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The history of Hezbollah, from Israel to Syria

Despite faltering popularity abroad, Hezbollah enjoys extensive political power at home in Lebanon.

by **Zoe Hu**

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Once a champion of Palestinian and Lebanese resistance, the group's popularity in the Middle East dropped amid its association with Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime in Syria [EPA]

In July 2006, long-standing tensions flared into war when Hezbollah operators crossed into Israel, killed three soldiers and abducted two others. Israel responded with a furious spate of air strikes on Lebanon, where Hezbollah is based, and violence soon swept the

country, less than two decades after the population had emerged from its own civil war.

That summer, conflict between the two sides ripped through Lebanon's recovering infrastructure and displaced almost a quarter of its people.

Israel has launched wars on Lebanon and Hezbollah many times, often in the southern swath of land that Israel carved out of the country and deemed a security zone during its long occupation throughout the 1980s and 90s.

The zone, which at one point grew to 10 percent of Lebanese territory, endured past the end of Lebanon's civil war and generated frequent, bloody confrontations. Before Israel withdrew in 2000, Hezbollah carried out a dozen "self-martyrdom missions" on Israeli military targets; in 1996, the Israeli army launched a campaign that led to the massacre of civilians at a United Nations base in Qana.

Compared with the hostile decades of the security zone, the summer war was a short blip on the historical record: 33 days of destruction that punctuated each side's longer struggle against the simple fact of the other's existence.

Both Israel and Hezbollah claimed 2006 as a victory at first, yet it was clear that for Hezbollah the gains extended beyond the war zone's borders. Across the Arab world, citizens had been watching from afar as Israel's bombing of bridges and shelters locked Lebanese communities into a grinding summer siege.

In the book Hezbollah: A Short History, scholar Augustus Richard Norton notes how outrage quickly spread over Israel's military approach, termed the Dahiya doctrine for the neighbourhoods that Israel flattened across Lebanon's south. By late July, angry demonstrations were mushrooming across Egypt.

In Syria and Palestine, posters, bumper stickers and keychains blared strong messages of support for Hezbollah's soldiers. The group had become a regional anti-hero, exiting the war with a newfound cache of sympathy across the region.

"After the war in 2006, Hezbollah reached the peak of its popularity," said Amer Sabaileh, a political analyst from the Washington-based Middle East Media and Policy Studies Institute. "[It] had the consensus of people when it came to resistance, credibility and speaking the truth."

Yet today, Hezbollah is in flux. Once a champion of Palestinian and Lebanese resistance, the group's popularity in the Middle East hovers at a new low due to its association with Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime in Syria. In a 2015 Zogby poll, 96 percent of Egyptians agreed that Hezbollah has contributed to growing regional extremism.

Other Arab countries have joined the chorus of disapproval, with 86 percent of polled Jordanians holding a negative view of Hezbollah.

The quicksand pull of Assad's campaign has drawn Hezbollah deeper into a damaging war, even while forcing its members to shed some of their most important founding doctrines. As Sabaileh put it: "Right now, Hezbollah is becoming, for many parts of Lebanese society, an antagonist."

As Hezbollah wages its new, more unpopular war in Syria, Lebanon's past summer conflict is once again surfacing to political relevance. Last July, a Hezbollah-affiliated TV channel released a documentary titled 2006 about the group's war against Israel. The series showed never-before-seen footage of Hezbollah operations, as well as interviews with high-ranking Israeli officials who were apparently tricked into appearing on camera.

Political forces often turn to the past to sow legitimacy. For Hezbollah, the documentary harkens back to a point in time when the group enjoyed widespread legitimacy, and its violence could be framed in easier, Arab v Israeli terms.

According to Sahar Atrache, the International Crisis Group's senior Lebanon analyst, Hezbollah has always worked to knit tenuous associations between the legitimacy it garnered in 2006, and its current, more polarising involvement in Syria.

"From the beginning, Hezbollah has tried to link the fight in Syria to Israel," she said. "It has kept saying that Syria's part of the same axis of resistance to Israel, and that the aim of the war in Syria … is a continuation of the war of 2006. Hezbollah keeps constantly

going back to Israel; it's something that's very recurrent in its speeches and party narrative."

For so long, Hezbollah has set its legitimacy against the backdrop of Israel's regional unpopularity. Today, however, the group is seeing its resources drained by Syria's war, and is in need of a new raison d'etre to bolster this costly involvement. It will be the responsibility of the enigmatic Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah to deliver.

Nasrallah is a polarising figure. For many, he possesses an undeniable reserve of charisma, despite his leading role in what several international bodies have classified as a terrorist organisation.

Born one of nine children, Nasrallah's early childhood in East Beirut is cloaked in political mythology. He is said to have been pious from an early age, often taking long walks to the city centre to find second-hand books on Islam. Nasrallah himself has described how his childhood free time was spent staring reverently at a portrait of the famous Shia cleric Musa al-Sadr - a pastime that foreshadowed his future concern with politics and Shia communities in Lebanon.

In 1974, Sadr founded an organisation - the Movement of the Deprived - that became the ideological kernel for the well-known Lebanese party and Hezbollah rival, Amal. Grown into a political heavyweight in the 1980s, Amal mined support from middle-class Shia who had grown frustrated with the sect's historic marginalisation in Lebanon. Besides commandeering an anti-establishment message, Amal also provided stable income to many Shia families, unfurling a complex system of patronage across Lebanon's south.

After the outbreak of civil war between Lebanon's Christian Maronites and Muslims, Nasrallah joined Amal's movement and fought with its militia. But as the conflict progressed, Amal adopted a staunchly unsympathetic stance towards the presence of Palestinian militias in Lebanon, and it was from opposition to this sentiment that Hezbollah emerged.

Nourished by a steady lifeline of Iranian military support, Hezbollah's revolutionary ideology attracted many Amal defectors, among them a young Nasrallah, fresh out of his stay at a Shia seminary in Iraq. By 1985, Hezbollah had crystallised its own dogma in a founding document, which addressed the "downtrodden of Lebanon" and named the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran as its one true leader.

Throughout the civil war, Hezbollah and Amal evolved in bitter tandem, often jostling with each other for support among Lebanon's Shia constituents. As Norton notes in his book, political alliances in Lebanon's Shia communities have never been rigid. Personal allegiances change over the course of a lifetime; families often become messy sites of overlap, with members of the same household supporting different groups. Indeed, Nasrallah's brother, Hussein, has been a lifelong member of Amal.

Championing the Palestinian cause as its own, Hezbollah expanded during the Lebanese civil war under a shadow of kidnappings, hijackings and violence. The group abducted dozens of foreigners and leveraged them in complex negotiations that muddled their interests with Iran's. It drove bomb-laden trucks to US targets in Lebanon, and killed hundreds of people, both abroad and at home: Until 9/11, Hezbollah had taken more American lives than any other US-deemed terrorist groups.

By the 1990s, after numerous bloody clashes, Hezbollah had largely trumped Amal for prominence among Lebanon's Shia supporters. Nasrallah became the group's third secretary-general during this peak, two years after the civil war's ceasefire in 1990.

Since his early career, Nasrallah's speeches have helped cement his persona as a wise, humble figure, deeply invested in the lives of everyday people - a leader who shuns formal Arabic in favour of the dialect spoken on the street, and who reportedly prefers to sleep, every night, on a simple foam mattress on the ground. Perhaps more than anything, the man is a masterful public speaker; as Sabaileh put it, "His style of speech, his terminology, the persona of Hassan Nasrallah - [those are] his strongest winning cards. We know Nasrallah just by his speeches."

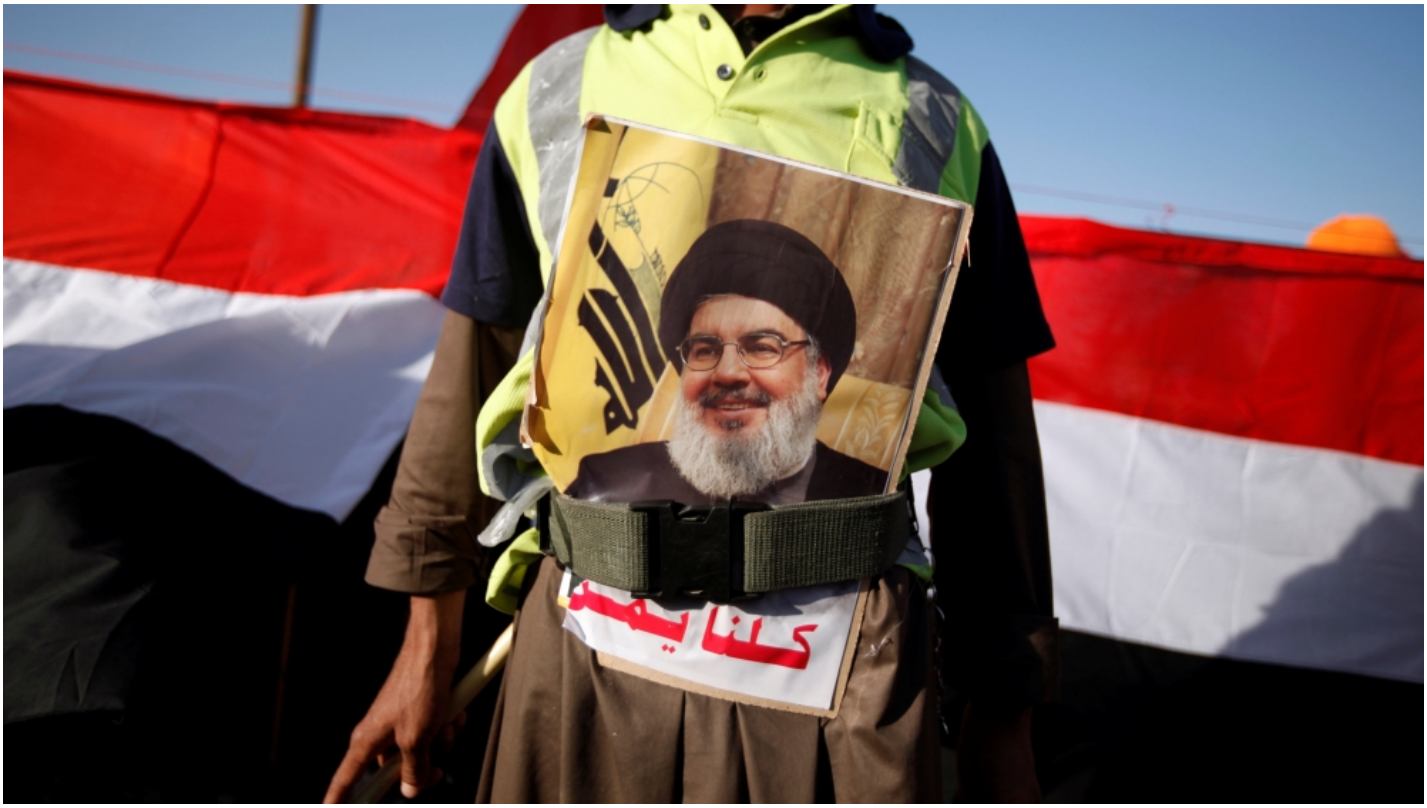
In the book The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication, scholar Dina Matar describes how Nasrallah's words have fused political claims and religious imagery, creating speeches with high emotional voltage that transform Nasrallah into "the very embodiment of the group".

Nasrallah's charisma is far-reaching; his elegies on the history of oppression in the Middle East have made him a moving figure across sects and nations. Certainly helping is Hezbollah's sprawling media apparatus, which makes use of TV, print news, and even musical theatre shows to spread its message.

When Nasrallah took on the position of secretary-general, he was charged with easing Hezbollah into the melee of Lebanon's post-war political scene. Hezbollah went from being a rogue actor, working outside the official enclosure of state politics, to become a national party asking for every citizen's support. Presiding over this shift was Nasrallah, who put Hezbollah on the ballot for the first time in 1992 and appealed to the masses in rousing speeches. As he told Al Jazeera in 2006, "We, Shia and Sunnis, are fighting together against Israel," adding that he did not fear "any sedition, neither between Muslims and Christians, nor between Shia and Sunnis in Lebanon."

Today, however, the message seems to be changing. Nasrallah's rhetoric, once laden with anti-Israel and anti-West sentiment, has shifted since the group's involvement in Syria. Now that Hezbollah is no longer battling Israel, its message is less focused on Palestinian resistance, and has taken on a thicker sectarian gloss. Above all, Nasrallah's speeches seem to have found a new target in the region: Saudi Arabia.

"In every speech of his, Hassan Nasrallah makes sure to attack Saudi Arabia or the al-Sauds themselves," said Atrache, noting that Nasrallah often does this by criticising Saudi Arabia's role in Yemen's worsening crisis. Since Hezbollah's entrance into Syria, Nasrallah has pointed to Saudi Arabia as an antagonist in the region - a line that fits with Hezbollah's larger claim to be defending Lebanon from Sunni "terrorists" in Syria.



'After the war in 2006, Hezbollah reached the peak of its popularity. [
It] had the consensus of people when it came to resistance, credibility and speaking the truth' [Reuters]

If Nasrallah's targeting of the Sunni Gulf power lends the group a rallying banner, his words may have the unintended consequence of throwing the party's Shia identity into sharp relief. As Iran and Saudi Arabia become further embroiled in a proxy war, Hezbollah's stances on regional conflicts may be seen as dictated solely by Shia interests and allegiances. In March 2016, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and then the Arab League, labelled Hezbollah a terrorist organisation. Increasingly, Hezbollah's position in the Arab world seems to be drawn against sectarian lines.

"Hezbollah is paying a price from within the Shia-Sunni conflict pervading the Arab world today. It cannot help but be presented or be seen as a Shia group," Sabaileh noted.

It has not always been like this. Under Nasrallah, Hezbollah once sought support from all religions; it beefed up the social services it provided to other communities in 2006, looping Christian families into the vast welfare programme that made the party so popular in Shia-dominated neighborhoods.

According to its evolving logic, Hezbollah was not just a Lebanese party but also the country's protector. Its soldiers claimed that they provided the first line of defence against Israeli aggression, and so were justified in retaining their arms in defiance of a UN Security Council Resolution. Again and again, Nasrallah assured the media that Hezbollah would never turn these weapons against Lebanon's own people - a promise that unravelled in 2008, when Hezbollah gunmen forcibly took control of West Beirut after the government tried to shut down the group's sprawling telecommunications network and fire an airport head of security for having Hezbollah ties.

Despite its faltering popularity abroad, Hezbollah enjoys extensive political power back home today, wielding alliances and effective veto power to direct legislature in parliament. Just recently, Lebanon elected a Hezbollah ally, Michel Aoun, as its first president in two years. A range of critics have blamed Hezbollah for introducing the political deadlock that kept the country from choosing a president in the first place (the government also collapsed in 2011, when Hezbollah walked out in protest over a UN investigation into the group's involvement in the assassination of former President Rafiq al-Hariri). Yet even as its popularity drops across the region, Hezbollah has solidified support from communities that were staunch advocates of the group all along.

"After it had completely entered the fight in Syria, I do think the group was able to convince Shia, but also other communities - people who have already supported the party - that this is an existential fight and that you have to go all the way," Atrache said.

Popularity may not be Hezbollah's largest concern, as the war in Syria has proved to exact larger costs for the organisation. In addition to losing a founding ideology, Hezbollah has seen more than 1,000 of its soldiers killed in Syria, among them top commanders like Mustafa Badreddine.

"Hezbollah is facing a very complex problem," said Sabaileh. "In a way, it is draining its resources and draining its popularity at the same time."

Despite its political power in Lebanon, Hezbollah has always been dependent on the support it receives from Iran and Syria. But with one of its backers at war, and the other maybe reaching a detente with western powers, Hezbollah has to reckon with a changing

geopolitical map.

"Syria, in all cases, will not be the same after the war," said Sabaileh. "Syria and Iran ... have both changed drastically in the past years. Without them, it would be difficult to imagine that Hezbollah can maintain its current status.

"If we compare Hezbollah with Amal, I think Amal has more chances to survive in the future," he added. "At the end it's a political movement that has no weapons or army. It can bridge much more easily the diverse components in Lebanese society."

SOURCE: **AL JAZEERA**