

Hezbollah's Hybrid Model Under Strain: Relative Decline and the Evolving Dynamics of Irregular Warfare in Lebanon

Description

Since its [founding in 1985](#), Hezbollah has stood out as a prototype of the modern hybrid actor. Hezbollah seamlessly blended irregular warfare tactics, conventional capabilities, political participation, and a deep-rooted social service network. In irregular warfare theory, such actors derive their strength from asymmetry, population control, and strategically using legitimacy to rival or undermine state authority. Hezbollah exemplified this model by operating as both a resistance movement and a parallel state, while also enjoying the patronage of powerful regional allies like Iran and Syria.

However, recent developments in late 2024 and early 2025 suggest an emerging, albeit relative, decline in its influence, viewed through the analytical lens of irregular warfare theory. Hezbollah's operational model, as a [hybrid actor](#), has traditionally enabled it to integrate conventional military capabilities with unconventional tactics, leveraging both state-like functions and clandestine operations. This unique characteristic, once a source of its strength, is now being tested by a confluence of internal and external pressures.

Hybrid Actors and the Theory of Irregular Warfare

As defined by the [US Department of Defense](#), irregular warfare is "a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population." This encompasses a range of activities including insurgency, terrorism, sabotage, subversion, and influence operations. [Hybrid actors](#) like Hezbollah complicate this further by incorporating both irregular and conventional elements: they engage in kinetic operations, field military units, control territory, and simultaneously participate in political systems and governance.

Hezbollah's operational advantage has historically stemmed from its ability to function across these domains. It built local legitimacy through social services, ideological messaging, and [armed resistance](#), all while maintaining deep vertical integration with regional networks. [Irregular warfare theory](#) also suggests that such dominance is fragile: the legitimacy, mobility, and sustainability of hybrid actors are vulnerable to internal fracturing, external pressure, and evolving political contexts.

A September to Remember: Israeli Strikes and the Loss of Nasrallah

Israel's precision attacks in [Operation Grim Beeper](#) in September 2024 struck a devastating blow to Hezbollah's communications and command structure. By targeting communication devices and leadership clusters with hidden explosives, Israel exploited the critical role of trust, morale, and cohesion in sustaining non-conventional actors. Israel killed over forty people and wounded thousands. Added to this, [1,500 fighters](#) became combat ineffective. These underscore the compromise of [Hezbollah's operational effectiveness](#).

Israel's subsequent [assassination](#) of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on September 27, 2024 deepened the strategic disruption. Nasrallah was not only a charismatic figurehead but also the ideological architect unifying Hezbollah's political, religious, and military wings. His successor, [Naim Qassem](#), may be competent but lacks the symbolic capital and mobilizing charisma required to maintain morale across the movement's varied factions.

As is often the case with hybrid movements, the absence of a charismatic leader can erode morale and diminish the dedication of followers. This particularly affects those drawn to the movement's broader ideological tenets, rather than impacting operational effectiveness.

Changing Lebanese Political Dynamics and the Challenge to Hezbollah's Legitimacy

A cornerstone of Hezbollah's hybrid strength has been its [embeddedness in the Lebanese political system](#). However, the new government formed in early 2025 under Prime Minister Nawaf Salam and President Joseph Aoun signaled a clear [shift away from tolerance of armed non-state actors](#). The government's stated priority of disarming all Lebanese armed groups and enforcing [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701](#) directly confronts Hezbollah's military wing. The elimination of the article of resistance from government policy statements, a long-standing justification for Hezbollah's armed existence, further underscores this intent.

This political shift represents a significant strategic setback for a hybrid actor deriving much of its legitimacy and power from an armed resistance narrative. The shift may force Hezbollah to either relinquish its military arm or face increasing marginalization within the formal political system.

Hezbollah's power has long depended on the permissive environment Lebanon's fragmented political order permits. Hezbollah's space for political and military maneuver is narrowing with the state now asserting monopoly over violence and attempting to dismantle parallel military structures.

In practice, state consolidation often poses existential risks to hybrid actors, especially when such efforts receive international backing and domestic legitimacy. Lebanon's [recent](#) municipal election exemplifies the nuanced and evolving relationship between Hezbollah and its support base, particularly in southern Lebanon. **Hezbollah and its [political ally Amal](#) were able to secure victories across**

dozens of municipalities, in some cases winning unopposed. **Lower voter turnout**, modest gains by reformist candidates, and limited space for alternative Shiâ??a voices suggest that Hezbollahâ??s monopoly on representation is not absolute. Moreover, while many constituents continue identifying their fate with Hezbollah, especially amid Israelâ??s ongoing attacks and a state perceived as absent or ineffective, others are beginning to question the cost of perpetual conflict and transnational entanglements.

Hezbollah retains local legitimacy. But its broader identity as a national resistance movement is weakening, thereby threatening its posture that once fused guns, governance, and grassroots.

Economic Strain and the Erosion of Social Support

The protracted economic collapse in Lebanon drastically weakened Hezbollahâ??s welfare and patronage networks, long a key source of local legitimacy among its Shiâ??a base. Historically, Hezbollahâ??s [extensive social programs](#) and financial aid have bolstered support, particularly within the Shiâ??a community. The devaluation of the Lebanese pound, rampant inflation, and widespread poverty curtailed Hezbollahâ??s capacity to deliver these services.

At the same time, [Iranâ??s economic freefall](#), exacerbated by renewed U.S. sanctions and internal mismanagement, has compelled Tehran to scale back its funding. This has left Hezbollah to fill financial gaps through illicit trade, diaspora fundraising, and regional smuggling networks. This shift mirrors a broader pattern among irregular actors in decline: turning to [grey and black economies](#) to maintain operations.

[The 2024 Arab Barometer](#) indicated a decrease in Shiâ??a trust in Hezbollah and a perception that the organization prioritizes Iranian interests over Lebanese welfare. The shift highlights the growing disconnect between the organization and its traditional support base.

From Resistance to Narco-Economics: The Captagon Trade and Criminal Hybridization

The economic pressures on Iran are forcing Hezbollah to diversify its financial sources, leading to a potential activation of its Latin American networks. These are primarily involved in money laundering and drug trafficking. They offer a strategic lifeline but also pose significant risks.

For Hezbollah, this is not new. The group has [a long-standing presence in Latin America](#), particularly in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) spanning Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Over the years, Hezbollah has established operational and financial networks involving money laundering, illicit finance, and arms and narcotics trafficking. It has built alliances with transnational criminal organizations, such as Brazilâ??s Primeiro Comando da Capital and Mexican cartels like Los Zetas, generating revenue streams beyond

the reach of sanctions.

However, while Hezbollah's Latin American networks have long been [active in a supporting role](#), the current convergence of regional pressures may prompt the group to increasingly refocus its attention on these external criminal operations. Latin America, in this sense, may become a strategic fallback zone for Hezbollah, offering alternative funding pipelines and operational sanctuaries at a time when its core base in Lebanon is under stress.

Heightened activity in Latin America will inevitably attract greater scrutiny from U.S. and regional security agencies, many of which have already classified Hezbollah as a transnational threat.

Hezbollah's entanglement in the [Captagon trade](#) reflects a broader strategy of exploiting illicit economies to offset declining financial support from traditional backers like Iran and to exert influence over Lebanon's porous borderlands and failing institutions.

Hezbollah's role was critical in shaping this permissive environment: it leveraged its military control over the Lebanese-Syrian border to facilitate trafficking and shielded smugglers from prosecution. Occasionally Hezbollah was implicated in production activities inside both Syria and Lebanon. This [drug economy](#) became central to Hezbollah's ability to maintain local patronage networks, particularly in the marginalized [Beqaa region](#), a historically underdeveloped and predominantly Shi'a area near the porous Syrian border. Beqaa is known for weak state oversight, its strategic role in cross border smuggling, and supporting finance operations amid increased sanctions and financial collapse.

However, recent shifts threaten to upend Hezbollah's dominance over this illicit economy. The downfall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in late 2024 dismantled Syria's state-sponsored production system, removing a key logistical and manufacturing hub.

Alarmed by Captagon's social impact, the [Lebanese government has launched investigations](#), purged corrupt officials, and begun cracking down on Hezbollah's influence at strategic locations like airports and ports. These changes have the potential to severely curtail Hezbollah's ability to benefit from the Captagon trade.

Irregular warfare theory warns of the [criminalization of resistance](#) as a tipping point in hybrid actor evolution. As the group becomes increasingly dependent on narco-networks and transnational crime alliances (e.g., in Latin America's TBA), it risks losing ideological coherence and exposing itself to international law enforcement and intelligence operations. What once bolstered irregular resilience may now undermine strategic discipline and operational security.

Syrian Collapse and Loss of Strategic Depth

Perhaps the most significant structural blow to Hezbollah's regional projection has been the [fall of al-Assad's regime in Syria](#). For years, Syria functioned as a vital corridor for Iranian arms shipments and strategic depth for Hezbollah's regional activities.

Syria had been a critical component of [Iran's axis of resistance](#), directly supporting Hezbollah's military power and regional influence. The emergence of a hostile Syrian transitional government, composed of groups like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, further compounds Hezbollah's challenges, creating a new, actively contested northeastern border. This [loss of a critical operational and logistical hub](#) severely impacts Hezbollah's ability to maintain its military capabilities and project regional influence, directly challenging its effectiveness as a hybrid military actor. The loss of a Syrian corridor profoundly weakens Hezbollah's ability to replenish weapons, rotate personnel, or project force into Israel and beyond

Hezbollah in Relative Decline—Hybrid Yet Weakened

Hezbollah's relative decline carries broader implications for understanding and countering hybrid actors. First, it demonstrates the fragility of even the most institutionalized irregular groups when deprived of charismatic leadership, external patronage, and permissive political environments. Second, it offers insight for U.S. and allied irregular warfare planners: denying sanctuary, disrupting illicit finance, and leveraging political reform can erode the foundations of hybrid power more effectively than direct military confrontation alone. Lastly, Hezbollah's trajectory may serve as a cautionary tale for similarly structured groups like the Houthis in Yemen, Hamas in Gaza, and al-Hashd al-Sha'abi in Iraq. Understanding Hezbollah's vulnerabilities offers strategic lessons for developing nuanced, non-kinetic counter-hybrid frameworks.

Hezbollah remains a formidable actor, with robust intelligence, logistical, and propaganda capabilities. However, its hybrid warfare model is fraying under multidimensional pressure. The group is struggling to maintain narrative control, military autonomy, and popular legitimacy—three pillars essential for effective hybrid engagement. While it is premature to declare Hezbollah's defeat, its trajectory reflects the vulnerability of irregular actors when strategic depth collapses, funding dries up, charismatic leadership vanishes, and host-state tolerance diminishes. Hezbollah's current unraveling is more than a momentary crisis—it is a warning sign that even the most sophisticated hybrid actors can falter when stripped of legitimacy, sanctuary, and state complicity.

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