021).

From that moment, Hezbollah has been an Iran's proxy: it has acted in the interests of Iran, which – according to Israel's intelligence estimates<sup>51</sup> - has provided more than 700 million dollars per year. During the first years, Iranian officials also took part of the Hezbollah's Shura Council and Military Committee (Levitt, 2021). However, while following and promoting Iranian doctrine, Hezbollah's leadership soon declared the intention to be independent and to follow its own path. Moreover, Hezbollah today does no longer depend totally on Iran for its existence, over time it has built a strong network and a solid base (Khan and Zhaoying, 2021).

### 3.1.2 Indirect effects of the Iranian support

The support of Iran had both a direct and an indirect effect on Hezbollah's decision-making. Starting from the indirect impact, the financial aid provided by Iran has been crucial for the development of a long-term strategy, which was the key for the success of the group. Hezbollah started as a combination of different Shia groups and individuals brought together by a shared ideology. It is difficult to determine what exactly would have happened without the Iranian support, but presumably the

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<sup>51</sup>Israeli estimates reported by Lieutenant-General Gadi Eizenkot in 2018



resistance would have been less structured and controlled, and it would not have lasted long (DeVore, 2012). The first evidence of the indirect influence that Iranian support had on Hezbollah was the construction of a politico-military command structure. From being a disorganized militia at the local level, the leaders of the different groups gathered in the Beeka Valley, which became a safe haven where the decision-making and the strategy could be organized (DeVore, 2012).

While the initial financial support was crucial for the emergence of the Party, the long-term commitment of Iran was even more important to enlarge the strategic options available to Hezbollah (DeVore, 2012). The leaders of the group had in fact the possibility to opt for a long-term strategy, better suited to achieve their goals – first, the destruction of Israel. Given the military superiority of the adversary, a short-term success would have been unfeasible for Hezbollah. They decided to pursue their objective by inflicting great numbers of casualties on Israel, on a longer period of time (DeVore, 2012). Moreover, the resources provided by Iran were used by Hezbollah to build and develop its military apparatus: they acquired new and modern capabilities over time, and they continually trained the fighters. The Beeka Valley has been used not only for preparing the strategy but also as a training camp (Levitt, 2021). Finally, the members are full-time employed and salaried; in this way they remain loyal and they can work on their expertise<sup>52</sup>. In short, the leadership demonstrated to be far-sighted exploiting the Iranian sponsorship to build a strong and capable militia, ready to confront Israel, rather than pursue an immediate result.

Thanks to the Iranian financial aid, then, Hezbollah was able to increase its popularity within the Lebanese society. In fact, it provided social services and welfare benefits, that had two consequences: first, to gain the trust of the population; second, to mitigate the losses and damages caused by the conflict against Israel (DeVore, 2012). Since 1982, Hezbollah has provided social services to the population, in particular

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<sup>52</sup>Interview with (ret.) Brigadier Elias Hanna, Lebanese Army, April 5, 2011 (in DeVore, 2012)

through the “Imam Khomeini Relief Committee” (IKRC), affiliated and sponsored by Iran. On 2010, the U.S. Department of the Treasury about the IKRC wrote: “The IKRC has helped fund and operate Hizballah youth training camps, which have been used to recruit future Hizballah members and operatives. Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah has acknowledged the IKRC branch in Lebanon as one of Hizballah's openly functioning institutions linked to and funded by Iran, which has provided millions of dollars over the years”<sup>53</sup>.

In retrospect, the decision of Hezbollah's leadership to favor a long-term strategy proved to be effective (DeVore, 2012). The Party has stood for more than forty years, it obtained the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon, it was able to resist to the Israeli attack in 2006 proven to be well prepared, and it is keeping a successful deterrent posture since then.

Iran has also given a crucial support to Hezbollah in its conflict against Israel. In fact, in the war of 2006, the Party was prepared and armed thanks to the IRGC, which provided resources and tactical training (Al-Aloosy, 2020). After the war, again, the aid of Iran was fundamental for the reconstruction and rearmament. Finally, the deterrent posture adopted by the group, as said in the previous chapter, was in large part based on the possession of a large missile arsenal, mostly funded by Teheran. In addition, the backing of an aggressive state like Iran represents a deterrent element for an eventual Israeli attack (Al-Aloosy, 2022).

### 3.1.3 Direct effects of the Iranian support

Alongside the indirect impact that the Iranian sponsorship had on Hezbollah, it had also a direct effect on the decisions taken by the group. As said earlier, Iran had some

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<sup>53</sup>U.S. Department of the Treasury, Fact Sheet: U.S. Treasury Department Targets Iran's Support for Terrorism Treasury Announces New Sanctions Against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force Leadership, 08 March 2010

strategic motives to sponsor the Party of God, hence sometimes it used the proxy to obtain its own objectives – or to avoid disadvantageous situations (DeVore, 2012). Hezbollah has always been almost exclusively focused on the conflict against Israel and on the internal Lebanese politics. Iran, on the contrary, had some adversaries, especially in the 80s: for instance, the United States, for the arms embargo imposed and the freezing of Iranian assets; and France, that offered asylum to opponents of the Khomeini regime, and supplied weapons to Iraq during the war (1980-1988) (DeVore, 2012). After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, therefore, France stopped the provision of enriched uranium to Iran and refused to repay Iran for the \$1 billion investment that the Iran's Shah had granted Eurodif<sup>54</sup> (DeVore, 2012).

Hezbollah engaged in terrorist attacks at the behest of Iran since its emergence. In 1983, suicide attacks in Beirut against the American and French contingents of the Multinational Force in Lebanon (MNF) killed 241 U.S. service personnel, 58 French soldiers, and 6 civilians<sup>55</sup>. The attack was ordered by the Iranian Ambassador in Damascus; this suggests that Syria could be part of this operation, interested in reducing MNF's role in Lebanon. The attack, indeed, pushed the withdrawal of the western force, paving the way for Syria to fill the vacuum (DeVore, 2012). Another example is the Lebanese hostage crisis of 1982 to 1991. Hezbollah kidnapped in some years more than a hundred American and European citizens in Lebanon. In exchange for their returns, Iran obtained from the US the smuggling of American weapons (Blanford, 2011); France expelled the Mujahedin-e Khalq's leaders and resolved the dispute over the Eurodif company (Avon, 2010). Hezbollah believed that the

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<sup>54</sup>“European *Gaseous Diffusion Uranium Enrichment Consortium*”, was a French company, which operated a uranium enrichment plant. The joint stock company was formed in 1973 by France, Belgium, Italy, Spain and Sweden. In 1975, Sweden sold its 10 per cent share to Iran, that established an agreement with France. The Iranian Shah Pahlavi lent 1 billion dollars for the construction of the factory, in order to have the right to buy 10% of the production. After 1979, Iran decided to withdraw from Eurodif, and France refused to repay the loan to Iran, because its abrupt withdrawal could cost the other partners billions of dollars (“Iran Freeze is upheld in France”, 22 Dec 1979, The New York Times)

<sup>55</sup>US Department of Justice, *Terrorist Group Profiles*, 1988

kidnappings would be negative for the Party, and more than once denied its involvement. Hence, this operation demonstrated how influential was Iran over Hezbollah (DeVore, 2012).

Iran also intervened in Hezbollah's involvement in Lebanese politics. At the end of the Civil War, Hezbollah's leadership did not accept the Taif Agreement, judged as a suppression of the Muslims in Lebanon (Al-Aloosy, 2020). This opposition was a problem for Teheran because the Accord provided for a cooperation among Syria, the Arab League and the United States, that would be in the interests of Iranian foreign policy. Therefore, both Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Iranian President Rafsanjani pushed Hezbollah to accept the Agreement and the Party Secretary General was replaced, with the election of Abbas al-Musawi. Iran was then one of the main reason that pressured Hezbollah to enter in the Lebanese political system – once strongly condemned – and to participate in national elections in 1992 (Blanford, 2011).

Lastly, Iran demanded Hezbollah to train Shia militias all over the region. In general, over time Iran assigned increased regional responsibilities and missions, and Hezbollah gradually widened its role at the regional level. One of the main task that Iran has assigned to Hezbollah was the training and control of Shia fighters in Iraq to contrast the Coalition Forces in the country. The case of Iraq is very important, since Iran had a great influence on Iraq post-2003, and used Hezbollah to implement its objectives in the country (Levitt, 2021). In 2003, US forces invaded Iraq allegedly to destroy Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and end the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein<sup>56</sup>. A war began and on December Hussein has been captured. In December 2005, the elections saw the victory of the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance, which chose Nouri al-Maliki – closely tied to Iran - as Prime Minister. However, the war went on with harsh clashes and since 2005 Iran, through Hezbollah, trained Iraqi Shia fighters

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<sup>56</sup>Council on Foreign Relations, Timeline of the Iraq War, 2003-2011

to contrast the western forces in the country (Levitt, 2021). According to the US Department of the Treasury, Nasrallah established a covert unit to train and advise Iraqi militants and deployed top commanders to accomplish the tasks assigned by Iran. Ali Mussa Daqduq al-Musawi has been designated by the United States for the attacks against the Coalition Forces; evidence revealed that, besides the training of local fighters, he was personally involved in violent operations<sup>57</sup> (Levitt, 2021).

#### 3.1.4 Other Hezbollah's operations as an Iranian proxy

Another role that Hezbollah covers as an Iranian proxy is the smuggling of weapons: it procures armaments for itself and the other Iran-sponsored groups (Levitt, 2021). To this end, it has constructed a large network of illicit activities such as drug trafficking and money laundering. Some of these operations have been exposed in 2015 in an investigation of the US Drug Enforcement Administration<sup>58</sup>. In 2013, two Hezbollah operatives and eight Yemenis have been arrested in Yemen for the shipping of Iranian weapons in the country. Hezbollah members have been accused of providing military training and capabilities to the Yemen's Houthi militia<sup>59</sup>. In 2020, similarly, Bahraini authorities interdicted two Hezbollah attempts to smuggle explosives from Iran into the country (Levitt, 2021).

Hezbollah is also commissioned with intelligence collection and cyber operations across the region. Tasks comprehend cyber espionage and sophisticated malware operations. It helps other Shi'a militant groups with media and propaganda outlets, including television, radio, and online communications. And finally, it runs disinformation boot camps in Lebanon to build "electronic armies" of Iran's proxy groups around the region (Levitt, 2021).

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<sup>57</sup>US Department of the Treasury, Treasury Designates Hizballah Commander Responsible for American Deaths in Iraq, 19 November 2012

<sup>58</sup>"DEA and European Authorities Uncover Massive Hizballah Drug and Money Laundering Scheme" U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration Press Release, February 1, 2016

<sup>59</sup>Bayoumy Y., Ghobari M., "Iranian support seen crucial for Yemen's Houthis", 15 Dec 2014, Reuters

Over time, however, Iran has been target of sanctions and budget cuts, like drops in the price of oil, that reduced its ability to sustain its expenses and that of its proxies. Consequently, Hezbollah had to expand its regional activities to compensate for this lack (Levitt, 2021). One of these illicit financial activities is the increased trade of the amphetamine Captagon. The Party smuggled it all over the region, creating a huge deficit of security and public health; but also in Europe: in 2020 a shipping trailer with 84 million tablets has been recovered at the Italian port of Salerno<sup>60</sup>. Another source of funding is the illicit shipping of oil, in which Hezbollah is engaged both as operator and recipient. Iran is directing this “oil-for-terror” to fund its proxies, but at the same time, Hezbollah has an active role in these transnational operations (US Department of Treasury, 2019).

In conclusion, Hezbollah has been, and still is, deeply tied with Iran, that supported and trained the Party from its emergence. Iranian financial support has helped Hezbollah to become a structured and strong organization, and to develop a long-term strategy to reach its objectives. However, over the years, Hezbollah has built a strong base by itself, that would allow it to be autonomous and independent from Iran in case of necessity. Today, Hezbollah acts more as a partner rather than a proxy of Iran, since it has acquired more and more responsibilities over the years (Levitt, 2021).

### 3.2 The fluctuating relationship between Hezbollah and Syria

Syria was active in Lebanon before the emergence of Hezbollah; thus, it had a deep influence on the Party since its formation. However, they had – and still have - a conflicting relationship. On one hand the support of Syria has been fundamental for the evolution of Hezbollah, it has provided political and military aid, on the other hand,

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<sup>60</sup>Warrick J., Mekhennet S., “Hezbollah operatives seen behind spike in drug trafficking, analysts say”, 4 August 2020, The Washington Post

a long-standing Syrian goal is the control over Lebanon and a wider role in the region, and it considers Hezbollah a perfect instrument.

The history of Syria and Lebanon intertwines since 1943, when the Lebanese National Pact explicitly stated that the country would not unify with other Arab states, in particular Syria (Krayem, 1997). The latter has been specifically called into question because it was bordering with Lebanon and had a close relationship with France: the objective was to balance the interests of the Christians to ally with the West, and of the Muslims to ally with other Arab countries. Again, in 1989 after the end of the Lebanese Civil War, the Taif Agreement confirmed the separation from Syria (Krayem, 1997).

Syria intervened in Lebanon for the first time in 1976, one year after the beginning of the civil war, on request of the then Lebanese President to aid the Maronites against the leftists and the Palestinians (Al-Aloosy, 2020). However, over the years, the Syrian presence became increasingly burdensome and economically costly and the only Lebanese party that kept good relations with Damascus was Amal. Al-Sadr, Amal's leader, recognized the advantages of this situation since they had the same objective of contrasting the PLO (Norton, 2014). Meanwhile, Syria built a new alliance with Iran, favored by the existence of two common enemies, Saddam Hussein and Israel (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Hafez al-Assad, Syrian President from 1971 to 2000, allowed the IRGC to stabilize in Lebanon for the creation of Hezbollah.

The first period after the emergence of Hezbollah, al-Assad was skeptic of the group<sup>61</sup>, because in 1982 the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood rebelled against the regime after years of contrasts. The Syrian President became then distrustful of Islamist groups, either Shia or Sunni. Hence, al-Assad accepted and helped the formation of Hezbollah for using it as a tool to achieve its goals.<sup>62</sup> However, the

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<sup>61</sup>Interview with Timur Goksel, former senior adviser and spokesman of the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon, in Al-Aloosy, 2020

<sup>62</sup>Interview with Loqman Salim, Lebanese publisher, political activist and critic, in Al-Aloosy, 2020

relations between Syria and Hezbollah faced up-and-down periods. For instance, while Syria was willing to accept Hezbollah to pursue its aims, Hezbollah was deeply focused on the revolutionary ideas exported from Iran and refused to take orders from Syria. It was Iran that - after the so called Fathullah incident in which twenty-three Hezbollah fighters were killed by the Syrian Forces - mediated between the two sides to avoid clashes (Al-Aloosy, 2020). The incident, among others, showed how Syria wanted to avoid that any political party acquired a large power in the country, because it would have been against its interests. This meant that it aided Hezbollah meanwhile limiting its expansion or independence<sup>63</sup> (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

### 3.2.1 Israel shaped Hezbollah-Syria relationship

A central element in the relationship between Hezbollah and Syria is Israel. During the 80s and 90s several Arab states engaged in efforts for a peace process with Israel: in 1978, Israeli Prime Begin and Egyptian President Sadat, with the mediation of US President Carter, signed the so called Camp David Accords; in 1993 Israel (Rabin) and the PLO (Arafat) signed the Oslo Accords; in 1994 Jordanian Prime Minister Majali and Israeli Prime Minister Rabin signed a Peace Treaty. Syria started to fear an Israeli-Lebanese peace accord, because it would mean for Damascus to remain alone in dealing with Israel. Consequently, it has hindered the success of the negotiations (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Moreover, al-Assad saw its geopolitical position to even further deteriorate when the Soviet Union, a great power ally for Syria, began to collapse. Without the Soviet support, it became almost impossible to face Israel alone. The only viable solution was the cooperation with Hezbollah, “there is no path in front of us to face Israeli expansion except the Islamic resistance in Lebanon”, claimed the Syrian President in a meeting with his party (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Syria could use the Party of God to pressure Israel into the negotiations table, but in order to do so it had to keep Hezbollah under control. Once again, Syria supported and cooperated with Hezbollah,

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<sup>63</sup>CIA Report “December 1987 Terrorism Review” describes tense Hezbollah-Syria Relationship, 21 December 1987



but prevented that it converts the military success in political achievements and limited the weapons available to the group (Blanford, 2012). Finally, 30'000 Syrian troops were deployed in Lebanon.<sup>64</sup> Initially, Hezbollah opposed the Syrian rules, but soon it understood that the military force of al-Assad regime was too powerful to be challenged. Moreover, it could benefit from the Syrian support, both from the direct military and political support by al-Assad, and as a passage for weapons from Iran (Al-Aloosy, 2020). As a result, Hezbollah's successes against Israel increased.<sup>65</sup>

A first attempt for Syria to start a peace process with Israel was in Madrid in 1991, during the peace Conference hosted by Spain, with the sponsorship of United States and Soviet Union. However, Syria decided not to participate to the multilateral negotiations following the conference. After the Oslo Accords of 1993, another round of negotiations between Israel and Syria showed signs of an imminent agreement between the two states. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin stated willingness to discuss a plan for the withdrawal from the Golan Heights, lost by Syria in the 1967 war, in return for a peace agreement<sup>66</sup>. But the assassination of Rabin in 1995 and the following return of Likud Party in Israel, led to the failure of this second attempt of negotiations (Al-Aloosy, 2020).

### 3.2.2 Syria's impact on internal Lebanese politics

During the same period, besides the military presence in the country, Syria influenced the conduct of elections. It manipulated candidate lists and the distribution of electoral districts to secure the victory of its allies. In 2000, after the Israeli withdrawal, due to the success achieved, Hezbollah could obtain more seats in the parliament,

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<sup>64</sup>EUAA Report "Country Guidance: Syria", The Syrian intervention in the Lebanese civil war and presence in Lebanon, April 2024

<sup>65</sup>Interview with Elias Farhat, retired General of the Lebanese Army in Al-Aloosy, 2020

<sup>66</sup>Haberman C., "Rabin Outlines Phased Pullout In Golan Area", 9 September 1994, The New York Times

but Syria imposed an upper limit (*saqf al-suri*, “Syrian ceiling”) on the number of Hezbollah candidates that could participate to the elections (Norton, 2007). It was another effort for Syria to maintain a balance among the parties and actors in Lebanon, to avoid the supremacy of one party, especially Hezbollah, that would have meant the loss of the possibility of control over Lebanon (Norton, 2007). Furthermore, the Lebanese parliament, at the request of Syria, extended the presidential term of Elias Hrawi in 1995 and Emile Lahoud in 2004. This second “exception” to the constitution was one of the element that led the United Nations Security Council to pass the Resolution 1559, which declared “its support for a free and fair electoral process in Lebanon’s upcoming presidential election conducted according to Lebanese constitutional rules devised without foreign interference or influence”<sup>67</sup>. Moreover, it called for “the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias” and for “all remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon”<sup>68</sup>. Hezbollah protested against the Resolution, mainly because of the request of disarmament, but also in support of Syria. Nasrallah stressed that Hezbollah was committed “to standing by Syria and to defending Syria just like Syria has defended us”, and thousands of Hezbollah supporters marched in Beirut, carrying pictures of Syrian President Al-Assad and Lebanese President Lahoud.<sup>69</sup> The main opponent of the Lahoud's term extension was Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, hence, when the extension was approved, he resigned from office. Few months later, on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2005, he was assassinated in a bomb attack. Syria was held responsible<sup>70</sup>, large anti-Syrian demonstrations broke out in Beirut; as a result, Syria had to withdraw from Lebanon and the troops left the country after almost thirty years (Norton, 2007).

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<sup>67</sup>UN Security Council Resolution 1559 (2004) adopted by the Security Council on 2 September 2004

<sup>68</sup>*Ibidem*

<sup>69</sup>UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon Judgment, 2020 (p.169)

<sup>70</sup>In 2011 the Special Tribunal (STL) for Lebanon indicted five men, all Hezbollah's members, for the assassination. In 2020 the SLT convicted Salim Jamil Ayyash and other three were acquitted (one died in 2016). However, tribunal judges said that there was no evidence implicating the Hezbollah's leadership or the Syrian Government (UN News, 18 August 2020).

After Syria's withdrawal, Hezbollah had to further engage in Lebanese domestic policy in order to survive without the support of the external ally (Berti, 2011).

### 3.2.3 The arrival of Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian civil war

The relationship between Hezbollah and Syria improved when in 2000 Bashar al-Assad took the place of his father as Syrian President, with an increased cooperation between the two leaders (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Al-Assad continued to support Hezbollah, and his aid was fundamental for Hezbollah during the 2006 War against Israel. As explained in the previous chapter, the Syrian and Iranian military support and training made Hezbollah well-prepared to face the enemy. Syrian-supplied launchers and rockets came as a surprise for the Israeli intelligence. And, lastly, Syria and Iran highly contributed to the rearmament after the war and the development of its arsenal, crucial element in the deterrent posture adopted by the Party of God (Cordesman, 2007).

This proximity between Nasrallah and al-Assad was clearer than ever when protests against the regime broke out in Syria in 2010 and Hezbollah immediately stood by al-Assad. Bashar al-Assad, as newly elected Syrian President, promised reforms in favor of the Syrian society, to overturn old patronage mechanism and to revive the market (Laub, 2023). However, the policies adopted benefited only small, well-connected parts of the society, while rural peasant and urban laborers were adversely affected (Laub, 2023). People, inspired by the Arab Spring, began to protest against the regime, and soon the demonstrations spread to the major cities (Laub, 2023). Hassan Nasrallah, moved by the alliance with al-Assad but also by his own interests, showed support for the regime, highlighting in his speeches the virtues of the Syrian leadership. He praised al-Assad effort to promote reforms and fight corruption, “And we believe, and I personally believe so—not based on analysis—but based on discussions that Bashar al-Assad is ready for reform.”<sup>71</sup> At the same time, in his

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<sup>71</sup>Hassan Nasrallah speech on May 25, 2011

speeches, Nasrallah reiterated that Syria is “a backbone of Hezbollah not only on the political, popular, social, but even on the military level”<sup>72</sup>. However, while supporting the regime, Nasrallah advised it to avoid the military repression of the protests and pursue a political solution, otherwise, he believed, a long, harsh conflict would start. He pushed for a political solution because it would be beneficial both for the regime and for Hezbollah, threatened by the possible fall of the regime and consequently the loss of its politico-military support (Al-Aloosy, 2020). In any case, Hezbollah continued to military support the regime if the peaceful negotiations had not happened. The USA reported that “Hizballah has provided training, advice and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria’s increasingly ruthless efforts to fight against the opposition. Hasan Nasrallah [...] has overseen Hizballah’s efforts to help the Syrian regime’s violent crackdown on the Syrian civilian population. Hizballah has facilitated the training of Syrian forces by Iran’s terrorist arm, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Qods Force (IRGC-QF). Hizballah also has played a substantial role in efforts to expel Syrian opposition forces from areas within Syria”<sup>73</sup>. Hezbollah's support has been fundamental for the military success of the regime.

The situation increasingly escalated: the protests turned violent, the Syrian army responded with force, and what started as a peaceful protest became a full-scale civil war between the Syrian regime and the anti-government rebel groups.<sup>74</sup> The deepening of the war and the subsequent damages that both sides were facing led them to demand for external support. Al-Assad, alongside Russian and Iranian aid, had a large assistance from Hezbollah (Laub, 2023). As the situation escalated, Hezbollah increased its role in Syria, from a supportive, indirect role, to an active engagement in the combat operations (Sullivan, 2014). This shift was in both Assad

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<sup>72</sup>Hassan Nasrallah speech on May 25, 2011

<sup>73</sup>US Department of the Treasury, “Treasury Targets Hizballah for Supporting the Assad Regime”, 8 October 2012

<sup>74</sup>Global Conflict Tracker “Conflict in Syria”, Center for Preventive Action, Council of Foreign Relations, Updated February 2024

and Nasrallah's interests. Nasrallah, in fact, was well aware of the consequences that the war in Syria or the fall of the regime could have on its Party: and if on one hand, he claimed “we fear for Syria, we fear from civil war, we fear from chaos, we fear for Syria because of what it represent”<sup>75</sup>, on the other, he was worried for the spillover effect on Lebanon, and on Hezbollah itself (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Both Iran and Hezbollah deployed their top commanders to support al-Assad regime. Hezbollah sent Mustafa Badr al-Din, head of the security apparatus, as a top commander in the activities in Syria. “Badr Al Din is assessed to be responsible for Hizballah's military operations in Syria since 2011, including the movement of Hizballah fighters from Lebanon to Syria, in support of the Syrian regime. Since 2012, Badr Al Din coordinated Hizballah military activities in Syria [and] led Hizballah ground offensives in the Syrian town of al-Qusayr in February 2013.”<sup>76</sup>

Alongside an increased external support, Syrian military force rearranged its strategy: one of the main novelties was the creation of the National Defense Force (NDF), a national paramilitary force, comprising the majority of militia groups in the country. Hezbollah was appointed for the development and training of the NDF: the skills taught comprehended basic combat skills, urban warfare and guerrilla tactics, as well as specialized tactics such as infiltration, surveillance, and intelligence collection (Sullivan, 2014).

The major shift in Hezbollah's involvement in Syria happened in 2013: it launched and commanded an operation in al-Qusayr. Some signals anticipated the operation: first, Nasrallah increased the number of the trips to Teheran, where he had meeting with Soleimani<sup>77</sup>, Khamenei, and other senior Iranian officials to discuss the situation in

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<sup>75</sup>Hassan Nasrallah, speech on March 15, 2012

<sup>76</sup>US Department of the Treasury designates Mustafa Badr al-Din for his involvement in the Syrian civil war, “Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Leaders, Military Officials, And An Associate In Lebanon”, 21 July 2015

<sup>77</sup>Quassem Soleimani, the IRGC-QF commander deployed in Syria. Since 2012 he made regular visits to Damascus to personally oversee the operations.

Syria; second, on April 30, 2013 Nasrallah openly confirmed for the first time the Party's active involvement in Syria - "Hezbollah is giving a hand in Syria," he stated (Sullivan, 2014).

In April 2013 Hezbollah launched its first operation in the Syrian civil war in al-Qusayr, a Sunni town close to the Lebanese border, controlled by the rebels for a year. Hezbollah, as for the other choices that led its participation in Syria, was moved by its own interests. The presence of anti-regime forces in the city was a problem for Assad, but also for the Lebanese Shia villages across the border (Sullivan, 2014). The border of the town has never officially been settled, and there were Lebanese Shias on both sides. Hence, Hezbollah had ulterior motives rather than only aid the regime (O'Bagy, 2013). The strategy deployed by Hezbollah was to isolate the city, in order to inflict damages on the rebels while preventing reinforcement, resupply or withdrawal. Once the city was cordoned off, Syrian airforces would bombard, and finally Hezbollah would conduct a ground operation to clear the area from the anti-regime occupation (Sullivan, 2014). In mid-April 2013, therefore, Hezbollah's fighters attacked small villages to southwest of the town, while the regime forces those to the north; in one month they have mostly besieged the town (Sullivan, 2014).

The tactics of decentralized operations, that was successful in 2006 against Israel, was useful also in this operation. The Hezbollah force was divided in units of 100 fighters, and then into smaller squads of three to five men. As part of the preparation for the attack, Hezbollah reconnoitered the area, divided it into 16 military zones and defined the objectives. Every part of the strategy, then, - locations, objectives – was assigned with a specific code name, unidentifiable by the enemies, allowing the unites to communicate over unencrypted radios without risk (Sullivan, 2014).

The major ground operation started on May 19, 2013. Hezbollah fighters, backed by the Syrian forces and NDF, entered the town from all directions (O'Bagy, 2013). Initially,

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the rebel forces were able to resist and inflict heavy losses on Hezbollah troops. They could smuggle weapons and resources from Lebanon (O'Bagy, 2013). Despite the strength of the resistance, in some weeks Hezbollah cleared the city block to block. Hezbollah's urban warfare tactics, trained since the end of the 2006 war, proved effective (Sullivan, 2014). At the beginning of June, Hezbollah and Syrian troops launched the final attack and on 5<sup>th</sup> June, Syrian media outlets transmitted that Qusayr had fallen to the regime<sup>78</sup>. A Lebanese-brokered agreement between Hezbollah and rebel groups allowed the remaining opposition fighters to withdraw and evacuate families and wounded through a small corridor in the north (O'Bagy, 2013).

Although the initial difficulties, the well-coordinated offensive was a success for the regime. The regime showed its ability to adapt its strategy and military tactics to the situation on the ground, which is effective against an insurgency (O'Bagy, 2013). Moreover, Hezbollah's contribution was a key factor for the success, it shifted the balance of forces in the operations. Rebel commanders themselves recognized the ability of Hezbollah troops, which were "better fighters"<sup>79</sup> and "more professional" than the Syrian army, and consequently, more difficult to fight (O'Bagy, 2013). The victory had also a large rhetorical meaning. First, it clearly demonstrated Hezbollah's commitment to the cause. In a speech on May 23, 2013, Nasrallah confirmed, indeed, that "Syria is the rear guard of the resistance, its backbone, and the resistance cannot stay with its arms folded when its rear guard is exposed"<sup>80</sup>. Second, the victory represented for Hezbollah and Assad not only a success against the anti-regime groups, but also in the conflict against Israel, the USA and the *takfiri* (Sunni extremism) (Sullivan, 2014).

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<sup>78</sup>Hezbollah-run Al-Manar television station reported "Syrian Army Recaptures Al-Qusayr, Foreign-Backed Militants Flee", Al-Manar English Archive, 05 June 2013

<sup>79</sup>Interviews with Syrian rebels conducted in March 2013 by Elizabeth O'Bagy

<sup>80</sup>Barnard A., "Hezbollah commits to an all-out fight to save Assad", 25 May 2013, The New York Times

After the success of al-Qusayr, the Syrian army focused on regaining Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. Hezbollah maintained its support to the regime, but in these cases the Party's involvement is more uncertain and not as strong and direct as in Qusayr. The information about the nature of Hezbollah's operation was covered by a greater secrecy (Sullivan, 2014).

Overall, despite the information about the Qusayr battle, Hezbollah did not share data or evidence about the size, organization, and activities of its fighters in Syria (Sullivan, 2014). Some reports <sup>81</sup> indicate that Hezbollah's military commitment in Syria included thousands of fighters deployed and the training and organization of other Shia militants, mainly from Syria but also from all over the region. More than 10'000 Hezbollah's men have fought in Syria and the group faced significant losses.

Besides the support to the Assad regime, one of the main tasks that Hezbollah covered in Syria was, together with IRGC, the training of local Shia militias. In 2014, these started to define themselves *Hezbollah fi Suriya* ("Hezbollah in Syria"). And in May of that year, IRGC Gen. Hossein Hamedani announced the building of "a second Hezbollah in Syria". Given the success of the Party of God in Lebanon, the IRGC planned to form a Syrian wing of the movement, to spread the ideology and values and to have a military backing all over the region (Smyth, 2016).

#### 3.2.4 Consequences of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria

The involvement and the actions of Hezbollah in Syria had several consequences. First, the main consequence of Hezbollah's commitment in Syria is the impact on the Assad regime. In fact, the support of the Party of God and Iran was fundamental for the survival of the regime. Both the active combat operations and the training of local forces contributed to bring the successes on the ground against the rebel groups

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<sup>81</sup> Mapping Militants Projects: Hezbollah, Stanford University, 2021



(Sullivan, 2014). Hezbollah was a crucial asset for the regime, thanks to its experience in guerrilla warfare, and because it came at one of the lowest point for the Syrian forces. Therefore, “Hezbollah can be considered as one of the main pillars that hindered the fall of al-Assad in Syria” (Al-Aloosy, 2020). Moreover, Hezbollah's commitment strengthened the relationship Syria-Hezbollah-Iran.

Second, Hezbollah's decisions were directly reflected over Lebanon. The involvement in Syria has been both supported and criticized. On one hand, a large part of Lebanese Shias supported the group; in particular, a strong sustain arrived from the population in the Beeka Valley, tired of the frequent attacks from across the border (Sullivan, 2014). On the other hand, the Sunni community opposed to Hezbollah's involvement, leading to increased tension and instability in the country. A series of attacks against Hezbollah deteriorated the security of the country<sup>82</sup> (Sullivan, 2014).

Finally, the conflict in Syria had both a positive and a negative impact on Hezbollah's military force. Hezbollah acquired competencies and capabilities about offensive strategy and urban warfare tactics, that could use as a new element for its deterrence posture against Israel (Jones et al., 2024). In addition, the rotation of fighters deployed in the battlefield allowed the newer recruits and reserves to gain experience. In general, the active participation in the operations gave the group a continuous practice and training (Jones et al., 2024). However, the long commitment in Syria has dried up Hezbollah's resources. The Party, indeed, had to focus its attention and capabilities on another front, rather than the resistance against Israel. Moreover, it suffered high number of casualties: an estimated 1,600-2,000 Hezbollah troops were killed and a lot more were wounded<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup>For instance, in 2013, after Nasrallah declared Hezbollah's full commitment in support to Assad regime, two rockets hit the area of Dahiyeh in Beirut controlled by Hezbollah. Barnard A., “Hezbollah areas in Beirut are hit”, 26 May 2013, The New York Times

<sup>83</sup> Mapping Militants Projects: Hezbollah, Stanford University, 2021

Summing up the advantages and disadvantages, Hezbollah's continued engagement suggests that the benefits were larger than the costs of losing Assad's support (Sullivan, 2014).

### 3.3 United States and European Union

The United States designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in 1997, since their actions “threaten[s] the security of U.S. nationals or the national security (national defense, foreign relations, or the economic interests) of the United States.”<sup>84</sup> The USA have been, indeed, victims of Hezbollah's attacks since 1983. In 2001, Hezbollah appeared on the list of Specially Designated Global Terrorist entities (Executive Order 13224) redacted by the US government after 9/11. The Order “gives the U.S. Government a powerful tool to impede terrorist funding” and in general terms, it “provides a means by which to disrupt the financial support network for terrorists and terrorist organizations by authorizing the U.S. government to designate and block the assets of foreign individuals and entities that commit, or pose a significant risk of committing, acts of terrorism.”<sup>85</sup>

The European Union added Hezbollah's military wing to its list of terrorist organizations in 2013<sup>86</sup>. The decision arrived after some attacks deployed by Hezbollah in the previous years (i.e. the 2012 bus bombing in Bulgaria) and the increased involvement in the Syrian civil war<sup>87</sup>.

#### 3.3.1 Hezbollah and the United States

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<sup>84</sup> US Department of State, Office of Coordinator for Counterterrorism, “Designation for Foreign Terrorist Organizations”, 8 October 1997

<sup>85</sup> US Government, Bureau of Counter-Terrorism, Executive Order 13224, last update 2020

<sup>86</sup> European Council, “EU Terrorist List”

<sup>87</sup> Kanter J., Rudoren J., “European Union adds military wing of Hezbollah to list of terrorist organizations”, The New York Times, 22 July 2013

On June 6, 1982 Israel launched “Operation Peace for Galilee” and invaded Lebanon to destroy the PLO's forces in the country. It met the resistance of Syria, involved in the Lebanese civil war since 1976, interested in expanding its control over the country. In August 1982, the United States, France, Italy and Great Britain deployed a multinational peacekeeping force to stabilize the country and avoid the fall of the government, and the subsequent instability in the region. The multinational force was meant as a peacekeeping mission, but the western presence in the country provoked an increased number of clashes, that culminated with an attack by the newly emerged Hezbollah on 23 October 1983. The group bombed the US Marine headquarters and the French MNF barracks in Beirut, killing a total of 300 soldiers<sup>88</sup>. During the first months of the following year, the situation in the country has even deteriorated, and on February, American President Ronald Reagan ordered the withdrawal of the troops<sup>89</sup>.

The United States have been considered an enemy by Hezbollah since its emergence. In the Open Letter of 1985, the first Manifesto, the USA are listed among the “major enemies”<sup>90</sup>, seen as an oppressive force on the Muslim world: “the sons of Hizballah know who are their major enemies in the Middle East - the Phalanges, Israel, France and the US”. One of the objectives claimed in the document is “to expel the Americans, the French and their allies definitely from Lebanon, putting an end to any colonialist entity on our land”. And finally, they stressed that their “determination to fight the US is solid”. Again, in the revisited Manifesto of 2009, the United States are considered enemy for Hezbollah and the Muslim community, because they seek a global hegemony and a globalization that have a negative impact on the Muslim world (Berti, 2010).

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<sup>88</sup>US Government, November 1988 Terrorist Group Profiles

<sup>89</sup>Naval History and Heritage Command, “Lebanon – They came in peace”, 04 December 2006

<sup>90</sup>Open Letter, Hezbollah's Manifesto, 1985 translated by International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, 1988

Based on this enmity, during its forty years long history, Hezbollah launched frequent attacks against US infrastructures and personnel. Among the major attacks, in April 1983 Hezbollah was involved in a suicide car bombing against the US Embassy in Beirut, in which 49 people were killed and 120 wounded; in October of the same year, the group attacked the French and American MNF forces, on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1984 the US Embassy annex in Beirut has been bombed causing 24 deaths<sup>91</sup>. From 1982 to 1992, Hezbollah, pushed by Iran, was involved in what is referred to as the “Lebanese hostage crises”: 110 foreign citizens, mostly Americans and Europeans, have been kidnapped in the country by Hezbollah and other groups affiliated. The attacks were meant to convince the foreign forces to stop interfere in the ongoing Lebanese civil war. In addition, Iran directly managed these operations to obtain something in return from the US and France – namely American weapons and the resolve of past issues with France (Blanford, 2011).

Besides the attacks over the years, Hezbollah has been active on the American territory for decades. It has created an actual network of illegal activities to fund the group, that can be divided in two categories: financial and operational activities. The financial activities comprehended money laundering, fundraising, fraud and goods smuggling, to raise resources for financing the group and its other operations (Kokinos et al., 2022). The group has built and controlled charities such as the Mahdi Scouts, the Shia schools and the Martyrs Foundation. The Martyrs Foundation has been established by Iran in 1982 to fund Hezbollah and the other proxies<sup>92</sup>; the American branch is called Goodwill Charitable Organization and it is responsible for collecting funds from members and supporters and for sending them to Hezbollah's leaders (Clarke, 2017). Moreover, Hezbollah build a vast fraud network and it established companies to use as front businesses to launder money (i.e. perfume

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<sup>91</sup>US Government, November 1988 Terrorist Group Profiles

<sup>92</sup>US Department of the Treasury. The Martyrs Foundation has been designated for supporting terrorism in July 2007.

company or car reselling) (Clarke, 2017).

The operational category includes activities such as weapons smuggling and surveillance operations (Kokinos et al., 2022). Hezbollah has also deployed cyber operations; for instance, when in 2006 Israel interrupted Hezbollah's websites, the group responded by hacking American cable company to communicate and to broadcast messages (Clarke, 2017).

The United States administration has passed different acts and imposed sanctions during the years to limit the reach and the capacity of Hezbollah, in order to reduce its power. It had designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization to impose sanctions on the group itself and its supporters, it has blocked assets and prohibited American citizens to provide financial or material support<sup>93</sup> (Clarke, 2017).

In 2015, the U.S. Congress passed the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act, "to prevent Hizballah and associated entities from gaining access to international financial and other institutions" <sup>94</sup> . The Biden administration has sanctioned individuals connected to Hezbollah's financing network<sup>95</sup>. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in May 2021, claimed that "[t]he threat that Hizballah (Hezbollah) poses to the United States, our allies, and interests in the Middle East and globally, calls for countries around the world to take steps to restrict its activities and disrupt its facilitation networks."<sup>96</sup>

In conclusion, the United States can play a key role in preventing a new war between Israel and Hezbollah. After the attacks of 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023, Nasrallah declared that the US could prevent a regional conflict if they stop the attacks on Gaza. "You, the Americans, can stop the aggression against Gaza because it is your aggression.

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<sup>93</sup> Addis L., Blanchard C., "Hezbollah: background and issues for Congress", 3 January 2011, Congressional Research Service

<sup>94</sup> Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act, Public Law 114-102, 18 December 2015

<sup>95</sup> US Department of the Treasury, "Treasury sanctions international financial networks supporting terrorism", 17 September 2021, Press Release

<sup>96</sup> "Blinken calls Hezbollah 'threat,' U.S. blacklists 7 Lebanese nationals." 11 May 2021, Reuters

Whoever wants to prevent a regional war, and I am talking to the Americans, must quickly halt the aggression on Gaza”, claimed Nasrallah in November<sup>97</sup>. Moreover, the USA have a huge influence on Israel, hence could cover an important role for the development of the situation. Since October, the United States and Europe are working on coercive diplomacy to avoid the regionalization of the conflict (Jones et al., 2024).

### 3.3.2 Hezbollah and the European Union

Since its emergence, Hezbollah has also been involved in a series of attacks against European targets in the Middle East and in Europe.

In particular, France, together with the USA has been listed among the main enemies in Hezbollah's Open Letter of 1985, and has been hit by deadly attacks over the years. In 1983, French troops of the Multinational Force in Lebanon have been killed, in 1984 French facilities in Beirut have been attacked. In 1985-1986, according to a CIA Report, France “experienced high levels of both domestic and international terrorism”<sup>98</sup>, and Hezbollah was involved in several attacks, for instance against large shopping centers in Paris. France has been targeted, as well, of the hostage crisis of 1982-1991.

In 2013, European Union designated Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist organization after the terrorist attack of the previous year. Two members of the group bombed a bus of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria<sup>99</sup>. Despite the blacklist and the EU's warnings, Hezbollah continued to plot attacks on European soil. German intelligence agency reported in 2015 that Hezbollah still had 950 active operatives in Europe (Levitt, 2015). As in the US, Hezbollah established businesses in Europe to use them

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<sup>97</sup>Alkousaa R., “Hezbollah tells U.S. to halt Israel's Gaza attack to prevent regional war”, 3 November 2023, Reuters

<sup>98</sup>CIA April 1986 Terrorism Review

<sup>99</sup>“Bulgaria court convicts two over 2012 Burgas bus attack on Israelis”, 21 September 2020, BBC

as front organizations: in 2014, Germany banned the charity organization “Orphan Children Project Lebanon”, found to have raised millions of dollars for Hezbollah (Levitt, 2015). Moreover, Hezbollah built a network of illicit financial activities across Europe, that includes drug trafficking, money laundering and cybercrime (ELNET, 2020). In 2020, Europol confirmed that Hezbollah “is suspected of trafficking diamonds and drugs and of money laundering via the trade in second-hand cars. Capital is sent to Lebanon through the banking system but also through physical transport of cash via commercial aviation.”<sup>100</sup> Again in the Report of 2022, Europol signaled that, "Hezbollah has been using the EU as a base for fundraising, recruitment and criminal activities from which they obtain significant profits."<sup>101</sup>

European Union has however designated as a terrorist organization only the military wing of Hezbollah. According to the European Leadership Network report (ELNET, 2020), this is due to four main reasons:

- Hezbollah is a strong political party in Lebanon and it is integrated in the Lebanese government, hence some European governments, especially France, fear that the designation of Hezbollah in its entirety would close important channels of communication with - and influence over - Lebanon.
- Some governments believe that it would be counterproductive to ban an elected political party. Getting increasingly more integrated in the Lebanese political system, Hezbollah may become more “moderated”. On the contrary, putting too much pressure, could trigger an even more violent reaction.
- Governments hope that by avoiding to designate the group in its entirety, they could decrease the chances to be targeted.
- This choice is, lastly, a way to preserve the relationships and communications with Iran.

There are, however, some European Parliament members and national politicians that pressure the EU for the recognition of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in its

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<sup>100</sup> Europol, European Union Terrorism situation and trend report, 2020, p.23

<sup>101</sup> Europol, European Union Terrorism situation and trend report, 2020, p.20

entirety<sup>102</sup>. Germany, Netherlands, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Estonia have banned Hezbollah in its entirety and demanded to Brussels to do the same<sup>103</sup>. In Italy, in 2021, region Liguria approved an official request to the Parliament for the designation of Hezbollah as terrorist organization also in its political wing.<sup>104</sup> The main opponent remains France, worried that a decision in this direction would jeopardize the relationships with Lebanon and Iran (ELNET, 2020). In 2020, with the “transatlantic declaration”, 260 lawmakers “from both sides of the Atlantic” called on the European Union “to designate Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organization”<sup>105</sup>.

### 3.3.3 UNIFIL

United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)<sup>106</sup> has been established with the Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426 on 19 March 1978, to:

- “Confirm the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon.
- Restore international peace and security.
- Assist the Government of Lebanon in ensuring the return of its effective authority in the area.”<sup>107</sup>

Since then, at the request of the Lebanese government, the UNIFIL mandate is renewed annually.

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<sup>102</sup> “Hundreds of lawmakers call on EU to ban Hezbollah”, 17 July 2020, Politico

<sup>103</sup> Carrer G., “L’Ue metta al bando Hezbollah. L’appello transatlantico”, 17 July 2020, Formiche

<sup>104</sup> Carrer G., “Dalla Liguria una richiesta al governo: bandire Hezbollah”, 2 February 2021, Formiche

<sup>105</sup> Transatlantic Declaration on Hezbollah, 2020, Aje Transatlantic Institute

<sup>106</sup> Information about UNIFIL is taken from the dedicated page on the UN website.

<sup>107</sup> UNIFIL Mandate



The Interim Force was established in Lebanon after the Israeli invasion of 1978<sup>108</sup>. In the 70s, tensions across the Israeli-Lebanese border increased, mostly due to the presence of Palestinian forces in Lebanon. On 11 March 1978, the PLO fighters made an attack against Israel that caused some casualties and Israel retaliated by invading South Lebanon. Consequently, the Lebanese government denounced the invasion to the Security Council, that in response adopted the two resolutions which created the UNIFIL. The troops arrived in the country on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1978. With Resolution 425 (1978), the Security Council called for: “strict respect for the territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence of Lebanon within its internationally recognized boundaries” and upon “Israel immediately to cease its military action against Lebanese territorial integrity and withdraw forthwith its forces from all Lebanese territory”<sup>109</sup>.

When in 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon again, the UNIFIL could not fulfill its mandate and had to stand behind the Israeli line. But it continued the efforts to limit the conflict, to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to the population and to maintain some stability. The then Secretary-General, Perez de Cuellar, was working to persuade Israel to leave the country, while he increasingly enlarged the UNIFIL mandate at the request of the Lebanese government.<sup>110</sup>

In 2000, Israel formally notified the Security Council of its intention to withdraw, in accordance with resolutions 425 (1978) and 426 (1978), and that it was willing to cooperate with the United Nations<sup>111</sup>. On June 16, 2000 the Secretary General reported the completed Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. However, after the withdrawal, Israel committed some violations of the withdrawal line, reported by the

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<sup>108</sup> UNIFIL Background

<sup>109</sup>UNSC Resolution 425 (1978) of 19 March 1978

<sup>110</sup>UNIFIL Background

<sup>111</sup>Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of the Security Council resolutions 425 (1978) and 426 (1978), 22 May 2000

UNIFIL. Hence, the government of Lebanon demanded that the Interim Force would remain until the correction of these violations. Due to the vacuum left from Israel, and the insecurity in the area because of Hezbollah's presence, UNIFIL was reinforced with additional troops (from 4'513 to 5'600)<sup>112</sup>.

On 12 July 2006, at the wake of the war between Israel and Hezbollah, the then Secretary-General Kofi Annan, noted that the situation in which the mission operated "had radically changed"<sup>113</sup>, and the UNIFIL mandate was prolonged. UNIFIL played an active role, within the limits of the mandate, during the hostilities: UNIFIL troops conducted military observations, provided humanitarian and medical assistance. The conflict caused five casualties among the UNIFIL peacekeepers and some injuries.

After the 2006 war, the UNSC Resolution 1701 for the cease-fire, introduced new responsibilities for the UNIFIL. UNIFIL II, with an expanded and more robust mandate, is authorized. The increased responsibilities were:

- "Monitor the cessation of hostilities.
- Accompany and support the Lebanese armed forces as they deploy throughout the South, including along the Blue Line, as Israel withdraws its armed forces from Lebanon.
- Coordinate its activities referred to in the preceding paragraph (above) with the Government of Lebanon and the Government of Israel.
- Extend its assistance to help ensure humanitarian access to civilian populations and the voluntary and safe return of displaced persons.
- Assist the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in taking steps towards the establishment between the Blue Line and the Litani river of an area free of any armed personnel, assets and weapons other than those of the Government of

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<sup>112</sup>*Ibidem*

<sup>113</sup>Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, 21 July 2006

Lebanon and of UNIFIL deployed in this area.

- Assist the Government of Lebanon, at its request, in securing its borders and other entry points to prevent the entry in Lebanon without its consent of arms or related materiel.”<sup>114</sup>

The Security Council, after the Second Lebanon war, recognized that the UNIFIL mission with a limited mandate “has only been able to play a peripheral role in the [...] crisis”<sup>115</sup>, hence a new mission with integrated capacity is required. UNIFIL II, with its extended mandate, is an example of contemporary peacekeeping operations, characterized by increased responsibilities compared to traditional peacekeeping (Elron, 2007). Nowadays, after UNSC resolutions 2373 (2017), 2433 (2018) and 2485 (2019), the UNIFIL is focused on the deployment and transition of responsibilities to the Lebanese Armed Force.

In 2024, UNIFIL's force is composed of 10'272 peacekeepers from 49 countries. Italy gives the largest Western contribution with its 1081 troops deployed<sup>116</sup>. Within UNIFIL II, Italy deployed “Operazione Leone”<sup>117</sup>.

After the attack of Hamas of October 7, 2023 UNIFIL is monitoring the conflict, working to preserve the stability in the area. However, the peacekeepers have been victims of some incidents<sup>118</sup> in the past few months and “measures have been taken to implement [their] safeguard and enable them to fulfill their duties effectively”, assures UNIFIL Deputy Spokesperson Kandice Ardiel<sup>119</sup>.

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<sup>114</sup>UNSC Resolution 1701(2006) of 11 August 2006

<sup>115</sup>UN Security Council Update Report No.5: Lebanon/Israel, 20 July 2006

<sup>116</sup>Data taken from the UN website.

<sup>117</sup>Italian Ministry of Defense, Libano – UNIFIL “Operazione Leone”

<sup>118</sup>“Attacco a una pattuglia Unifil in Libano, militari illesi”, 9 march 2024, Ansa.it; “Guerra Israele-Hamas: razzo colpisce base UNIFIL nel Libano sud. Crosetto, nessun miliare italiano coinvolto”, 16 October 2023, Onultalia.com

<sup>119</sup>“UNIFIL Monitors Situation in Lebanon Amid Ongoing Attacks”, 22 June 2024, mtv Lebanon

## CONCLUSION

Which are the characteristics that compose the mutual deterrence of Hezbollah and Israel? This thesis aimed at answering this question, to understand which are the strengths and weaknesses and the eventual game changers of the strategies deployed. The relationship between Hezbollah and Israel, despite being always tense, is characterized by periods of clashes and others of greater stability. The first years, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, were the most turbulent, with more than six thousand operations launched by Hezbollah against the IDF <sup>120</sup>. After Israel's withdrawal in 2000, a more stable period followed. Both opponents feared another escalation and decided to implement a deterrent posture: military operations changed from action to reaction. Only small attacks were deployed by both Israel and Hezbollah, while they remained very careful to deal with the adversary and avoid a large retaliation. However, things changed again in 2006, when Israel decided to heavily respond to an attack of the adversary. A war started and went on for thirty-three days. The conflict ended with no winners: neither Hezbollah nor Israel could achieve the desired objectives. Indeed, Hezbollah was well-prepared - mostly thanks to the training and funding received by Iran and Syria in the years prior the war - but still incapable to match Israeli military capability; while the IDF, despite the military power of Israel, was not trained and equipped to confront an insurgency.

Following the failure of the war, after due strategic considerations, both Hezbollah and Israel chose to implement a deterrence strategy, understanding that a next confrontation would be devastating. The deterrence is a central topic of this thesis. After a brief theoretical description, the analysis focused on the elements that composed – and still do – the deterrence strategies of the opponents. Hezbollah structured its deterrent posture on four pillars. First, it invested resources to develop the arsenal, especially the missiles stockpile, to be prepared for an eventual next war

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<sup>120</sup> Gabrielsen, 2013

and to deter the adversary. Second, it fought a “psychological war”: Hassan Nasrallah's speeches and interviews were directed to undermine the adversary and threaten a strong retaliation in case of attack. Third, the capabilities and competencies about conventional warfare tactics acquired in the Syrian civil war represented an new tool that Hezbollah could use against Israel. And finally, Hezbollah used the actions and attacks at the international level as an additional deterrent. On the other side, the core element of the Israeli deterrence strategy was the Dahiya Concept. In any future clash with Hezbollah, Israel would use a disproportionate force against any village used to launch attacks. Every civilian infrastructure will be indiscriminately considered as a military base.

Determined the features used by the adversaries to deter each other, the analysis outlined the game changers that could disrupt the fragile balance that lasts since 2006. In general, the external factors that can have the major impact are: the political decisions of Syria and Iran and the changes in Lebanese internal politics. Over the years some issues have been potentially dangerous: the Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war, the potential acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran, the Hariri case. Nevertheless, this thesis showed that, at the moment of writing<sup>121</sup>, the mutual deterrence is still working.

The topic has become of great concern after the attack of Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023. The tensions in the Middle East could trigger a resumption of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Moreover, Hezbollah could decide – or Iran could push it – to take the side of Hamas in the resistance against the adversary. Another possibility is that, on the contrary, the close relationship between Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran could trigger a reaction from Israel, which could reopen the Lebanese front. This seems plausible also because Israel responded to the attack of Hamas by using a disproportionate use of force, that recalled the start of the 2006

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<sup>121</sup> June 2024

war against Hezbollah. The reason could be, as it was in 2006, the will of restoring and preserving its credibility as powerful state in the region and of its deterrence. In the weeks after the attack of 7th October more than 4'000 incidents between the two parties have been reported.

Since October 7, 2023 tensions are escalating between Israel and Hezbollah, which are engaged in a low-level conflict across the border<sup>122</sup>. However, both sides are still trying to avoid high number of civilian casualties and the escalation to an all-out war. The game of deterrence is at one of the most critical moments since 2006, with both Israel and Hezbollah threatening the adversary a worse and worse retaliation, raising the stakes in case of attack. However, deterrence is still working, and while both sides have adopted a more aggressive posture, the costs of a potential war are still too high. On one side, despite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed that Israel “is prepared for a very intense operation along its border with Lebanon”<sup>123</sup>, analysts<sup>124</sup> do not believe that the Israeli invasion is imminent. Israel is already engaged in a deadly conflict and, in addition, an attack against Lebanon would be severely condemned and Israel might not be willing to risk a deterioration of the relationship with the USA. On the other side, while Hezbollah is sending strong messages to Israel - “Don’t think today you will win a war or a war will advance your calls or create more leverage” -, the Party is interested in reaching an agreement to stop the fighting in Gaza and has openly declared that it has no intention to broaden the conflict if the circumstances does not change<sup>125</sup>. For now, hence, it seems that the regionalization of the conflict can be avoided. However, an all-out war is still very risky, and the USA and Europe should continue to work on coercive diplomacy to avoid this scenario.

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<sup>122</sup> Nashed M., “Are Lebanon's Hezbollah and Israel about to go to war?”, Al Jazeera English, 7 June 2024

<sup>123</sup> “Netanyahu says Israel ‘prepared for very intense operation’ near Lebanon”, Al Jazeera English, 5 June 2024

<sup>124</sup> Imad Salamey, associate professor of political science at the Lebanese American University, in Nashed, 2024

<sup>125</sup> Jones et al., 2024



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