

Hezbollah's Evolution, Challenges

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[Hezbollah](#) as a political and doctrinal organization does not stand out as any sort of exception in Lebanon or the Muslim and Arab world. It has, however, become a model for study and research at the largest Western academic institutes and research centers, where no distinction is made between the political and military-security aspects of the organization. This is especially true after the [July 2006 war](#), which left in its wake a greater understanding of organized and guerrilla warfare.

About This Article

Summary :

More than 30 years since its founding, Hezbollah has developed from a Shiite party focused on resistance to a more inclusive political entity, yet still faces a number of challenges, writes Qassem Qassir.

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Hezbollah 27 Years After the 'Open Letter'

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On Feb. 16, 1985, in commemoration of the first anniversary of the martyrdom of Sheikh Ragheb Harb, Hezbollah's first official spokesman, Sayyed Ibrahim al-Amin (who later assumed the presidency of the "Loyalty to the Resistance" bloc and currently serves as chairman of the political council under his real name, Sayyed Ibrahim Amin Sayyed), emerged from the al-Shayah Shiite Religious Center in Beirut's southern suburbs and issued the first "open letter," which constituted the first document that specified the party's positions on many issues.

Before this letter, the Lebanese people and the rest of the world had known Hezbollah for its military presence under different names, whose first act was the [bombing of the Israeli military commander's headquarters](#) in Tyre (carried out by suicide bomber Ahmad Qassir). They were also known by their mass movements, protected by the late imam Ayatollah Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah. This movement was best known for its protest of Amin Gemayel's government's signing of the [May 17 agreement](#) (1983) with Israel, carrying out its infamous sit-in at the Radaa Mosque in Beer al-Abd, south Beirut as called for by the Gathering of Scholars. The incident culminated in a confrontation with the Lebanese army, leading to the death of the young Mohammed Najdi and injuring dozens of others.

"The open letter"

The letter was addressed to "vulnerable of the world," constituting the first public announcement from Hezbollah to the world, three years after the party's establishment in 1982, and more specifically after Israel's assault on Lebanon. Representatives from the Islamic Councils, Hezb al-Dawa, the Gathering of Bekaa Scholars, and the

Islamic Amal movement agreed to launch the “Islamic resistance” in Lebanon under the patronage of imam al-Khomeini and the supervision of a group from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard who came to Lebanon via Syria to carry out military training.

The letter represented the party’s first “Manifesto,” after working under a great deal of secrecy since its beginning. Its message centered around facing the Israeli occupation, the Lebanese regime, the “political Maronite system” in addition to global forces (the US and France) and UN institutions. It also called for establishing Islamic rule without imposing it by force, leaving the Lebanese people to decide as they see fit, a positive aspect of the party that has been part and parcel to it since the beginning, despite the initial political platform’s “extremist” political and doctrinal image.

Developing capabilities

On an organizational level, the party did not have any single or specified form. Prominently, the “Decision Shoura Authority” was formed to take on administrative work with a shoura (an Islamic consultative council) for each region. A hidden conflict appeared within the party between authorizing a strict, Leninist-Stalinist, centralized organizational structure (as in Hezb al-Dawa) and following a more open, expansive form under the title “Hezbollah nation.” The latter was closer in form to the work in Iran (pre-revolution) under the leadership of scholars, considering the mosques and Shiite religious centers to be the primary arena for mobilization as was the case with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Hezbollah succeeded over the course of three decades in developing its mass, military and material capabilities to establish dozens of media, health, social, professional, cultural and educational institutions and to form a strict and disciplined junction between the military and central security structures. At the same time, it managed to establish a flexible organizational structure capable of taking in tens of thousands of individuals and supporters and developing the party’s political message, letting go of several of its original positions and messages that it had espoused in the beginning. It became distinctly separate from the Lebanese political regime in 1992.

In terms of the party’s political positions and internal, Arab, and international relations, we now see a “new party” capable of establishing alliances and weaving relationships and mutual understandings with different forces, allowing them access to a network of Arab, Islamic and international connections. The party no longer faces any sort of complications in communicating, even with international institutions. It has begun to cooperate with the international UNIFIL forces in southern Lebanon after having reservations about UNIFIL’s role and performance in the first years after its foundation. These reservations caused a great number of problems between both sides during the 1980s.

Lebanese accession

In terms of its intellectual and doctrinal vision, in spite of the fact that the party has held onto many of the basic principles upon which it was founded — such as its commitment to *Velayat-e faqih* and working to spread Islamic thought — it has succeeded in setting out an intellectual and political message that was open to others, such as that which was presented at the end of 2009. The party no longer has any problem regarding its relationship with the Lebanese state and the Taif accords; indeed, the state has become a permanent fixture of the positions and speeches given by its leadership.

Cooperation with the Lebanese army and Lebanese security apparatuses is a central component of its field performance. The deputy secretary-general

of Hezbollah, Naim Qassem, recently said in a meeting with university professors that “the party and the resistance stand behind the Lebanese army in facing the occupation.” This statement could indicate a significant development in the group’s performance, maintaining the right to face any new aggression with the appropriate response, as announced by Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah at the annual commemoration of martyred leaders ten days ago.

Political and partisan stability

At the beginning of its 31st year (the first being in 1982) it can be said that Hezbollah is stable organizationally and politically, with jihadist and security efforts no longer taking up the greater part of its work. It does, however, still consider these aspects of its work important, continuing to prepare and train militarily and strengthening its advanced military capabilities to face any new Israeli aggression. It is also focusing on its prominent, unconditional relationship with the Palestinian resistance, an issue that will continue to take priority since the martyrdom of Imad Mughniyah. The latest Israeli war on Gaza demonstrated great developments in the Palestinian resistance’s defensive and offensive capabilities, giving Hamas and Jihad preference to Hezbollah.

The party’s foreign activities enjoy flexibility, pragmatism and versatility. Its international relationships fan out from China and Russia to the United Nations (its resident representative in Lebanon) and France, in addition to most of the European capitals, the BRIC countries and Latin America. The party has specified that its regional and Lebanese relationships ([Iran and Syria](#)) are a priority, and has left the door open to the Arab Spring nations — particularly Egypt. It has been keen to keep channels of dialogue open with the Muslim Brotherhood in all of its nationalist permutations, shown in the party’s relationship with the Lebanese Amal movement. It is keen to keep a certain degree of influence with Osama Saad in the south, Suleiman Franjiyeh in the north, along with Abdel Rahman Murad in the Bekaa and Talal Arsalan and Wiam Wehab in the mountains.

However, none of this compares to the party’s interest in its emerging and stable relationship with Michel Aoun since the signing of their bilateral understanding at the beginning of 2006. This is without avoiding the situation with Sunnis, as no clear alternative to the Hariri politics has emerged on the one hand and the party’s inability to draft a minimum understanding with the Future movement on the other, even as it prioritizes confronting issues of Sunni-Shiite conflict.

Lack of accountability

Does this mean that there are not any fundamental problems the party faces in its organizational structure, its ideological vision, or its political and religious role?

Those following [the party’s internal situation](#) know that there are a number of challenges it faces today. Foremost among them is a lack of strict accountability and transparency among its leadership and the inability to democratically effect lasting change in the leadership structure, in spite of an abundance of qualified individuals and leaders capable of taking on basic responsibilities. Perhaps the fact that the names of the members of the Shoura Council have not changed for over ten years, with the exception of the tenuous change necessitated by the death of Mughniyah, will raise questions about whether this stagnancy points to stability and strength or if it expresses flaws within the party’s ranks. The damage inflicted by this

aforementioned change on all parts of the organizational, jihadist and political body emphasizes this.

The other issue confronting the party over the last six years is related to an increase in corruption of the environment surrounding the party and its extensions, and the discovery of the first group of spies within the party. This all points to an organizational flaw that requires a second glance into the internal structure and the development of mechanisms for internal accountability. It could be the fact that the party has attained high positions among the Lebanese authorities, as well as its municipal, parliamentary, and ministerial work and special relationship with the Lebanese security forces and state institutions, exposing its personnel to the material temptations that might reflect negatively on its activity and positions.

The large number of members who left the party brings to mind other historical partisan experiences in Lebanon, characterized by a high degree of estrangement, requiring them to prioritize the issues and interests of the people in their agenda and party.

A Shiite party or a national party?

As for the intellectual and doctrinal aspects, in spite of the amount of flexibility that characterizes the party's political positions and its ability to overcome certain harsh ideological positions of Islamic thought and the logic of *Velayat-e faqih*, upon which it was established, the party has not developed the intellectual and jurisprudential visions it authorizes. This has allowed it to transition from being a Shiite party to a national party capable of taking in elements and members from all of Lebanon's sects, which are distinguished by ideas and theses that may differ from the party's own opinions. These other elements and members would, however, see eye to eye with Hezbollah regarding general policy, especially the resistance [to Israel].

Last but not least is the party's national role. It has succeeded in establishing bilateral national alliances as it enters parliamentary battles or to form a government that includes various forces. It did not succeed in setting up a broad national front with a platform for change or comprehensive reform. This may have been caused by the conditions of internal battles and external challenges, especially during the years following the assassination of the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The coming period may present ideal circumstances to start with a clean slate for internal political work in developing a political system, realizing reform, and dealing with corruption.

Yet 27 years since the first "open letter," and three decades since the real beginning, there are organizational, political and intellectual challenges that require fresh and renewed perspectives on how to change from a doctrinal, ideologically Shiite party to a political reformist party capable of taking on the responsibility of change after successfully carrying out battles for resistance and liberation.