

Hezbollah: Beyond Resistance and Terrorism

In 2015 while in Syria, Hamza - a Lebanese citizen and an advocate of Hezbollah - sustained heavy injuries as a result of a suicide bombing. He was brought back to Lebanon where he was hospitalized. Hezbollah has been paying his medical bills ever since.

Hamza currently lives with his wife and two daughters in a village thirteen miles away from Beirut. But as a result of the pandemic, he lost his job working as a foreman in a roadworks firm mostly focused on repairing the potholed streets of Lebanon.

But Hamza's loss of income was not devastating. Hezbollah gave his family access to their subsidized schools and has provided them with weekly groceries.

Hezbollah emerged as a result of the Israeli invasion during the Lebanese Civil War. What started out as a coalition of militias is now one of the most influential political parties in Lebanon. Following the 2018 parliamentary elections, 62 out of 128 seats in Lebanon's parliament were attributed to Hezbollah and its allies.

They are infamously associated to atrocious crimes such as the murder of 220 marines, the bombing of the US embassy, numerous assassinations, and the notable murder of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Several countries, including the United States and Europe, deem the Party a terrorist group. Western and domestic portrayals of Hezbollah's strength is often associated with their sophisticated weapons arsenal, their resistance against Israel and the West, and their ability to protect Lebanon's borders.

Yet, Hamza's predicament points to a critical observation. While it is true that they are heavily armed, Hezbollah's political strength is the result of the Party's incommensurable social apparatus.

For more than thirty years, Hezbollah invested heavily in building a robust welfare platform – a network focused on two modes of support. The first are direct monetary funds created in 1982, *Mu'assasat al-Shahid*, the Martyrs' Institution and *Mu'assasat al Jarha*, Institution of the Wounded. Members of the Party who dedicated their lives to the Resistance and were killed or injured carrying out the Group's manifesto are the main beneficiaries of the respective funds.

Hezbollah's direct support of its members is better known. What is less known is their aid to the larger community of Lebanese – non-affiliated citizens– in need of socio-economic services. The health care, educational, and social services built are overseen by members of Hezbollah, but administratively, and financially independent from the Party.

While Hamza himself appears to be a collaborator, it is very clear that many beneficiaries of this network are not.

In 1984, Hezbollah built their health care facilities, the Islamic Health Unit. The Islamic Health Unit created the *Difā' al-Madanī*, Civil Defense. Its inception was sparked by the Israeli occupation of Lebanon's southern border. The fleet of ambulances and medics were trained to respond to injuries and fatalities caused by the Israel-Hezbollah clashes. The Health Care sector also witnessed a proliferation of hospitals around Lebanon such as *Mustashfā al-Shahīd Rāghib Harb* and *Al-Rasūl al- A'dham Hospital*.

Today, the social apparatus manifests itself in the fight against the on-going pandemic. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, Sayyed Hashem Safieddine, head of the Shi'ite group's executive council, proudly said "Managing crises and managing wars ... are not that different."

Hezbollah mobilized a fleet of ambulances, over 25,000 people, rented hotels for quarantine, and built new hospitals. The group dedicated a Beirut hospital to treating coronavirus patients, rented four abandoned hospitals, prepared 32 medical centers across Lebanon, and presented plans to build three field hospitals if necessary.

Through my interviews with journalists and activists working in Lebanon, I was told of additional efforts that were less captured by the media's attention.

For example, Hezbollah provided housing and food stamps to those who were unable to curb the damages caused by the pandemic and the economic crisis. Activists who journeyed to Hermel - a Hezbollah dominated region- informed me of supermarkets possessing products at cheaper prices. Only those who support the Resistance would be able to access these products.

A more recent expression of this social apparatus happened a few weeks ago in response to Lebanon's financial meltdown. Sayed Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Hezbollah [delivered a speech on March 18, 2021](#). He outlined economic solutions - an ode to his attempt at placing Hezbollah as the lifeline of the Lebanese people.

Nasrallah pushed his supporters who earn money in dollars to "help their families and neighbors, and create an internal funding to gather donations for needy families."

The reason policy makers, and Lebanese activists need to listen to Hamza is because there is a need to strip down the paramount focus on Hezbollah's hard power politics. Instead, it points to the decades of strategic planning the Party put into building their service-oriented network.

Reframing Hezbollah as a social organization is essential to address the broader problem. It will highlight the source of the Party's grip on Lebanese society. Any serious domestic or international

policy aimed at addressing the group is forced to grapple with the myriad of ways it exercises its power.

In a time where Lebanon is facing a complete meltdown of its institutions, citizens took to the street to point the finger to our flailing government. Hezbollah sustained injuries from this period of protests.

In tandem to international sanctions, it is the first instance since 2005 that a noose found itself around Hassan Nasrallah's neck. Yet, Hezbollah's efforts demonstrate that in a time of crisis, the web of social services' they weaved is perceived as the lifeline for some.

Today, it is even more urgent to recognize the impact of Hezbollah's social apparatus. The local currency lost [90% of its value](#), with the current black-market rate reaching 15,000LL (1\$ was 1,500LL).

Hezbollah exercises more economic power than ever because it continues to operate in U.S. dollars. Its members receive [their salary in dollars](#). And, Qard al Hassan - a micro-credit institution, criticized for operating like a traditional bank - allows those who benefit from the institution's loans, to [withdraw cash in US dollars](#) and Lebanese lira free from financial restrictions.

Using its social welfare apparatus to aid Lebanese allies and non-affiliated alike has become an increasingly cheap feat.

Lebanon is constantly tip-toeing around an unfolding tragedy. Creating a spur to invest in social welfare organizations, and state-making activities will rebuild trust amongst Lebanese. Otherwise we continue to be at risk of sectarian groups - with strength analogous to Hezbollah's- growing even more influential and powerful during a time of crisis.

Hamza summed it best. As Lebanon was facing its second strict lockdown, I found myself across the phone from him. With my meager Arabic skills, and Hamza's weak English, his fifteen-year-old bilingual daughter translated his words thus: "when there is no State present to help all Lebanese, each sectarian group seeks to help their own."