

# Hezbollah: At the Crossroads of Religion and Politics

Written by Mairi Robertson

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/11/26/hezbollah-at-the-crossroads-of-religion-and-politics/>

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In the current context of the Middle East the line between religion and politics is hard to distinguish, and characterising organisations as simply one or the other has become an increasingly elusive task. The dominant religion in the region is Islam, and as a religion which has always had a strong doctrine of political implementation, it is unsurprising that Islamic groups have come to dominate the political scene. The term 'Islamist,' often used interchangeably with 'political Islam,' was coined in the 1970s to refer to the rise of movements which drew on Islamic ideology for a distinctly political agenda[1]. Islamism is not a monolithic movement, and despite some common themes and shared vocabulary, the term encompasses a wide variety of groups with considerable ideological, political and organizational differences[2]. One has only to look at today's two effective Islamist states, Saudi Arabia and Iran, who differ dramatically in their organisation of political life, to see that no consensus exists as to what constitutes an Islamic political system[3]. In such a diverse region as the Middle East, it is unsurprising that groups differ depending on their particular contexts, but expressions of Islamism can also differ within the same context and are constantly being readjusting according to changing conditions[4].

There are a number of characteristics shared by the majority of Islamist organisations, and as such constitute a reasonable set of criteria by which to judge whether a group is Islamist. Firstly, they self-identify as an organisation founded on the principles of Islam, are structured according to their particular Islamic ideology, and use familiar Islamic rhetoric to legitimise their cause[5]. Secondly, at the very heart of Islamist ideology is a profound abhorrence of the west, expressed particularly against the hegemony of the United States and the state of Israel[6]. Thirdly, they seek to create, whether through force or otherwise, an Islamic state under Shari'a law. Finally, Islamist organisations are, by definition, political actors who seek to further their political agendas in their given context.

Within these basic parameters of an Islamist organisation are also found variations ranging between radical Islamism and moderate or mainstream Islamism. Amongst several other nuances, radical Islamists advocate the use of violence for political ends with the ambition of revolution in order to impose an Islamic state. Moderate Islamists, while still favouring an Islamic order, often pursue a more incremental approach to its establishment. Generally, they rely on social and charitable activities to 'Islamise' society, transforming the system from within instead of overthrowing it[7]. Islamist organisations can also differ depending on their transnational and national objectives. It is not uncommon for Islamist organisations to adjust their rhetoric and behaviour to portray radical, moderate, transnational and national elements, and nor is it unusual for an organisation to be divided into competing tendencies[8].

It is commonly understood that Hezbollah, a Lebanese based organisation founded in 1985, is an Islamist organisation. Yet tracing its history from an underground, hard-lined Shi'a liberation movement, to its entrance and deep involvement in the Lebanese political system, to its current military role in the Syrian civil war shows that its rhetoric, motivations, and objectives have evolved significantly. Looking at documents published by Hezbollah, evidence from public statements, and with an analysis of the organisation's actions, reveals that Hezbollah can be characterised as a hybrid organisation with elements of a religious Islamic organisation and a political party.

A brief history of Hezbollah, including a contextual introduction to the primary documents used in this essay, will be followed by a thematic exploration of four key identity markers and objectives of the organisation. Determined from the documents they are: their religious foundations expressed through their relationship with Iran, their structure, and

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through their use of Islamic rhetoric; their goal to create an Islamic state in Lebanon; their image as resistor and liberator of all oppressed; and their national versus regional agenda. This will show that in balancing its multifaceted nature Hezbollah displays characteristics of both a radical and a moderate Islamist organisation, as well as employs a mix of dogmatic Islamic, pragmatic political and distinctly nationalist rhetoric. The situation in Syria has presented the organisation with a significant challenge, yet although its balance of religion and politics has shifted, Hezbollah remains an Islamist organisation at its core with distinct Islamic characteristics.

## A brief history of Hezbollah

The interplay between religion and politics has been a dominant feature of Lebanon since its creation in 1923 under the French mandate[9]. When Lebanon gained independence from France in 1943 the Lebanese National Pact laid the foundations for the confessional political system which remains in place today. Supposedly representing the demographics of the state, proportional sharing of state offices and political power along confessional lines was based on an outdated national census from 1932[10]. As such it favoured the Christians over the Muslims in a 6:5 ratio, in which the President was a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister was Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of the Parliament was a Shi'a Muslim[11]. The Lebanese civil war began in 1975 with fighting between the politically powerful Maronite Christians and the Palestinian resistance movement, but as the war progressed sectarian divides within the Muslim community became more pronounced[12].

Hezbollah emerged in the context of growing Shi'a frustrations at their limited political representation, sentiments which were intensified following the 1982 Israeli invasion of the predominantly Shi'a populated south of Lebanon. Splintering from its precursor, Amal, Hezbollah began as an underground organisation with a dual purpose – channeling Shi'a frustrations into both political and militant aims, and as a liberation organisation against Israeli occupation[13]. Funded by the Iranian government, trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and with close ties to the Ba'athist regime in Syria, they created the Axis of Resistance in the Middle East[14].

On February 16, 1985, Hezbollah published the Open Letter “to all the Oppressed in Lebanon and the World”, and in doing so publicly declared its existence and stated its core beliefs and objectives[15]. The letter employs passionate and emotive language, presenting themselves as an anti-Israel liberation organisation which fundamentally rejects the Lebanese political system, and as a Shi'a organisation with its religious foundations rooted in a commitment to Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic ideology.

Following the Ta'if accords of 1989, which brought an end to the civil war by readjusting the balance of political power between the sects, Hezbollah entered the political system as an opposition party in the 1992 parliamentary elections[16]. Its overtly Shi'a identity and religious rhetoric mellowed as it portrayed itself as a more pragmatic Lebanese political party. The 1996 electoral platform depicts an organisation which has by this point evolved into the existing system and as a result is more balanced, more political, and less ideological than its original self. Resistance and liberation are still portrayed as their *raison d'être*, but specific policies in areas such as economics and education appear the primary preoccupation of the document. While the abolition of the proportional representational system remains an objective, pragmatism wins out and the formation of an Islamic State is not explicitly mentioned. Hezbollah's social policies were coupled with military successes during this period, such as their guerrilla campaign against the Israeli backed South Lebanon Army which led to Israel's withdrawal in May 2000. As a result, they enjoyed widespread support both at home and across the region, increasingly seen as a symbol of Pan-Arab resistance[17].

The New Manifesto, published in November 2009, while still emotive, employs much more sophisticated language than the previous documents. It demonstrates Hezbollah's evolution as a political party, with a greater understanding of international politics and an ambition to be recognised as an international movement[18]. The New Manifesto was not, however, an attempt to recant the Open Letter or any of its preceding electoral platforms, but aimed “to define the *political* vision of the party.”[19] Its objective was not to deal with “aspects of belief, ideology, or intellectual culture,” and none of Hezbollah's previous more ideological documents have since been revoked or amended[20]. The New Manifesto does not, therefore, imply that their original objectives have been abandoned, but instead that their public focus shifted from religion to pragmatism and politics during this period.

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Hezbollah has skilfully employed varying levels of ideological and pragmatic rhetoric to reach its aims, but 2011 marks the beginning of a new and ongoing phase of Hezbollah's evolution, as the Arab Spring uprisings took hold across the region. Its involvement in the Syrian war has seen the collision of its religious and political objectives, presenting a significant challenge for the organisation. Religious language and anti-Israel resistance rhetoric remain prevalent in all its discourse, ramping up again with victory on the horizon in Syria. However, it has become irrefutably sectarian, its legitimacy as a Lebanese liberation organisation has been questioned, and it has revealed its role as an instrument of Iran's expansionist aims[21].

Looking at Hezbollah's core objectives in the context of these key developments can reveal its Islamic tendencies, alongside elements of its pragmatic political, nationalistic, and Shi'a identities.

## Islamic Ideology and Rhetoric

One of the core characteristics of an Islamist organisation is a foundation in and an ongoing commitment to Islamic ideology. This can be demonstrated in several ways including its structure, its actions, and its rhetoric. Under this criteria, Hezbollah has maintained its Islamic identity in more ways than one, despite its evolution and entrance into mainstream politics. The concept of the *Wilayat al-Faqih*, or the Guardianship of the Jurisprudent, remains integral to the party's intellectual foundations, they consistently use Islamic rhetoric, they maintain a religious governing structure, and religious training is essential for all members[22]. Having a founding ideology which integrates religion and politics to the highest extent makes it difficult to distinguish which underlying motivation is at play, but a mix of both genuine religious observance and political rationality can in many instances be noted.

*Wilayat al-Faqih* was the ideology and Islamic political system developed by Ruhollah Khomeini, who led the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. It extends the *faqaha's*, or Islamist jurists', authority, with Khomeini concluding that they "ought to concern themselves with the political, economic and legal problems of Islam rather than to focus exclusively on ritual matters"[23]. The most learned jurist, designated to be himself at the time, holds the office of Ayatollah or Supreme Leader and is custodian of the people in the place of the Twelfth Imam. It is a distinctly Shi'a ideology which grants legitimacy to the Ayatollah through belief in the spiritual and political line of succession from the prophet Muhammad.

Like post-revolutionary Iran, Hezbollah's organisational structure is inherently Islamic, with a central place for religious authorities in the political practices of the organisation[24]. Hezbollah is governed by a *Shura*, or consultative council, which is an Islamic form of governance, and it looks to Iran for both religious and political leadership[25]. Hezbollah pledged their allegiance to Khomeini in overtly religious language in 1985 saying, "we obey the orders of one leader, wise and just, that of our tutor and faqih who fulfills all the necessary conditions: Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini. God save him!"[26] When Khomeini was replaced by Sayyed Ali Hosseini Khamenei in 1989 Hezbollah again affirmed their commitment to him. The permission or the blessing of the Ayatollah has at times been sought to justify actions taken to further its own political as well as religious goals, such as in their decision to contest the 1992 general elections, as well as for their use of suicide bombers and martyrdom[27].

Religion also plays an important role in the recruitment and training process of Hezbollah. A network of schools, camps and religious programs, including the organisation's youth wing, the Mahdi Scouts, ensure that Shiite ideology permeates society from the bottom up. Those recruited to the organisation receive religious as well as combat training, and those who are not dedicated to Hezbollah's ideology are free to leave, ensuring that the recruits' minds, as well as bodies, are invested in their cause[28]. While this could be seen as religious indoctrination, it is clear that members of Hezbollah adhere to the religious ideology put forward by the organisation: *Wilayat al-Faqih*.

Not only is Hezbollah founded on an Islamic ideology, but it has also maintained its self-perception and public image as an Islamic organisation through its continued use of Islamic rhetoric. Its early texts contain a particularly strong Islamic flare, the 1985 Open Letter declaring "we are the sons of the umma – the party of God, the vanguard of which was made victorious by God in Iran" and, "we declare openly and loudly that we are an umma which fears God only."[29] Their entrance into mainstream politics saw them soften their religious language, opening the 1996 electoral program instead with "In persistence with our political course that is *based on divine values*." [30] In

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contrast to their 1985 document, in 2009 Hezbollah refers to their relationship with Iran in distinctly political terms, saying they “consider Iran as a central *state* in the Muslim world.”[31] Although in the New Manifesto they state that the document is aiming to “define the *political* vision of the party,”[32] public statements by key members continue to emphasise their Islamic identity. The organisation became increasingly pragmatic as they learnt and evolved as a political actor, but although they stopped stating their objectives in overtly religious rhetoric, their Islamic identity remains evident throughout.

Whether Hezbollah uses religious or political rhetoric to describe its affiliation with Iran, the reality is that evidence for both motivations exist for their continued cooperation and commitment. In their Islamic religious structure, Iran represents the authority, but Hezbollah relies on Iran for much more than religious guidance, and the purely pragmatic and political side of their relationship should not be downplayed. Hezbollah has often resorted to religious rhetoric as a means to further its political objectives, as is common amongst Islamist organisations, but regardless of the motivation, *Wilayat al-Faqih* remains the cornerstone of their religious and political ideology.

## The creation of an Islamic State in Lebanon

A central element of Islamist ideology is the ambition to create an Islamic state founded on Shari’a law. Through its transformation Hezbollah has softened its stance on this objective, leading many to believe that they have forfeited their identity as an Islamist organisation in favour of becoming a purely political actor. However, although they no longer present this objective in radical Islamist terms, they continue to display characteristics of a moderate Islamist organisation. Tracing how their rhetoric and actions have changed since 1985 sheds light on how and why this objective is no longer at the forefront of their public agenda, as well as demonstrates how, despite this, Hezbollah is still an Islamist organisation against this criterion.

Formed in the midst of a civil war which was increasingly defined along sectarian lines, there is little surprise that Hezbollah rejected the system which marginalised their community, declaring it unjust and corrupt[33]. The 1985 Open Letter makes this clear, portraying them as a group with no interest in entering or reforming the political system. With a revolutionary flare that is distinct of radical Islamist organisations they proclaim that “we do not constitute an organized and closed party in Lebanon,” and state “we consider all opposition in Lebanon voiced in the name of reform can only profit, ultimately, the present system.”[34] They leave no question that they reject it in its entirety and show no ambition of forming a formal opposition party. They “don’t want to impose Islam upon anybody,” but instead envisioned something akin to the Iranian Islamic Revolution, where popular support would overthrow the system in favour of a larger Pan-Islamic state[35].

Although appearing to be a core objective of the organisation at the time of its foundation, changing circumstances in Lebanon saw Hezbollah soften its position on the formation of an Islamic state in Lebanon relatively quickly. The Ta’if accords gave Shiites the potential for increased political representation and influence. Hezbollah recognised that the social and political reality of Lebanon would not allow for an Islamic republic and that a middle ground would have to be sought within the existing system, which was now more suitable for them to operate in[36]. Although the decision caused divisions in the organisation, blessed by the Ayatollah Hezbollah, they publicly announced their decision to participate in the electoral process on July 4, 1992[37].

This decision marked a significant turning point for Hezbollah as they shifted away from the short-term acquisition of a core religious objective in a bid for more political power. Throughout the 1990s Hezbollah changed its image from an extreme Islamic movement into a legitimate political party in Lebanon, with its key leaders working to present it as trustworthy, responsible, and moderate[38]. In order to engage with a diverse and multi-confessional society, Hezbollah necessarily moved away from its hard-lined rhetoric regarding an Islamic state and focussed on its political agenda over its ideological principles[39]. There was widespread international anticipation that Hezbollah was abandoning its Islamic foundations and with it its history of terrorism. Yet while their language moderated, the aim to abolish political sectarianism with the ultimate goal of an Islamic state has continued to feature on the sidelines of their public documents.

In their 1996 electoral platform, they still proclaim that political sectarianism “represents the centre of the essential

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flaw in the formula of the Lebanese political system,” and that it should be replaced by “a proportional representational system.”[40] And again in the New Manifesto they define political sectarianism as “the major problem in the Lebanese political system, which thwarts its reform, development and regular updating.”[41] Although a far cry from their early revolutionary sentiments which flatly refused participation in the system, Hezbollah acted pragmatically in altering its image from a radical to a moderate Islamist organisation to achieve its long-term ambition of an Islamic state. The Islamization of society, through grassroots initiatives, education, social and welfare services, is popular amongst moderate Islamist organisations. While they are not pursuing a quick Islamic revolution through force, Hezbollah is actively involved in these activities in Lebanon[42].

One of Hezbollah’s strengths, as it has matured and evolved, has been that it has been able to use “the ambiguity of its hybrid nature to tactically navigate towards its goals,” stressing its religious identity at times and its political pragmatism at others[43]. These later documents are self-consciously political and not ideological because Hezbollah understood that they could profit more from the Lebanese context through a call to common political desires over religious sentiments shared only by some. The 1996 electoral platform and the New Manifesto undoubtedly maintain a strong Islamic identity but, as is not uncommon for Islamist organisations, they chose to balance out religious ideology with the political realities facing them[44].

## Resistance and liberation from the oppressor

Created initially as a liberation organisation against Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, Hezbollah positioned themselves as an organisation who would resist Israel and the west for “all the Oppressed in Lebanon and the World.”[45] It is an aspect of its identity which Hezbollah has relied on over the years to achieve both political and military aims, and has therefore worked hard to maintain it. Following Israel’s retreat in 2000, and despite numerous UN resolutions calling for “the disarmament of all armed groups in Lebanon,” Hezbollah has refused to comply[46]. Claiming that Israel still occupies Lebanese territory in the Sheeba Farms and the Gholan Heights, which the international community deem to belong to Syria, has granted Hezbollah continued legitimacy in the eyes of many.

In the 1985 Open Letter, the language used was overtly religious and passionate, declaring that “we see in Israel the vanguard of the United States in our Islamic world... our struggle will end only when this entity is obliterated.”[47] Their declaration positions themselves on the side of the oppressed, alongside the Palestinians who represent the ultimate oppressed population in the Muslim world, and sets Israel and the US up as the occupier and enemy. Their first stated objective in the 1996 electoral program is “resisting occupation,” and they reaffirm that “as it has always been, Hizbullah will continue to be, with greater drive and increasing responsibility, the party of Resistance and Liberation.”[48] While the 2009 New Manifesto uses much more sophisticated and political language to describe this objective, it is none the less one of the main features of the document. The time is taken to outline the US’s crimes against the Islamic world, including “American Terrorism,” “western schemes of domination,” and “creating and embedding sedition and division of all types” in the Arab world[49].

The oppressor-oppressed narrative is popular amongst Islamist organisations, particularly those from the Shi’a tradition, as it is a political tool with the power to mobilise those disenfranchised with the current state of affairs. As a Shi’a organisation, formed in a period when the Shiites had very little political power despite constituting a majority of the population in Lebanon, Hezbollah was able to use this narrative and their image as liberator to win support and justify its actions. The destruction of Israel and the reinstatement of a Palestinian state are common causes amongst many Islamist organisations. Hezbollah’s military successes against the common enemy, affirming the reality of their capabilities to protect the oppressed, brought much praise both from within Lebanon and around the region and widened their support base beyond the Lebanese Shi’a.

When the Arab Spring uprisings began in 2011 Hezbollah supported the protesters, the *oppressed* peoples of the region against infidel regimes. Aligning the uprisings with their own ideology, they denigrated the regimes as being pro-US and Israel, and as having abandoned the common Arab cause of liberating the Palestinians[50]. Despite the fact that the protesters were more motivated by legal, economic and social grievances, Hezbollah framed the events in the familiar language of oppressed and oppressor to strengthen their own image “as supporter of the downtrodden and defier of injustice.”[51] Hezbollah was able to use the changing circumstances in the region to its advantage until

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the uprisings came to Syria. When the Syrian regime turned weapons against their own people Hezbollah, the 'liberator' and 'defender' of land and people, should have condemned its actions[52]. Yet Syria is a key ally to Hezbollah, the third node of the Axis of Resistance, and provides the organisation with significant strategic benefits. The fall of the Assad regime would be a severe political blow for Hezbollah.

Although Hezbollah is now deeply involved in the Syrian war, it continues to frame its involvement as confrontation with the west and Israel, on whom they have long blamed any internal discord[53]. Throughout 2011 and 2012, before publicly announcing its military support for Assad, Hezbollah attempted to sell stories of victimisation to justify its position, adding the threat of radical Sunnis, *takfiris*, alongside those of their traditional enemies[54]. As sectarian divides spilled across the border and Hezbollah failed to maintain the illusion of minimal involvement, they have propagated the conspiracy that the war is the work of the west and of Israel, so as to align it with their objectives[55].

Hezbollah relies on its identity as liberator of the oppressed for its continued legitimacy and has been able to skillfully exploit this image in the pursuit of political ends. However, as much as Hezbollah has attempted to couch its support for Assad in familiar rhetoric, the organisation has hit a clear road bump in safeguarding its hybrid identity. Due to material necessities, it has had to realign its priorities and shift its focus away from direct confrontation with Israel.

Yet, continually rejecting allegations that they have forgotten their objective of the obliteration of Israel, Secretary-General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, reiterated that "we are busy in Lebanon, in Syria and probably in other places. But our utmost priority remains to stay ready to confront Israel." [56] Hezbollah has previously claimed to have more than 130 rockets, missiles, and mortars aimed towards Israel, and currently has up to 10,000 fighters deployed in Southern Syria, reportedly preparing for confrontation with Israel at the Golan Heights front[57]. Despite how accurate these claims are, how Hezbollah presents its involvement in Syria makes it clear that abhorrence to the west and Israel remains integral to Hezbollah's agenda.

## Nationalism, inclusion and unity

Transnational Islamist organisations have become increasingly prevalent in the past few decades, with the rise of groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIL. While, through its link to Iran and aspirations of a future Pan-Islamic state, Hezbollah shares some characteristics with such groups, it also has a nationalistic, country-specific agenda which many transnational Islamists would reject[58]. According to many definitions Islamism and nationalism are incompatible. Islamists seek an Islamic State which is not dictated by state borders, nationalists seek sovereignty and territorial integrity as a nation-state. Hezbollah, however, portrays a combination of Islamist and nationalistic characteristics, and one identity does not deny it the other. Instead, Hezbollah is a multifaceted organisation which can use the ambiguity of its identity to its advantage, but which must also balance its national and regional aspirations.

As Hezbollah evolved as a political party it shifted from talking about the concept of community in religious terms, the *umma*, to more political terms[59]. But shrouded in whichever rhetoric, its national agenda has always played a central role in Hezbollah's political ideology. In a show of underlying pragmatism towards the complex reality of the Lebanese community, Hezbollah avoids framing itself as either strictly Shi'a or Lebanese, which would ultimately alienate large portions of the population, and from its Open Letter to the New Manifesto it has always called for unity in Lebanon amongst Muslims and Christians alike[60]. An entire section of the Open Letter is addressed "to the Christians of Lebanon," while in the 1996 electoral platform they portray their objectives "within a framework of integration and unity... with no discrimination, and participation with no exclusion or elimination." [61] The New Manifesto also calls for "a unified Lebanon for all Lebanese alike." [62] Even when sectarian divides have flared up throughout Lebanon, Hezbollah's rhetoric has remained inclusive, aiming to appeal to Sunnis, Shiites, and Christians.

While Hezbollah has largely been able to balance its Islamic and national identities, Syria has been a potential turning point for the organisation as it finds its national and regional agendas to be in direct conflict. Having historically positioned themselves as the liberators and protectors of *both* Sunnis and Shiites in Lebanon, they found themselves sliding deeper into a war which took an irrefutable sectarian turn[63].

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There is little doubt over why Hezbollah initially remained quiet on its involvement in the war, aware that it could severely damage its reputation. But as body bags began returning home it became difficult to maintain the illusion and Hezbollah was faced with the reality – to uphold their fundamental ideology of the unification of all people in Lebanon, or to protect their political and strategic assets through their alliance with Iran and Syria. If Assad fell, and it is unlikely the Syrian army would have been able to make the gains it has without the aid and expertise of Hezbollah, they would lose an important political backer in the region whom it relies on as a conduit for weapons transfers from Iran, a safe haven for training bases, weapons storage and much more[64].

In statements from Hezbollah and key members of the organisation it is clear that they have attempted to maintain consistency, framing their involvement alongside their underlying ideologies and using the familiar rhetoric of resistance against Israel and liberation of the oppressed. But as the protracted war became increasingly sectarian, Hezbollah has proved itself to be on one side, prompting attacks against Shi'a strongholds which have had a direct consequence on the stability and security of Lebanon[65].

When Hezbollah had to choose between its material interests and its ideological principles it ultimately prioritised the former, adapting its national and regional priorities and severely damaging its anti-sectarian reputation as a consequence[66]. Although their motivations in Syria are premised primarily on their political agenda rather than their religious ideology, Hezbollah has none the less slipped ever further into a sectarian war, choosing to play a greater regional role to protect the interests of the Iranian axis[67].

## Conclusion

Based on the criteria outlined in the introduction Hezbollah is an Islamist organisation. It self-identifies as an organisation founded on the principles of Islam, is structured according to the concept of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, and uses familiar Islamic rhetoric to legitimise its cause[68]. At the very heart of its ideology is a profound abhorrence of the west, expressed particularly against the United States and Israel[69]. It ultimately seeks to create an Islamic state under Shari'a law and works through social and welfare programs to Islamise society from the ground up. Hezbollah is also a political actor which seek to further its political agenda in Lebanon and the region.

Hezbollah is a hybrid organisation which combines Shia, Pan-Islamic, political and national characteristics. As it has matured it has moulded and adapted its identity in response to a changing domestic and regional environment, stressing certain features over others at various times. It has evolved from an underground Shi'a organisation with predominantly radical Islamic tendencies, into one of the most formidable and pragmatic political and military actors in Lebanon and across the region.

However, Hezbollah is at a crossroads in Syria, where its web of identities is in danger of coming undone. As political and strategic necessity pulled it ever deeper into the sectarian war next door, Hezbollah has jeopardised its identity as the liberator against Israel, the protector of the oppressed, and as the independent, moderate and pragmatic political party fighting for a unified Lebanon. It has instead encouraged its image as an Iranian puppet with radical sectarian aims, which has abandoned its fight against Israel and has abused its influence in the Lebanese political system. Though recent victories for Hezbollah and its allies have supported their claims as protector of Lebanon, the Syrian abyss remains a challenge to Hezbollah's multifaceted identity. How the war plays out, how Hezbollah evolves, and how it balances its religious and political traits will have a significant impact on Lebanon's future[70].

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Written at: The University of Melbourne  
Written for: Islam and Politics  
Date written: September 2017

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