

Hezbollah at a Crossroads

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 29.05.2025

May 24, 2000, marked the height of Hezbollah's glory. A moment in which, from its perspective, it succeeded, for the first time in the Arab world, in causing Israel to unilaterally withdraw from Arab territory (the security zone in southern Lebanon) without a political agreement. That victory not only strengthened its standing in Lebanon and among the Shiite society but also enabled it to complete its takeover of Lebanon and shape a new reality in the country, wherein it is the real sovereign, while the Lebanese government and army became secondary players. It seems that Nasrallah's "Spider Web" speech, delivered in Bint Jbeil on May 26, 2000, two days after the withdrawal, expressed the smugness and euphoria he fell into at that time, after the terrorist organization achieved the most significant accomplishment in its history.

In Hezbollah's view, the victory in 2000 constituted a historical turning point. Under the guise of "resistance," Hezbollah took over the mechanisms of the Lebanese state and society and granted itself complete freedom of action. The most notable expression of this was the abduction of IDF soldiers Goldwasser and Regev in July 2006 - a military initiative that caught the Lebanese government and its army completely by surprise. Nasrallah acted smugly and with a sense of superiority toward Israel, believing he understood its weak points after decoding the Israeli genome. But in reality, he miscalculated, and Israel chose to respond with full-scale war (the Second Lebanon War).

After the failures of the Second Lebanon War, both sides sought to learn from it and prepare for the next campaign. Hezbollah, with the support of Iran's Quds Force, began an impressive force-building process, including the precision missile project, the establishment of the Radwan Force intended for the "conquest of the Galilee," and broad strengthening of its logistics and combat systems. The organization built itself into an advanced army, equipped with modern weapons and diverse capabilities.

But in Israel, a quiet yet powerful transformation took place: a dramatic intelligence improvement and the intensification of precise counteraction capabilities.

All of this was manifested with great force during the war that broke out in

October 2023, especially from late July 2024, when Hezbollah's "Chief of Staff" Fuad Shukr was eliminated, and the peak that transpired in September 2024 with the surprise attack - the "Pager Attack" - through which Israel succeeded in striking deep into Hezbollah's command and control arrays, and through a series of eliminations it carried out during the war, it succeeded in eliminating the organization's leadership: Nasrallah, his successor Hashem Safi al-Din, operations commander Ibrahim Aqil, southern front commander Ali Karaki, Mohammad Jaafar Qasir - commander of Unit 4400 (responsible for smuggling weapons from Iran to Lebanon), and many others. The combination of accurate intelligence and lethal means created a move that reshuffled the deck for Hezbollah.

According to the Alma Center, Israel succeeded in impairing 176 senior Hezbollah members - leadership, high to mid-level military command, knowledge centers, and so forth.

Since the ceasefire on November 27, 2024, Hezbollah is undergoing a deep internal review.

The organization is investigating how Israel managed to achieve such dramatic successes and how it penetrated its systems so deeply. It claims to have arrested spy networks working for Israel. But the simple fact is that Hezbollah was critically harmed - physically, economically, morally, and cognitively - and needs a long and comprehensive rehabilitation of its military, intelligence, and political power.

Meanwhile, it must also deal with a difficult internal challenge: rebuilding trust within the Shiite community, which suffered heavy losses in the war. The community, which supported it for years out of a sense of mission and resistance to Israel, is showing signs of fatigue. Hezbollah Secretary General Naim Qassem understands the difficulty facing the organization and accordingly signaled again in his speech marking the withdrawal anniversary on May 25, 2025, that the organization will not be dragged into a new confrontation with Israel and is leaving the lead in dealing with Israel to the Lebanese government.

But not everything is bad for Hezbollah: In the municipal elections, the organization succeeded in maintaining its influence in southern Lebanon, the Bekaa, and Beirut.

It proves that in the civil and municipal sphere - its power is still great. Its political, economic, and social infrastructures still give it an inherent advantage

that has not eroded.

Still, Hezbollah stands before a dual strategic challenge: External – rehabilitating deterrence and power against Israel, and internal – maintaining hegemony within Lebanon.

Initiatives by senior Lebanese state officials – led by President Joseph Aoun and Prime Minister Nawaf Salam – to advance Hezbollah’s disarmament, illustrate the state’s attempt to rid itself of Hezbollah’s hegemony. But there is serious doubt whether declarations alone will succeed in forcing Hezbollah to give up its weapons, which are the backbone of its power and influence.

To challenge Hezbollah’s power, a comprehensive American strategy is needed, that will help the Lebanese state draw the Shiite community closer via a broad mechanism that will offer it patronage and aim to sever its dependence on Iran and Hezbollah, thus eroding Hezbollah’s social base. Alongside this, the U.S. must strengthen the Lebanese army by removing Hezbollah’s influence over it, primarily through Shiite officers in its ranks holding army roles.

Despite the Trump administration’s desire to achieve immediate gains against Hezbollah in Lebanon, it is difficult to expect that the United States will be able to reap immediate benefits in the country when faced with a comprehensive Iranian strategy that has been implemented in Lebanon since the early 1980s. Therefore, the Trump administration should adopt a long-term perspective aimed at leading deep processes that cannot be completed hastily.

The Trump administration should encourage the Lebanese state to regain sovereignty at Hezbollah’s expense. In light of Hezbollah’s weakening, significant signs already indicate the Lebanese state’s strengthening since the ceasefire. This includes the election (January 2025) of Joseph Aoun as president (after two years without a president, during which Hezbollah pushed for Suleiman Frangieh’s election), who already declared at his inauguration that only the Lebanese state would act to remove the “Israeli occupation,” and subsequently the election of Nawaf Salam as prime minister; the summons of Iran’s ambassador to Lebanon, Mojtaba Amani, (April 2025) for a historic reprimand after publicly criticizing the Lebanese initiative to disarm Hezbollah, calling it a “clear conspiracy” and warning against “falling into the enemy’s trap” ; the suspension of flights from Iran to Lebanon in January 2025—prompted by Israel’s threat to target Beirut Airport due to its use by Tehran for smuggling to Hezbollah—which paved the

way for a broader initiative by the Lebanese state to assert control over the airport. Reportedly, in early May, Hezbollah's significant foothold at this strategic site was impaired after dozens of airport employees suspected of ties to it were fired, and inspection procedures were tightened.

These early signs of the Lebanese state's reclaiming of sovereignty and the erosion of Hezbollah's influence are significant and promising yet still fall short of bringing about a historic transformation in Lebanon.

Thus, despite PM Salam's recent declaration (May 26) that the era of exporting the Iranian revolution to Lebanon is over, as important as it is, it is still not enough to produce real change. Hezbollah, apparently now led by two of its surviving commanders, Mohammad Haidar and Haitham Ali Tabatabai (alongside Secretary General Naim Qassem), is now experiencing, indeed, the most significant crisis in its history.

Nonetheless, according to Alma Center's assessment, Hezbollah still holds around 20,000 rockets of all sorts and is assisted by Quds Force personnel in Lebanon to rebuild its force and readiness. Due to the difficulty in smuggling arms from Iran, including thwarted attempts via Syria by the new regime, the organization is striving to rebuild its missile arsenal via local production, however, under continued Israeli attacks, it is also seeking to establish a maritime smuggling route in collaboration with Iran. Moreover, Hezbollah has come to recognize a disconnect between its military capabilities and its capacity to fully exercise them, due to opposition from the Lebanese state. Nevertheless, it is actively striving to rebuild and strengthen itself in order to regain its footing.

In conclusion, 25 years after the IDF's withdrawal from Lebanon, Hezbollah, now in the deepest crisis of its history, is no longer the same organization. Hezbollah must adapt to the absence of Nasrallah, who played such a dominant role in the organization since the 1990s, and cultivate a new generation of commanders (including senior officers at the unit and regional command levels) to fill the ranks in place of their eliminated peers.

History remembers the withdrawal as a rare achievement for it, but the present and the future confront it with significant challenges.

Published in Alma, May 29, 2025.