HEZBOLLAH: BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND POLITICAL PRAGMATISM

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**Hezbollah: Between Ideology and Political Pragmatism**   
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**Introduction**

A closer look at Hezbollah, a religious movement affiliated with political Islam, reveals the extent to which this movement has been reluctant to adhere to its strict religious dogma at any price. It also has tended to adopt political strategies that minimize the danger of rigidly adhering to principle, doctrine, or ideology. In addition to that, it moved almost away from dogmatic positions in a quest for innovative and pliable modes of conduct, the opposite of doctrinaire rigidity, ready to respond or adjust to fluid conditions without loosing sight of its ultimate objectives.[[1]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn1" \o ")

After almost a decade of political radicalism, Hezbollah has undergone integration in a secular political system and this integration has rendered it a compelling case for observation and study by many academics. The old Lebanese perception of Hezbollah as a fanatical religious organization seeking to impose its Islamic vision of the socio-political order, modelled on the Islamic republic of Iran and onto the Lebanese society, underwent a gradual change through the 1990s. The politically exclusive and intolerant tone adopted at the time of Hezbollah’s emergence, later gave way to the politically inclusive and conciliatory discourse that later lead to the party’s participation in the secular and democratic political system. Thus, after the term of the strictly ideological Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli, a much lenient discourse was initiated by al-Sayyid Abbas al-Mussawi. After Mussawi’s assassination by Israeli forces in February 1992, his successor, al-Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, continued this discourse and emphasized the themes of Christian-Muslim reconciliation and co-existence in a politically pluralist society.

Hezbollah’s political performance in parliament from the time it entered it until now, has added further credibility to their conciliatory discourse. Both the parties’ admirers and detractors agree that, of all the political forces in Lebanon, Hezbollah is among the very few political parties that have not been tainted by charges of corruption or political opportunism and have resolutely stuck to their principles. This perceived moral and ideological integrity was epitomized by the death of Nasrallah’s son in September 1997 while in combat with Israeli troops, an incident that won the party leader the respect of all Lebanese.

Hezbollah’s participation in the Lebanese democratic rule demonstrates its conviction that the party can gain influence and promote its objectives by operating within the existing political order. The party escaped a binary perception regarding its relations with ideological rivals and political opponents. They are careful not to depict their social and political reality as a cluster of mutually exclusive, diametrically opposed categories, perceived by “either-or” relations.

In religious fundamentalist movements, support is usually gained at the price of conformity, by publicly renouncing any tactic that could offset the group’s normative values. However, my research aims at showing that policy devices used by Hezbollah, have enabled their leaders to manipulate normative rules in a pragmatic fashion. Indeed, the leaders of this movement have been able to publicly move from a total moral commitment to a principle towards a more pragmatic bargaining posture which recognizes that certain norms and interests are shared with the other side and can be used as a basis for a workable compromise. Moreover, the leaders’ ability to justify such deviations from official doctrine and from public commitments has reduced the risk of intra-organizational disorder and enhanced the prospects of maintaining public support and gaining the rank and file’s compliance.

**Hezbollah’s Participation in Political Life**

Hezbollah does not lack the ability of balancing between ideology and everyday political considerations. However, it was Syria’s gradual political ascendancy in Lebanon and the post-war role it achieved in this country that enabled Hezbollah to continue its jihad activities against Israel under the auspices of the post-war Lebanese regime. This development legitimated Hezbollah as an authentic Lebanese party and cast its struggle against the Israeli military and the SLA in the guise of national resistance. If Hezbollah’s terrorist image were ever to be overridden, this tricky manoeuvre would have to be dealt with first. Was Syrian arm-twisting involved as the post-war government formed or had Hezbollah smoothed its transition to mainstream party status through its own efforts?

As a form of political accommodation, Hezbollah’s agreement to abide by the reformulated Lebanese constitution and its decision to participate in the Parliamentary elections of 1992, in the post-Ta’if political order, must be viewed within the framework of it moral bases for political violence and accommodation in oppressive secular systems. Although one cannot ignore the party’s customary rationale for its accommodation with the Lebanese state, which relates to the end of the civil war in 1989 and the establishment of its resistance priority in 1990[[2]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn2" \o "), its changing perception of this state from one which warranted revolutionary rejectionism to one which merited political accommodation, provides a deeper insight into the transformation of its political stand.

Aside from the Gemayel regime itself, which was branded by the party as ‘oppressive, hypocritical and blasphemous rule’, the political system within which it operated and with which it was closely identified was viewed in equally iniquitous terms. This perception did not stem from the un-Islamic nature of the Lebanese state, but form its ‘fundamentally oppressive’ configuration which was founded on the Maronite community’s political supremacy. Its depiction by the party as ‘a rotten sectarian system’ was therefore a product of the institutionalization of this hegemony.

By implication, Hezbollah’s opposition to the sectarian underpinnings of this system was as much an opposition to the principle of political sectarianism as it was a rejection of the Maronites’ monopoly of the ‘sectarian privileges’ the system had to offer. While Hezbollah’s disparagement of the political system was caused by the party’s repudiation of political sectarianism per se, it was partially rooted as well in the system’s under-representation of the Shi’ite community.

There was no way that the party could reconcile itself to a system that was not only unjust by dint of its sectarian essence, but also because it apportioned its sectarian shares on an entirely inequitable basis. Because such a system could not lend itself to the possibility of political reform, but required a revolutionary overhaul to extirpate its very roots, any opposition to it had to come from outside its constitutional boundaries, or it would be ‘protecting and safeguarding the constitution currently in force’. In effect, Hezbollah’s opposition to the pre-Ta’if political system rendered it not only an ‘anti-system’ party which sought to change the very system of government, but a revolutionary one, which sought to change it from ‘outside the system’.[[3]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn3" \o ")

With the formulation of a new constitution under the Ta’if agreement of 1989, Hezbollah’s perception of the state underwent a significant transformation. Correspondingly, the party metamorphosed from a revolutionary ‘total refusal’ anti-system party, into a ‘protest’ anti-system party. Yet even as an anti-system protest party, its political alienation from the state could not be classified under a ‘normlessness’ category – which denotes a rejection of both the principle and institutions underpinning the political system[[4]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn4" \o ") – as it rejected the sectarian essence of the system but not its institutional structure. By the same token, it could not be classified in the ‘cynicism’ category either – which refers to distrust of the government and political leadership of a country, without questioning the political order within which they operate – as it rejects the political order. Although the party’s perception of the state underwent a transformation, its attitude toward it remained ambivalent.

**Accommodation?**

Hezbollah’s attitudes to post-Ta’if governments cannot be considered prototypical instances of political accommodation on account of their oppositional nature. However, when compared with the party’s anathematisation of the Gemayel regime, both the form and content of this opposition represent such radical departures from that stand, that no term short of accommodation can be used to describe it.

As a regime ‘associated with Israel’, which in turn threatened the very existence of Hezbollah, the Gemayel government fulfilled the two aforementioned criteria that designate it an ultimate oppressor necessitating politically violent or revolutionary responses to it. To oppose such a regime from within the system would therefore be both morally and religiously proscribed as well as fruitless, as it would be a ‘superficial opposition that will ultimately agree with existing regime’, and which would also serve to legitimize the ‘oppressive’ political system.

While the principal factor which licensed Hezbollah’s participation in the post-Ta’if system was its changed perception of the Lebanese political system, the fact that the Rafiq al-Hariri government was not viewed as being oppressive enough to warrant destruction facilitated this participation. Furthermore, in contrast to the Gemayel regime, which was directly associated with the unjust political system, government and system became dissociated from each other in the post-Ta’if order. This enabled Hezbollah to retain the ideological purity of its opposition to the Hariri regime and afforded it a politically non-violent and a morally legitimate means of channelling this opposition.

This opposition did not assume the form of a ‘boycott’ that opposed the government on every conceivable issue, but was one which selectively opposed or supported various government policies according to ‘rational’ criteria. It was, as Hezbollah describes it, a ‘constructive’ opposition, which criticised the government and its policies in a responsible manner, with the general interest in mind, as opposed to a ‘disruptive’ one that would ‘disrupt’ the work of government solely on account of its hostility towards it. Thus, although Hezbollah twice raised a vote of no confidence in the Hariri governments of 1992 and 1995, its parliamentarians have, in the words of Augustus Richard Norton, ‘behaved responsibly and cooperatively’ in voicing their opposition to the Hariri government.[[5]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn5" \o ")

Rather than uniformly oppose the government or focus its parliamentary activity on peculiarly Islamic issues, Hezbollah’s opposition was an ‘inclusionary’ and ‘issue-based’ social, economic and political critic of the government, which pursued (and still pursues) the implementation of such secular issues as the abolition of political sectarianism, social justice for the oppressed, public freedoms, diffusion of political power and political transparency. Accordingly, its castigation of the government revolved around the popular themes of political corruption, administrative inefficiency, overspending on large-scale reconstruction projects and the under-development of deprived areas.

Despite the fact that the party’s opposition is not limited to the government, but extends to the very system of government, the responsible and constructive nature of its opposition makes its political behavior closer to a ‘constitutional opposition’ than an ‘anti-system opposition’[[6]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn6" \o "). According to Sartori, parties falling into the former category assent to the ‘fundamentals’ of the political system, whereas those in the latter category reject those fundamentals.

Not only is Hezbollah’s opposition to the Lebanese government constructive in form, it is also politically mature in content. Though the party depicts the government as an ‘oppressive’ one which has come to power by means of the ‘exploitation of circumstances’, the ‘falsification of the general will’ and electoral ‘forgery’ (especially in the 2005 parliamentary elections), and as such does not truly represent the Lebanese people, it admits that the government is still theoretically legitimate.

For this reason, the party disagreed with the civil disobedience campaign of ‘the Hunger Revolution’, launched by Hezbollah’s former secretary-general, Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayly, arguing that though his demands for improved living conditions in the Biqa’ were justified, the means he used to fulfil them were ill-conceived[[7]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn7" \o "). Clearly, the party did not believe that the use of violence against an oppressive but legitimate government was religiously or morally justifiable, especially when public disorder was the most probable outcome.

The party’s changing stand on participation in the Hariri regime was another indication of the party’s political maturation. Although its refusal to participate in the Hariri government was initially based on the grounds of principle, those who objected to this participation later came to reject it on political grounds[[8]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn8" \o "). This shift was largely attributable to the party’s distinction between a government that was only theoretically participating in negotiations with Israel, and one that was technically negotiating with it[[9]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn9" \o "). In turn, Hezbollah’s ability to make this distinction was greatly facilitated by the diminishing likelihood of a Lebanese-Israel peace during Hariri’s second tenure in office, and hence the theoretical nature of his government’s negotiations with Israel.

In short, ‘the party was no longer of the opinion that participation in government was illegitimate’, thereby enabling some party members to advocate such participation, while others objected to it solely on account of the Hariri regime’s social and economic policies. Hezbollah’s refusal to participate in government on principle grounds would be confined to one which had already concluded a peace agreement with Israel, was already in negotiations with it, or was about to enter negotiations with it.

Hezbollah’s participation in a government that was neither negotiating with Israel, nor about to, could still not be guaranteed, as exemplified by the case of the second Hariri government. The fact that socio-economic and political considerations are as great an obstacle to participation and hence full political accommodation as are ideological ones is further demonstrated by Hezbollah’s refusal to participate in the favorably viewed Salim al-Hoss government, which was not about to enter peace negotiations with Israel.

As portrayed by the party, the regime led by Prime Minister Hoss and President Emile Lahhud, which was instituted at the end of 1998, took an unprecedented stand towards the Resistance and displayed an unparalleled concern and vision of balanced development for the deprived regions. It was a regime ‘distinguished’ by such ‘positive qualities’ as the ‘qualifications’ and ‘integrity’ of it cabinet ministers[[10]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn10" \o "), and the ‘honesty’ of its president.[[11]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn11" \o ") Moreover, the party had nominated Hoss for the premiership, which was also indicative of its support for this government.

Yet despite this vocal show of support, the party declined to pass a motion of confidence in the Hoss government, and chose instead to abstain from voting, claiming that it could not vote for a government, no matter how favorable, before viewing its actual performance. As it turned out, the economic legacy left by Hariri’s overambitious reconstruction project had left the new government with little room to manoeuvre and therefore prevented it from implementing many of its development schemes. The party claimed that, even if it had been afforded the opportunity to join such a government, it would have declined from doing so. Not only the party’s presence in a government over whose politics it had little control would not be beneficial to people’s needs and demands and thereby render it an ‘uninfluential’ actor in the decision-making process, but it would also have caused the party to ‘bear responsibility for mistakes’ that it had not made.[[12]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn12" \o ")

In conclusion, the extent of Hezbollah’s political accommodation with Lebanese governments had as much to do with political considerations as with ideological ones related to the peace process. This juxtaposition of the ideological and the political has enabled the party’s opposition to the Hariri regime and its semi-support for the Hoss administration to assume a politically constructive form and a politically mature content – the requisites for any party’s institutional longevity.

**Abiding by Democracy**

Precisely because Hezbollah’s decision to participate in the democratic system was motivated in part by rational considerations related to the party’s survival, it could be argued that Hezbollah is only using democracy to preserve its political status and is therefore not genuinely committed to it as an ideological principle. In fact, Hezbollah makes no pretence at embracing democracy as a central pillar of its intellectual structure. Hezbollah confines the concept of democracy to the political realm, as opposed to the realm of ‘intellectual thought’, which is reserved exclusively for the Islamic state.[[13]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn13" \o ")

However, it does not necessarily follow that the party does not genuinely endorse democracy as ‘a system of government’, but merely advocates its use as ‘a procedure of transition to power’. To believe in democracy as a system of government, one need not believe in it as the best system of government, just as the non-idealisation of any principle must not necessarily means that it is rejected out of hand. By the same token, Hezbollah’s embrace of democracy as a system through which the greatest possible extent of justice can be fulfilled means that, although it is not viewed as the ideal system capable of fulfilling absolute justice, as Islam is, it is accepted, and even Hezbollah does not endorse democracy as the best system of government on the intellectual level, it endorses it as a system of government on the political level.

In short, some of the former governments were castigated by the party for only subscribing to democracy in appearance, and therefore for not being committed to it in principle. Thus, although Hezbollah does not espouse democracy as an intellectual construct, it does expect the government to. Moreover, the extent that Hezbollah invokes the Israeli state as a democratic exemplar, inasmuch as it respects the will of its people and illustrates the indispensability of democracy to the resolution of internal disputes[[14]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn14" \o "), the party exhorts the government to emulate such democratic qualities. Thus, the genuineness of the party’s political endorsement of democracy is further underscored.

In addition, Hezbollah’s goal of ‘deconfessionalizing Lebanese politics is also demonstrative of its sincere commitment to the implementation of democracy. While it could be contended that Hezbollah’s intent to abolish political sectarianism is an intrinsic part to establish an Islamic state in Lebanon, insofar as the party’s extensive popularity amongst Lebanon’s Shi’ites would give it an advantage over all other political forces in a majority system, it is not difficult to repudiate such an argument, in view of two factors.

In the first place, the party’s aspiration to deconfessionalize the political system is an essentially secular and democratic demand for equality of opportunity. No democrat could dispute Hezbollah’s call for the replacement of a sectarian democracy with a citizen’s democracy where representation would be based on citizenship and not on sectarian considerations. Even if such a demand was ultimately conducive to the establishment of an Islamic state, this would not detract from the democratic substance of this demand.

In the second place, Hezbollah does not match its demand for the abolition of political sectarianism with a call for the replacement of the current system with a majority one. While the party advocates the constituency system, it does not require that the system be established on a majority, first past the post basis, which would necessarily exclude some other minorities. Rather, the party would favour a proportional representation basis of example, which would guarantee the inclusion of all Lebanese sects, and prevent anyone from monopolizing the executive branch of the state.[[15]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn15" \o ")

The corollary of this is that Hezbollah does not pursue the concept of a non-sectarian citizens’ democracy as a means of monopolizing political power and instituting Islamic rule, but values it as and end in itself. Accordingly, Hezbollah would not overturn democracy if it attained a parliamentary majority under a non-sectarian proportional representation system. As maintained by several party officials, if Hezbollah were ever able to form a government on its own, it would accept the dissolution of this government if the popular will later chose to replace it with another one[[16]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn16" \o "). The party would assent to this reversal of power, but would strive to regain people’s trust, so that it could reinstate its government democratically and not through revolution.

To some extent, such discourse is a product of the ‘pragmatizing’ effect of political pluralism, which compels participants in the democratic system who constitute less than a 51% parliamentary majority to negotiate and bargain with other participants and thereby adopt a more moderate and inclusive political tone.[[17]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn17" \o ") But it is also a product of the party’s conviction that a simple 51% majority would not provide a sufficient popular basis for the establishment of an Islamic state[[18]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn18" \o "), even in a religiously homogenous Muslim state. Thus, even if Hezbollah did secure a parliamentary majority of 51% of the popular vote, it would still have to operate within the confines of the democratic political system in order to accommodate the 49% or so of Lebanese society who do not favour the establishment of an Islamic state.

Yet as strong an indicator of Hezbollah’s political endorsement of democracy as this is, and as reassuring as it may be to secular democrats, one is reminded here of the precondition Hezbollah posits for the establishment of the Islamic state.

Finally, the party would institute Islamic rule if the overwhelming majority of Lebanese people demanded the establishment of an Islamic state. By implication, Hezbollah would overturn their democratic system that brought it to power if it obtained such a large parliamentary majority and would consequently not afford people the opportunity to oust it, of any other Islamic party that might succeed. This would necessarily be the case because the Islamic state does not contain a mechanism of its own overthrow, as does the exemplary democratic state.[[19]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn19" \o ") There would not be any non-Islamic parties that espouse counter-ideologies in the Islamic state, and therefore the electorate would not be able to vote for a party that advocates the reinstitution of the secular democratic system.

In effect, there is a seeming incongruity between Hezbollah’s expressed intent to preserve democracy and the undeclared potential it has to subvert it. However, this becomes less of an incongruity when one recalls that the party’s preference for an Islamic state over a democratic state does not make its commitment to democracy in the absence of an Islamic state a disingenuous one. The party’s intellectual commitment to the Islamic state is profound, but this does not render its political commitment to democracy hollow.

This incongruity has been shrouded by the ultimate unfeasibility of Hezbollah ever amassing such a large extent of popular support for the implementation of an Islamic state in a religiously and politically diverse society. This has enabled it to pledge its sincere commitment to the cause of democracy in Lebanon while preserving its Islamic state ideal.

**Seeking Christians’ Understanding and Support**

Hezbollah members and sympathisers began active efforts to encourage Christian support for its resistance role immediately after the leaders’ decision to enter the 1992 elections. Referred to as *infitah* (opening), this policy included several different approaches that have been vigorously pursued over the past sixteen years and remain in force today.

One of these activities essentially followed Sayyed Fadlallah’s lead insofar as it attempted to convince non-Muslims of Islam’s peaceful approach to co-existence. In an interview with Fadlallah on the Lebanese Broadcasting Company’s television channel in July 1997, the clergyman explained the Islamists’ general approach to dialogue as follows: “We carry on a dialogue with Christians without imposing any belief and without any prior conditions on either side. The basis of discussion should be to propose ideas as one of several around which debate resolves. Christians aim to win the other side over to Christianity and this applies well to Islamists… there is nothing wrong with trying to convince individuals by civilized means”.[[20]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn20" \o ")

Hezbollah attempted to engage Christians in socio-political discussions in several ways – through formal and informal dialogue with notables and ordinary citizens of other sects, through the establishment of organizational linkages with different social, economic and political organizations and through various activities. In 1993 and 1996, Israel launched severe retaliatory raids against Lebanon to try to get the Lebanese authorities to rein Hezbollah. After these onslaughts, Hezbollah leaders increased meetings with the Maronite Christian patriarch Cardinal Nasrallah Butros Sfeir and other Christian groups to explain their positions and ask for outspoken support of resistance activities. As one of Israel’s goals in launching the attacks had been to provoke dissension within Lebanese ranks, these meetings tried to encourage a united front as far as the Lebanese resistance was concerned.

Apart from these emergency meetings, however, there were also protocol visits during which a wide range of issues facing the country were discussed. These visits paved the way for further exchanges of views. During one of these sessions, Christian opposition leaders who expressed disillusionment with the new regime were reportedly advised by Hezbollah representatives to ‘integrate themselves into the political system despite their disappointment, and to respond positively’[[21]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn21" \o "). Regarding Hezbollah’s multiple contacts with various groups, Sayyed Nasrallah observed in 1997: "We have surpassed the stage of explanation, and contacts are taking place with everyone and in depth"[[22]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn22" \o ").

Another example of Hezbollah’s formal outreach policy occurred on 25 August, 2001, when party representative Nawaf Musawi and Mohammed Kmati spent an afternoon at one of Lebanon’s mountain resorts with members of the Committee on Islamic-Christian Dialogue and a Christian political group known as Qornet Shehwan Gathering discussing current issues.

Nasrallah once described this openness policy as one of the principle characteristics of his organization[[23]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn23" \o "). He noted that it invariably promoted resistance discussions that in his opinion had helped to create a sounder political, intellectual and psychological environment for many Lebanese than had been the case in earlier years.

Hezbollah youths were also mobilized to do their part in establishing relations with those of other faiths. A Hezbollah official, Ali Fayyad, explained that this work was important because “the student arena is one of the broad ones in the umma where committed Muslims mix with others who don’t know much about Islam. Many think negatively of committed Muslims since we are portrayed to them by a hostile media as nothing more than terrorists and extremists”.[[24]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn24" \o ")

**Enhancing Political Ties**

Apart from providing a broader support base for the resistance, Hezbollah’s efforts to establish good relations with all sectors of Lebanese society made perfect political sense. Lebanon’s version of confessional democracy requires candidates of different faiths to work together to create winning electoral tickets. That means that in many mixed confessional districts, Hezbollah candidates must stand with Christians on the same electoral ticket and must attract Christian votes as well as Shi’ite ones to win seats. In a sense then, infitah hit two birds with one stone. It helped Hezbollah win seats in parliament while garnering specific Christian support for the resistance – both vital parts of the push to undermine the terrorist image.

There are other activities in which this kind of pragmatism is illustrated by the infitah policy of Hezbollah. For example, the party encourages involvement and participation of its partisans in the various professional syndicates in Lebanon, where they also rub shoulders with members of all faiths and political persuasions.  In 1999, they formed a coalition with the Communist Party and various leftist currents, and at another time they did a complete ideological turnabout where the Party of God collaborated with the Christian Phalange Party and the National Liberal Party, both of which were staunch allies of Israel during the civil war. Finally, there is nothing unusual in Hezbollah’s pragmatism which is the typical Lebanese “get-the-seat” mentality with ideology out the window.

**Hezbollah and the Municipal Elections**

Hezbollah’s gradualist-pragmatic mode was reflected even more clearly in the municipal elections. The 1998 municipal elections which were held for the first time in thirty-five years were the first local elections in which Hezbollah and other Islamist movements participated.[[25]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn25" \o ") Hezbollah’s participation in the parliamentary elections since 1992 has given the party legitimacy and political influence. The municipal elections of 1998 provided the opportunity for the party to come into power in several important cities, towns, and local governments.

Given the assumption that the nature of municipal work – the provision of social services to the community – is a fundamental tenet of faith, Hezbollah has struck at the heart of the Lebanese old and new zu’ama’ and their clientalism that has persisted in one form or another for more than one hundred years.

In the municipal elections, the gradualist-pragmatic mode of Hezbollah was reflected in its programs, alliances, and campaign committees. Hezbollah sanctioned this mode under the pretext that “winning is religiously permissible”. As such, Hezbollah’s candidates in the villages, towns, and cities of Lebanon’s six provinces offered comprehensive programs of a practical rather than ideological nature. To appeal to the voters, Hezbollah’s programs placed greater emphasis on the economic, social, and developmental aspect of the various municipalities, particularly the most deprived. The party introduced its candidates on a non-sectarian bases, emphasizing honesty and seriousness in municipal work. Such an attitude was reflected clearly in Hezbollah’s slogan, which declared that municipal work is a religio-legal designation that requires providing the people with the best models of services. In the southern suburbs of Beirut, (Ghobairi and Borj al-Barajneh), South Lebanon, Nabatiyyah, Beirut, and Biq’a, the party emphasized its experience in social welfare activities.

**Pragmatism in Response to War on Terror**

The U.S. war on terror after September 11 and its victories over al-Qa’ida and the Taliban forces in Afghanistan and Saddam in Iraq have pushed Hezbollah further into a strategy of calculated response regarding the new political stage created by the United States in the region[[26]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn26" \o "). In fact, Hezbollah’s calculated-response strategy is not completely new nor does it contradict the party’s modes of action – militancy and pragmatism. The strategy complements Hezbollah’s modes of action and goes beyond them to a deeper process of calculating the party’s choices and their consequences. Such strategy has made the party more aware of not risking its survival.

Although Hezbollah has been included in the State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations since 1999, the Bush administration in the immediate aftermath of September 11 excluded the party from the list, along with Syrian-backed Palestinian groups in order to secure the backing of Arab states.[[27]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn27" \o ") For the first month, the American anti-terror campaign was strictly limited to the al-Qa’ida network. However, on September 24, 2001, an executive order threatened sanctions against states or financial institutions that do business with twenty-seven groups and individuals tied to Oussama Ben Laden. On October 12, the Bush Administration released an additional list of thirty-nine individuals which included the former head of Hezbollah’s special oversees operations, Imad Mughniyyah, along with two other members, Hasan Ezzeddine and Ali Attwah. Reportedly, the list of individuals also included Hezbollah’s secretary-general Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, and his predecessor, Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli. The American officials demanded that the Lebanese government freeze the assets of all listed individuals.

While Hezbollah’s officials and members rejected and condemned the U.S. accusations of terrorism, calling them lies, the party stopped short of calling for a war against the United States or for the expulsion of its ambassador in Lebanon. Instead, the party opted for a war of words with the U.S. administration. Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, during a rally in support of the Intifada, challenged the U.S. administration to provide evidence that Hezbollah’s activities went beyond resistance to Israel.[[28]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn28" \o ")

As the United States escalated its pressure on Hezbollah to disarm, the party threatened to respond to any attack whether by the United States or by Israel. However, Nasrallah declared that the resistance in Lebanon and Palestine is in defensive rather than offensive conditions.[[29]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn29" \o ") Nasrallah’s declarations created an extensive war of words between Hezbollah and the United States.

However, realizing the danger of leading an active war like al-Qa’ida’s against the United States, the Party chose not to put its survival at risk. Equally important, Hezbollah did not want to complicate its good relations with the Lebanese and Syrian governments, to whom they made clear that Hezbollah is a resistance organization, not a terrorist organization. Although Hezbollah has considered that the United States is its enemy because of its partnership with Israel, Hezbollah is certain that the cost of leading a war against the United States after September 11 is too great for the party to undertake. Perhaps the aftermath of September 11 did not elicit expressions of fear or moderation from Hezbollah; however, it has made the party strive to distinguish itself, ideologically and politically from al-Qa’ida and to show neither support nor sympathy for its terrorist acts. Many militant Wahhabists and Sunni Islamist movements criticised this position privately and publicly across the Arab-Muslim world. Despite the fact that the situation between the United States and Hezbollah was very tense, Hezbollah chose not to lead a war against the United States. Instead, it launched a wave of mortar and rocket offensives against Israeli outposts in Sheb’a Farms, a calculated escalation in reaction to the United States, as well as to Israel’s reoccupation of the West Bank.

Hezbollah’s calculated response not to lead a war against the United States was even clearer in the party’s calculated reaction to the U.S. war in Iraq. Although, Hezbollah positioned itself at the forefront of fighting Israeli and U.S. plans in the region, the party’s reaction to the Iraqi situation has not been to urge resistance against the Americans. In fact, when the United States was preparing to invade Iraq, Hezbollah’s leader, Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, did not call for jihad against the Americans. Instead, he rejected the U.S. war and proposed an initiative of reconciliation between Saddam and the Iraqi opposition, in particular the Shi’ite opposition.[[30]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn30" \o ") Nasrallah’s proposal presented three major points. First, he called for no one to offer help to the Americans because such help would not be against Saddam but against the umma. Second, the initiative called on the Arab League or the Islamic Conference Organization to sponsor a national reconciliation conference that would establish a structure for the reconciliation between Saddam’s regime and the Iraqi opposition. Finally, he gave a call for elections by the Iraqi people that will result in the formation of a national government. Nasrallah vowed that if such reconciliation took place, “then we would say that it is a duty on every Arab and Muslim able to carry guns to fight the Americans to defend Iraq”. However, such reconciliation was impossible because of Saddam’s refusal to reconcile with the Iraqi opposition. More importantly, the initiative neither supported Saddam nor called for jihad against the Americans. The initiative was desperately needed in order for Hezbollah to get out of a situation that divided Shi’ites and Sunnis across the Arab-Muslim world over the war in Iraq.

As the Iraqi resistance against the Americans assumed more of a Sunni Islamist stature, Hezbollah again found itself reaffirming that Muslims in each state are allowed to run their own affairs, a calculated response to division between Shi’ite and Sunni Islamists over the resistance in Iraq. Speaking at the fourteenth anniversary of the kidnapping of Shaykh Abdel Karim Obeid, a Hezbollah leader, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah reaffirmed that “the resistance is a choice of unity not of division or betrayal. When, for example, the Palestinians escalate, fight, or stop the resistance, it is their right because they know their own affairs. Nobody has the right to put the mujahidin in the circle of accusation. This is the logical and the brotherly way”.

Despite the increased high level of tension between the United States and Hezbollah, in particular after the Syrian Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act endorsed sanctions against Syria for supporting “terrorism”, Hezbollah has maintained a calculated response to the U.S. pressure. It has neither called for a large-scale war against the Americans, like al-Qa’ida, nor urged for resistance in Iraq, similar to Iran. In an interview with CNN, Nasrallah said, “The American administration’s problem with us is that the party fights Israel. If we stopped fighting the Israelis there is a great possibility that the U.S. administration would take us off the terrorist organization list”. He added, “We don’t want war with America, but if any person attacks us we will answer him in the same way and it is our right to defend ourselves”.[[31]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftn31" \o ") However, it appears that a war between Hezbollah and the United States is still possible if emotions and idealism get in the way and substitute for calculated responses.

In conclusion, Hezbollah’s operational choices – militancy and gradualist-pragmatic modes – sanctioned by its ideology as “armed” and “unarmed” struggle – give the party a choice to act according to the circumstances. This is why Hezbollah has fluctuated between militancy that sought to conquer the state from the top down and political gradualism that strove to conquer the state from the bottom up.

**Conclusion**

Over the course of time, Hezbollah has evolved from an essentially military organization into a military-cum-political movement bound together by an intellectual structure founded on various religious, moral and political pillars. These pillars have had to interact with an ever-changing socio-political reality, which in several cases has necessitated their reformulation. But rather than entail a relinquishment of these pillars, this reformulation has involved an earnest attempt by the party to preserve them as moral absolutes, while adapting themselves to various political developments by means of a relative moral outlook.

Also, the co-existence of Hezbollah and the Lebanese government is a clear sign that this party is not far from dialogue. As my study has shown, Hezbollah is far from being fixated on unrealistic “all or nothing” objectives. Despite the perception that this party caters only to fantasies, it has demonstrated an awareness of shifting political circumstances and a willing to base its policies on cost-benefit calculations. Hezbollah does not live up to its world image of a one-track organization with a monolithic and fanatic vision, unshakeable fundamental interests, rigidly binary perception, and intransigent preferences. In fact, were it to adopt such an unbending approach, it would have been counterproductive, increasing its isolation in the local, inter-Arab, and international arenas.

A comparison of Hezbollah’s declared principles with its concrete actions shows that it has been in its interest to become politically active and not to exclude the possibility of a settlement – albeit temporary – through non-involvement means. Consequently, their political imagination and their organizational energies have generally been directed towards striking a balance among constantly growing conflicting considerations, competing demands, and contradictory needs.

Moreover, one cannot but notice Hezbollah’s intense concern - perhaps paranoia – with America’s terrorism policy initiatives and with the fact that they are the principle targets of this policy. And although the saying confirms that ‘where there is smoke there is fire’, the Americans were unable to pinpoint the fire and put it out. This indecisiveness contributes to the USA’s inability to make an impact on Hezbollah’s jihad activities. The Bush Administration’s half-hearted strategy of coercing Lebanon to act against this party is a case in point. The Israelis had tried a much more punishing version of that strategy many times to get Beirut to rein in Hezbollah, yet massive destruction of Lebanon’s infrastructure did not change the existing balance of power.

In short, Hezbollah faces a permanent military and political pressure and terrorist labelling from more than one side, be it regional or international. However, despite the fact that such kind of pressure have resulted in more extremism with other Islamist parties elsewhere in the world, Hezbollah’s political program remains to be an essentially secular one that will closely correspond to the agendas of leftist and national political forces. It will remain an essentially Islamist party on the intellectual level, but will most likely become a semi-secularized one on the national political level.

As a form of political adaptation, the dual strategy of confining the quintessentially Islamic and unattainable to the intellectual realm, and the secular and attainable to the national and political realm is, to all interests and purposes, an ultimately complex one. The conjoining of the parties’ Islamic state ideal with their political endorsement of democracy as well as conjoining the paramountcy of their Islamic identity with their nationalism, typifies a marriage between the intellectual and political.

Thus, although Hezbollah has succeeded in striking an artful balance between its intellectual structure and political discourse for the time being, we cannot dismiss the fact that at the end of the day, it may tip the balance in favor of either one. Judging by the continued subordination of its domestic political role to its geo-strategic concerns, it seems as though the party has chosen to accord its Lebanese identity and role as an influential local political force secondary status to its Islamic identity and role as a revolutionary exemplar for the umma. However, this does not deny that Hezbollah will be capable of pragmatically accommodating to the ever-changing national and regional realities, given its ability to justify controversial political conduct in religious terms, willingness to exist with internal contradiction and tension in a hostile political environment, and the experience it has in manoeuvring in a context of conflicting relations between hierarchical organizational order and organic structures.

After all, it is not unknown for individuals, political groups, and social movements to profess publicly a determination to fight the existing order while at the same time not excluding the possibility of becoming part of it. Under these circumstances, the prose of reality may overcome the poetry of dogmatic ideology.

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[[16]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftnref16" \o ") Nasrallah quoted in *al-Maoqif, no. 26, p. 1.*

[[17]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftnref17" \o ") Augustus Richard Norton, **“Hizballah from Radicalism to Pragmatism?”** *Middle East Policy* 5, no. 4, p.3.

[[18]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftnref18" \o ") As asserted by Nasrallah on MTV, July 1998.

[[19]](https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism" \l "_ftnref19" \o ") In theory, democracy can encompass parties espousing counter ideologies such as Islam and Communism, which ultimately seek to overturn democracy. In reality, however, the capacity for democracy to absorb counter-ideologies has been severely limited, as exemplified by the cases of the U.S. where Communist parties are banned, the past prohibition of Islamic parties in Turkey and the cancellation of elections in Algeria, in which the FIS where poised to win.

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**حزب الله: بين الأيديولوجية والبرغماتية السياسية**

من خلال دراسة معمقة للواقع اللبناني، يتبين أن حزب الله يلتزم الأسس والقوانين الدينية، بالإضافة إلى استراتيجية سياسية واضحة وذلك لهدف التخفيف من التشدد الديني.

كما أن مشاركة حزب الله في الحياة الديمقراطية اللبنانية تشير إلى اقتناعه بأنه من الممكن تحقيق أهدافه من خلال التعامل مع الوضع السياسي للبلد وأن العيش المشترك بين حزب الله والحكومة اللبنانية علامة واضحة وصريحة أن هذا الحزب غير بعيد عن مبدأ الحوار والتزامه.

وإذا استطاعت الأحزاب اللبنانية والحركات الدينية التخلي عن أي وسيلة تثير تغييرا فجائيا في القيم الأساسية للجماعة، يمكن أن يكون الدعم كاملا.

وأخيرا تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الإشارة إلى الوسائل التي مكنت  حزب الله من التحول من حزب عسكري إلى حزب عسكري سياسي من خصائصه الأساسية بنية علمية مستندة إلى أسس دينية مثبتة.

- See more at: https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/hezbollah-between-ideology-and-political-pragmatism#sthash.LzDLOXyA.dpuf